Smee, Sebastian. "Manic Impression: Peter Saul mines taboos, vulgarity in antic works," *The Boston Globe*, 26 July 2015, pp. N6, N7.

Art

Manic impression

Peter Saul mines taboos, vulgarity in antic works

By Sebastian Smee
GLOBE STAFF

READING, Vt. — Today, when the psychic energy expended on trying not to say the wrong thing and on fervently policing the speech of others is so communally consuming that little energy is left in reserve for actually doing the right thing, there's something unexpectedly medicinal about the work of Peter Saul.

Visit the compressed career survey of 37 Saul paintings and drawings at the Hall Art Foundation in Vermont, and you will confront a smorgasbord of things that should not be thought, should not be depicted, and should never be said.

What kinds of taboos are we talking about here? Anything really. Swastikas and holocaust japes, rape and torture, vile racial stereotypes, travesties of Christian iconography, and slanderous depictions of US presidents, police, and servicemen — not to mention all manner of murky psychosexual goo.

Is there a defense for any of this? None springs to mind. Any that I can imagine would involve so much sophistry that I would no longer feel I was talking about Saul's painting. So, it's simple really: If you are prone to taking offense, stay away — or else come along and get your daily dose.

Saul, who was born in San Francisco in 1934 and studied art in California and St. Louis, is enjoying a comeback. In 2008, he was the subject of an acclaimed retrospective at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, Calif. His work appears in the inaugural hang at the new Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. And, with a large painting and an unforgettable sculpture called "Man in Electric Chair," he featured prominently in "What Nerve: Alternative Figures in American Art 1960 – Present" at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in 2014-15.

Saul spent the late '50s and early '60s living in Europe. He painted and drew in a brilliant idiom that combined the coloration (and some of the pulsing, edge-to-edge energy) of Willem de Kooning's 1950s style with cartoon imagery and a taste for vulgarity.

De Kooning also, mind you, loved comics, and spoke enthusiastically about being "wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity." But he subsumed these influences into his magisterial high style. In Saul's work, both the comics and the idea of vulgarity were amplified and made literal.

For a decade or so the work he produced was thrilling. Drawing on seemingly incompatible sources, he ground out his own minced meat, chopped liver concoctions that were (and still are) fearless, funny, cacophonous. In "True Crime," 1962, for instance, flat planes of saturated color in the de Kooning mold (mustard yellows and pale pinks) combine with more jarring colors and indeterminate shapes that might or might not be a bathtub, a book, pipes, fried eggs, thought bubbles, and a leg.

"The way it looks to me now is things out of the American dream sort of thrown into a bathtub with Abstract Expressionist leanings," he explained (in an interview available on the Hall Art Foundation's website).

By the time of "Mad Docter," which was painted two years later, just before his return from Europe, the figurative imagery had become more explicit. "I'm getting more conscious of how to paint the subject and skip the art style," he said.

Various body parts for sale ("$29") are displayed under a bell jar beside a doctor. A foreshortened fountain pen sucks in money. A dog howls. A yellow stick-figure duck wears a hat with a red cross, and points with an enlarged hand that has "OUCH WITZ" written on it.

The work conjures the nightmare of Josef Mengele and the Nazi doctors, but treats it all as a sort of antic, stream-of-consciousness joke. It's Mel Brooks meets Max Beckmann with a bit of Thomas Hart Benton thrown in. Or something like that.

Saul was attracted to everyday domestic items, often endowing them with lurid vibrations and uncanny resonances. Several works here address iceboxes, shower heads, stoves, and cigarettes. In their gauche immediacy and painterly dash, they seem to anticipate Philip Guston's later figurative work. And it's hard to imagine that Saul's paintings failed to register with artists such as Carroll Dunham and Dana Schutz.

Vietnam became a subject in the late '60s as Saul's colors became more and more fluorescent and his imagery more explicitly sexual and violent. Everything, mind you, came from his imagination: He never went to war, only tried marijuana a handful of times without ever liking it, and as for the psychosexual stuff, "I have no experience to back it up. I've been married twice, the current time for almost a half-century."

