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**Perversion and “the Other” as Social Criticism:**

**Peter Saul’s Vietnam**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Melissa Danelle Perez-Halley**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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in

**Art History and Criticism**

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Throughout the career of Peter Saul, different facets of his genius have variously been on display: Peter Saul the rabble-rouser, the reactionary, the formal painter, the thinker, the activist, and even Peter Saul the marginalized. My thesis will take a new and critical look at Saul and set out to establish that through the risky, bold, and innovative work of his 1960s Vietnam series, he filled a crucial gap and forged a distinctive path in the American Contemporary art scene.

The first section will focus on Saul’s life and professional development, up to the early 70s, as described in letters written between the artist and his dealer, critics, and historians. Here, I will attempt to clarify Saul’s historical and social context, in order to better situate his work.

I will begin the second section by explaining the theoretical underpinnings of Hegel, Levinas, and Derrida’s philosophical engagement with “the Other” and analyzing

the fracture and destabilization that occurs specifically in Saul's Vietnam series. Lastly, the third section will explain how this deconstruction or interpretation allows Saul's work to function in the mode of social criticism. Through the context of his personal journey, his Vietnam series will be critically broached. The main objective of this thesis will be to establish that, from the margins, Saul has been able to leave an indelible mark in contemporary art and has done so by giving a voice to "the Other." Walking the fine line of neither rejecting nor assimilating that which is different, Saul's rather admittedly offensive and shocking art actually engages "the Other," and doing so, acts as the prophetic voice of his generation.

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# Introduction

*The work of art is adjustment, balance, reassurance. It can be neither gloomy nor full of rosy hopes for its essence consists of justice. —Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>1</sup>*

In 1952 art critic Harold Rosenberg declared a new vanguard in the art world. Steeped in the European tradition of the Avant-Garde, artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Klein were painting gestural abstract compositions and America had finally triumphed over Europe as the center of the art world. Around this time artist Peter Saul was beginning his degree in studio art at Washington University in St. Louis. Defying all stylistic categories, Saul was determined to find his own artistic path. Unlike the Abstract Expressionists, Saul was drawn to the literary. From the beginning, Saul structured his work around a narrative framework – the intent to communicate is clear and distinct. Saul’s works are meant to draw in mature, discerning viewers, pressing them not only to actively engage, but more to be complicit in the aesthetic experience. With colors so bright they are called day glo, figures so abstract they are related more to the Surrealists than to the figurative, and subject matter so violent that his work is rarely given critical attention, Peter Saul has carved a niche for himself and become arguably one of the most influential American artists of the twenty-first century. Dennis Szakaacs, director of the Orange County Museum describes his work:

Rambunctious, wildly imaginative yet oddly moralistic, Peter Saul’s paintings are psychedelic tent revivals in which demons are exorcised, hypocrisies unmasked, and the grand themes of history and culture reduced to their often violent and narcissistic core. His work over the last forty years is one of the singular achievements in American Art. A pioneer

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke. *Letters on Life*. Translated and Edited by Ulrich Baer. New York: The Modern Library, 2005. p. 130.

during the early days of Pop, Saul adopted a maverick approach to painting and an incendiary subject matter that have kept his work on the margins while generations of younger artists have followed his path into the depths of the American Id.<sup>2</sup>

Psychologically engaging, emotionally disturbing, yet playfully satiric, Peter Saul challenges conceptions of art and at the same time perceptions of human experience.

In exploring Peter Saul's Vietnam series, this essay sets out to establish that even though as an artist he, himself was marginalized, he was able to give a voice to "the Other."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, he navigated the fine line between neither rejecting nor assimilating "the Other;" but paradoxically, through admittedly shocking, intentionally offensive images, Saul portrays "the Other's" pain, suffering, and alienation. In the process, with the inordinate insight and the insolent audacity of a modern day prophet, Saul tackles some of the most pressing issues of his generation. Speaking to this, Michael Duncan assesses Saul's interpretive style as one "dedicated to the dystopian reversal of all ideals—a comic-book grand manner."<sup>3</sup> Duncan elaborates, "Given his awareness of the ambivalences of our culture and its perverse dialectic of good and evil, he is perhaps the grand documentarian of the foibles of fallen America's ancient regime."<sup>4</sup> Conscious of the aesthetic and even moral expectations of his audience, as well as the communicative power of art, Saul sought out subject matter that would engage a wide variety of viewers, thus compelling them to critically deconstruct long-held values and ideals.

Regrettably, although not surprisingly due to acerbic nature of his work, until recently Saul and his work have been passed over by the writers of art survey texts. He

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 72

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 72

<sup>3</sup> As understood by Richard Bernstein in his article "Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited," as "the 'problem' of the one and the many and/or identity and difference." p. 85

has not been exhibited alongside the great American art masters, but his work remains some of the most significant of the twentieth century. Art historian and curator Dan Cameron says,

Peter Saul is the one whose ongoing lack of official recognition is probably the most strikingly disproportionate to his substantial influence on young painters today. In fact, considering how much American art over the past two decades has been devoted to dissecting the dark underbelly of the beached American dream, one might even be excused for thinking that Saul is one the quintessential U.S. painters of the past fifty years, as egregiously underrated as he is pathologically incorrigible.<sup>5</sup>

Despite being one of the lesser-recognized founders of Pop, Peter Saul influenced everyone from the Hairy Who in Chicago, to the Funk movement in the Bay Area, to contemporary painters who reject the mainstream American lineage of Abstraction, Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptualism.

