

VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

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Pictures with Problems



"I think I was way oversensitive as a kid, very much easily frightened," Peter Saul said in an oral history for the Archives of American Art in 2009:

I was frightened of movies, very scared. My mother was quite a fan of film noir and mystery stories by Ellery Queen and things of that type. And she took me to these movies, which by today's standards would be not only harmless, it would be impossible to imagine any child or human being being scared of. *Dressed to Kill* [1941] was the first one I remember ... The reason I was scared was because it took place in an old Victorian building like my parents rented at that time. And there was a dumbwaiter that went from

the basement, where there had been some servant kitchen, up to the dining room. And in the movie, a hand comes out of the dumbwaiter with a gun and shoots somebody at the dining table.

So anyway, we come into the dining room in the evening. The maid is going to serve the stuff and everything is fine. I realize that my position is with my back to the dumbwaiter. If it were to happen, of course, you know, imagination takes over, you know. I thought, oh, my God; I could be killed this evening.

You can see the aftereffects of this fear in his work, and it's contagious. To look at a Peter Saul painting is to think, I could be killed this evening—but, you know, I'm kind of looking forward to it. "From Pop to Punk," a show at Venus over Manhattan featuring his work from the sixties and seventies, brims with candy-colored violence and lush, vibrant grotesqueries. Hundreds of hands (and eyes and tongues) with guns emerge from the dumbwaiters of the mind. Things writhe, stab, choke, and unravel, often simultaneously. Saul, who's eighty now, describes these as "pictures with problems."

"Since I've become old, I've become much more interesting to most people," he said in his oral history. "I haven't given up on painting. I think it has to have a good story, and I think that the story was banished from painting too quickly at the end of the nineteenth century." And Saul is definitely a storyteller—the most interesting one at the campfire, an antic, willfully offensive bard. The narratives in his paintings hover just on the right side of inscrutability, and his fondness for labels ("combined rich and poor asshole" is a personal favorite) helps to demystify, though not, of course, to solve: these are pictures with problems, not solutions.