

# That's Saul, Folks

## Peter Saul in Conversation with Massimiliano Gioni and Gary Carrion-Murayari

Massimiliano Gioni: You've mentioned in the past that one of your very interesting early experiences as an artist was meeting the Surrealist painter Roberto Matta. How did you come to meet him?

Peter Saul: With great difficulty. I just saw some drawings by him. I didn't know who he was, but I saw some of his drawings. I was living in Paris at the time. It must have been 1958 and a half—between March and the end of 1958. I saw his drawings at the Galerie du Dragon on Rue du Dragon, and they struck my attention as looking sort of like the drawings I made. I didn't really know who he was because I had skipped much of my art history training. An art history teacher in St. Louis called me in and he said, "I don't want to see anybody smirking in the back of the room. I'll give you a B if you just don't show up." So I didn't show up. I took the opportunity to paint instead. Not that they would have really taught you about Matta in school back then. Anyway, I didn't know who Matta was, but I liked his work. I was talking to a guy named Roger Barr who taught Wellesley art students in Paris at the same place I was painting, and he was a very unfriendly person. Apparently Barr knew Matta's address, but he said, "I'm not going to give you his address. You'll just send him drawings, and then you'll get famous. You're a shithead." Yikes. Finally, after many months of misery and catastrophe, which I won't even go into—I can't, actually—after that he said, "You've suffered enough. Here's the address and the phone number." So I sent Matta some drawings with a note, and I waited three months. By now we're in the fall of 1959, probably—something like that. I hope I'm right on these dates, but I'm not far off.

MG: We can fact-check everything.

PS: Well, you really can't, actually. There is no way to know. You just have to take my word for it. Anyway, after a few months, I phoned him up and he was startled. He said, "Oh my word, Peter Saul. Yes, you sent me some drawings, didn't you?" He told me to go see the art dealer Allan Frumkin. So I didn't actually meet Matta before I met Frumkin.

MG: Did you meet Frumkin in Paris?

PS: At the Hotel Lutetia. There was a place called the Runting Room. I must have phoned in advance, and Frumkin said, "Okay. Come and see me right now. I'll be in the Runting Room." I immediately took the Metro

from where I was staying and went down to the basement with my drawings. That was the Runting Room.

MG: The Renting Room?

PS: No, the *Runting* Room, with a "U." Runting—beats me. Anyway. So I'm down there, and there's only one person in the bar, having a cup of coffee. That's him. I said, "Are you Mr. Frumkin?" He said yes and then he said, "Show me what you've got," and I did. As soon as I finished, which took maybe five minutes, he said, "Let's do business. What do you want for them?" I said, "How about \$15 each?" And he said, "We can do better: \$25. And any time you need more, just send me four and I'll send you \$100." So I had money immediately, and that was the end of the money problem.

MG: This begs the question: Did you eventually meet Matta?

PS: I did meet him later, but I didn't get to know him because my girlfriend had knitted us a couple of sweaters that were very fuzzy. You know what I mean, big knots? Matta pointed to my sweater and said, "Where'd you get those stupid-looking sweaters?" or something like that. My girlfriend was offended, so we didn't get to know him. That was the end of that relationship.

MG: Let's backtrack a little. Why were you in Paris?

PS: I was kicked out of Holland because we didn't have visas. We were in a little town called Bergen aan Zee—up north on the beach. My girlfriend wanted to paint landscapes. So I was there too, naturally enough, also painting landscapes. One day we were in town and the local cop said, "Show me your passports." We did, and there was no visa. He said, "You have to leave immediately." We just packed our suitcases and took off. There was nowhere to go but Paris. We ended up in Paris the next day—well, not exactly the next day. We had a friend in Amsterdam. We stayed with him for a couple of days, and then we were in Paris. And that's it. That starts the Paris adventure.

MG: Why were you in Europe? At that point did you know you were an artist?

PS: Yeah.

MG: That's what you wanted to do.

PS: Well, I wanted to escape the States. I was very negative about the States as a capitalist country. And, most importantly, I wanted to live the life of an artist. I had this fantasy—I guess my girlfriend tried to have the same fantasy—that we would find an art dealer somewhere that we could send pictures to and get money back and never have to meet anyone. You know what I mean? This was an idea where you do anything you want all day. If you want to make love, you make love. If you want to drink wine, you drink wine. Many cigarettes had to be smoked—heavy smoker. That was it. I walked around. I didn’t mind not speaking the language. It didn’t bother me one tiny bit. This was an unfriendly attitude, probably.

MG: What did your work look like back then?