Structured into three parts, the first section of this study sets out to establish the personal and historical context in which an artist such as Saul arose. Beginning in early childhood through his time at Washington University to his time in Europe and ending with his present day endeavors, the reader will receive a summary account of Saul's major life experiences.

The second chapter posits the theoretical foundation of the problematic of “the Other” using the philosophy of Hegel, Levinas, and Derrida. The trajectory of analysis of “the Other” is followed from the recognition of “the Other,” to the assimilation of “the Other” as the same, under the guise of inclusion. From this phase, the analysis moves to the recognition of “the Other” as the Absolute other, and ultimately to “the Other” as in-between—in the interface between same and radically different, between good and bad,

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<sup>5</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 9

in that liminal space where nothing is clear, but thereby becomes more complex and critically captivating.

The second chapter seeks to actively apply Derrida's theory of "the Other" within Saul's art, specifically in *Beautiful Yellow Mother* and *Human Dignity* of 1966, and *Pinkville* 1970. This section also seriously considers the development of Saul's technical skills as seen in the Vietnam series throughout the years, ending with a discussion of Saul's artistic lineage, tracing the influence of artists such as William Hogarth, Thomas Hart Benton, David Álfaro Siqueiros, and Frances Bacon.

The third section makes use of the work of Michael Walzer's, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, as a theoretical base for understanding Saul's interpretation of "the Other" as a vehicle of social criticism. Through his biting interpretation of America's involvement in Vietnam, Saul interprets the duplicity of the government's official rhetoric and stance as pitted against the underhanded, unethical, even immoral acts that history has since recorded. Walzer compares contemporary criticism to the poetic prophecy of the ancient clairvoyants of the Hebrew Bible, specifically citing Amos as a particularly successful example of the effectiveness and timelessness of the act of the interpretation of events as social criticism. Using Walzer's approach, Saul ideally fits this definition of a prophetic voice.

I will argue that Peter Saul reflects in his art the epic struggle of good vs. evil, same vs. different, those "in" vs. the marginalized only to find that upon closer inspection, the true struggle may not be that of polar opposites but one of degrees. Saul's art more than urges the informed viewers to take stock, it dares them, even heckles those keen and intrepid enough, to connect. In the process, Saul challenges his audience to

meet in that liminal space between ideals and cynicism to come to terms communally as a nation and admit failures of the past and strive again to regain a sense of justice and morality. Without a doubt, Saul's art is not for the faint of heart—or the weak of stomach. His works accost viewers and challenge most sensibilities. As noted by critic and historian Michael Duncan, "Saul spews race and gender-based caricatures back at us in scenes of violation, exploitation, and denigration, regurgitating the worst-case scenarios of political, social, and psychological reality."<sup>6</sup> Yet, Duncan concedes that "given the cartoonish direction of the United states over the past thirty years, his paintings seem more and more to be an accurate reflection of American reality."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 59

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59



# I.

*Not to be shocking means to agree to be furniture.*—Peter Saul

Peter Saul's life and personality defy facile description. A living oxymoron, he easily could be lewd and well-behaved, a traditionalist and an iconoclast, a formal painter and an informal satirist. Yet, for all his rabble-rousing, agitating, and reputation as a general nonconformist, this modern-day messiah has a candor that transcends the at times over-intellectualized art world. In his own, often-misunderstood way, Saul challenges many of society's values and mores. Numerous aesthetes have criticized Saul for his tendency towards narrative, his irreverent and crude attitude, and his fondness for representation over total abstraction. While these criticisms are not off-mark, it is this brazen ability to confront societal taboos head-on that makes his work uncompromising and impossible to ignore. As Robert Storr, a longtime friend and colleague, so incisively characterizes,

Peter's 'disgust' puts him beyond the pale. He is mad—still mad—immodestly, and unapologetically so. If that makes him a Philistine, he seems to say, 'So What?!' His reward is the license not just to be funny but to make fun, to ridicule, to mock, to lampoon, to burlesque all the modernist shibboleths that others must protect as they fight their fractional fights within modernism's fragmented enclave. (And what is post-modernism but an attempt to claim the crown once the king is dead?)<sup>4</sup>

This usurping of authority, this winner-takes-all attitude is indeed Saulesque. No one is exempt from Peter Saul's satirical eye and all topics are fair game-- be they related to race, gender, religion, history, or art. His work provokes, even taunts the viewer to explore possible new perspectives.

