

Peter Saul Doesn't Want Any Advice

The painter — known for colorful, cartoony works that explore the depths of American depravity — is still pushing the boundaries, but enjoys quiet afternoons on his porch most of all.

Next to a roadside barn in Germantown, N.Y., two and a half hours outside Manhattan, someone has set up an impressively elaborate “Trump 2024” display made from red, white and blue cut paper. The artist Peter Saul, who lives a few minutes down the road, gets a kick out of it. “Oh yeah, that’s good,” he said, sitting in his studio last month. “We have Trump people here out in the country. I’ve only met one — a mortician, retired, very intelligent. I think he thought, ‘Oh, a professional artist type, I’m going to show him that I’m not an idiot,’ so he tells me all about everything that’s going on. I know practically nothing. Nice fellow.”

It’s not exactly true that Saul knows nothing — he certainly knows something about art, even if the version he practices is rather antagonistic. Since the 1960s, he’s made rude, indelicate paintings that have agitated and mostly torched any idea of good taste and taken Cubism to unhinged extremes. Yet his imagery, which is alternately sophomoric, hysterical and grotesque — more Mad magazine than Mondrian — is deceptively potent: distended caricatures of presidents and soldiers meting out delirious violence, gormless figures stuffing their nostrils with cigarettes, cops blowing open skulls or yanking the lever on an electric chair. His subject matter is nothing so complicated as the brutal underbelly of American excess — it’s as if he’s turning over a rock in the woods and seeing what neon horror crawls out.

Saul has lived in this rural part of the Hudson Valley with his wife, the sculptor Sally Saul, for 21 years. The remoteness suits him. “I’ve always been a kind of isolated person,” he said. “I thought it was a great, luxurious thing to not have to deal with people. It’s a bad sign, mentally, but I seem to be OK. I mean, who knows? Maybe not, really. Don’t care. As long as I have a beautiful woman, I’m satisfied. I don’t need to talk to five other people.” The couple’s studio building, clad in corrugated sage green metal that blends in with the tall Norway spruce in the front yard, sits directly behind their modest house. Sally works downstairs, and Peter has the second floor.

Paints in use. Saul has never employed assistants. “I don’t want to see anybody during the day except Sally,” he said. Credit...Eric Chakeen

It’s spare, and more sober than you might imagine given his material. There are no couches, no soft surfaces of any kind, really. Just racks of paints and a Bose speaker, which is switched off, perched on a wooden stool. A few cardboard boxes and a sheet of plywood form a makeshift drafting table. The only inducement to slacking off is a narrow bookshelf (some Francis Bacon monographs, a lot of World War II histories) under a bank of windows. Saul’s placed two metal folding chairs in front of the picture on which he’s at work, in which Superman, a favorite motif, trades right hooks with God over the Brooklyn Bridge. He’s just about finished inking it in. Saul, who is nearing 87, has never employed assistants, something he prides himself on: “I don’t want any advice,” he said.

Tacked to an adjacent wall is a recently completed work, “Artist Receives Mind-Blowing Inspiration,” the titular painter gripping wilting brushes as his cranium floats away in a geyser of foaming, toxic-spill green. “I wanted an excuse to have the brain come out of the head without bloodshed,” Saul said. “It’s my second attempt at art appreciation as a subject.”

Saul doesn’t put much stock in art appreciation. He’s only recently been embraced by the market, which has finally caught up to him. For a long time, his work was held at a polite distance from the inner sanctums of the art world. Politeness isn’t an idea Saul has ever been much interested in either, of course. “It didn’t occur to me to join up with anything in a friendly way,” he said. “Still hasn’t, really. I just do what I want and try to make it through life without doing an honest day’s work. I wanted to live without working, and without going to prison. So what are you going to do? Modern art, it’s a blessing. I felt it was a do-anything-you-want area of life, though I didn’t find any agreement with that idea among people I knew. People I knew took it more seriously. I felt that it was serious enough.”