PS: I guess you could say I was trying to be an Abstract Expressionist somewhat. But eventually I became demoralized with the idea of individuality in art. Bookstores had these enormous, glamorous books about American art and I thought, “I’ve got to pay some attention to this. If this book costs \$40, it must be backed up by a lot of power—financial power.” So I tried to resemble Abstract Expressionism as I remembered it. Art in Paris was very grayed down, very restrained. It was cold, not giving.

MG: Had you studied art back in the States, before moving to Europe?

PS: Yes, in St. Louis—at a commercial art school, actually. I was there because when I told my parents I wanted to be an artist, they were so hopelessly crushed. That was what wanting to be an artist was like in my world, in America in 1951. It was like, “Oh my God, no more hope, only child gone.” So I said, “Okay, where will I go as an art student? Pick a school.” My father looked into it, and he picked Washington University School of Fine Arts in St. Louis because it was possible to get a college degree there if you took one academic class on Saturday mornings, which I did. There were five hundred art students, and all but twelve or fifteen were starting a course called Commercial Art, where at the end you could be hired by an advertising agency. I was one of these twelve or fifteen students, and I didn’t pay any attention to the actual commercial work. All the students were women, basically—one of whom became my girlfriend. And that’s it.

MG: So after college you went to Europe and you stayed in Paris for a few years. For how long exactly?

PS: Four years, from 1958 to 1962.

MG: By the early 1960s, you were already doing your *Ice Boxes*.

PS: Yes, yes. We celebrated the success of my first art show at Frumkin Gallery in New York City in January of 1962. We had money. I also had a Paris gallery by then, and had a solo show there, also in 1962, so all was well. Everything was super, really. We celebrated this by moving to Rome, which we both felt would be a more glamorous place to be. Paris seemed gray, even though it wasn’t unfriendly to me, for sure. But it seemed gray. And what can I say? We left for Rome and we never looked at any art. We weren’t that interested. We had one child by then and had a second in Rome. We just lived our lives on the outskirts of Rome.

MG: Your 1962 New York show was received as part of the first manifestations of Pop art at the time, wasn’t it?

PS: As soon as the show was over, or maybe six or eight weeks after it closed, Frumkin sent me—proudly—an article explaining Pop art, and that’s how I found out about it. I felt pretty bad, frankly.

MG: Were you disappointed to be part of a movement?

PS: I had thought I was onto something, that I had found my style, and then suddenly it turns out other people were doing it. It was quite depressing, actually. But then I decided to accentuate the characteristics that were mine and drop the other ones.

MG: At the time, were you aware of the work of David Hockney, R.B. Kitaj, Peter Blake, or other more painterly transitions from Abstract Expressionism to Pop?

PS: No, I guess not until I got to California. I don’t remember, frankly, but I don’t think so.

MG: I mention Hockney and Kitaj because they were both reacting against Francis Bacon’s work, which was also important to you.

PS: In 1953, in *Time* magazine, I saw a big spread of Francis Bacon’s paintings and was very taken

with them. They looked good to me. That was a big influence.

MG: Had you been to London?

PS: Yeah, we had. We started in London in 1956, after school. But it was so difficult and expensive that we quit after three months and went to Amsterdam, where it was much better.

MG: As an Italian, I can’t help asking you to talk more about your time in Rome. You showed at La Tartaruga, where Cy Twombly was also showing in the early 1960s.

PS: I remember the artist Giosetta Fioroni and, of course, the owner of the gallery, Plinio De Martiis. My show with him didn’t do very well. Or at least I didn’t get paid or something. It was kind of a nothing.

MG: In Rome, you also took part in the group show “13 Pittori a Roma” [13 Painters in Rome] at La Tartaruga in 1963. Jannis Kounellis, Cy Twombly, and Fabio Mauri were in that show, along with many younger Italian artists associated with the Piazza del Popolo School, which was a kind of Italian version of Pop. Some of the most interesting avant-garde Italian poets and writers of the moment contributed to the exhibition catalogue, including a thirty-one-year-old Umberto Eco, along with the founders of the avant-garde Gruppo 63: Nanni Balestrini, Alfredo Giuliani, Elio Pagliarani, Antonio Porta, and Edoardo Sanguineti. Did you have any contact with these writers at the time? And with the other artists in the show?

PS: No, not really. I don’t think I have ever met those writers and poets. Besides Fioroni and De Martiis, I remember meeting Afro, who was an older Italian painter from the Abstract-Expressionist generation. He had come to St. Louis when I was in art school and had said an encouraging word about a picture I was painting. He seemed startled to see me again at La Tartaruga many years later.