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<sup>4</sup>Benoit Decron, Robert Storr, and Anne Tronche. Peter Saul. Paris: Somogy Editions D'Art, 1999. p. 16

## **Early Childhood**

Not surprisingly, especially for a future artist, the young Peter Saul turned to images to make sense of his world. The source of the images, comic books, was not that unusual, especially for a child in the 1940's. Curious for more information, his friend Storr once asked Saul in an interview, "And what was the idea?" Saul simply, but revealingly replied, "That through these comics I could know the world, you know?"

While Saul shares details like this about his childhood seldom, there is one other memory that also stands out because of its power and relevancy to Saul becoming an artist. He remembers being about five years old when his parents took him to the Picasso exhibition of 1939. He remembers: "People were screaming and shaking their fists, surging against the barricades. To think that mere pictures could upset a whole city.... I was more than impressed. I immediately wanted to become an artist and cause riots."<sup>5</sup> The epiphany that an artist's work could register that decibel of passion in viewers never left him.

## **Adolescence and Young Adulthood**

While Saul prefers to give just sketchy glimpses of his childhood, he remembers his years at Shawnigan Lake School, a Catholic boarding school in Vancouver, Canada, rather vividly. His problems at the school seemed systemic as he was in trouble in the classroom as well as out. Since Saul committed chronic infractions, it did not bode well for him that the school firmly adhered to its corporal punishment policy. Unfortunately, Saul describes these sessions as "beatings," noting that at one point he received 17 beatings over a three-month period. Saul, himself, has said that this treatment impacted

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<sup>5</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 26

the way he feels compelled to treat subjects on canvas. Saul did not fare much better outside the classroom as he was incorrectly labeled as being of Jewish descent and ridiculed and bullied relentlessly. Looking back, Saul writes with some degree of detachment, “That I’m not even Jewish makes it funny and sets the stage for my artistic commitment to anti-Vietnam, etc., and explains as well the humorous side of that.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1950 Saul graduated from Shownigan, returned to San Francisco and had a brief stint as a merchant seaman and courier before briefly attending Stanford and the School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. In 1952 he finally settled in the University of Washington in St. Louis, where he developed a greater understanding of the art world and what life would be like as a full-time artist. It was the early 50s and Abstract Expressionism reigned supreme. There was little discussion of figuration or narrative art. For a time at the beginning of his studies, he attempted to fit in trying his hand at Abstract Expressionism, like his “serious” colleagues. But he always wanted to stand out—be different. This tension between wanting success but rejecting the art community that could help bring about the recognition—has been a constant refrain throughout Saul’s career.

While at Washington University, the work of Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning were applauded, while the work of university alum and one of Saul’s favorite artists, Max Beckmann, was considered less significant, less effective. His technical talent was appreciated but the narrative nature of his work and the figurative manifestation of the paintings were considered too literal and hence passé. Saul notes, “The official art-teacher opinion of Beckmann was that the ‘way’ he painted was super and we were encouraged to resemble him technically, but the subject, or message

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Saul. Letters to Robert Storr. May 22, 2000. George Adams Gallery, New York p. 14

(drawing?) was considered ‘too personal’ and we weren’t supposed to pay attention to that. I did the opposite, as always.”<sup>7</sup>

Subject matter, remains of course, at the heart of Saul’s interest in art. Saul writes, “When I’m going to paint a picture, the first thing I think about is the subject matter. I definitely avoid those subjects that would be interesting only to me and my friends (view out the window, people I know, etc.). Instead I try to think of something interesting to as many people as possible.”<sup>8</sup> Saul’s work is a template for Collingwood’s theory of collaboration, where the artist is part of a three-fold participation involving the art world (artists both past and present), his audience, and (when applicable) the additional artists who perform their work.<sup>9</sup>

Saul was not able to completely reject the pressures of the school to try Abstract Expressionist techniques. He describes this time of self-exploration, “At first, I made a little attempt to be part of it, work as much like de Kooning as possible. But my heart wasn’t in it, and with a painting of a motor boat, a pretty girl, and a palm tree under the influence of Francis Bacon and photos from National Geographic, I proceeded along the path I’m now on.”<sup>10</sup> Not only was Saul’s “heart not in it” but also in a letter to Allen Frumkin, his art dealer in 1966 he confesses,

I think the reason for these negative ideas is that modern art has been going on for so long, and Kandinsky’s original idea of making positive shapes that don’t resemble nature at all is so indisputably big-time, that there is little accomplishment possible now in a professional sense—distortion of the human figure, the most positive action an artist can take, has been absolutely worked over, and I just have a hunch that my idea of how to draw the human figure convincingly so that it projects to the

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Saul. Letters to Robert Storr. May 22, 2000. George Adams Gallery, New York p. 17

<sup>8</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 141

<sup>9</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1958. p. 310-324

<sup>10</sup> Peter Saul. Letters to Robert Storr. May 22, 2000. George Adams Gallery, New York. p. 13

spectator ideas about people that could be true—is the last one, the rest are too-small derivations, rather than ‘fields of inquiry’ in a high sense<sup>11</sup>

Saul turned to figuration and to Francis Bacon for inspiration throughout his youth. Bacon’s influence would make one more appearance in the trajectory of Saul’s work—during his Art on Art series in the late 70s.

