

ARTSY

Peter and Sally Saul on How to Thrive as a Creative Couple



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In Sally Saul's *Together* (2017), two happy polar bears stand side by side, holding hands. They look content (if a little befuddled), ready to face whatever the future might bring.

I couldn't help but think of this perfect ceramic sculpture after meeting with Sally and her husband, the offbeat painting legend Peter Saul, to discuss their unique, lasting marriage—and what other artistic couples might be able to learn from it.

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“They are both wonderful people and first-rate artists,” said Mary Boone, Peter’s New York gallerist since 1995. “It is great to see—and rare—that they help each other and share a lot creatively.”

I met the couple at their Upper East Side apartment, a small one-bedroom rental that they keep for occasional journeys into the city. They’re permanently based upstate in Germantown, New York, where they share a house (built in 1855) and a bi-level studio (redesigned in 2014 by the architect Stan Allen, a personal friend).

The living room of their Manhattan digs is cozy. Peter is dressed conservatively for a man who



Portrait of Sally and Peter Saul in their Upper East Side apartment by Stephanie Noritz for Artsy. Pictured: Painting of Sally in Montmartre, Paris in 2006 by Peter Saul.

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once painted Salvador Dalí urinating champagne into the ear of George W. Bush (only his bright teal sneakers hint at such a streak of eccentric wildness). Sally is likewise low-key, a calming presence, whether she's discussing the daily anxiety of Trump's America or her recent efforts to humanely trap gophers up in Germantown.

Spending an hour in their company makes it clear that—over the course of 43 years of marriage—they've settled into an admirably comfortable, supportive dynamic together. The Sauls, admittedly, are lucky. And any relationship—between artists or others—survives on a complex recipe of luck, compatibility, compromise, and trust. So what can we learn from Peter and Sally's four decades of creative matrimony?

Forget about online dating (“When Peter Met Sally”)

When Peter and Sally met in 1973, neither would have imagined the panoply of relationship apps that love-hungry artists take for granted today. They met in a slightly more nerve-wracking way: via the telephone, having yet to see each other in person.

Peter, 39, had been teaching at the Oakland School of Arts and Crafts (now the California College of the Arts). Someone Sally knew was one of his students; she had slipped Peter her friend's phone number, thinking they might be a good match.

“I was kind of queasy about this, but he did phone, actually,” recalled Sally, who was 27 at the time. “Yup, I got my nerve up...” Peter added.

“I just liked the sound of his voice,” Sally said. “He sounded very authentic. And in those days, too, Peter had a little stutter, which was sort of winning—when he was nervous, or on the phone,

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Sally Saul, *Blue Lady*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.



Peter Saul *Self Portrait with Haircut*, 2003
Pace Prints

or a little excited.”

The blind phone call went well, and the two set a dinner date. Peter managed to locate Sally’s apartment in the neighborhood of Glen Park by using a “map and a magnifying glass, stopping every few blocks,” he remembered. “It’s kind of amazing that he found it,” Sally noted. “He never knows where he’s going.”

At this point in time, in 1973, Peter was already an established artist. (That year he would paint *The Crucifixion of Angela Davis*, a visceral and surreal portrait of the radical activist.) Sally was

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working as a secretary; she wouldn't start actively making art until the 1980s. "Peter was very funny, and very lively. Easy to talk to," she said.

"I met Sally at the right moment, and we had a real relationship for the first time in my life," Peter said. "In the old days, relationships between men and women were just lousy across the board. And suddenly here it was: brand new and wonderful, like it's supposed to be."



You should support each other, not compete

Artists are driven and competitive; after all, there isn't an infinite amount of fame to go around. If we imagine two recent MFA grads settling down for a life together, we might also imagine the stress (and possible bitterness) that might result: What if one partner's career skyrocketed, while the other's fizzled?

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Peter and Sally managed to sidestep this dilemma due to circumstance. When they married, in 1975, Sally had earned a master's degree in American literature. She had yet to embark on a career as a ceramicist; it was Peter's social circle in San Francisco, the hotbed of the Funk movement, that turned her onto the medium's possibilities.

"I gradually became interested in it—I felt that it was something I could do," she said. The couple hung out with sculptors like Robert Arneson and his wife, Sandra Shannonhouse, as well as David Gilhooly. "I just had never seen art like that."

Peter, meanwhile, was showing with Allan Frumkin Gallery in New York (his debut solo exhibition was at the gallery's Chicago location back in 1961). It wasn't until the early 1980s, when the Sauls relocated to Austin, Texas, that Sally would start taking ceramics classes at the University of Texas and making her own work. Even then, she didn't seem overly driven to make a name for herself or to exhibit widely.

"Modesty had to be overcome in Sally's case," Peter surmised. "As she realizes now, you have to prize the work itself; you have to think it's good before other people think it's good. Sally had a rather low opinion."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with being self-critical—when you're learning," she countered. The fact that the pair wasn't actively dueling for art world recognition certainly took some of the pressure off. "I could feel competitive with other people," Sally added, "but I don't think I ever felt competitive with Peter. Not at all, really."

