

VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

Hirsch, Faye, "Peter Saul | Venus Over Manhattan," *Art in America*, June 10, 2015.

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Peter Saul: *The Government of California*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 68 by 96 inches; at Venus Over Manhattan.

PETER SAUL Venus Over Manhattan

I doubt Peter Saul will ever get his critical due as the significant painter of his generation that he is. Like Robert Colescott, another artist who did not hesitate to offend in his skewering of U.S. culture, Saul has never toed the line of art-world taste (or tastefulness), remaining staunchly figurative and political, and a painter to the core. War, greed, racism, sexual hypocrisy and institutional abuse are among his perennial targets, and his sheer glee in committing them to paint helps him defy categorization. The 16 paintings and five drawings in this recent exhibition come from the collection of Saul's longtime dealer Allan Frumkin (1927-2002), and they are quite the stash.

Spanning the years 1961 to 1973, "Peter Saul: From Pop to Punk" showed the artist migrating from somewhat conventionally arranged, Pop-infused oils to eye-popping acrylics with tangled compositions and fluorescent hues. How apt that Saul (b. 1934), who was already enamored of comics during his Bay Area childhood, first saw *Mad* magazine in a shop in Paris, where he lived between 1956 and 1964. His paintings became a crucible of high-art abstraction and low-life cartooning, which he rendered inseparable. Take *Pinkville* (1970), his monumental cri de coeur against the Vietnam War. A giant sunburnt G.I., his dick bulging out of skimpy green pants, rampages with a twisting stride through a pagoda-studded landscape. Painted words and phrases, themselves the stuff of linear excitation, embellish content. "Chung Chong," "Chung Ching," "Ching Chang" and "Ching Chong" are the impolite names for four naked, yellow-skinned women whom the G.I.

stomps with his big boots or shoots in the mouth and ass via four long, gummy arms. The phrase "Big Murder" ties two of the women together by their pigtails. All the elements are linked in a serpentine composition, a grand circuit of outrage. Saul thus commemorates the 1968 massacre that occurred in My Lai, nicknamed "Pinkville" by U.S. troops.

In *Government of California* (1969), Ronald Reagan, a creature with bleeding eyes who's being injected with drugs, is entwined with a haloed Martin Luther King Jr., portrayed as an octopus whose tentacles fail to distribute coins to the poor. Even the saints are grotesque. Surely Saul's sympathy lies with Angela Davis in *Crucifixion of Angela Davis* (1973), as he models her broken (though unsettlingly voluptuous) body on the type of the suffering Christ seen in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Our shock is meant to shake us out of complacency.

One of the early oils, *Superman in the Electric Chair*, was painted in 1963, the same year as Warhol's *Electric Chair*. The topic of the death penalty was in the air, as New York State performed its last executions. Saul's Pop, hot and wild, is a far cry from Warhol's chilly blankness. Five extraordinary drawings from 1966 feel closer in sensibility to coeval drawings by fellow West Coast artist H.C. Westermann. Saul's, however, tend toward a more raucous exposition. Executed in colored pencil, ballpoint pen, crayon, marker and pencil, the drawings are downright hallucinatory, more jam-packed than the paintings and subject to even more fluid transformations.

—Faye Hirsch