### **Years in Europe**

Shortly after his graduation from Washington University in 1956 Saul and his girlfriend Vicki moved to Europe. Saul immediately set out to work and established a connection with the American Students and Artists Club. He began working on a larger scale, with bolder colors and priming his canvas with a thin coat of white paint, creating a wet film that allowed his work to take on a “slick and fast” look. Saul writes, “These were pictures of cars, washing machines with talk blobs, women in bathing suits, similar to what I was doing in my room at Bergen Ann Zee, but more confident and a lot larger.”<sup>12</sup> Not only was he feeling more confident, but happily he noted, “I definitely got noticed—the public, anyone who could gain admittance to the snooty, elitist ‘American Student and Artist’s Club’ could go into the studio area on the top floor and look at the art. I even got mentioned in an article in the Sunday New York Times called (I think) ‘The New Bohemians’ and referring to the ‘kid at the A.S. and A. Club who paints suit cases’. Wow!”<sup>13</sup>

### **Peter Saul, the Artist**

It was around the fall of 1960 that Peter Saul entered into a business relationship with Allen Frumkin, an art-dealer with whom he would do life-long business. Saul was

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<sup>11</sup> J. Martin, *Peter Saul*. New York, Allen Frumkin Gallery, 1987. p. 6

<sup>12</sup> Peter Saul. Letters to Robert Storr. May 22, 2000. George Adams Gallery, New York. p. 4

<sup>13</sup> Peter Saul. Letters to Robert Storr. May 22, 2000. George Adams Gallery, New York. p. 5

still working in this pre-Pop mode, drawing imagery from advertisements and magazines. But there was still an element or relevance he felt his work lacked. He considered, “The ‘subjects’, icebox, washing machine, just sort of ‘sat there’ against the colored background, like advertisements do. I wanted a more expressive looking kind of picture more narrative more flashy less ‘formal’.”<sup>14</sup> Giving importance to narrative in painting was bold at the time. One of the goals of Modernism, and even Pop and Minimalism that followed, was to banish the need for the figure and in doing so, the narrative. There was more interest in concepts, ideas, technique, and materiality. But Saul chose the opposite, embracing and promoting narrative in his work.

This turn to narrative and satire specifically, was inspired by his rediscovery of the comic book genre, and *Mad Magazine* specifically. Saul affirms, “Consequently when I came across several ‘Mad Comics’ at the Wistral bookstore, on the left bank, the psychology of luridly making fun of Americana just jumped off the pages and into my head.”<sup>15</sup> Not only did the satire and subject matter affect Saul but the style and imagery recalled his childhood interest in these magazines and established an inspiration that would feed his imagination for the duration of his career.

As noted, Saul learned about the world through popular magazines and so it seems natural that at the beginning of his career he took inspiration from the popular world. Therefore, given his concern with subject matter, his interest in popular culture, and his hunger for large-scale appeal—it was at this point in his trajectory that Saul arrived at his style. However, in so doing, he found himself alone in his dialogue with figuration and connection with narration. Drawing from painful experiences both in his

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 6

childhood and boarding school years, Saul's works communicate pathos with a caustic dose of humor and/or an outrageous sense of irony unusual for his time.<sup>16</sup> He comes by this dark, almost demented sense of humor and irony honestly, since Saul writes that this defense mechanism was activated early in his years at the Catholic boarding school. As he himself has stated, he returned to these devices to offer possible buffers against other forms of ostracizing and cruelty.

Peter Saul's time in Europe also gave him some critical distance artistically, for he realized that American painters had come upon a formula. Saul notes, "What I noticed was the way the American artists relentlessly specialized in just one thing (Pollock's drips, Rothko's fuzzy squares, Kline's big black lines). That seemed a good, forceful thing to do (no one was worried about boredom yet, I guess). So . . . I resolved to paint only these new Mad Comics- and Dick Tracey -derived expressions and skip entirely more sedate things."<sup>17</sup> Saul perceptively recognizes this is as an effective marketing tool. "Somehow in 1959, variety of thoughts = weakness,"<sup>18</sup> he seems to lament, yet he also saw it as a way to create an artistic identity. He saw the success of these huge artistic personalities and, despite his interest in going against the grain, he still wanted name/image recognition and he seemed to see this "brand-recognition" as an acceptable compromise since it did not entail a sell-out of his ideals.

