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UFOs, Making Love: Peter Saul Keeps It Interesting

Peter Saul is a national treasure, a man who still, at the age of 80, is making exuberantly perverse paintings of the really important stuff — like pastries, having sex with each other. Tonight through April 18, Venus Over Manhattan presents "From Pop To Punk," a trove of drawings and large-scale canvases from the '60s and '70s, all of them from the collection of Saul's longtime dealer, the late Allan Frumkin. The works are rife with oozing orifices, crucifixions, lolling tongues, and Saul's trademark acidic wit and Day-Glo color palette. I spoke with the painter from his home in Germantown, New York, where he's working hard toward a May show at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles and a November solo with Mary Boone in Manhattan.



Where were you in 1960?

I was an isolated person living in Paris. I was looking for an art dealer to show my work.

What brought you to Paris?

I had been in Holland, with my girlfriend. We didn't bother to get a visa when we went. About a year later, the local cop in this tiny town we were living in asked to see our passports. And he said, Uh oh, you have to leave the country immediately. So we went to Paris, just like that. We dragged our

stuff across the snow, March, 1958, and from that point on it was sort of a struggle for a couple of years — to meet someone like Allan Frumkin. I met Frumkin in 1960, and he started buying my work. He bought my work all the way up until 1997. The first sales were very good, for the first few years. Terrific. Because of the Pop art thing that I coincided with. But then sales dropped off to zero, practically, for the longest time. But he kept on buying, anyway...



So you got to Paris and had a studio set-up there?

Not exactly, no. We just got there and we didn't know what to do. We were walking along the street and this guy tried to get us to enroll in his brother's art school. And when we told him we didn't have any money he said, That's O.K., you can still paint, I'll show you where! And he showed us the American Art Student's Club. All I had to do was pay \$12 and I could use the public studio. You just had to wear a necktie going through the lobby, so I carried a necktie in my pocket for the next couple of years. That's where I painted. Later, we found a place to live out in the country, a short metro ride south of Paris. I had a very small studio, about 12 feet square. It seemed to me lovely, a large space.

What were you thinking about with these early paintings?

I sort of designed my whole art-style at once. Before that things had been confused and chaotic, I painted landscapes and this and that. When we got to Paris I [thought]: Well, I'll use the American art style, Abstract Expressionism... and then two months later, approximately, it occurred to me that I needed something else. That something else was provided to me by a brief glimpse of

“Mad” magazine. In a bookstore, I simply opened it and turned to a page in which a guy has shot holes through a lot of dollar bills and things, with a smoking machine gun. I wasn’t really interested in cartoons as such; what struck me was the idea. I went to the studio and I began immediately — with a gun shooting many bullets at once. I put that on the canvas. And within a very short time, I had also thought of using other things from American culture. *Hey, I’ll put American culture in with Abstract Expressionism!* I just did it, without further thinking. What can I do? There’s Donald Duck, remember him? Remember Mickey Mouse? Dick Tracey, Flattop, Pruneface, all those people? And then I involved WWII, I had Donald Duck versus the Japs, all that stuff. And I was still very isolated, the only people I knew were a very few Americans who were inhabiting this studio with me [in Paris].

What did they think of what you were up to?

They were astonished. People found it astonishing, I don’t know why. It seemed an obvious thing to do. A lot of the things I do are obvious things that for some reason are not done. I could never figure this out. Why don’t people do the obvious? So that’s the story of how I began this, pretty much. I remained living an isolated life for a long time until I began teaching, really.

How long were you in France?

I was there from ’58 to ’62. The first year and a half was pretty chaotic. Selling newspapers and stuff, trying to get money, basically. And then the remainder was quite luxurious. I had money from Allan Frumkin. I celebrated success in the art world, which was quite sudden, and I suddenly had \$1,000 a month, when formerly I had nothing, basically. So what we did with this money: we had a baby, we bought a car, and we celebrated by going to Rome, because it would be warmer and better looking. I was in Rome from ’62 to ’64. And that’s when a number of these pictures were painted, like the one of the guy in the electric chair, “Sex Deviate being Executed.”

Did you pick up many influences from living in Italy or France?

I was an isolated person, I wasn’t picking up anything. I had to use my imagination. What was my actual mindset when I was painting these pictures? I would say to myself: Let’s do a man in an electric chair. Now what can we think about him? I would free associate. Let’s find out if it has any interesting psychology. *Oh boy, look at this, look what I’ve got going!* I like it when ideas collide. When somebody has the wrong idea about women, combined with the wrong idea about politics, combined with some other wrong idea — I like it. It makes me laugh. I have to admit I’ve been enjoying myself. But through a large part of my life I’ve been desperately trying to think of some good *reason* for all this, and I haven’t really thought of a good reason. So that’s that. I have to admit, I just made it up without excuse.

Well, as long as you keep entertaining yourself — you're your own best audience.

I don't even need to entertain myself. I hope this will make contact with other people in the sense that there will be a mutual entertainment. And if there's an ulterior motive on my part it would be fear of having a job. I didn't want that. I wanted to remain at home — and I *have* simply been at home, painting these pictures.

What brought you back to the States?

What happened was my father died and my mother said if you come and live near me I'll put a down payment on a house for you. We said *absolutely*. We were tired of dealing with landlords in Europe, they're terrible. So we went back and became homeowners, I lived near San Francisco, Mill Valley, a small town to the north. And I lived there for six or seven years. Then in the mid-'70s onwards I got divorced and remarried and we lived in Chappaqua, New York.

