

Peter Saul Wants to Paint Women's Misbehavior

A conversation with the painter ahead of his retrospective at the New Museum in New York.

Peter Saul's iconoclastic paintings have taken America's pulse for over six decades, by capturing the idiosyncrasies of our country's political and cultural landscape with caustic humor. His works caricature a chaotic medley of political figures, celebrities and pop culture icons to uncover the psychological underpinnings of the United States' national consciousness. Antagonistic to the very core, the artist's unruly compositions utilize cartoonish sensibilities to impart charged commentaries about a wide range of topics—for instance, capitalist greed, art history, and the American military's ghastly engagements in Vietnam and Iraq. Never one to shy away from challenging subject matters, he is a trailblazer in twentieth and twenty-first century painting, masterfully infusing form and color with the maddening incongruities of the world as he sees it.

Widely regarded as one of Pop Art's founding fathers, Saul has been credited as a formative source of influence for a long list of artists that includes Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon, Aaron Curry, and Jim Shaw, to name just a few. In spite of this, his inimitable practice still remains somewhat on the peripheries of the art historical canon, which more likely than not is a result of a persistent rebellion against the trends that have come to define the art genres of his time. In the earlier years of his career, Saul opted for his very own strain of psychedelic figuration while most other painters embraced Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Still to this day, the artist's bluntness and flair for perversion, inflicted by a devil-may-care attitude towards political correctness and conventional taste, feel as revelatory as ever.

On the eve of the New Museum's survey exhibition *Crime and Punishment*—remarkably, Saul's first in New York City, and a very long overdue one at that—the octogenarian artist reflects on his life and practice.



"THE GOVERNMENT OF CALIFORNIA," 1969, OIL ON CANVAS COURTESY VENUS OVER MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

When and why did you decide to settle in New York?

[I] moved to New York about 19 years ago, when I reached age 66 and retired from [my] teaching job. This was my first move motivated mainly by art. [My wife] Sally and I thought that we'd try our hand at having normal art careers—get to know art critics and curators, and all that sort of normal stuff that artists do.

Are there key artists or cultural figures (past or present) that stand out in your mind, as having influenced your work?

[I] have a definite taste for the gloomy, the heavy, and the psychological, even though my own pictures tend to make fun of those things. Most of the individual pictures that I could say have influenced me [were ones that] I saw as reproductions. For instance, Paul Cadmus's *Coney Island*, which I saw in 1939 in a book my mother got from a Book of the Month club; Graham Sutherland's portrait of Winston Churchill, which I saw in *Time*; Francis Bacon's screaming cardinals, also in *Time*. In the real, I very, very much enjoyed Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, which I got to know while in Amsterdam in 1957. More recently, I became interested in the 19th century—Manet, Monet, Gérôme, Whistler, Tissot, Bonheur—due to travels to France from the 1990s [onward]. In addition, some paintings like de Kooning's women, Picasso's *Guernica*, and Beckmann's *The Night*—while not actually influencing me—became works that I realized I could make my own versions of. Whew! Too complex to describe accurately.

The exhibition at the New Museum begins chronologically with paintings from the 1960s. What prompted you to create the Ice Box series, early on?

The icebox was simply an excuse to make some entertaining “mistakes.” Instead of just food, there would be guns, telephones, vegetables and so forth, all relating to each other in a kind of spontaneous narrative.



"DONALD TRUMP IN FLORIDA," 2017. ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. HALL COLLECTION. COURTESY HALL ART FOUNDATION

The appearance of various political figures obviously plays a huge role in your work. Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush were painted a number of times during their tenures. Donald Trump also appears in a few works, though I recall you saying that you no longer want to paint him. Is this still true?

I seem to be a lot more inspired by the bad guys than the good guys. Obama, Churchill, Ike—hard to do! Stalin, Mao, Reagan, Bush, Hitler—yes, I can! The problem with Trump is [that] I never expected him to be elected, so I was slow to get to him. About 10,000 other artists got there first, so there was nothing left for me but to turn him into a crocodile or a wonder woman.

In your mind, what is the role of art and painting within the realm of political engagement?

I think political leaders, wars, and executions make interesting subject matter. I probably agree with Harold Rosenberg that politics can help art, but art can't do any good for politics. Anyone who is politically influenced by a picture has a screw loose.

Are there figures (real or fictional) that you are currently interested in painting?

I want to paint the misbehavior of women from a sympathetic viewpoint. Actually, I've already begun in that I painted a large "women invade Wall Street" [composition] where three women of appropriate color—black, white and dusky—destroy three white executives, using just their knuckles and knees. Lots of fun, good picture. [It] was shown at Mary Boone's uptown space a year or so ago. The reason I want to continue is that it's such a good piece of subject matter, just like Vietnam, drug addiction, and Trump, which for some reason most other artists have a hard time with. (They have to be truthful, fair, etc. Yawn!) For complicated reasons of temperament and upbringing, I need little approval, so I can get right to it.



"TARGET PRACTICE," 1968. ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, DC; JOSEPH H. HIRSHHORN PURCHASE FUND, 2016. COURTESY VENUS OVER MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

I remember seeing that painting in your studio, when I visited you and Sally in Germantown for the first time! It was July, and you had on a Christmas album. Do you have any favorite records or musicians that you listen to when you paint?

My choice of music in the studio is pretty accidental. Normally, I press a button and the local classical station begins. If there's too much talk going on, I play whichever disc comes to hand. Mozart's Requiem, Christmas carols, or Johnny Paycheck's songs of male misery—makes no difference. I admit to [a] lack of musical taste.

Lastly, as someone who is widely regarded as one of Pop Art's founding fathers, what advice would you give to a young or emerging painter?

I think the young artist should try and avoid seriously considering any advice from anyone, including me. That said, I advise staying relaxed; avoid believing in things you don't have to (traffic rules OK, art movements forget it); and do what you want, not what someone thinks you should do.