"I like it best when two ideas collide," he said in a recent interview with Priscilla Frank in the Huffington Post, "like when you have a crazed attitude towards women combined with a crazed attitude towards the Vietnamese. I like that. Even if it's not true, I don't care whether it's true or false. I just do it."

When he returned from Europe in 1964, his manic, grotesque, cartoon-inspired work earned him a place in "Funk," an influential exhibition at the art museum of the University of California, Berkeley in 1967. During what was, in Saul's words, a "very clean time of American art," the artists in "Funk" were combing the culture for muck and mess. They certainly didn't need to look far. The world at large was anything but tidy, and Saul wanted his art to reflect this.

Unlike most of the other artists in "Funk," Saul saw himself as "a political protest artist" — fully aware that, in the eyes of many arbiters of aesthetic excellence at the time, protest art was "supposed to be very bad artistically."

His political sympathies were on the left: "I try to vote as left as I can," he said. "I hope that my paintings will coincide and be far left, but frequently

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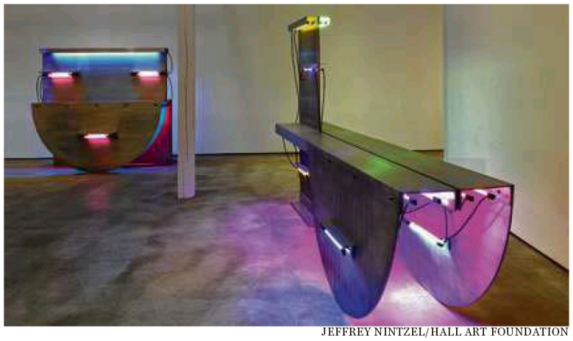
HALL ART FOUNDATION (ABOVE AND TOP)

PETER SAUL
and
KEITH SONNIER: EarlyNeon
At: Hall Art Foundation, Reading, Vt., through Nov. 29. 802-952-1056, www.hallartfoundation.org (open weekends and Wednesdays by appointment)

Clockwise, from above: Peter Saul's "Mad Docter" and "Peter Saul vs. Pop Art"; sculptures by Keith Sonnier.



JEFFREY NINTZEL/HALL ART FOUNDATION

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. . . the painting rebels and goes fascist on me. I don't mind! I don't mind! The painting is made up and has a life of its own."

Unfortunately, after all this early brilliance, Saul's creative engines conked out in the early 1970s, and his work went into a long and delirious tailspin. Which is exciting in its own way, I suppose. There's certainly nothing halfhearted about Saul's later work, which has veered between brightly colored remakes of canonical works by Eugene Delacroix ("The Death of Sardanapalus"), Beckmann, and de Kooning and hectic caricatures of art world figures and of such Republican politicians as George W. Bush and Newt Gingrich. If anything, it is embarrassingly strenuous, lacking the spirit of liquid nonchalance in the '50s and '60s work, which felt truly uncensored — blurted, urgent, and brilliant.

There's a confected feeling to the recent work that suggests a surplus of mental calculations: "This will outrage them!" "How do you like that?" and so on, all of it executed with a laboriousness that can only dampen the idea's original esprit.

Still, it's strong stuff that sticks in the mind, and it makes a good foil to the other display at the Hall Art Foundation. "Keith Sonnier: Early Neon" presents a selection of minimal neon, glass, and aluminum sculptures by the Mamou, La.-born artist.

Over a long career, Sonnier has been associated with minimalism, performance art, light art, and process art. These sculptures, made between 1968 and 1989, occupy space with the characteristically mute, take-me-or-leave-me reticence of minimalist art. Using simple geometrical shapes in architectural arrangements, they fuse plainspoken aluminum with lavish effusions of neon color.

Works such as "Column I," from 1981 and "Charioteer," from 1988, seem to marry the secret sensuality of Donald Judd, the heady optical experiments of Dan Flavin, and the "sculptitecture" of Anthony Caro. It's a fascinating body of work, and the Zen atmosphere of the gallery, punctured by the occasional koan-like crackle of neon, is just the right antidote to Saul's strong medicine.

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