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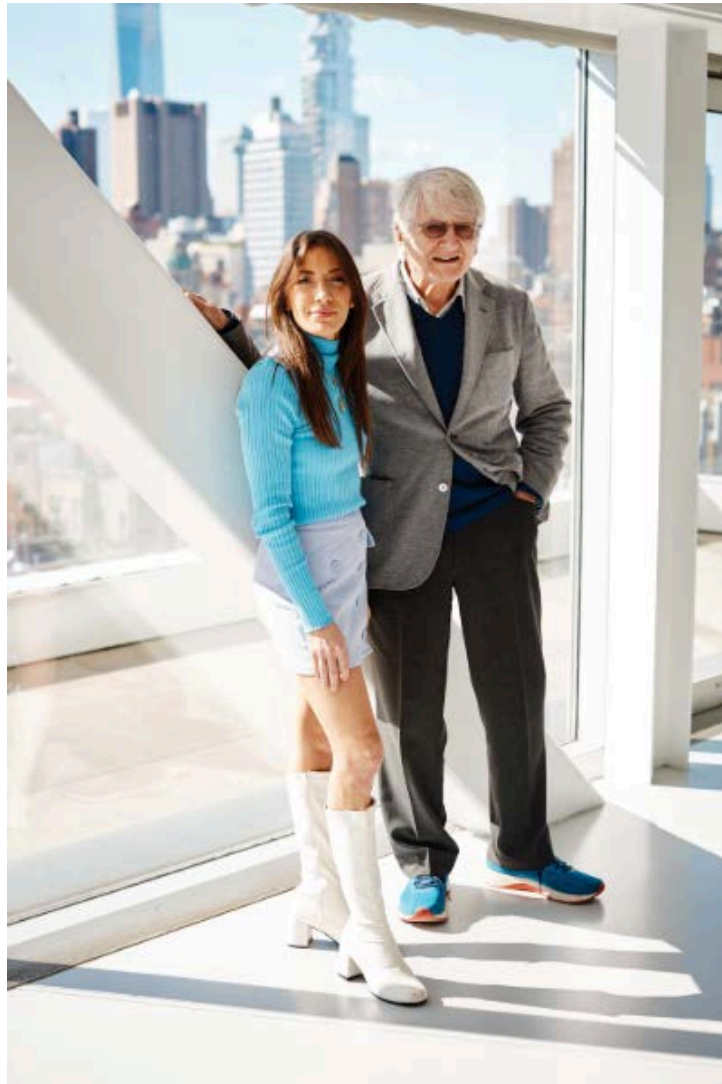
Ryan Waddoups, '7 Must-See Exhibitions This Week, From San Francisco to London and Beyond', Surface, February 2020

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# The ARTnews Accord: Painters Peter Saul and Jamian Juliano-Villani Talk Humor in Art, Life in the Studio, and More

BY **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Jamian Juliano-Villani and Peter Saul in the Sky Room at the New Museum.  
WESTON WELLS

**Peter Saul's** pointed and provocative style of painting has been raising brows and hackles since the late 1950s. On a long list of influences that counted as outliers within the fine-art tradition he transgressed were comic books and absurdist antics of the kind popularized by *Mad* magazine, mixed with an appreciation of Surrealism and other perhaps surprisingly stately painters throughout the ages. After decades of underground appreciation as an “artist’s artist,” Saul has been cited by a growing list of young painters for whom his lively and playful vision has proven influential. The market for his work has also swelled, with a recent auction record of \$575,000 for *Saul's Guernica* in 2016 and sales led by the galleries Venus Over Manhattan and Michael Werner. Later this month, the New Museum will mount the first museum exhibition of Saul's work in New York, with some 60 paintings spanning his decades-long career on view until the summer

**Jamian Juliano-Villani** has emerged as a visionary painter in New York starting with her first gallery show in the city in 2013. A native of New Jersey, the 32-year-old artist participated in the 2014 group exhibition “Puddle, Pothole, Portal”—curated by Ruba Katrib and artist Camille Henrot—at SculptureCenter in Queens. The following year, she presented her first show of phantasmagorical paintings at JTT, the Lower East Side gallery that currently represents her.

