

Press Reviews

Pearl Fontaine, 'Irving Penn, Fiona Rae, and More Must See Paris Shows',
Whitewall, January 2020

Gloomy Blend



“Rude art seems to be my specialty”—asserts U.S. painter Peter Saul in this conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, pointing out how his career began accidentally in Paris in the early 1960s. From his words emerge a faithful devotion to painting, an obsession to get the “fresh image,” and a natural ability to mix cartoons, vernacular illustrations, current events, and history painting with a dose of chaos, destruction, and grotesque brutality that is still up nowadays in our society. Developed independently from concurrent art historical movements like Pop art and Abstract Expressionism, Saul’s works offer a critical take on consumeristic and imperialist models, drawing inspiration and ideas from *Time* and *Life* magazines as well.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

I’m curious to know about your beginnings. How did you come to art?

PETER SAUL

I don’t know, but it began between 1948 and 1952. Before I knew there was an “art world,” I decided I wanted to be an artist because I didn’t like the look of the way things were going to be. At that time, there were only two options for men: either shove boxes around in the back of a department store, or wear a necktie and talk about money all day. I didn’t want to get a job like that. I just wanted to stay at home and paint pictures—and have a beautiful woman and smoke a lot of cigarettes. [laughs] So I decided to be an artist.

HANS ULRICH

What did your parents say?

PETER

They were hurt, deeply hurt. They thought: “Oh God, he’s going to be a bum, a panhandler. Art’s a hobby, not a career.” My parents saw modern art as what wealthy women did in the afternoon to keep busy. It wasn’t a man’s work. A man goes to the office and wears a necktie. For them it was just a terrible decision on my part. I went to art school at Washington University in Saint Louis, where the teachers loved Georges Braque and Henri Matisse, so I got a proper beginning. After art school, in 1956, my girlfriend and I took off for Europe. We intended never to come back, but we did.

HANS ULRICH

Who were your heroes or heroines at the time?

PETER

The closest to a hero I had was Francis Bacon. I liked his gloomy look, that tragic atmosphere of his works. When I had my first show in Paris at Galerie Breteau in 1962, I came into the gallery and people were laughing at my pictures, so I knew I wasn’t going to make it as gloomy. So I just changed in an instant and became humorous. That’s it.

HANS ULRICH

But you were inspired by Bacon.

PETER

Not visually, but I liked the idea of gloom and tragedy. In the United States in the 1950s there was only cheerfulness. Nothing bad was allowed into your life. I liked that postwar gloom. I got all my art ideas from *Time* and *Life* magazines: they were my only contacts. I discovered *ARTnews* later. I read about Jackson Pollock in *Life* magazine. In the pre-TV days it was a big deal, the way you kept track of what was happening in the world.

HANS ULRICH

Did you meet Pollock?

PETER

No, I just read about him in *Life* magazine. I thought dripping paint off a stick was a phony gimmick. I did pay attention to other artists, like Paul Cadmus.

HANS ULRICH

And did you see Cadmus’s work *Coney Island*, from 1935?

PETER

Yes, I love it. I adore that sort of “bad stuff.”

HANS ULRICH

How long did you stay in Europe?

PETER

Eight years. We were in London, Amsterdam, Paris, and Rome.

HANS ULRICH

I understand you first saw *Mad* magazine in a Paris bookshop.

PETER

It was accidental. I just picked it up and looked at it. I didn’t know about it. In 1958 it was a magazine for young collectors, and it was too expensive for me. So I just looked at it for a minute and put it down, but I was immediately influenced toward storytelling.

HANS ULRICH

And how did cartoons enter your work? It’s interesting because there was Existentialism in Europe at that time, and you combined it with cartoons. Kind of an oxymoron.

PETER

I don’t know. It was hard to find out anything, and I was extremely isolated. The years we were in Paris were 1958 to 1962. I got lucky there, so then we celebrated by going to Rome. A better climate.

HANS ULRICH

Did you meet Leon Golub and Nancy Spero at that time?

PETER

I met them once, in 1962, in a Paris apartment. I saw Leon again later, at a summer camp.

HANS ULRICH

I heard from architect and painter Roberto Matta that you knew him, though.

