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, with a “U.” Runting—beats me. Anyway. 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 Renting Room, with a “Li!” Renting—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, “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 met 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.
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 nice. We celebrated 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. 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. My 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, Francis and I decided, in a way, pretty much, 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 artists from the Abstract-Expressionist generation. I remember meeting Afro, who was an older Italian painter from the Abstract-Expressionist generation.

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: Did you meet Twombly at that time, didn't you?

PS: Yeah. At that moment in his life, Twombly was sharing a large studio in Rome with a bunch of other American artists. I forgot 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.

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 many years later.

PS: I remember the artist Giosetta Fioroni and, of course, the owner of the gallery, Plinio De Martis. 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 1961. I remember meeting Hockney, R.B. Kitaj, Peter Blake, or other more painterly artists. I remember meeting Afro, who was an older Italian painter from the Abstract-Expressionist generation. He was in many of those same shows.

PS: I know, not really. I don't think I have ever met those writers and poets. Besides Fioroni and De Martis, 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?

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MG: But you hadn't been in the army, had you?
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 who you were interested in seeing? Who did you con- nect with?

PS: The art scene was unknown to me when I moved back. Within a couple of months, William T. Wiley discovered me, and I went to see him. We became good friends, and I worked with him. I met 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 I was kicked out of Holland, my mother wrote me a letter and said, “If you’ll come back and live near me I’ll put down a 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.

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 American people take 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: No, but I did 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 in the back 58, my mother wrote me a letter and said, “We’re going over to Berkeley to look at the beatniks, 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 Bay Area in the Bay Area, weren’t they? Something you saw in the news?

PS: Yeah, but I didn’t think it had anything to do with Frumkin. The first pictures I made when I came back 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 mari- juana funnypack, 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.

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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 it would work, 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 be 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 of Picasso and maybe I was still thinking of those when I was five years old. And I was probably thinking of Andy Warhol's Silver Car Crash (1963), which I had seen in reproduction and an early painting that I liked a lot was Paul Cadmus's GCM: Were there precedents for the type of political work you were interested in?

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 was when I met 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 more xenophobic. 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 very lucky that nobody else was doing his kind of work for some 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, so I probably 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 at peace with 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'd 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. Who are we going to do? He can pop. Let's do it around him. 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 is sprawling, how did it feel when your paintings started to add up to some-thing that captured a moment, captured the way many people felt about America and politics at that time?

PS: I look back and I remember people telling me, "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 responsi-bility 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 making political 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 responsi-bility 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 prob-ably 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 or did you move 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 healthcare?" The next thing I know I was teaching in 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
marriage. At a certain point in my life, I realized that I made those paintings as a celebration of a happy time. I did the paintings of the young girl—paintings. I did the painting of a young girl in a skirt that was really quite wonderful. So I thought, "Gee, that's weird. I'm just hanging 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, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm a student." 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 wrote that. And then I wrote: "Peter Saul, your art teacher, if I get fired, you'll find me. Show up!" or something like that—big exclamation mark. They all showed up, and they were thrilled by the idea that I feel fortunate to have is people attached to me. I feel fortunate to have had an idea. My most recent idea is really what it amounts to. Out comes Crumb to make prints. I did find crime comics and crime busters and all kinds of old things that were collector's items. But just looking at them I thought, "This is a great idea: storytelling." Believe it or not, there were no stories in comics. I mentioned liking that painting by Paul Cadmus, George Bellows, and they were collector's items. But just looking at them I thought, "This is a great idea: storytelling." Believe it or not, there were no stories in comics 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—who 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 really can help you with that." He picted 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 he said, "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 named Robert Crumb. And he'll come out and help you get it going."

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

PS: I was probably a constant disappointment in the media. 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 who 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'd been bought by the collector's items. But just looking at it, I only 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."
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 banned. 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.

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 thought 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.