Strangely enough, a change in his style at this point in his life came about quite unexpectedly and in retrospect, serendipitously. Feeling depressed and rejected after his girlfriend ran off with a mime actor, Saul, writes,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 7

I went back to Paris, feeling bad, perhaps violent and when standing in the subway suddenly noticed the advertisements and how they were defaced by the graffiti and that seemed to relate to how I felt about myself (defaced?) so I went to the American Student and Artist's Club (this was 1959) and 'defaced' my pictures of cars and ice boxes with linear graffiti of cocks, toilet bowls and hands with guns shooting bullets—made the pictures a lot more interesting to look at!!<sup>19</sup>

Saul could relate so well to this idea of defacement that it became a signature element of his work. Considering the Pop Movement had not happened yet, his work was received as fresh, unexpected. The only frequent complaint was that people were offended by the “slickness” of it, to use Saul's own word. That was the historical time, the late 50's, when the concept of 'good' (American) art was to show 'struggle' and the concept of 'bad' (French) art was to skip over the 'struggle' and be 'slick'.<sup>20</sup> At the time, it was generally believed that American Abstract Expressionism had finally triumphed over French Modern art.

Saul was un-phased by the Modern Masters of the 1950's and he did not have any particular loyalty to the work being created in the United States. He thought the best path to recognition was by being true to himself and to his vision for his work, as opposed to trying to be “good” as defined by the artistic barometer of the time. Saul writes, “To hell with being 'good'. I wanted to be 'noticed', sincerely.”<sup>21</sup> For Saul, being an artist is less about idea or concept and more about reaction, effect, and general communication.

Shortly after his work began winning praise in Paris, the Pop Movement started taking shape in America. In 1961 Saul first learned of it when his mother-in-law sent him a newspaper clipping about artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Claes Oldenburg. This news came a few months before his first New York show with Frumkin.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 10

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 10



The article spoke of the artists' interest in isolating the objects from their context and not engaging the objects as the subject matter itself so there was still a difference between his and their work. He was more or less grateful for the sudden rise of Pop and generally credits its popularity for allowing him entrance into the mainstream art world. But at the same time, Saul explains, "to be part of a group of artists was extremely unpleasant to me, especially accidentally."<sup>22</sup> Saul struggled with the tension of both appreciating and hating Pop. He remained completely dumbfounded by the way the Pop artists diluted content,

Looking at the thing we shared—this is late 1961—that is, 'the comics' as subject—I could not believe that he [referring to Lichtenstein], or any human being could be more interested in the technique (dots?) than the subject (violence, sex, adventure, etc.). I decided that if this was indeed the case, I would concentrate more on the subject and skip the techniques. I always did feel it was the message and personality of the comics that was the main thing about them.<sup>23</sup>

Saul found the comics' content most important and understood that their visual technique or manifestation was a way to draw attention to their message. Saul found the critical nature of Mad Comics engaging, saying he liked, "that (the comics) seem to parody U.S. life and its goals."<sup>24</sup> Saul's critical view of the United States fits easily within this format and so he continued with stronger satirical statements of idealistic American values.

Saul also credits his childhood interest in comics with informing his work in one more way, that is, by adding a psychological dimension. He comments, "So, my mind was pre-filled (and remains chock-full) of this stuff. From 'Crimeboy's Secret Bathroom' (1962) onwards there is no more-if there was ever-interest in 'pop' to help the picture to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 19

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 20

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 20

look good, and instead (if not always, even before) a total dedication to the plot and psychology of ‘pop’.”<sup>25</sup> Not only was Saul committed to narrative when it was generally rejected, but he was also devoted to the psychology of the subject. This was not the specific Freudian interpretation that the Surrealists employed, but a more general, layman’s psychology of the narrative and the ensuing psychological response of the viewer.

In the last years of the ‘50s, Saul established a type of dialogical community that included Thomas Hart Benton, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Francis Bacon. He admired both their subject matter as well as their painting technique,

I also like other artists for their ‘message and personality. Again, that doesn’t mean I am indifferent to how they paint-on the contrary, the way they do it has to enhance what they do. But I am unable to see the ‘way it’s done’ as the subject of the work. I simply see the personality of the artist, as expressed in his work, primarily graphically, first, as the most interesting thing about the work. I much preferred Bacon’s anxiety and gloomy homosexuality to Buffet’s skinniness and existential worry.<sup>26</sup>

Saul seems to take the social themes and narrative structure of Thomas Hart Benton, the historic scale, political satire, and experimentation of technique of David Alfaro Siqueiros, and the anxious angst, and tendency toward abstracted representation of Francis Bacon. From this community of artists Saul established his language both visually and in regards to his choices in content.