MG: Around that time, your work was also included in a couple of group exhibitions in Paris alongside artists whose work is typically associated with the so-called New Figuration or Narrative Figuration movements. Neo-Surrealist writers and poets Jean-Jacques Lévêque and Alain Jouffroy were

associated with these groups of artists. Were you in touch with them?

PS: I don’t think so. I don’t really remember taking part in those shows in Paris. Probably my Parisian gallerist at the time, Madame Breteau, wrote me about them, but I paid no attention. My almost complete isolation from any art world contact at the time is difficult to explain, but that’s the way things went. I was friendly, then and now, so I am not really sure why I remained so isolated.

MG: You did meet Twombly at that time, didn’t you? He was in many of those same shows.

PS: Yeah. At that moment in his life, Twombly was sharing a large studio in Rome with a bunch of other American artists. I forget many of their names, but Jack Zajac was one—a sculptor. Unknown now?

MG: I think so. At least unknown to me.

PS: Well, that’s life.

MG: What did you make of Twombly’s work at the time?

PS: I didn’t really think about it. I thought about his lifestyle some, though. He had this enormous, old-fashioned apartment and I couldn’t figure out how a person could have such a thing. It looked like the place of a multimillionaire. But it wasn’t, actually. He explained to me that it was relatively inexpensive and all that. I lived on the outskirts of Rome and it turned out we were living next to Madame Nhu, the first lady of South Vietnam, who was in exile in Rome.

MG: Vietnam was already on your mind then . . .

PS: It turned out she lived next door. She was living in this mansion that belonged to the Catholic Church, which also owned the house we were renting. There were guards inside the estate trying to punch out the photographers who were trying to photograph Madame Nhu. Oddly enough, we shared the same maid as Madame Nhu. Her name was Franca, and she was quite a nice lady. One day Franca said, “I’ve been told not to talk to you anymore.” Madame Nhu thought we were American spies. I lost my studio because it was on the same property as hers.

MG: But you hadn’t been in the army, had you?

PS: No, I hadn't. Anyway, so we got out of Rome in 1964. We came back to California, because my father died around then, and my mother said, "If you'll come back and live near me I'll put a down payment on a house for you." So we thought, "Why not?" After all this knocking around with rentals and never finding a studio and everything being hard, we did accept my mother's offer and we were back in 1964 and stayed in the Bay Area through nearly 1975, when we moved East. By then I had remarried.

Gary Carrion-Murayari: Where in California were you?

PS: Just north of San Francisco.

GCM: When you got back to the Bay Area, were you aware of the art scene there? Were there people that you were interested in seeing? Who did you connect with?

PS: The art scene was unknown to me when I moved back. But within a couple of months, William T. Wiley suddenly knocked on the door and said, "Hi, I'm William T. Wiley. I'm an artist, and I live up the street," or something like that. He dressed like a cowboy and was very, very relaxed. So I got to know him and his friends Robert Arneson and Bill Allen, and went up to see the school they taught at—University of California, Davis—and got to know Bruce Nauman, who was a student there.

GCM: Did you know about the beat scene in San Francisco?

PS: No. Actually, my only knowledge of the beat scene was that, just before we were kicked out of Holland back in '58, my mother wrote me a letter and said, "We're going over to Berkeley to look at the beatniks, but I don't think it's right to look at people just because they don't take baths. Do you?" I didn't have time to reply. Two days later we're on our way out of the country, and I never got around to giving an opinion on that.

GCM: Once you got back to the States, were you interested in literature or music?

PS: No, unfortunately. I just didn't know what was going on anywhere.

GCM: Did you feel like you had to change your work in any way once you came back to the US?

PS: Yeah. But that had nothing to do with the Bay Area, really. It had to do with Frumkin. The first pictures I made after moving to California were, in his opinion, a little on the conventional side.

GCM: So what did you do?

PS: I don't think those works would look conventional now, but his comments made me wonder what I should do, and what I did was just look in the newspaper, and there it was—Vietnam War on the front page, battle against drugs, life in prison for one marijuana cigarette, people taking their clothes off and jumping in the Bay. . . . This was what was going on. It was a lot of fun and chaos and everybody was going to a shrink. Everybody was finding out the bad news about themselves.

GCM: You started including Donald Duck and Superman in your paintings as early as 1961, which is when Roy Lichtenstein started experimenting with comic books as well.

PS: Those were just the first things I thought of in Paris, maybe because I was so far away from America. I had no idea of Lichtenstein or Warhol. I had this idea that I was dealing with Abstract Expressionism and that the Ab-Ex artists were in control of the art world and that I could annoy them by depicting Americana and those popular subjects, because the Expressionist painters were very upset by this kind of thing. They didn't like it.

GCM: Did you get the reaction you wanted from the painters and their critics?

