

## ARTFORUM

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### Peter Saul

ALLAN FRUMKIN GALLERY

Peter Saul, who is in his early 50s, belongs to the generation that includes Dan Flavin and Lawrence Poons. Like them, he began exhibiting in the early '60s. During that turbulent decade, he gave his socially conscious paintings such titles as *Mickey Mouse vs. the Japs*, 1962, *Homage to Thomas Hart Benton*, 1966, *I Torture Commie Virgins*, 1967, and *Government of California*, 1969. Influenced by Max Beckmann's late work, Picasso's elongated, biomorphic forms of the '30s, and (long before it was fashionable) cartoonists of the '40s, Saul's paintings can be characterized as demotic, provocative, vulgar, and grotesque. His subjects have included political repression, racial inequality and stereotyping, consumerism, sexual politics, urban violence, and art itself.

Although most of these subjects have only recently become acceptable in mainstream art, Saul remains an iconoclast who doesn't fit in. The most obvious reason for this is his relationship to irony. He has chosen to satirize everything and everyone, including himself. Typically, his paintings are meant to make viewers uncomfortable, even as they laugh, for humor is Saul's way of dealing with his own desperation and anguish. In contrast to the Pop artists of his generation and certain younger artists, who comment on subject and style from an ironic and therefore elitist position, Saul is a fierce moralist whose gallows humor is the only defense he has left. Consequently, it is not directed toward an "educated" art audience who cares about such matters as the correct Modernist and post-Modernist stylization or the in joke suavely told.

In his recent paintings and works on paper shown here, from 1986 and '87, Saul examines such subjects as self-portraiture, the relationship between man and woman, and the complacent upper-middle-class notion of leisure. The major difference between these works and those of the '70s and early '80s is the paint handling and color. Whereas Saul's best-known work was often posterlike in its use of small dots and a mixture of Day-Glo and acrylic to delineate

areas, the recent paintings are a combination of acrylic (mixed with a mat gel) and oil. Saul modulates and highlights areas through the application of neo-Pointillist blotches and the layering of different opulent colors. The final layer is oil paint, used to contrast the figure with the surrounding area. Saul is not interested in either all-over composition or painting as object, and—a minor flaw—is more concerned with the figure than the space of the painting.

*New York Painter*, 1987, features a pipe-smoking male holding a brush in one hand while squeezing paint onto a shaped canvas with the other. The pale blue-and-pink-striped wallpaper recalls Kenneth Noland's paintings of the early '70s. On the artist's sweatshirt, Saul has painted the letters YAIL, reminding us of a certain art school's long-held allegiance to critically accepted styles, formalism and its derivations, and Josef Albers' theories and subsequent influence. The painting raises questions so obvious that one wonders why they have not been asked repeatedly. Is much of recent art a product of art schools and therefore academic? Is what is accepted a sign of individualism or a matter of conformity? Do we look for how art fits into history or how it rejects repressive notions of historicism and linearity? Are we more interested in style or in subject? Saul has raised such questions throughout his career, pursuing one of the most trenchant examinations of received ideas and attitudes that contemporary art has witnessed. If art is to remain vital in these vacuous, media-determined times, it will be due largely to Saul and artists like him.

—John Yau