Were you still a secluded person when you returned to the US?

I was ready to meet artists but it wasn't as easy as I thought. I'd been way too isolated, and I still am. Unfortunately I haven't thought sufficiently about art. What I never realized — and it's really stupid — is the art world is the art world because all these thousands of famous and not-famous artists do things, over centuries. This hadn't occurred to me. It was just *me*, I just saw myself and my needs and what I was going to paint. But anyway, what the heck. Too late now. Well, teaching convinced me that my personality was O.K.

The show at Venus Over Manhattan demonstrates a pretty obvious switch in your work at a certain point — you move from this looser look to a harder, almost airbrushed thing.

That would be right when I came to California from Europe. I wanted to accentuate the image. I used these Day-Glo acrylics to make it shine out towards you.

Were those colors that painters were using at the time, in a fine-art context?

No. I found them accidentally. They were from a Mexican company, they made some of these Day-Glo colors for Mexican muralists, I guess. They had a store in San Francisco, and I simply started using it in the paint, and then more and more. I'm into using acrylic, in a complicated kind of way. Making it just as good as oil paint, better maybe. It's odd — when I started out, acrylic was for children, pretty much. It was a cheaper paint. It wasn't supposed to look very good or last very long. Oil paint was very expensive and something to consider, seriously. This

came to me early in California: To make the picture look really good, glamorous. Ultra-good, if I could.

Did you have any connection to the cartooning scene?

Cartooning and me are friends. I seem to have been attracted to it from the beginning, but I never tried to be a cartoonist myself. To want to have a cartoon strip or something never occurred to me, although it did occur to other people. I remember when Zap Comix came out, the guy who was putting it together, Don Donahue, invited me to be part of it, but I never did it. After about three or four months he quit waiting for me. But I remember meeting Robert Crumb, and S. Clay Wilson and those people. It was interesting. I like comics, but what I want to do is control the *wall*. I want something that is on the wall, not something you make at a *desk*.



What other things inspired you?

I [based] the likenesses [for some of the paintings] from the contributor's photos in Artforum magazine. But anyway, I just made the pictures. And looking back on it, I should have done a lot more thinking, but I never thought about what would help or hinder art, or what art should be, I just saw

myself and my need to be in the art field without actually *being* there. I wanted (and this is a foolish idea), I wanted my pictures to exist in art whereas I wouldn't need to. I would remain at home and relax. Enjoy myself. While my pictures were doing all the work out there. It puts a lot of strain on the art dealer. I wanted an art dealer to be my stand-in in the art world. I would remain in the studio, relaxed, happy, woman, glass of wine, plenty of cigarettes to smoke, that kind of thing.

You didn't like the schmoozing?

I didn't do it. But now I've changed my mind, of course. I mean, after retirement at age 66, my wife and I decided to come up here to the Hudson Valley, in

Germantown. We lived in the city for a number of years. My wife is a ceramicist, and we share a studio — she has a kiln downstairs, I'm upstairs.

Do you ever collaborate?

Well, no, not really. We should, but we haven't. It's just a matter of time before we do, if I live that long. We simplified our life. I'm 80 years old, I have a right to have a simple life. People come and see me if they really want to. Germantown is a tiny place, it's one stop light. It's got a good grocery store, a fairly decent wine store, post office, and not much else. It's got gas stations, you got a big choice of gas stations. You know how New York is in the countryside — it's mostly messed up, but that's the way life is up here.

What have you been working on recently?

Right now I'm painting a picture of Donald Duck versus Piet Mondrian. They have boxing gloves and they're battling. The duck is getting beat up by Mondrian. And before that I painted a picture of art and money.

Also at war with each other?

Not really. In my version — and this is again probably not thought through as well as it should be — the money is making the art. The money has arms, with brushes, and is schmooshing around in paint. And then before that I did a sex picture, with these airplanes. The pilots become like cocks, and they have intercourse with each other — it's kind of weird. It's in mid-air, but it's crowded — there's like four airplanes up there. And two flying saucers, *doing it down* in one corner.

Sounds pretty normal to me.

You never see flying saucers doing it! There are a lot of flying saucers up there, everybody sees them. But you never see them having sex. They never make love. There has to be some way for them to reproduce... And let's see, before that, I did cake and pie making love. I'm very busy! I've got all kinds of things in my head that I need to do.

Do you keep a running list of scenarios?

What I do is make little sketches. When I get them right, which takes a while — it can take quite a few days — I grid them and put them on the canvas. I start with that. I redraw it a great deal until I get what I want, because the problem with a little sketch is that it tends to have a graphic solution, whereas a big canvas, five by six feet, it gets its life not by having graphic solutions but by being realized as one thing and another thing, next to each other. So I have to redraw it at least some, and maybe completely, so that I have a solution that makes sense in terms of being *viewed*, not just like read in a comic book.

And these paintings will be for your Los Angeles show at David Kordansky?

These are for LA I'm going to deal with New York [for Mary Boone] separately. I think what I need to do is make a fairly complete break, to do something that looks quite different. The more times you do that, you give the illusion that you're still alive. You do the same thing all the time, it lulls people to sleep. I'm going to deal with some of the Old Masters, using my skills and colors to redraw them somewhat. Kind of a modernization. I have a career to maintain. The way I maintain it is to stay interesting, if possible.