In October, Saul and Juliano-Villani joined *ARTnews* for lunch (with more than a little alcohol to loosen the mood) at Floret, a few doors down from the New Museum on the Bowery. For Saul, a cheeseburger and red wine; for Juliano-Villani, whiskey, neat (with a Coke on the side for appearance's sake)

**ARTnews: What was a formative early experience you had with an artwork?**

**Peter Saul:** Mine was a gay masterpiece by Paul Cadmus. My mother got a book from the Book of the Month Club on American art—the only art book my parents ever owned—and his *Coney Island* (1935) was in there. I was really attracted to it at age 5. My mother was upset with my choice of art, but, you know, what the hell. All of my influences came to me from reproductions mostly. The first picture I saw in person was Larry Rivers's *Double Portrait of Berdie* (1955), of his mother-in-law naked. That I liked.

**Jamian Juliano-Villani:** I used to love Andrew Wyeth. It's pretty corny, but that's OK. Also Giorgio Morandi, because it was so boring. It looks like what art should be, but you can totally ignore it at the same time. I liked that. Then I was looking at Robert Rauschenberg and reading *The Andy Warhol Diaries*. It's really big and is a good bathroom book. I got really into how he had all these time-capsule boxes and would save everything. I started doing that with printed materials. I am a hoarder. When I found out *Playboy* was going out of print, I bought every *Playboy* I could—because the ads are so good.



Jamian Juliano-Villani, *Born This Way*, 2018.  
COURTESY JTT, NEW YORK

**ARTnews:** Both of you work with a pointed sense of humor, which is not especially common in art. How did you find that register?

**Saul:** I thought I was a follower of Francis Bacon actually—a gloomer. But then when I had my first show in Paris, I walked into the opening and, of about 30 people in the room, two were laughing. At what, I don't know—but I took that to mean my paintings were funny. I decided then that I was a funny artist instead of a gloomer. That was it. I changed my self-definition to being a funny artist, and I have been one ever since. I laugh at everything. I'm not supposed to say that, but it's true that I have *too much* of a sense of humor.

**Juliano-Villani:** You know how you have all the different areas for tastes on your tongue? In paintings I've got to hit those marks—and humor is one of them. When I make a painting, I like to start out with something stupid, then bring it somewhere to cancel that out—then bring it back to something else . . .

**Saul:** . . . to be *more* stupid . . .

**Juliano-Villani:** . . . so aggressively stupid that you can't even talk about it!

**Saul:** That's when you know it's a good idea.

**ARTnews:** Is the art world more or less receptive to humor now than in the past?

**Saul:** The audience has reacted differently, mostly negatively, until recent years. Now it is becoming a little bit OK. But if you were buying a new car and you handed over the check and the salesman burst out laughing, how would you feel? That is the thinking behind the seriousness of art—avoid humor because it interferes with serious collecting. People try to be serious, and it makes sense in a way because people are teaching this stuff. But I don't give a damn.

**Juliano-Villani:** I would never teach.

**Saul:** It's an advantage. It gives your voice gravity.

**Juliano-Villani:** I just feel like once you start teaching, you have to justify everything and then your work will suck because you have to give reasons for everything. I will do it when I am really broke in a couple of years.

**Saul:** I enjoyed it. I just asked each student what they were trying to do and helped them do it. I treated all paintings the same: spooky realistic pictures and big zigzag-y things—they're all the same to me. It also helps with the conversational ability you need as a modern artist. You need to sound convincing, because if you look at modern art from a certain distance, one thing is pretty much as good as another.



Peter Saul, *Girl Trouble II*, 1987.

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