### **Return From Europe**

By 1964, Saul had a young family, his father was on his deathbed, and he felt the need to return to America. He moved back from his 8-year stint in Europe, to the home his mother had promised him on his return. By now he had taken on semi-political

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 21

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 22

subject matter beginning with *Mickey Mouse vs. The Japs*<sup>27</sup> back in 1962. This painting marked the beginning of his mature style, and his first cohesive series which featured Vietnam. During this time, the United States was in conflict with both Cuba and North Vietnam over communism. In 1964 Saul made a significant shift in subject matter, turning from his general societal criticism, to a more specific criticism of the United States' foreign affairs. Also in 1964 he created some of the most poignant works of this series including, *Donald Duck vs. The Japs*<sup>28</sup>, *Co Itchee Bitchee*<sup>29</sup> 1964, *New China*<sup>30</sup> 1965, *Human Dignity*<sup>31</sup>, *Vietnam*<sup>32</sup>, and *Beautiful Yellow Mother*<sup>33</sup> 1966, *Saigon*<sup>34</sup> 1967, *Little Joe in Hanoi*<sup>35</sup> and *Typical Saigon*<sup>36</sup> 1968, returning to the subject one last time with *Pinkville*<sup>37</sup> in 1970. Canvas after canvas lambasts the United States' idealistic morals, satirizing the hypocritical behavior abroad. Saul addresses this new direction, "By late 1964, I was absolutely in the mood to separate myself from 'Pop Art'—if not for the good reasons on the previous pages, [speaking of conceptual difference, like his preoccupation with subject matter] then just because my constant urge has always been to be as singular and different as possible, because its' a more 'romantic' position than being part of some lousy 'organization.'"<sup>38</sup> Instead of trying to understand the American politics, Saul pined after quixotic revolutionaries: "Che Guevara is more my idea," he admits, "a tough guy on a losing side. And yet, I also want to get ahead, so it's

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<sup>27</sup> Figure 1

<sup>28</sup> Figure 4

<sup>29</sup> Figure 2

<sup>30</sup> Figure 4

<sup>31</sup> Figure 6

<sup>32</sup> Figure 8

<sup>33</sup> Figure 7

<sup>34</sup> Figure 9

<sup>35</sup> Figure 10

<sup>36</sup> Figure 11

<sup>37</sup> Figure 12

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23

complicated and unclear to me.”<sup>39</sup> Saul exposed his vulnerabilities in a statement such as this, showing not only his tendency toward romantic ideals, but also his affinity for what these kinds of revolutionaries represent. Throughout this time from about 1964 to about 1970 Saul resided in Mill Valley, teaching part time at several small universities and working on several other critical satires of the United States including a series featuring Angela Davis and focusing on Civil Rights, a series following Regan while he was governor of California, and several other paintings that did not cleanly fit into a particular series. He continued showing at the Frumkin Gallery both in Chicago and New York, but purposefully stayed away from the art scene.

### **California to New York**

Around 1972, while living his last few years in California, Minimalism had overtaken Pop art and a new kind of pictorial realism was taking shape.

Concept art had gone away and been replaced by realism (Estes, etc.) in the outside world. During the concept art years, my stuff had to be as maximal and hot as the other stuff was minimal and cool (to me, wanting to be ‘cool’, seems similar to wanting to be inadequate; ‘hot’ being the ideal). Now, I saw that painting had not disappeared forever as Art Forum had said, but had come back in an extremely conservative way that astonished me.<sup>40</sup>

Saul compares the work of Estes, Beal, and Close to that of an older generation. He saw them as wanting to reclaim painting once again after minimalism reigned. Since Saul saw this “new realism” as being steeped in the past he felt no connection with it. “Because of my distortions and day glo, I felt comfortably removed from this ‘realism’, yet able to just ‘paint’ more. Plus my art career, after 6 years of being different and getting hotter

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 23

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 30

and hotter I was at a complete standstill (I mean here my career was in bad shape after all the unsalable art I'd made).”<sup>41</sup>

From 1973 to 1981 Saul lived in Chappaqua, New York and lived a quiet life. Despite the fact that he was now on the East coast, he was still far enough removed from the art world that he did not feel any pressure to change with the ever-evolving styles, and in 1979 he received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1980, just before he moved to Texas, he was given his first retrospective at the Northern Illinois University in De Kalb.

### **Texas to the Present**

In 1981 Saul moved to Austin and began teaching at the University of Texas at Austin, where he worked for the next 19 years. During that prosperous time in his career, Saul received the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship 1993 and was given his second retrospective in 1989. Saul found that he loved teaching and was in a prime place to bring his work to a new technical level. Dan Cameron, curator of the 2008 Peter Saul retrospective at the Orange County Museum of Art, tells of Saul's time in Texas, “In Austin, Saul's distance from the mainstream art world became both geographical and cultural, as a result of which his painting became much more confident and focused. For much of this period, his emphasis was less on headlines than on historical themes, as well as introspective paintings dealing with identity and relationships. He also became a teacher of some renown.”<sup>42</sup> This renown led to more introspective and technically sturdy paintings. While Saul felt he was a kind of failure for not breaking into the very art world he despised, he also felt a type of freedom that

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 30

<sup>42</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 24

allowed him to refine his technique and reconsider his intentions. He worked with glazes, adding a depth and dimension that had not been there in the past. Robert Storr notes Saul's development, "The difference between then and now marks an artistic maturation generally ignored by those who take Peter too much at his work and only pay attention to the subject matter, and to its stubborn denial of maturity. The reality, however, is that in an effort to subdue 'paint' as a sign of uncontaminated creativity expressing itself, Peter has paid increasing attention to paint's potential nuances."<sup>43</sup>

Saul returned to New York around 2000 and has resided there since, with homes in both upstate New York and New York City as well as in California. While his close ties with the George Adams Gallery (once Frumkin Gallery) have for the most part come to a stand still he still shows with the David Nolan Gallery and exhibits throughout the United States and Europe. Peter Saul is a continual influence on up and coming generations of artists the world over.