"That would be kind of self-defeating, if you're married," he agreed. "It would be sort of a problem."

Gallerist Gwenolee Zürcher concurred. In 2014, Peter curated a massive group show at her New York space entitled "If You're Accidentally Not Included, Don't Worry About It." He included

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some of Sally's ceramics in the mix; it was one of the first times she showed her work in the city. "Peter and Sally's relationship is pretty unique, based on mutual love, sharing the same ideas and wishes," Zürcher said. "I've known several artist-couples. I was close to Joan Mitchell, who lived with Jean-Paul Riopelle for 25 years. Their relationship was extremely intense; it was based on competition. They were fighting all the time.... Any durable relationship should be based on mutual respect and admiration."

"Sally and Peter's support of each other doesn't feel forced or strategic at all," said Rachel Uffner, the New York gallerist who currently represents Sally. "They're not promoting each other's work, they just enjoy each other's work—and they obviously enjoy each other."

You don't have to share the same exact taste

Part of the joy of being in a couple is getting to experience the things you enjoy in common. But that can also lead to friction. The Sauls are fortunate to have a fairly *simpatico* affection for art that is grotesque, comic, absurd, and in-your-face; they co-curated a massive group show entitled "Out of Control," on view at Venus in New York through August 10th, featuring a sprawling assortment of work by friends and peers like Erik Parker, Joe Bradley, Dana Schutz, and Arlene Shechet.

"Peter and Sally see more art and visit more galleries than most people," said Anna Christina Furney, a partner at the gallery. "When one takes an interest in an artist or object, the other is so enthused and eager to see it themselves. There is this wonderful mutual respect and curiosity that exists in the way they pursue art—it is rare and special and a rapport that is exclusively theirs."

But that doesn't mean they agree on everything. "Certain things I have an interest in that Sally is absolutely not interested in," Peter admitted, nodding to TV shows like *Lockup: Raw*,

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Portrait of Peter Saul by Stephanie Noritz for Artsy.

Portrait of Sally Saul by Stephanie Noritz for Artsy.

a documentary series about prison life. “I definitely show an interest in ghastly doings that Sally doesn’t. However, I follow Sally’s interest in *Pride and Prejudice* and many 19th-century things that I also enjoy.” (Peter also acknowledged a passion, now lapsed, for *People* magazine. “I gave up on it because it’s not hot enough,” he said. “I wanted to find out the ghastly doings of the celebrities, none of whom I actually know the names of or who the hell they are. But it’s all sanitized.”)

Meanwhile, Sally is slowly filling in the gaps in Peter’s knowledge of literary classics. She’ll read aloud to him before bed. They’ve made it through *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*,

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Frankenstein, and others. “The current one, Steinbeck, we’re not enjoying too much,” Peter noted. “*East of Eden*. It’s a yawner, a little bit.”

And if they get tired of the English-language canon, the Sauls have a shared love for the (seemingly endless) “My Struggle” series, the autobiographical doorstops by Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard.

Find the right long-term home

Ask any relationship counselor what couples tend to fight about, and certain things will top the list—major existential questions about where to live, or how to spend and save money. Here again, the Sauls are unique: Peter said he’s grateful to have “done nothing but art or teach” since 1959. “Sally’s just very recently started making money off art,” Peter added. “We’ve been very comfortable up to now, and Sally is adding to it.”

Still, they’re not extravagant. “We’re conservative like crazy,” Peter said, somewhat counterintuitively. Sally quickly added, “But on the other hand, we enjoy life, too.”

These days, the Sauls are permanently based in Germantown, a two-hour drive from Manhattan. That’s enabled them to enjoy a lifestyle that would be fairly unfeasible in the city. Their daily routine—which involves a commute of mere meters between their house and studio—begins with breakfast on the porch and a shared newspaper.

Peter cooks. Sally washes the dishes. She also handles a larger share of their joint administrative work in the morning. “Sally likes the email more than I do,” Peter admitted. “She’s more modern.” Both artists will then dedicate the bulk of their day to the studio, where they each have their own floor. While they’re waiting for inspiration to strike, the countryside also offers its fair share of mundane but necessary tasks. “I do the weeding,” Sally clarified. “And for a while, we trapped woodchucks regularly.” (The secret: cantaloupe bait and Havahart’s humane traps.)

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Peter Saul, "Louis XIV Feeds His Pets," 2015. © Peter Saul. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



Sally Saul, *Peter*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

Living outside of the city provides peace and quiet, but it can also have its downsides. “I really like being able to come to the city, because otherwise, after a while, you kind of forget who you are upstate,” Sally said.

The Sauls aren’t completely removed from the New York art world, of course—they count artists like Jeffrey Gibson, and gallerists like Alexander Grey and the Levai family, as upstate neighbors. But they still value the opportunities to spend time back in the city. Their complementary temperaments balance one another nicely. Peter is more reserved, less inclined to socialize: “I’m an isolated person,” he said. Sally, meanwhile, seems to be the one who might suggest the couple should make it out to openings in Chelsea, the Lower East Side, or Brooklyn. “I grew up in the countryside outside of Ithaca, the Finger Lakes,” she surmised, “and so I’ve always had this

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longing to be where the excitement was.”

