

ARTFORUM

NEW YORK

PRINT FEBRUARY 1991

Peter Saul

FRUMKIN/ADAMS

What I like about Peter Saul's political paintings is not their politics but their fusion of aesthetics and erotics. Not that I'm adverse to the anti-Vietnam and generally antifascist, antiauthoritarian sentiments expressed in these works from 1965–71, although his politics do seem somewhat knee-jerk and unnuanced. But it is their expressive bravado—their sheer physical opulence and sardonic intensity—that gives them extraordinary carrying power, and keeps them from becoming moralistic and farcically punitive, like so much politically oriented art. Saul's comic esthetic—the Aristophanic wit of his hyperbole, the tallness of his visual tales—keeps his rectitude from getting out of hand.

Saul creates a brave new world of color and rapaciously fluid figures; indeed, they flow like uncontrollable liquid in the shallow trough of the picture's field. Their own color is acidic, in contrast to that of the bland and alkaline field, and certainly, the tension between dense, tart, dry color contributes to the unbalanced air that pervades these frenzied pictures. All the parts hang in midair, like an eccentrically balanced house of cards about to collapse. Saul's pictures combine high and low—ingenious color and wild, inventive cartoon wit—in images that radiate beyond the borders of their ostensible meaning, evoking a sense of erotic overstimulation and suffering.

Indeed, it is the sadistic violence of Saul's figures and the formal violence Saul perpetrates on them that constitute the real political and moral issues of his work. At bottom these paintings are about the war between G.I. Joe and the Dragon Lady, that is, a conflation of various wars between opposing sexes, cultures, and races. I see in Saul's pictures a latent antifeminism. Yellow women—with the big boobs American boys add to them in fantasy—are frequently shafted (literally sodomized by phallic gunfire as in *Pinkville*, 1970). "Beautiful Yellow Mother" in the 1966 work of that name downs one American pilot and plane after another with the pugnacious spikey mines that are her fists. The dignity of the Oriental female monster, wearing a red T-shirt emblazoned with the words "Human Dignity" in a 1966 work, crucifies and castrates an American top sergeant labeled "White Garbage." The three little pigs—"Justis," "Munny," and "Powur" are crucified in *San Quentin #1*, 1971, even as they inject "Freedom" into the neck of the voluptuous black female with whom they are entangled. In *Story of Race Hate*, 1969, Ronald Reagan is castrated by a black female nude wielding a knife labeled "Race Riot." She is nailed to a white cross, he to a black one, and their right hands are nailed together on her cross. The relationships Saul establishes between his figures are

complex, and while the good guys and bad guys are clearly distinguished, they are bound in a perverse symbiotic relationship, and they are equally monstrous.

In Saul's paintings phallus becomes umbilical cord, streaming through the work and strangling everything in its path, like Laocoön's snakes. These pictures are apocalyptic fantasies, and the apocalypse is sexual. They are about regression in the name of power, and the perverse intimacy those who pursue power have with their victims. More particularly, they are about the regression that inevitably occurs in the lives of those who blindly pursue power, as well as about regressive relationships as means of achieving power. Rape recurs—power humiliates, and power is achieved through humiliation—that is the real message of this message art. Indeed, one could argue that the physical gruesomeness of Saul's scenes is a metaphor for a traumatized state of mind. Saul discharges his sense of the trauma of living in the still-warm contemporary moment, full of power-hungry maniacs, into his pictures. He liberates himself from the insanity of history through his good humor. Saul is one of the most authentic history painters of our day—the comic Jacques-Louis David of our morbid society, narrating its decline into suicidal, tragic violence.