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<sup>43</sup> Beniot Decron, Robert Storr, and Anne Tronche. *Peter Saul*. Paris: Somogy Editions D'Art, 1999. p. 13

## II.

*It might be that we are all tattooed savages since Sophocles. But there is more to Art than the straightness of lines and the perfection of surfaces. Plasticity of style is not as large as the entire idea.... —Flaubert<sup>44</sup>*

To this point, I have explored Saul's life and explained the background that brought him to maturity both personally and professionally. Through satire, narrative subject matter, and lurid attention-grabbing imagery Saul creates his unforgettable paintings. Vietnam was his first cohesive and mature series, and while it did not gain critical acclaim, it stands as one of his most valiant, critical, and moving bodies of work. For the first time he was able to delve into the American psyche and its relation with the conflict in the East. Saul did not depict soldiers heroically fending off the enemy in the name of Democracy. Instead, he explains,

My idea of a soldier is quite different: he never finds the enemy soldier, never fights him with any weapons. My soldier is a dirty freak; he avoids the enemy; his object is to get around the enemy, sneak into his camp, rape his women, commit perversion on children, rob banks. Nothing but 'home' thrills, loot-lust, killing of innocents, purposeful atrocities.<sup>45</sup>

Based on this characterization of the soldiers alone, it is not difficult to understand why his work was not received openly. What was possibly even more disturbing than this characterization was the fact that he made the enemy the victim. If only Saul's work could be that clear cut, perhaps it would not be as offensive. The problem is that there is no "bad guy." Saul argues, "The next thing I see is the politics of the situation, a

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<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978. p. 3

<sup>45</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 113

traditional ‘bad guy,’ shooting a bunch of ‘worse guys.’ That’s fine, more sophisticated than good versus bad.”<sup>46</sup> What Saul calls sophisticated, can also be seen as more nuanced, more trying, and even incriminating. If “they” are not the bad guy, and “we” are not the good guys, then what exactly is happening? This is a question that Saul’s work forces his viewers to ask. By creating this uncertainty and nuance the images clear a fertile ground for critical engagement and visceral penetrating experience.

### **The Other**

The characteristic that sets Saul’s Vietnam series apart revolves around the philosophical problematic of the Other, and the artist’s tackling of a motif that has been at the crux of continental philosophy since the better part of last century. The enigma of the Other, or more precisely the matrix dealing with, “the ‘problem’ of the one and the many and/or identity and difference”<sup>47</sup> defies clear categorization or even definition. Studies of the presence and the ramifications of the Other pervade most fields, including cultural/gender studies, metaphysics, ethics, politics, and religion.

Richard Bernstein’s essay titled “Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited,” posits that, over the last century, “the dominant tendency in Western philosophy and metaphysics has been to privilege and valorize unity, harmony, and totality and thereby to denigrate, suppress, or marginalize multiplicity, contingency, particularity, and singularity.”<sup>48</sup> Bernstein traces this interest and privileging of unity and totality back to the foundations Hegel created in the early 1800s. This philosopher and theorist first attempted to integrate identity and difference in his seminal treatise, *Phenomenology of*

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 142

<sup>47</sup> Eliot Deutsch, editor. *East-West Philosophic Perspectives*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991. p. 85

<sup>48</sup> Eliot Deutsch, editor. *East-West Philosophic Perspectives*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991. p. 86



*Spirit*, in which he advocates totality of experience and ultimate understanding through sameness.<sup>49</sup> Many twentieth century philosophers who have written on this subject do so in response to Hegel, including Jean Francois Lyotard, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas.

Levinas' work, *Totality and Infinity*, for example, challenges Hegel's final solution, which involves embracing the Other as same and unified. Levinas gauges Hegel's advocacy toward assimilating the Other to the same as a violent appropriation and imperialistic subsuming of the Other. Levinas objects,

The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it. It is the primal identity, the primordial work of the identification...Hegelian phenomenology, where self-consciousness is the distinguishing of what is not distinct, expresses the universality of the same identifying itself in the alterity of objects thought and despite the opposition of self to self.<sup>50</sup>

Here Levinas recognizes that radical difference exists in the ego of humanity. Even in the I there is a difference that is shaped throughout experience. Reduction of the Other to the Same, is no solution, and in fact creates a loss. There is a loss of the richness of diversity. Similarly alarmed, psychoanalyst Chasseguet-Smirgel in her work, *Creativity and Perversion*, notes that reduction, or breaking down the boundaries between the Same and the Other creates perversion.<sup>51</sup> Once there is a collapse in differentiation, chaos ensues. Despite the fact that difference drives the Hegelian dialectic, it is made null by the Absolute subject. Difference ends up being only a moment within the same. Chasseguet-Smirgel explains,

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<sup>49</sup> Because of the scope of this thesis, this is a gloss of Hegel's text that is exceedingly over simplified.