“Sally has wanted to go out to openings much more than me,” Peter said. “So we go out to these places—during the last 18 years of living in the New York area—and I think it’s been very, very helpful to our art careers, because I didn’t understand how the art world worked at all. We realize now that because we show up, thanks to Sally, people know us a bit more. They see that we’re nice, we’re not horrible. You know?”

Be critical, but open-minded, about your partner’s work



Peter Saul, “Global Warming, the Last Beer,” 2017. © Peter Saul. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

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If you share your life with someone, it stands to reason that you'll also share your unfiltered, honest opinions. But how much should two artists in a relationship counsel each other about the work that they're making?

Peter and Sally seem to take a fairly hands-off approach in terms of mutual criticism, with some exceptions. "Peter's very supportive," Sally said. "I don't think he's ever super critical. He has good, very specific formal suggestions sometimes."

Sally, meanwhile, certainly feels comfortable venturing into Peter's floor of the studio to offer her own critiques. But she counsels against making definitive statements; just because your partner's latest work might not make sense to you now, it doesn't mean that you should tell him or her to abandon an experimental effort.

"Over time, your opinion can change," she said. "I've seen it with Peter's work over the years, how acceptance or lack of acceptance changes. Something that he made years ago that was just considered awful is now perfectly acceptable. You have to be a little careful."

And, of course, it always helps to have confidence, and a slightly thick skin. "Other people's opinions have never been a big deal in my life," Peter said. "I'm sort of self-contained."

Protect your relationship from the world's daily chaos

"Sally's more worried about the future than I am," Peter said, though no one would mistake him for an artist who thinks the world is in particularly good shape. Over the decades, he has expertly skewered politics, depicting Ronald Reagan as a sort of intestinal snake, or the war in Vietnam as a luridly grotesque horror show. As for the current occupant of the White

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House: “I’m finished with Trump,” Peter asserted. “I painted him five times, and that’s it. I’m not thinking about it anymore. It doesn’t interest me to have that situation in my head. I want somebody new—I’d like to be mad at somebody else.”

In the meantime, the couple has found uplift in an unlikely source: the recent acclaimed documentary about Mr. Rogers, *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* “He says, at some point: ‘Love is at the root of everything,’” Sally recalled. “All learning, all relationships—love, or the lack of it? I realized how important he was in terms of how he could talk to children. It’s an extraordinary person who can do that, really, as he did.”



Peter Saul, “Vietnam,” 1966. © Peter Saul. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



Sally Saul, *Lady with Rose*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

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Remember that kids can change the equation

Speaking of children: Peter and Sally raised a daughter together; her toddler years were spent in Austin, Texas. As for how kids would impact their respective careers: “I don’t think we thought about this very closely” at the time, Sally said, “which is one reason I’d recommend doing so.”

While their homebase in upstate New York might suit the Sauls’ current needs, Sally cherished the amenities for tots that a more urban setting provided. “Living in a place with plenty of resources for kids is a big help,” she said. “Austin turned out to be such a place—many parks, for example, with pools. We walked to our neighborhood park almost every day.” Other benefits included a small theater that put on magic acts and performances for kids; swim classes and the U.T. String Project at the University of Texas; art classes offered through the local museum; and a



Sally Saul, *Untitled*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

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nature program through Parks and Recreation. “I feel as if I had a second childhood!” Sally said.

Artmaking isn't always the most stable vocation, and kids aren't cheap. But artists considering having children also shouldn't be too discouraged by the costs of bringing another human being into the world. Imagination, after all, is invaluable—and totally free. Peter recalled an ongoing game he would play with his daughter involving a small colony of 17 Barbie dolls and a telenovela's worth of drama. “We had a town full of jealousies, fights, betrayals, and friendships,” he said, “and then we let the cat—as a wild animal—attack them. We had the whole range of human emotion, and I had as much fun doing this as our daughter.”

Remember what actually matters



Portrait of Peter and Sally Saul walking on the Upper East Side by Stephanie Noritz for Artsy.

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Peter and Sally are both intensely passionate about the art they make, but they haven't lost sight of what truly endures. “*Enjoy yourselves,*” Peter said, when asked to counsel a hypothetical duo of artists-in-love. “Don't worry about money and art appreciation any more than you absolutely have to. Art is not a ‘job.’”

In the end, a man who draws the Mona Lisa throwing up macaroni can find his creative soulmate in a woman prone to sculpting anxiously yearning humans or happy beavers with nine teats. But ultimately, a relationship is built on true connection, not just the fortunate sharing of eccentric tastes.

Art world fame is fleeting—love is built to last. “My idea is, I want to have a wonderful relationship with a beautiful woman,” Peter concluded, with refreshing honesty. “This isn't art-based, really. It's passion-based.”



Scott Indrisek is Artsy's Deputy Editor.

Header image: Portrait of Peter and Sally Saul by Stephanie Noritz for Artsy.