PETER

I only met him for fifteen minutes, but we spoke on the phone. It was nice. I saw Roberto’s drawings at Galerie du Dragon in Paris. This is a well-known story I’ve told before: I saw some of his drawings but I didn’t know who he was because I didn’t attend any art history courses. My teacher said I could skip his class because he didn’t want anyone snickering in the back of the room, and he’d give me a C or a B.

HANS ULRICH

Galerie du Dragon was a very relevant gallery. Etel Adnan always went there to buy poetry and art. Max Clarac-Sérou ran it. Were you friends?

PETER

I never met him, but I knew of him. I was completely unknown then, but I liked Roberto’s drawings. I thought his work looked something like mine, and maybe he’d help me if I sent him some works. It took about ten months to find his address and phone number. Eventually I sent him some drawings, rolled up. Nothing happened, of course, and after three months I got the nerve up to phone him. He answered and said: “Oh yes, you sent me some drawings. See Allan Frumkin immediately at the Hotel Lutetia in Paris.” So I phoned Frumkin, and met him, and we started do business together. In 1961 I had my first show with him in Chicago, and in 1962 I had a show at his New York gallery.

HANS ULRICH

Which pieces did you show?

PETER

Mickey Mouse vs. the Japs from 1962, and two paintings from the *Icebox* series that were very popular. I didn't go to New York to find out anything or meet anybody. I wasn't troubled by anybody. I was completely reliant on letters from Allan. Money came in the mail.

HANS ULRICH

That's so different from now.

PETER

Well, most people were social at that time but I was a hard-core Communist. My girlfriend was even more negative than me. She *really* didn't like to socialize.

HANS ULRICH

What inspired you to be a Communist? The Communist Manifesto, or writings by Karl Marx?

PETER

A friend of mine read all the newspapers and filled me in. I didn't really know much. I was actually looking for a way to escape the draft, and if you joined the Communist Party you couldn't be in the U.S. Army. That was my main impetus. But I was never able to locate the Communist Party. It was too underground.

HANS ULRICH

In terms of Roberto Matta, I was wondering what your relationship was to Surrealism.

PETER

I liked Salvador Dalí, but I didn't know much about Surrealism. I was completely in the dark. There were five hundred students at my art school, but only twelve or fifteen were studying fine art; all the rest were studying commercial art, Ford and Mustang cars in perspective. But I didn't do that.

HANS ULRICH

What's the first work in your catalogue raisonné? The first one where you felt it's no longer a student work.

PETER

When I was in Amsterdam I realized two very large six-foot-wide paintings of American cars, like Cadillac. But we didn't know what to do with them, so I just stored them. They're still there, as far as I know.

HANS ULRICH

So these would be the first works in your catalogue raisonné?

PETER

Yeah, maybe. They are from 1956 or the beginning of 1957.

HANS ULRICH

And what about *Mickey Mouse vs. the Japs*? What prompted that painting?

PETER

This was an actual painting that I made for my first show in New York with Frumkin in 1962. I was pleased with the result. I just made it up. I knew I had to use my imagination, so I tried to do it. I thought: "What is American culture? It's about Japs, it's about Mickey Mouse. Let's try to fight it out." I'm starting to sketch out some paintings about women titled *Women Invade Wall Street* (2018). All the men have chins that get socked. The women come in, beat up the stockbrokers and the money men. I'm also finishing a picture called *A Clash of Styles*, where people have different-colored paintbrushes and sort of challenge each other.

HANS ULRICH

Like a war in painting?

PETER

Yes, war in painting. [*laughs*] Then I'm going to paint women in the art world, and myself as a woman.

HANS ULRICH

But you are not familiar with self-portraits, are you?

PETER

I guess not, but I'm going to do a self-portrait as an African American woman.

HANS ULRICH

Before you paint, you create drawings or sketches, right?

PETER

Yes. If I can't get an image, I don't do the painting.

HANS ULRICH

Do you realize them in color, with pastels?

PETER

No, just line drawings. Everything else is worked out while I paint, but if I don't get a fresh image, I don't go further.

HANS ULRICH

Do you have sketchbooks and doodles?

PETER

I have a pile of these sketches. One for each painting, since 1980.

HANS ULRICH

And what did you do before 1980?

PETER

I sketched on the picture itself, with markers.

HANS ULRICH

And do you use photography when you work?