PS: It was really just in my brain. The people I actually met were mostly friendly, and I took their interest as a kind of encouragement.

MG: When you returned to the States, what was it that you were painting against?

PS: I don't know if I paint *against* anything. I did have this idea—and this is probably important—that psychiatry was going to take over the world because it had taken over the Bay Area. Around that time, I had this very strange experience. I met Fritz Perls at his Esalen Institute in Big Sur. Perls had invented Gestalt therapy, which was very popular at the time. While I was in Paris, I accidentally made friends with

this woman who turned out to be his secretary, and perhaps mistress. So we went to see her and him, and that was quite an event. He had an office overlooking the Pacific, where he had paintings by major artists—all portraits of him, all around the walls, in between the windows. There was one by Otto Dix.

GCM: Really?

PS: Yes, no kidding. He had lived in Berlin early on. So we met him. My family and I went into the room where he was and he just burst out laughing. I felt so weird, because I felt like he thought I was funny. I never recovered from that, frankly. I didn't know this guy, and he just started laughing at me. That was one of my encounters with psychology. . . . It was just everywhere. I tried to inflict these ideas on all my paintings. I decided to combine celebrities, narcissism, and psychotic attitudes. Why not? I had a lot of fun doing it. And I could take any character, say Nixon or someone else, and just do it to him. It was way over the top. And it wasn't just with the portraits; it was with everything. Take a painting like *Subway I* (1979), for example. I never thought about what viewers might think of that painting. I just thought, "Oh boy, I'm going to get a lot of psychology in this one. I'm going to have weird surprises." I didn't even think about viewers. They never concerned me. I didn't even know who they were—someone Frumkin might have known, maybe.

GCM: You were also making sculptures when you were in the Bay Area, weren't you?

PS: Yeah, but I quit shortly after. Sculptures were too fragile, and they got broken. My ex-wife threw a couple over the balcony at our house, and I threw one over too. I threw the best one. It was really stupid. It was during a fight.

MG: You had sculptures in the "Funk" show that Peter Selz curated at the UC Berkeley Art Museum in 1967, didn't you?

PS: I did, but my main contribution to the show was my picture *Saigon* (1967). People were angry with me for being in the show, because they felt like I didn't even know what the word "Funk" meant, whereas they, evidently, had invested their lives in the idea of Funk art. It was the first time I felt anger toward me from artists. Even though the anger had probably been there all the time, I didn't know about it until that

moment. And it was kind of interesting. *Saigon* was in that show but, the way I remember it, it was hanging behind the coat rack, so you couldn't even see it. Everybody was very unhappy with it. The unpopularity of those Vietnam paintings was noteworthy.

GCM: How did you decide to start working on the Vietnam paintings? Was there an event in particular that shocked you and made you start working on them? Something you saw in the news?

PS: What was shocking was really that I was interested in that type of material. I thought, "This is sensational subject matter. And nobody's dealing with it. I'll do it." I just felt lucky.

GCM: Do you think other artists were afraid of dealing with it?

PS: I think the artists I knew were convinced it was a very, very dead idea to deal with it. They were into new materials and forms. Any hint of politics was a return to the 1930s. Roy De Forest's opinion of *Saigon* was, "Sand it off." William T. Wiley was more polite; he said, "It's a funny-looking picture." And Robert Crumb was not very impressed. No one liked it except me and Frumkin, frankly.

GCM: Because they thought it was too—

PS: Old-fashioned and totally predictable and dead. D-E-A-D.

GCM: And yet, you just kept going.

PS: Yes, I just kept right on going. The fact that nobody liked them but me and Frumkin did not bother me. Believe it or not, one of my great strengths is that I care little about what other people think of my pictures. It's a huge advantage, because most people care all too much. And if you do, you'll hardly do anything. Having been an art teacher in Austin, Texas, my actual opinion is that the only reason most people aren't artists is because they can't handle the lack of appreciation that might result. I mean, most likely, when you paint a picture, there is a fair chance that no one even looks at it. And this is a thing that causes most people to not even start a painting in the first place. You'd have to have a guarantee that someone's going to look at it. As a teacher, that's what you do: you promise to look at the pictures. So the students

go, “Okay, Mr. Saul. I’ll paint one.”

GCM: How did the Vietnam series evolve?

PS: There was no excuse or reason behind it. I had no idea of how to proceed. And nobody was interested. Quite frankly, it was just me and the canvas, and I kept going. I didn’t think enough about the viewer. I thought about Frumkin and I thought about me. At the time, really, there were only two viewers for my work: Frumkin and me. As long as those two viewers were satisfied, I didn’t really involve myself. I assumed there would have been a lot of negative reactions, which I didn’t give a damn about.

