

VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

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ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS New York

Peter Saul

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN
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Caught up in the fluorescent reds, acidic greens, and woozy ultramarine blues coating erotic entanglements of cartoons and classical figuration, politics and fantasy, in these acrylic and oil canvases, you could just miss the black marker insignia "SAUL '68" on *Target Practice*.



Hiding in plain sight is evidence that these large works hail from an era of riots, uprisings, the Vietnam War, and the flourishing of countercultural glee in America. Take equal parts hysterical protest and militaristic righteousness and you have a painting like *Pinkville*, 1970: A glistening orange American soldier with a cross around his neck, a protruding erection, and a green army helmet stabs and stomps on dehumanized representations of Vietnamese women, one of whose hair curls into fat black letters spelling *Big Murder*. This canvas's power lies in the way it toys with enshrining entitled fantasies about domination while bellowing its protest against such scenes, which are brought to life through war time after time.

Throughout the paintings on view, not an inch of their surfaces backs down from competing for the eye's attention through their formal ingenuity, lurid palette, and the brake-screaming words, such as *Bank of Shitor Fucking Cop*, that address all too contemporary realities. The latter phrase is emblazoned across the length of a red-faced policeman's fleshy pink schlong, whose head splits to grasp the blade of a sickening yellow pocketknife inscribed with *Decency* in *Self Defense*, 1969. The handle of the knife reads *Self-defense*, though, and is delicately grasped by the claw of a Black Panther woman tangled in the drooling policemen's limbs. But her expression reads cool as a cucumber compared to the cops' spluttering hate, fear, and telling lust.