PETER

I like to. If there's a celebrity in the painting, like George W. Bush, I try to have their photo. If I can't find one it's frustrating. To do the painting with Donald Trump, I spent sixty U.S. dollars on books about him.

HANS ULRICH

And what about the *Icebox* series?

PETER

It occurred to me that if I painted an icebox, I could put something inside it that wasn't supposed to be there. Like a telephone, or a naked woman. An icebox is a container. The idea was to have sort of a story that you make up. An uncensored story. For some unknown reason, the telephone is angry at the vegetables. Who knows why, who cares? You just do it. I'm not censorious.

HANS ULRICH

Have you ever been censored in your life?

PETER

Probably, but I don't know it. But now I'm more conscious. I try to be humorous, because otherwise it's simply noncommercial.

HANS ULRICH

In an interview you said that while in Paris, you were very inspired by nineteenth-century French art. What moved you the most?

PETER

In the 1990s we started going back to Paris again. We worked with Galerie du Centre, near the Centre Pompidou. I had a couple of shows there, and the gallery sold a lot of my works. I visited the Musée d'Orsay. I love Rosa Bonheur, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, and Jean-Léon Gérôme—to name just a few.

HANS ULRICH

I read that James Abbott McNeill Whistler was also of interest to you.

PETER

Yes, I saw recently his work at the Frick Collection in

New York, along with paintings by Diego Velázquez, Rembrandt. I really like them.

HANS ULRICH

And what do you like by Rosa Bonheur?

PETER

The Horse Fair (1852-1855) is the first painting I saw, at the Met. I love it. I'm impressed by the big subjects.

HANS ULRICH

Another epiphany I read about had to do with *The Night Watch* in Amsterdam. You've mentioned in two interviews that this moment was a transformative encounter. That *The Night Watch* was as transformative as *Mad* magazine.

PETER

It was all the same to me, because what I'm looking for is my own art style. I'm not looking for anything else. I'm not looking for quality, for bad, or good. I'm looking for something that will help me out, so I can live my whole life as an artist.

HANS ULRICH

Is it about freedom?

PETER

I've been totally free. The last "useful" work I did was 1959, when I sold newspapers on the street briefly—*briefly*—in Paris.

HANS ULRICH

And ever since, you've been free?

PETER

Free from any sort of obligation. I didn't want to be told what to do. I was sent to a very decent school, got a whole lot of beatings, and a lot of hell for everybody. It was supposed to teach boys to respect authority, but it didn't work for me.

HANS ULRICH

Do you have a daily ritual?

PETER

I paint from noon to seven, approximately. I get up late.

HANS ULRICH

Seven days a week?

PETER

Yes, if possible.

HANS ULRICH

After Paris you moved back to the United States, to the San Francisco Bay Area. What prompted that?

PETER

My father died, so we came back. I lived near San Francisco until 1973, and that's when I met Sally, and everything changed. A lot of life depends on who you're living with. I guess I'm not very forceful. *[laughs]*

HANS ULRICH

In the late 1960s, at the time of the Vietnam War, you were in California, and at a certain moment politics started entering in your work. When did it begin? Because although you were a Communist in Paris, one doesn't yet see politics in the paintings from that time.

PETER

There was some in Paris, but it wasn't very strong. *Hitler's Bathroom* from 1960 was in my first show. But when I got back to the United States and started painting, Allan used to visit once a year. His first visit was a little disappointing—he hinted that maybe my work wasn't scandalous enough, I wasn't going to cause any trouble. *[laughs]* So I looked in the newspaper and there was the Vietnam War, drug addiction, and psychotherapy. I just mixed them all together, and that was it. I'm not a person who cares a lot. I'm relaxed, more or less. The job is to make a picture that can be looked at.

HANS ULRICH

So you were inspired by images from newspapers. But your work has never been photo panting?

PETER

Probably not. Although you never know when a photograph is going to be useful. Some things are very hard to paint without looking at a photograph. One such is spaghetti. When you look at spaghetti on a plate it winds around itself, that's very hard to paint if you don't have a photo handy. Also with other things like Adolf Hitler's face or Joseph Stalin, all the big shots, you've got to have photos.

HANS ULRICH

When do you decide that a painting is finished?

PETER

It takes a few days to really finish it. But that's technical. The first thing the viewer sees is the last thing the artist did.