GCM: Those paintings are still quite shocking today, and part of the shock derives from the fact that you were visualizing a horror that people didn’t want to be confronted with in their everyday life.

PS: Yeah, I think you can say that.

GCM: Were there precedents for the type of political work you were interested in?

PS: It had nothing to do in terms of subject matter, but an early painting that I liked a lot was Paul Cadmus’s *Coney Island* (1934), which I had seen in reproduction when I was five years old. And I was probably thinking of Picasso and maybe I was still thinking of those Francis Bacon screaming cardinals. But the truth is that I didn’t feel I was successfully part of the art world. I didn’t feel part of a dialogue, so I wasn’t encouraged to think in art historical terms. I was dealing with ordinary people as far as I knew. And I felt I was lucky. I had received a lucky break meeting this man, Frumkin, who would show up once a year and pick some paintings and send me a check every month. I was just going to hang onto it and stay with it, and do my work.

GCM: Did you show the Vietnam pictures together at the time?

PS: I showed them at Frumkin’s and they were in a few shows in the Bay Area, and they were here and there. Students liked them. I have always felt that there’s a big difference between the opinions of art people and those of ordinary people. Ordinary people found these works interesting. So I went to college campuses and talked about them. Students and ordinary people

understood the paintings were trying to be protests against the war, at least.

MG: Were you aware of other contemporary artists doing work against the Vietnam War? People like Robert Morris, for example, who closed his exhibition at the Whitney as a protest against the war?

PS: No, not really. And I am sure Robert Morris would have been very negative toward my work. All those artists were really negative toward Vietnam-type subjects. People were against the war, but nobody really depicted it or tried to paint it. I didn’t know Judith Bernstein at the time, but she was also engaging with war images directly. I was lucky enough to have an art gallery to show these things that nobody else seemed to like. I didn’t really put two and two together at the time. Nobody seemed to be interested in my paintings.

GCM: When did you decide to stop working on the Vietnam paintings?

PS: I probably just got a better idea, which was to paint troubling, insane, psychotic pictures of celebrities and politicians—who at that time were becoming celebrities themselves. That’s when I started with Nixon. I also started getting interested in what was happening in Berkeley. Things were heating up. There was chaos everywhere and things were getting tougher and tougher. You know what I mean? People were getting killed for the color of their skin and everybody seemed caught in a war at home. That’s when I started painting the pictures about the government of California and Angela Davis being arrested and Mohammed Ali.

MG: What was the public reception of those paintings?

PS: There was no reception. Nobody seemed to care. In the art establishment, those paintings were met with absolute silence, but I enjoyed painting the pictures, quite frankly. I probably shouldn’t have, but I did. I put a lot of psychology into them.

GCM: A painting like *The Government of California* (1969) can feel tougher than the Vietnam paintings, because it is about what’s happening at home in America. It’s a painting that registers, almost in real time, a shifting attitude toward the government and a certain political attitude on the part of the

government itself. Did you anticipate you’d be painting current events?

PS: Gosh, I don’t think I had any thought of that kind. I just felt I had some good luck in finding this subject. I felt so lucky that nobody else was doing this type of work for some crazy reason. I just couldn’t believe I could find these subjects, one after another: Vietnam, race violence, and then sexually troubled celebrities and politicians. And then all of a sudden, my life changed because I got divorced, and I thought, “Uh oh, I haven’t sold anything really. Frumkin’s been very kind to me. He’s given me extra money because I need to pay alimony and child support, all this stuff. Oh my God, what now?” So I said, “I’ll try and make friends with the art world.” And that’s when I started making my own versions of famous paintings. That’s when I started repainting the museum. It was a way to feel part of the art world again.

MG: Going back to the Vietnam War and those paintings about the governments of California and the US in the 1960s and 1970s—I like to call them your “Allegories of Good and Bad Government,” like Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s frescos in Siena—I’d like to better understand how you saw them in relation to political art. Did you think of them as political works?

PS: Yes, I did. I wanted them to reflect leftist politics as much as possible, but I wasn’t very coherent about it. While I was painting them, I mainly thought of them abstractly or formally, in a sense. I would say, “Okay. We’ve got Ronald Reagan on this side of the painting. What are we going to do? He can poop. Let’s let it happen. And what else can happen in this painting? We can have Martin Luther King up there. Why not? No law against it, right?” And so I just put things in to try them out, to see how they worked.

GCM: As much as you can’t necessarily build a coherent political message in a painting that sprawling, how did it feel when your paintings started to add up to something that captured a moment, captured the way many people felt about America and politics at that time?