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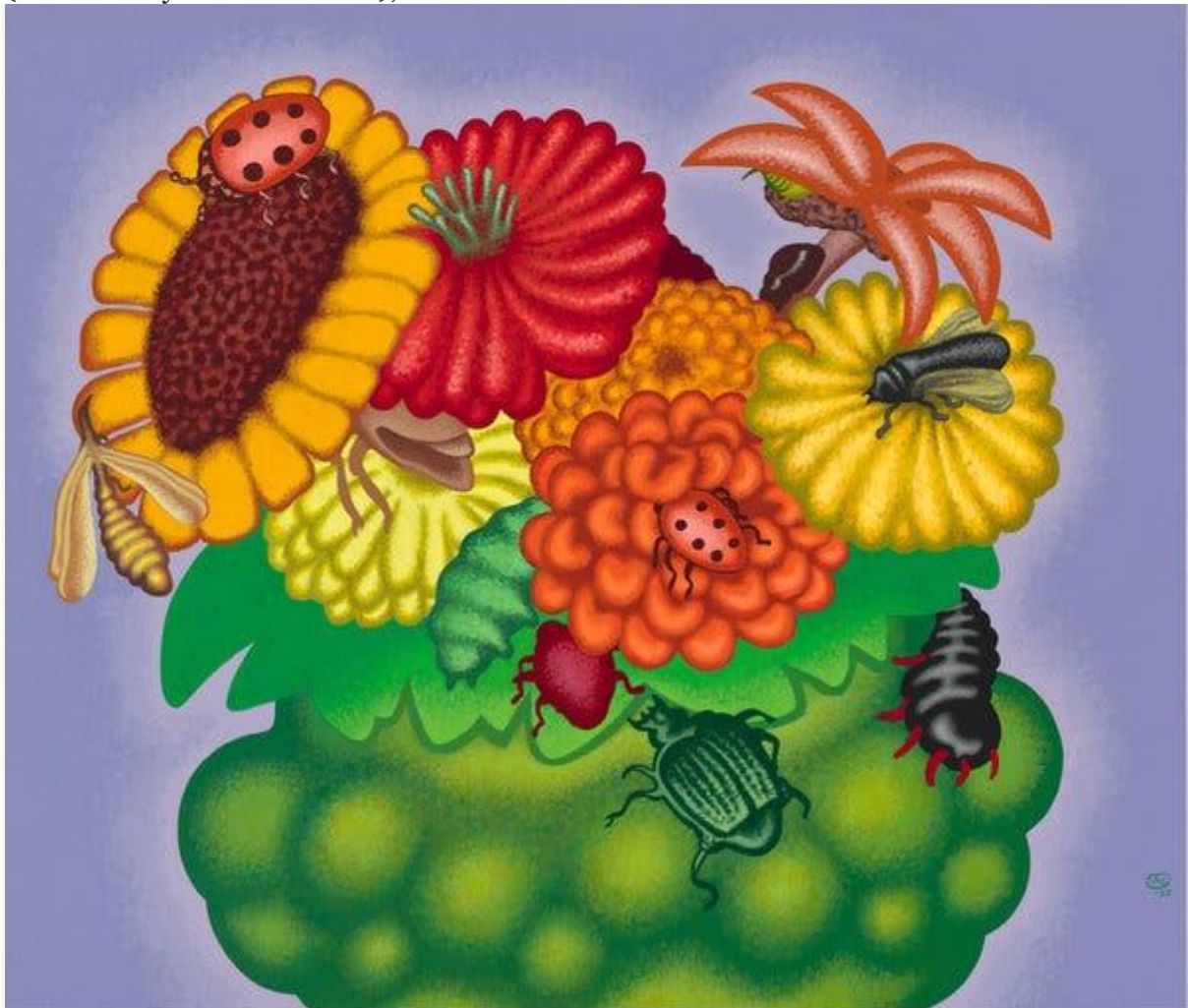
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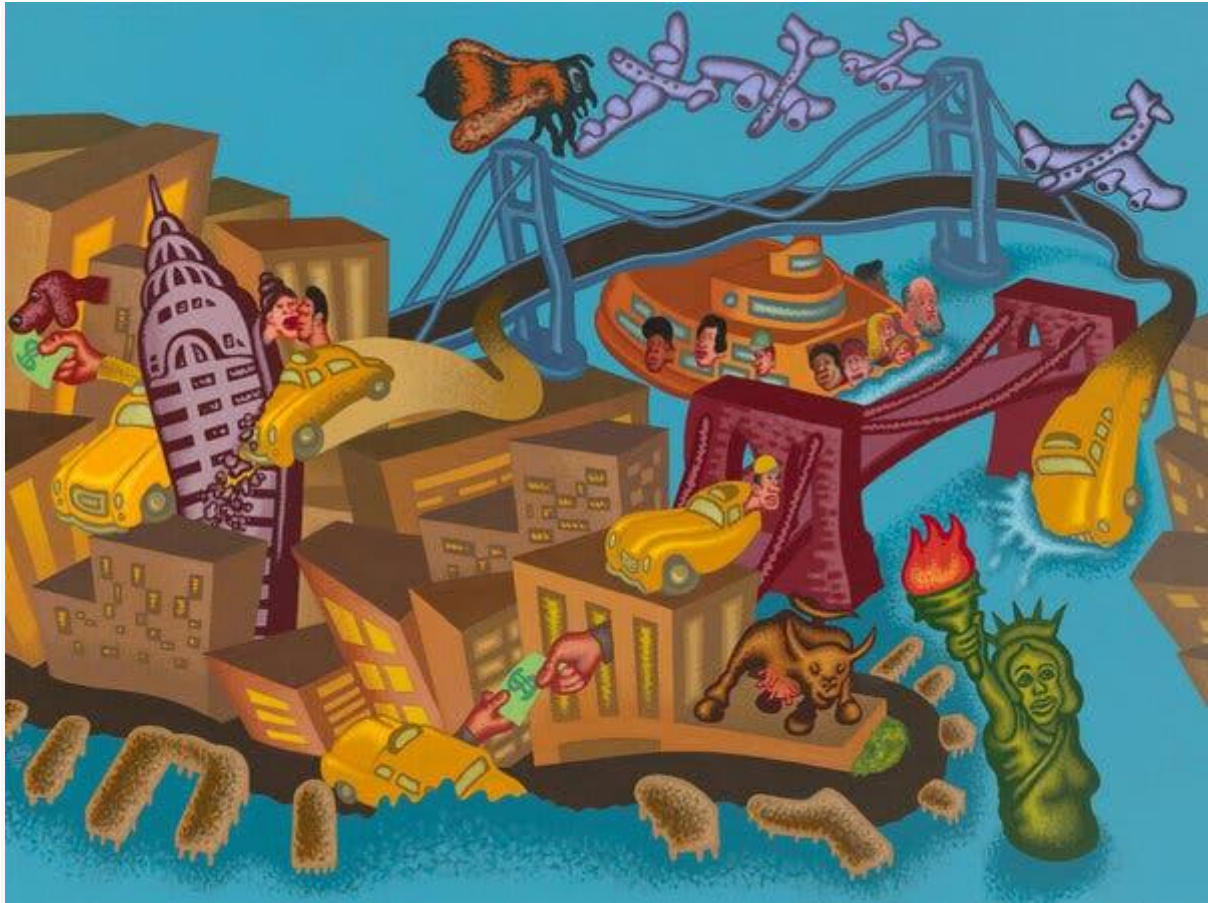
Saul’s “Art Critic Suicide,” from 1996, on display, which he made [in response to a bad review](#). Credit...Eric Chakeen