HANS ULRICH

What else is difficult to paint?

PETER

Cherry pie, snowy mountains. But if I can't find images of them in five minutes, I just use my imagination.

HANS ULRICH

And do certain things come from dreams? Do you dream?

PETER

Yes, but nothing interesting.

HANS ULRICH

The Vietnam connection is obvious, but what about the drugs, the psychoanalysis? How did they come in?

PETER

Well, a mother of a child who was my son's playmate was married to a psychiatrist. She dropped my son off at my house one day and saw one of my paintings and was quite upset. She said: "I'm going to sign you up for a club that I know about: a psychotherapy book club." I started getting these books, which mostly were just trash. What was really good were the life stories of insane people, how they became insane, and the crimes they committed. The book *In Cold Blood* (1965) by Truman Capote was very influential for me. I was very inspired by that whole story.

HANS ULRICH

Have you read many of Capote's books?

PETER

All of them, as far as I know.

HANS ULRICH

Is he your favorite writer?

PETER,

Yes, one of them.

HANS ULRICH

Who else do you like?

PETER

Well, we sometimes read out loud, Sally and me, and I like very much *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) by John Steinbeck, *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain, *Frankenstein* (1823) by Mary Shelley, *My Antonia* (1918) by Willa Cather, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), also by Willa Cather. Sally has a master's degree in English, so she picks the books.

HANS ULRICH

And then you read them to each other?

PETER

She does most of the reading; her eyes are better.

HANS ULRICH

Did you ever write about your work?

PETER

I did, quite a bit. My letters to the art dealer Allan Frumkin are going to be printed soon. But I haven't reread them, as I don't like to go back into the past.

HANS ULRICH

What do you write about?

PETER

Only myself. I was going to write my life story but it's too time consuming. But I just wrote a hundred words for the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art about *Superman Versus the Toilet Duck* (1963), a painting in their collection.

HANS ULRICH

What did you say about it?

PETER

I just wrote about how I wanted to make things up, and how I was displeased with modern art.

HANS ULRICH

Was this a form of counteraction?

PETER

I felt I wouldn't be noticed if I did modern art the way it was being done. You had to know the right people, obviously, and I didn't even *want* to know the right people.

HANS ULRICH

We spoke earlier about literature, but Dan Graham always says we can only understand an artist if we know what music he or she is listening to. What kind of music do you listen to?

PETER

For about the last twenty-five years I've just listened to classical music. At one time, for about ten or fifteen years, I listened to country and western because my children were coming into the studio and camping out right in front my paintings with their toys such that I couldn't even get to the work. That was kind of hopeless, so I tuned the radio to country and western and they fled! It got rid of my children! That was nice. That's a good anecdote I've never told.

HANS ULRICH

And now you listen to classical music when you paint?

PETER

Yes, I have just three buttons: heating, lights, and music.

HANS ULRICH

You've combined the Vietnam War with psychoanalysis and other sources. But what do you think painting can do now? And what's the mix today?

PETER

I don't think painting can ever help politics, but politics can help painting. I agree with Harold Rosenberg's idea that being influenced by a painting is so stupid. There's a wonderful painting waiting to be painted. Women: they're doing all the things they want to do: painting beautiful paintings, worth a lot of money, having art shows everywhere, but they're not doing the kind of paintings that I'm describing. They don't want to be rude in art. They may be rude socially, but they're not rude in art. And rude art seems to be my specialty. This has been evident since I started the paintings with a black maniac crossing the Golden Gate Bridge (from 1968 to 1970), or the series *Art World Portraits* (early 1970s). I made thirty-six of them on cardboard and Allan showed them in New York. I only got one review. At that point I thought I'd gone too far. So I went into the *History Paintings*.

HANS ULRICH

And what kind of histories did you paint?

PETER

I'm still doing them. I don't dislike other old history

paintings. I'm not against history paintings, I just want to add my own flavor to it, like *Sardanapalus* (2005), *Custer's Last Stand* (1989), and the most recent one, as *Return to the Alamo* (2017). Abstraction has to come, too.

HANS ULRICH

What are your abstract paintings?