PS: Nobody felt it captured the moment.

GCM: But now, if you look back at them . . .

PS: I look back and I remember people telling me calmly and intelligently that Bruce Nauman captured

the moment. “Peter, you are so out of it. This has no meaning at all. Please don’t tell me you think this is important”: that was how people reacted to those paintings—a complete negative, which I didn’t mind, frankly. I didn’t mind at all.

MG: Did you feel that as an artist, you had a responsibility to witness and chronicle what was happening around you?

PS: I didn’t really witness anything. I made it all up, so I don’t know what my responsibility was. I probably made a mistake in painting a lot of these pictures, but it’s too late now. They’re out. They’re painted. They’re gone.

GCM: So you never felt you had a historical responsibility to describe the crisis you saw around you?

PS: If I captured the moment, I did so psychologically. But at the time I was just thinking to myself, “I can’t be the only person who’s interested in this.” And probably I wasn’t. There must have been other people interested. I just don’t remember ever meeting them.

GCM: When did you go to Austin? Did your work change again once you felt more removed from San Francisco and New York?

PS: We spent a few years on the East Coast. After my divorce, I moved to Chappaqua, in New York State, with my wife, Sally. Some years later, we had a baby and we thought, “Wouldn’t it be good to have health-care?” The next thing I know a letter arrived from Austin. I think it was written by a woman who had been my teaching assistant when I taught one semester at one of those art schools in San Francisco. The letter said, “We have a good job. Why don’t you apply for it?” So I did, and I got it easily. They loved me a lot at the art school, and I worked there for nineteen years, then retired due to age. At age sixty-six, they figure you should sort of move on, so I did.

GCM: During those years teaching, what did you feel was the most important message you could get across to young artists?

PS: I didn’t really try and do that kind of thing. I tried to help artists do whatever they wanted to do. I was trying to be a decent employee about this. And I tried to find out, conversationally, what people wanted to

do with their pictures and help them to do that technically. However, if they didn't want to paint any picture, which was most likely, they just left quietly, and I gave them an A, and that was the end of it.

MG: Was teaching a new experience for you?

PS: I had done some teaching here and there, but in Austin it was different. At the beginning it was weird. When I started the job, I went to the room that the paper told me to go to: Advanced Painting. And I sat there, and nobody else came in. And after the whole class was over, still nobody had showed up. So I thought, "Gee, that's weird. I'll just hang in there." After about three weeks, still no one had showed up, period. And I thought, "Well, if I'm fired, I'm fired. What can you do?" I didn't know how to contact anybody; no phone numbers were given, just names. So I just did nothing.

I was sitting in the classroom reading my newspaper one day, and an older teacher came in and asked, "Where are your students?" I said, "I don't know." And he said, "That's not good. You have to get them here and talk to them." I said, "Okay. I'll do it." So I made a sign that said, "Peter Saul, professor." I wasn't a professor yet, but I just wrote that. And then I wrote: "Peter Saul, your art teacher, if I get fired, you flunk. Show up!" or something like that—big exclamation mark. They all showed up, and they were thrilled by this note. I don't know why it affected them, but it was just what they wanted. They liked it so much, and they liked me doing it, and they all came in and showed me their pictures. And the next semester the students—a different group—said, "Can we do the note thing again?" And I said no.

MG: When was this? When did you go to Austin?

PS: This is the fall of 1981, I think.

MG: Did you feel your work became less topical in Austin—less driven by current events?

PS: Maybe, I don't know. I still did a lot of strange paintings. I did the *Girl Trouble* paintings [*Girl Trouble I* (1984–86) and *Girl Trouble II* (1987)] there, so there was still a lot of craziness. The irony, though, is that I made those paintings as a celebration of a happy marriage. At a certain point in my life, I realized that I no longer had those problems that men usually

experience in relating to women. I just didn't have any of those issues anymore—gone. I was happy. So I decided to paint pictures of someone who had those problems. My oldest son says I paint pictures of people who are not me. That's his opinion of what I do.

MG: That's reassuring to know...

GCM: When did you start to look back and paint more historical themes, like *Washington Crossing the Delaware*?

PS: I originally did *Washington Crossing the Delaware* early on in 1975. It just occurred to me that these were good subjects. I really just go by the subject. Every time I get an idea for a subject, I feel lucky. Even today, I feel fortunate to have had an idea. My most recent idea that I feel fortunate to have is people attached to dice. I am going to start a painting of heads attached to these dice, and they bonk into each other. They kiss each other. They hate each other. They have problems. It's luck, right? And the dice are different colors, different shapes... I know this might not make sense to you, but there'll be other things going on too.