Saul landed on just what he wanted to do around 1959, when he was living in Paris and selling copies of The Herald Tribune on the street, which he refers to as his last real job. He found Abstract Expressionism, the dominant American mode, too cerebral. Instead, he shaded toward realism, but only just, creating soft, flat, crowded compositions of cartoon steaks spilling out of iceboxes and rubbery superheroes with snaking limbs. He was lumped in with the Pop artists but bristled at the association. “As soon as I realized it existed, I wanted out of it because I felt that I was being used as a bad example,” he said. “I was rebellious. The idea that you use subject matter was very controversial. However, I did want to have a successful situation where I show art and it’s sold. How to do that? I mean, I don’t know. To this day it’s kind of a mystery. I was told earlier in life I wasn’t OK. I’m told I’m appreciated now, but I don’t inquire further.”

The Sauls didn’t travel over the past year, and Peter says he didn’t use the extra time to get any more work done. Instead, he “sat on the porch looking at the trees.” But that’s also not exactly true. He made 13 new paintings and four works on paper, which were recently on view between his two New York galleries, [Venus Over Manhattan](#) and [Michael Werner](#). They’re a touch sunnier than his usual output (there’s only one execution), but as insolent as ever.



The artist’s “Bowl of Flowers with Insects” (2020).Credit...© 2021 Peter Saul/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the Artist, Venus Over Manhattan, New York, and Michael Werner Gallery, New York.



His “New York Number 2” (2021).Credit...© 2021 Peter Saul/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the Artist, Venus Over Manhattan, New York, and Michael Werner Gallery, New York.

Across two wall-size panels, one of which was on view in each gallery, he’s painted New York in cheerful disaster, the Statue of Liberty sinking into the Hudson, taxis spinning off the George Washington Bridge and into the top floors of the Chrysler Building, their respective occupants locking lips in a smooch. The obvious thought is that these works are a commentary on the state of the city during the darkest moments of the pandemic. Saul is surprised by this reading, though “I don’t mind interpretation,” he says.

“I’m not out for my pictures accomplishing anything outside of art. They want to be looked at. The pictures say: ‘Pleaaaaase.’ I’m trying to rescue painting from its actual fate, which is as an intellectual exercise. I don’t think about honesty. I don’t know what my personal relationship to these pictures is, really. I use my imagination freely. I don’t worry where it’s going to go.”

The most startling picture in the body of work is “Bowl of Flowers with Insects,” which is probably Saul’s sweetest, most earnest still life. He painted it for Sally. “I want to make sure I don’t get stuck,” he said. “Almost everybody over 60 does the same thing over and over again until they drop dead, like Wayne Thiebaud, you know? Chuck Close — it never occurred to him to do the kneecaps. I just feel like, maybe for business reasons or something, they produce, and I’m not going to do that. So flowers are an obvious thing, but getting into them is hard. I never even thought of doing them before. The flowers, I actually Googled a couple, and some I looked at

growing. But next time I'll probably just make the whole thing up, like everything else." Lest he verge too far into the saccharine, a successive painting with a similar arrangement shows Saul's bug-eyed figures sawing off sunflowers.

