

Press Reviews

Alex Jovanovich, 'Peter Saul', Artforum, February 2020

INTERVIEWS

PETER SAUL

February 11, 2020 • Peter Saul on his life and art



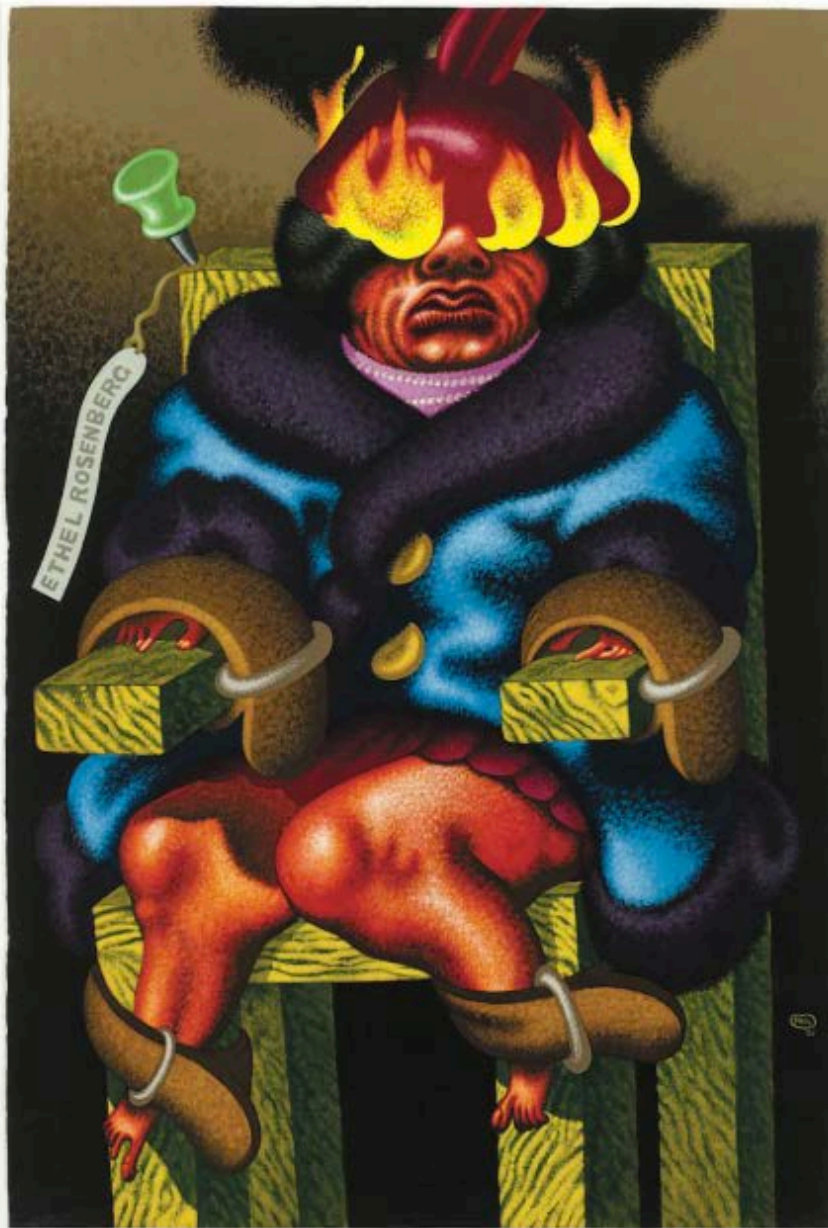
Peter Saul, *Bush at Abu Ghraib*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 90".

Peter Saul remembers a radio broadcast about the electrocution of Ethel Rosenberg at New York's Sing Sing Correctional Facility in 1953—in particular, the moment when a horrified announcer described her hair going up in flames. There's a gruesome, orange-skinned rendering of her, strapped to an acid-green version of Old Sparky, in "Peter Saul: Crime and Punishment," a six-decade survey that features more than sixty of the artist's dark, dyspeptic, and ruefully funny paintings, which take on American history, stupidity, and culture. The show, organized by Massimiliano Gioni and Gary Carrion-Murayari for New York's New Museum, runs until May 31, 2020. Here, the octogenarian painter—affable, self-effacing, and utterly gracious—talks about life, luck, and the pitfalls of needing validation.

HAVING MY FIRST SURVEY IN NEW YORK FEELS PRETTY GOOD. Massimiliano and Gary contacted me about the exhibition a few years ago and came up with the concept for it. Several electric chair paintings are going to make up the core of the show—the ones featuring the serial killer John Wayne Gacy and Superman getting executed are among them. And I let the curators do what they wanted to do. I didn't try to push them around. It's impossible to make anybody do anything on that kind of institutional level, so I just relaxed and enjoyed it.

Actually, I'm surprised at how good it feels to have this show. Two or three years ago, I wouldn't have imagined such a thing could have been possible. But I've resolved myself to live without these kinds of expectations. I've spent a long time doing my own thing, without much fuss or attention. Also, I have this ability to not need a lot of approval. Well, I need *a little bit*, I guess, but I don't need as much as most artists. I know this from teaching—I was a painting professor at the University of Texas in Austin for nearly twenty years. I saw that most of my students couldn't even begin to paint a picture because they needed so much approval just to get started. I'm the opposite: I go at the canvas with enthusiasm. I don't think of other people when I paint.

Which means that I'm not really bothered by disapproval. In fact, I find it kind of flattering. I've angered so many different kinds of people over the years with my work. I don't do it on purpose, necessarily—there are just certain subjects I enjoy using and exploring because it's great material. And usually, it's pretty awful stuff! I shouldn't say it because it's likely the wrong attitude, but I enjoyed painting the Vietnam War, and I enjoy painting women getting mad—I enjoy every darn thing I paint! I don't demand that my pictures agree with the public. But I don't demand that they agree with me, either.



Peter Saul, *Ethel Rosenberg in Electric Chair*, 1987, acrylic on paper, 60 x 40".

It takes approximately a month to make a painting—I waste a few days worrying about it at the start. And I work on one picture at a time. A carpenter friend of mine creates the stretchers. They're expensive, like getting big pieces of furniture made. Anyway, the most important thing is figuring out the image, that's the hardest part. Once I have a sense of it the colors and shapes just slowly come together. I like to think that I'm giving the viewer a lot to look at. Contemporary art doesn't like to give all that much, you know? But I think I do—I put a lot in for a hand-painted picture. And I try not to make art for the “educated” few. I treat all my viewers the same.

When I was first starting out, I was a little disappointed to discover that pursuing art was somehow respectable. I simply denied that aspect of it, quite frankly. I decided to just keep doing what I wanted to do, even though, for a long time, it didn't make sense to a lot of people. But I'm grateful that Allan Frumkin, my first art dealer—he died about eighteen years ago—understood it. From about 1960 to 1997, he was my sole supporter. He and three or four collectors were the only human beings who liked my work. In some ways, Allan was my closest friend, too. I was very fortunate to meet him.

I have a good life. I've been married to my wife, Sally, a sculptor, for forty-five years. We get along well and don't have any problems. I've also been very, very lucky—I credit luck to a great extent for everything that's happened to me as an artist. Well, that and my optimism. Basically, I'm just living my life, and it's good. This New Museum show is a little bit of a plus. I like it.

— *As told to Alex Jovanovich*