MG: Do you write down your ideas? Or do you make sketches before starting a painting?

PS: In my head. I redo them all day. That's why I don't need to read books very much. I just sit on the train and think about it. And then yes, I do make drawings, and I square off.

MG: So when you get to the canvas, you have a relatively clear idea of what the painting is going to be like.

PS: Yes. And then I redraw it a few times because it's never any good when you see it blown up. It's creaky. It's a piece of nonsense, and you redo it. The first picture I made a drawing for is the subway one.

GCM: Is it because of the scale?

PS: Probably. It seemed big. So I was like, "Okay. I'll plan it out some."

MG: Speaking of drawings, there is often an assumption around your work that you were a fan of *Mad* magazine and popular comics. Do you think that's an accurate description of your interests?

PS: Well, I was interested in art before I got interested in comics. I mentioned liking that painting by Paul Cadmus. I saw that painting in an art book, the only art book my parents had, which for some reason included that painting. And my mother was pretty upset by my choice of painting.

GCM: When did you start getting interested in pulp novels and crime comics?

PS: As a kid, I really enjoyed crime comics. And Alcatraz was right there in the Bay. I would see it every day, leaving my parents' house to go to school from grades one to five. And then crime was everywhere in the news. Before World War II, crime was the headline. "He fries!" That was the kind of thing you'd read in the newspaper. It was fascinating. I wanted to know all about it. It was hypnotic.

MG: Did TV play much of a role in your imagery?

PS: No, it didn't, because my parents wouldn't get a TV. They thought it was low class. They thought it was stupid. I'm afraid my parents had aspirations. We didn't watch TV.

GCM: And were they disappointed by your interest in comics?

PS: I was probably a constant disappointment in the making, yeah. Oh dear, I don't know. I was interested in comics, period. What are we getting at though?

MG: The question is really about sources and inspirations for your work. People always assume you were interested in comics, but I find it more revelatory that you were interested in Paul Cadmus, George Bellows, and Thomas Hart Benton—all those artists that were certainly not considered canonical for a contemporary artist making work in the 1960s or 1970s.

PS: I did find crime comics and crime busters and all that very fruitful. But that was early on. People usually mention *Mad* magazine in relation to my work, but I only discovered it much later, around 1957, at the bookstore Le Mistral in Paris. Unfortunately, I couldn't buy them anyway because they were very expensive; they were collector's items. But just looking at them gave me ideas. Immediately, I thought, "This is a great idea: storytelling." Believe it or not, there were no storytelling pictures at that time. It wasn't done. It was

considered very, very bad—which of course was why I was immediately attracted to it. It came into my head: "Tell stories." Hey, why didn't I think of that? The next thing I know, I'm telling stories.

MG: Did you meet many of the artists from the comic book world? You mentioned Crumb earlier. Who else did you meet?

PS: Yes, Crumb I met a few times. I like his work. Originally I knew this guy named Don Donahue—now deceased—who started *Zap Comix*. He was a student at UC Berkeley, and he asked me, "Can I come over to your house and help you get better radio stations?" Jesus. I said, "There's nothing wrong with my radio station." And he said, "No, no. I want to do it. I can really help you with music." He pictured me appreciating the finest music, modern jazz or something—totally unrealistic. So I said, "Okay. Come on over."

So he comes over on the bus from wherever he is, Berkeley I guess. And while he's there, he says, "Look, I want to start a comic book. I want to sell 50,000 comics for 25 cents each or 25,000 for 50 cents, something like that. You know what I mean?" I am like, "Yeah, yeah." He says, "And I've got you. You're going to do it because I know your work through S. Clay Wilson. And I know a guy who's done it before named Robert Crumb. And he'll come out and show you how to do it." So I said, "Wow, okay." I say yes to everything and then don't do it. That is really what it amounts to. Out comes Crumb to show me how to do it, and he gave me good advice that I was finally able to use last year, when I was making prints.

MG: What was the advice?

PS: He said, "Give it a lot of ink." You have to over-ink everything because when they print it, they'll cheat and they'll just drain it of ink. Crumb knew that. I said, "Sure, sure. Thanks for the advice." And then months passed, and I didn't do it. I'm too busy. I don't give a damn, frankly, I didn't care about comics that much. I wasn't going to start making comics. Finally, Don Donahue phoned up and asked, "Peter, are you going to do it?" I said, "Well, maybe." And he said, "If you don't do it immediately I'm going to get Rory Hayes to do it." So he got Rory Hayes and I didn't mind, and that was that, my adventure with comics.

MG: So you always thought your work was meant for the world of fine art.

PS: The wall—always the wall. That’s what really always mattered to me: putting pictures on the wall.