"They want to be looked at," said Saul, shown here examining an early work that's being repaired. "The pictures say: 'Pleaaaaase.'"Credit...Eric Chakeen

The artist's sketchbook and reference images.Credit...Eric Chakeen

Looking at Saul's works, with their scenes of melting faces and psychotropic delirium, it's easy to imagine the artist on a 60-year bender — agitated, consuming any number of illicit and mind-altering substances. But he is in fact the opposite of that: even-keeled, patient, gentle. He speaks softly. There's no opium in sight. "I never used drugs, I was too frightened. I thought the sheriff would be right outside the door. Basically, I wanted to live a calm life," he said, adding, "I mean I've committed a few felonies. I'm not completely gutless."

Saul gets his kicks elsewhere, like slaughtering modern art's sacred cows. He's painted the Mona Lisa throwing up and Donald Duck dupes wailing on Mondrian's grids ("that was pretty good"). "Attack on Abstraction," from last year, is a neon dust cloud of flying bullets, knives and chain saws poking out from gestural brush strokes. "The thing is, bottom line, is the painting sufficiently interesting to look at that a normal adult can look at it without studying Artforum for six months and taking a couple of courses?"

"Pleasantness was the rule when I was growing up," he continued. "It's back again now, I believe. Oh well." I told Saul I think it's pretty obvious he isn't interested in making pleasant pictures. "God," he said, "I hope so." Below are his answers to [T's Artist's Questionnaire](#).

What is your day like? What's your work schedule?

I have no fixed schedule. I try to work all the time, but often feel like sitting on the porch. Most likely my time in the studio is about noon to 7:30, with time off for lunch and a short nap.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

No fixed place to begin — depends on the imagery, what I'm painting a picture of.

What's the first work you ever sold, and for how much?

In Paris, 1959, at the Salon de Jeune Peinture. I sold a painting, sort of crazy-looking — like now, pretty much — to a high official in the French Communist Party for \$90. I was thrilled and totally surprised.

Image

"Artist Receives Mind-Blowing Inspiration," a recently completed work.Credit...Eric Chakeen

How do you know when you're done?

When I think I'm done I wait a couple of days and discover a whole lot of last touches that I think I was too timid to do!

What are you reading?

My wife, Sally, and I are reading "[The Overstory](#)" (2018) by Richard Powers. Just started it, really. Not sure if I like it.

What music do you play when you're making art?

When I go into the studio, I press a button on the radio and the local classical station begins playing Mozart, etc. If they get too "talky," like when doing fund-raising, I put in one of my three or four country and western discs, Patsy Cline, etc., but these discs are wearing out, and then I'm driven to try and find the oldies station that plays elevator music from 1970 to 1990. All I ask of music is that it keeps me company. An accompanying noise.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

I never have felt comfortable calling myself a "professional artist" — in fact, it gives me the creeps to think of myself that way. It's more romantic and exciting to be an outsider, which I am, following no rules, doing anything that occurs to me.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

My favorite artworks to look at are by all the 19th-century people: Manet, Monet, Gérôme, Tissot, Sargent, Rosa Bonheur and Whistler, the whole thing — Impressionist, academic, glamorous, ugly, funny, tragic — whatever is on the wall in the museum when I happen to go there.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

Hopefully, the weirdest object in my studio is the picture I'm painting.

How often do you talk to other artists?

Sally is a ceramic sculptor, and we talk during the day. She has the downstairs studio and I paint upstairs, so there's a natural chatter off and on and at mealtimes. Otherwise, there are some artists in the community or nearby. [Suzan Frecon](#) is good to talk to, although I don't see her very often, and [Polly Apfelbaum](#) lives nearby part of the time and we see her and her husband, Stan. It would be good for me to talk to artists more, but everyone's pretty busy, including me.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

For about the last 10 years, I cry at violence in movies. "Saving Private Ryan" (1998) comes to mind, but also "[Little Women](#)" (2017) on PBS.

What's your worst habit?

I like to watch really gruesome and depressing programs on TV, like "Lockup: Raw." I am fascinated. I want to see if I can take it.

What embarrasses you?

I don't know what embarrasses me, I don't want to find out. In my pictures, absolutely nothing embarrasses me — I think I've proven that. In fact, what would be embarrassing makes me laugh. I just do anything, except less and less in recent years because I'm trying to have a normal art career, a situation where my pictures are respected by the heavy thinkers.

This interview has been edited and condensed.