

VENUS

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Review: 'Peter Saul: From Pop to Punk,' a Firebrand Willing to Offend

The New York art dealer Ileana Sonnabend once avowed — somewhat self-servingly — that the best collectors are people in her line of work. Every so often the evidence mounts, as it does with ["Peter Saul: From Pop to Punk"](#) at Venus Over Manhattan. This poetically named art gallery established in 2012 by Adam Lindemann, a collector and occasional writer for *The New York Observer*, does not represent artists, but it regularly stages relevant exhibitions, and this is one of his best.

The show consists of a riveting clutch of 16 paintings and five large drawings from 1962 to 1973, all from the collection of Mr. Saul's longtime dealer, Allan Frumkin (1927-2002). They shed special light on a crucial period in the development of this firebrand painter and lifelong abstract art denier, who, despite quite a bit of exposure, has yet to receive his due.

Mr. Saul, who was born in San Francisco in 1934, attended what is now the San Francisco Art Institute and Washington University in St. Louis before heading to Europe in 1956. There he scraped by, going to museums and making paintings, first in the Netherlands, then Paris — where he had an influential encounter with *Mad Magazine* in a bookstore and also met Mr. Frumkin — and finally Rome.



During the years covered by this show, Mr. Saul made an Abstract Expressionist version of Pop Art; returned to the United States in 1964; relinquished oil paint for acrylic; and quickly evolved his rather tightly wound fluorescent "wild style" concoctions of figures that are at once savage political cartoons and beautiful if

disconcerting paintings. Mr. Saul has called them “glamorous,” which is accurate, considering how his palette and smooth surfaces align with Andy Warhol’s.

In short order, Mr. Saul was skewering the American presence in Vietnam and assorted political figures, assaulting and seducing eye and mind with a rare and aggressive simultaneity of form and meaning. This much is apparent as soon as you step into the gallery and feel the heat of paintings like the 1973 “Pinkville,” with its monstrous pink American G.I. in Vietnam torturing writhing yellow bodies, or a green-skinned woman with a purple Afro twisting on a yellow, carefully wood-grained cross titled “Crucifixion of Angela Davis,” also 1973. Mr. Frumkin — in many ways an abstract art denier in his own right — opened a gallery in Chicago in 1952 and another on 57th Street in Manhattan in 1959. In Chicago, he showed Franz Kline, Roberto Matta, Leon Golub, Louise Bourgeois and H. C. Westermann, who initially worked as his assistant. In New York, he operated stubbornly and fairly successfully beyond the fringe of the mainstream art world.

He was best known as an unswerving advocate for the California Funk artists, a group that has included Mr. Saul and Mr. Westermann. He also represented New Realists like Philip Pearlstein, Jack Beal and Willard Midgette. If it took New York a while to lose its blind spot for some of these artists, the gallery’s shows were never less than bracing.

And then there was its impeccable historical material. Underpinning his penchant for figuration, Mr. Frumkin also showed German Expressionist prints and drawings, and for a while, represented the estate of Lovis Corinth. He accrued an exceptional personal collection of 382 prints by Max Beckmann that is now in the St. Louis Art Museum.

I vividly remember encountering as if for the time the prints of Emil Nolde and Beckmann at the gallery, as well as a spectacular Beckmann charcoal now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

When Mr. Frumkin and Mr. Saul met in Paris in 1960, Mr. Saul was a genuine starving artist sent the dealer’s way by Matta, the Chilean Surrealist to whom Mr. Saul had appealed in desperation, because he rightly sensed an affinity with the older artist’s work. The meeting occurred in the basement bar of a hotel. The artist unrolled some drawings on the floor. The dealer bought several on the spot for \$25 each, \$10 above the artist’s asking price. In 1961, Mr. Saul made his American debut at Mr. Frumkin’s Chicago gallery. A year later, his New York debut took place at the Frumkin Gallery on 57th Street. There followed a total of 19 Frumkin shows, 13 in New York and six in Chicago.

I detail this because the artist-dealer relationship is arguably the most basic, if volatile, of all art-world molecules, and because the history of galleries is extremely ephemeral. (Readers with a ken for geographical minutiae may enjoy learning that the New York Frumkin opened at 32 East 57th Street, where the

Pace Gallery now occupies several floors, and then relocated to the second-floor space at 50 West 57th, previously the Howard Wise Gallery.)

At that first Paris meeting, Mr. Frumkin also committed to paying Mr. Saul a monthly stipend that would continue for decades, accumulating in return the works that we see here. And we are seeing them largely because Mr. Lindemann went to school with Mr. Frumkin's sons and recently asked them about "Pinkville," which he remembered hanging near the family pool table.



At the core of the show are eight paintings from Mr. Saul's corrosive antiwar and political series, these dating 1968 to 1973. They culminate in "Pinkville," which Mr. Frumkin considered Mr. Saul's masterpiece, and identify the artist as an equal opportunity abuser prone to distorting and maligning figures both real and imagined, admired and vilified.

In the tangle of orange, hot-pink and chartreuse against black and blue that is "The Government of California," Ronald Reagan and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. are depicted as greedy monsters, looming over San Francisco like the ravaging aliens of later apocalyptic movies. Dr. King's tentacular hands finger gold coins, but he has a halo, while Reagan, considerably viler, sprouts tubes labeled with words like "police power" and "education."

These paintings are illuminated by three other groups of works. Just the titles of several early, relatively lush-surfaced paintings in oil (1961-64) display a willingness to offend on several levels: "Superman in the Electric Chair" and "Sex Deviate Being Executed." Their bestrewed compositions also owe a debt to Pollock's allover paintings — so much for abstraction denied.

Even more remarkable, and less familiar, are large drawings from 1966 notable especially for their skeins of automatist drawing in pencil, crayon and ballpoint. Finally there are two paintings from 1966, also exceedingly unfamiliar, where you see Mr. Saul first finding his legs with acrylic, leaving visible bits of canvas bare and delectable exploratory drawing.

The title of one of them — “Homage to Thomas Hart Benton” — announces an ambition to pervert and amplify American Scene painting, while the other, “Human Dignity” (1966), is an early masterpiece. Here an Asian woman with an ample chest bearing the work’s title floats beside an American G.I. mounted on a soft white polka-dot cross, a little like Wonder Bread packaging, beneath a feathery multicolored sky. The motif recurs, considerably tightened up, in the 1967 “G.I. Christ,” where the cross is red rived with black, a marvelous swollen form that might almost be a bloody cross-section of flesh.

The surfaces of subsequent paintings here aren’t quite as much fun to pore over. Mr. Saul turns into a kind of mad Jan van Eyck, rendering his fantastical interpolations of current events as precisely and vehemently as possible. His progress here is exciting to relive, and the outcome is an early instance of the politically incorrect, visually adamant work that artists like Kara Walker and Sue Williams would be producing 20 years on. It stands head and shoulders above much of today’s visually challenged political art.

The package of color, composition, narrative and fury that Mr. Saul formulated in these works may be unique to the 20th century in its richness, its longevity and its vociferous objections to American life as it was, and mostly continues to be. It is also abstract art by another name. This show allows us to share Mr. Frumkin’s delight in hoarding them.