GCM: Aside from teaching, when did you get a sense that younger artists were interested in your work?

PS: Probably with Mike Kelley. I met him a few times. The first time was probably when I was still in Austin. I’m not sure, actually. Someone pointed out that he had mentioned me in an article he had written in *Artforum*, and I was just astonished that a young artist would be able to write an article in *Artforum* and mention me. I would have thought he’d be banished. But evidently he knew people. That’s how I heard about him, and I was flattered and got to know him a little bit throughout the years. I also met that other friend of his, Paul McCarthy?

GCM: Yes.

PS: He came to Austin as a guest artist, and we even made a picture together. It wasn’t a big deal, really. Neither one of us had the slightest fame.

MG: The way in which artists like Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and Jim Shaw connected with your work was very formative for us. Perhaps because I am a foreigner, I have always been fascinated by their view of American culture, which is also present in your work.

GCM: As you were saying, it’s a darker psychology of America, which was particularly apparent in California. Raymond Pettibon likes your work as well.

PS: For some unknown reason, that psychology was too often kept out of American art. Our art had always to be tremendously clean. I could never figure that out. I joined a psychological book club because my son, who was five years old, had a friend whose father was a psychiatrist. One day he came over to our place and he saw my paintings and said, “I’m signing you up. You need help.” His interpretation of my paintings was, “This guy is really sick.” And I was very proud of that. I said, “Okay. I’ll join up.” So I did, and I enjoyed enormously all the clinical cases and the stories of the lunatics. I still like that stuff, and I don’t find many other people who enjoy it. Then again, I had the wrong attitude, 100 percent. I always thought these were just

interesting stories and then you look around and there are murders everywhere and people going crazy everywhere. That was the big change I witnessed when I came back to California in the 1960s. Psychology was everywhere.

MG: You mentioned a few times that you eventually started painting politicians and celebrities, or politicians as they were turning into celebrities. At the center of your show at the New Museum, we have an incredible array of presidential portraits, including pictures of George Washington, George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump...

PS: Yes. I wait for the presidents to be a politically important problem. I never did Obama. People have asked me why. I can only do bad guys, pretty much.

GCM: Did you ever do Ford?

PS: No, I missed him. I don’t make a point of doing them. It’s just that if I need one and one is there, I’ll use him.

MG: Did you ever feel—with Trump, for example—that the subject was too easy?

PS: Yes. I got to him too late, but that was okay too. Ten thousand people had been there before me. And I didn’t even think he’d be president. I was one of those fools who believed the *New York Times*. Trump didn’t have a chance. It was going to be a landslide for Hillary. Yeah, famous last words. By the time I even thought about painting Trump, ten thousand people had painted him at every level. Everything had been insulted. They’ve insulted his sex life, his financial life, his hair—everything. Holy cow. I just felt like I was arriving way too late. But that was part of the challenge, because apparently I have this reputation for doing the wrong thing at the wrong time, so I might as well keep going.

GCM: In your case, though, you already had a pantheon of villains that he slots very easily into. So even if there are other people painting him, now he’s part of your cast of characters.

PS: I also just felt I could still do it, even if a lot of other people had already touched him. I’m capable, talent-wise, of doing anything. I feel pretty talented when it comes to painting.

MG: Do you feel the politics of the painting have to be right, so to speak? Do you want the politics of the painting to be clear?

PS: I am not sure. Apparently, I would have liked some of my paintings to be more obviously leftist, but some of them end up looking more fascist than I had wanted them to be. And I just say, “Well, okay,” because the subject of the painting is fascism.

MG: So you think the painting holds up a mirror to the world that has created it?

PS: The scariest thing is that when I was making some of those paintings in the 1960s or 1970s, people were only interested in technique and they just ignored the subject, period.

MG: How do you see yourself, as a product of the world you depict or as an imitator of that world? Is your work a symptom or a cure?

PS: I never confuse my personal behavior with things I think of. I know what I’m doing in this world, and my imagination does anything it wants to. Now I realize that a lot of it is useless, because not only is it noncommercial, it’s highly troubling.

GCM: Were there ever works that were censored from your shows?

PS: S. Clay Wilson, the underground cartoonist, apparently got to know my work through the University of Nebraska when some painting of mine—this was in 1963, maybe—was shown and taken away. He objected to this. We became friends a little bit, though he was kind of a troubled person.

MG: And is there any painting that you yourself decided not to release because it was too uncomfortable? Have you ever self-censored?

PS: I think I should, but I haven’t.

*The title of this interview is borrowed from the title of the essay “That’s Saul, Folks” by David Zack, originally published in Artnews, November 1969.*