PETER

In 1961 there were some kind of abstract moments that I do want to revisit. But actually they weren't really abstract. I was just trying to resemble Willem de Kooning. I started Abstract Expressionism in Paris, immediately after I'd been there a few days. It was easy to do, so I just kept doing it, and I expected it would help my career. But it did not at all. It was very harmful to me.

HANS ULRICH

How so?

PETER

Because people had already seen it.

HANS ULRICH

I'm very interested in artists' unrealized projects. Do you have any dreams or projects that were too big to be realized?

PETER

No, I don't want anything that's not hand-painted pictures. I don't want to build anything, although I have been contacted by somebody who wants to work with me on that.

HANS ULRICH

Have you ever made public art, like murals?

PETER

The problem is that it probably needs to be financed by somebody, and no one's ever commissioned me.

HANS ULRICH

Between 1966 and 1970 you did sculptures. They are quite unknown. Could you tell us about them?

PETER

di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art in California has a sculpture titled *Relax in Electric Chair (Dirty Guy)* from 1965.

HANS ULRICH

Could you describe it?

PETER

Yes, I got the idea while coming to the United States by boat in 1964. It's Styrofoam coated in white glue and a hand-applied plastic layer, all painted with enamels. The thing is, though, my ex-wife accidentally destroyed three of them. She didn't like them.

HANS ULRICH

How many were there?

PETER

Five or six.

HANS ULRICH

So there's never been an exhibition of your sculpture?

PETER

No, never. And I'm not going to make any more. I want to be alone with my canvas.

HANS ULRICH

What's the biggest canvas you've ever done?

PETER

It was called *Subway Massacre* (1979-1980). I think it was shown in New York in 1981, and then in Chicago.

HANS ULRICH

Have you had any connection with groups of artists like the Hairy Who in Chicago and the Bay Area Funk artists?

PETER

No. I've met these people, but very fleetingly. I haven't excelled at all in socializing, even though I'm very friendly, in my opinion.

HANS ULRICH

But have you been teaching, right?

PETER

Yes, I taught for nineteen years straight, and I'm still sometimes invited to campuses. I also taught before that, occasionally. But teaching art is easy. All you do is have a pleasant conversation. There's nothing else to it.

HANS ULRICH

Given all of your teaching, I expect you will have a good answer to this question I love to ask: What would be your advice to a young artist?

PETER

Avoid taking advice! Especially intelligent advice. It's a trap. If you take intelligent advice, you just end up in a comfortable group having two or three one-person shows, and then it's all over.

HANS ULRICH

Which young artist do you like?

PETER

Erik Parker, a friend of mine. I know him and his work. I like him a lot. KAWS [Brian Donnelly], Dana Shutz, and Keltie Ferris. But there are so many. I'm very friendly to artists. I like Nicole Eisenman, and Jim Shaw, too.

HANS ULRICH

Have you ever worked with film?

PETER

Yes, Bill Allen and Bruce Nauman made movies together, and I acted in a couple of those. In one film we smoked heavily, me and Allen, and talked nonsense about art while Nauman shoveled flour on the floor. In another one we're in the trenches during World War I, acting with wooden guns. I was very pleased to act with them.

PETER SAUL (b. 1945, San Francisco, lives in New York) received a BFA from the School of Fine Arts at Washington University in St. Louis in 1956. He has been the subject of retrospective exhibitions at the New Museum, New York (2019); Les Abattoirs, Toulouse (2019); Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2017); Deichtorhallen Hamburg (2017); the Orange County Museum of Art, Santa Ana (2008); Pennsylvania Academy of Arts, Philadelphia (2008); Musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables d'Olonne (1999); Musée de l'Hôtel Bertrand, Châteauroux (1999); the Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (1989); the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (1989); Contemporary Austin – Laguna Gloria (1989); Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans (1989); Swen Parson Gallery, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb (1980); and Madison Art Center, Wisconsin (1980). His work has been included in many important group exhibitions, including *Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965–1975*, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington (2019); *Les années Pop, 1956–1968*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2001); the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1995); *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–1962*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1992); *Funk*, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley (1967); and the Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (1967).

HANS ULRICH OBRIST (b. 1968, Zurich) is artistic director of the Serpentine Galleries, London. Prior to this he was the curator of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Since his first exhibition, *World Soup (The Kitchen Show)* in 1991, he has curated more than three hundred shows.

