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David Ebony's Top 10 New York Gallery Shows for March

David Ebony, Thursday, March 19, 2015



Peter Saul, *The Government of California* (1969).
Photo: Courtesy Venus Over Manhattan.

Peter Saul at Venus Over Manhattan, through April 18.

"Peter Saul: From Pop to Punk" is a stunning, museum-quality survey of Peter Saul's early work, from 1961 to 1973. The twenty-one major paintings and large works on paper on view are rarely exhibited pieces from the estate of Saul's long-time dealer Allan Frumkin. And many of them may be counted among the best and most provocative works of the San Francisco-born New York artist's long career. Right from the start, Saul was not out to please art audiences. His early work has a consistently acerbic edge and a raw and fearless political stance in which no subject matter seemed to be off limits.

Paintings such as *Sex Boat* (1961), and *Superman and Superdog in Jail* (1963), place Saul at the forefront of the early Pop art movement, since they feature cartoon imagery and schematic figurative elements executed with painterly panache. While these works address the American vernacular with tongue-in-cheek humor, they appear as send-ups of the *Ab Ex* tradition that dominated painting of the previous decade. As the 1960s progressed, Saul's palette became increasingly caustic, as he favored hot pinks and acid greens, and his painting and drawing style grew more refined.

His imagery, too, became increasingly outrageous while he aimed for a new kind of cartoon-inflected, epic history painting. A number of works, such as *Human Dignity* (1966) and *Pinkville* (1970), for instance, constitute ferocious protests against the Vietnam War. In *The Government of California* (1969), Saul tackles corruption in his home state, with an image that features a sardonic portrait of then-governor, and future U.S. president, Ronald Reagan. I imagine that Saul's paintings were difficult for most people to look at, let alone appreciate, when they first appeared. Today, they seem masterful and of-the-moment, well attuned to the *Zeitgeist* of our time.