<sup>50</sup> Emanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007. p. 36

<sup>51</sup> Janine Chassehuet-Smirgel. *Creativity and Perversion*. Forward by Otto Kernberg. London: Free Association of Books, 1998. p. 156

Levinas boldly seeks to escape this philosophical imperialism of ‘the Same’ and ‘the Other’ by opening the space for the absolute exteriority of the metaphysical Other, which he sharply distinguishes from the ontological other. The metaphysical other is an ‘other with an alterity that is not formal, is not the simple reversal of identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the same, but is prior to every initiative, to all imperialism of the same. It is the other with an alterity constitutive of the very content of the other.’<sup>52</sup>

The otherness of the Other must be recognized in such a way that it is not treated and identified as the *Same*. In order to ascertain this, Levinas establishes the concept of Absolute Other. In reference to Levinas’ theory, Richard Bernstein elaborates, “It is this radically asymmetrical relation between the I and the other (a ‘relation’ that defies reduction to reciprocal equality) that characterizes what Levinas calls *the ethical relation*.”<sup>53</sup> This idea of ‘ethical relation’ has primacy as it holds true in both the realms of the metaphysical and the ontological. There must be a separation or an asymmetry between the Other and I, in order for there to be ethical relation, which can be created in what Levinas calls the *face to face*,

A relation whose terms do not form a totality can hence be produced within the general economy of being only as proceeding from the I to the other, as face to face, as delineating a distance in depth—that of conversation, of goodness, of Desire—irreducible to the distance the synthetic activity of the understanding establishes between the diverse terms, other with respect to one another, that lend themselves to its synoptic operation.<sup>54</sup>

The concept of *face to face* interaction, or “conversation” is not necessarily a reciprocal or an actual dialogue. Rather, it is merely a “synoptic operation” and reinforces, “the asymmetry of responsibility, where I, in responding to ‘the Other,’ am

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<sup>52</sup> Eliot Deutsch, editor. *East-West Philosophic Perspectives*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991. p. 96

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96

<sup>54</sup> Emanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007. p. 39

always responsible for ‘the Other,’ regardless of ‘the Other’s’ response to me.”<sup>55</sup> The basic dilemma plaguing Levinas seems to be the language of imperialism, colonization, and mastery, “even the ‘logical imperialism,’ where the language of reciprocal recognition and reconciliation masks the violent reduction of the alterity of ‘the Other’ to ‘more of the same.’”<sup>56</sup> The Other must *not* be radically reduced. Such is the extreme rigidity of Levinas’ demands, however, that the Other is permanently deemed radically different. The main problem is that Levinas runs the risk of classifying the Other as totally unapproachable and incomprehensible, as opposed to Hegel’s attempt to consume the Other as the Same. Enter Jacques Derrida. At this point Levinas comes dangerously close to the reduction of absolute exteriority. Since there is none of the Other in the I, there is no position for dialogue, no critical engagement, no learning.

There are many points of relation between Derrida and Levinas, Bernstein notes that, “Derrida agrees with Levinas that ‘the other is the other only if his alterity is absolutely irreducible, that is, infinitely irreducible...”<sup>57</sup> But Derrida believes that the Other can be, rather must be, recognized by the ego, or else its humanity is lost. Ironically the alter ego (of the Other) must be sustained for alterity to remain. Derrida argues that one must recognize the ego of the Other, or else there is no recognition at all. That is why the Other has a face, in order for the *face to face* to even be possible. If there is not first a recognition that the Other is an alter ego, yet an ego nonetheless, then there will never be the urge for ethical relation. The radical alterity of the other is based on the most basic of

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<sup>55</sup> Eliot Deutsch, editor. *East-West Philosophic Perspectives*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991. p. 97

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97

recognitions in the first place. Once that is established, the Same and the Other become a context for discussing alterity.

According to Derrida, this “thought of Being”, “conditions respect for the other as what it is. Without this acknowledgement, which is not a knowledge, or let us say, without this ‘letting be’ of an existent (other) as something existing outside me in the essence of what it is (first in its alterity), no ethics would be possible.”<sup>58</sup> Derrida posits that by first understanding our differences, understanding what is not of my experience, we could not ever ethically encounter with one another. Derrida finds a middle ground where the radical alterity of the Other is recognized and respected, yet acknowledges that the Other must be accepted as Being, as alter ego, or minimally the same, for there to be any fertile ground for growth, understanding, and relation.

## **Vietnam**

It is with this theoretical foundation that Saul’s work is critically engaged as he embarks on his exploration of the American psyche, the atrocities of war, and the problematic of “the Other”. In much the same way as Derrida’s philosophy, Saul visually strikes a balance between the sameness of the Other and the radical alterity of the other. By both recognizing the ego and the difference within the Other, Saul encourages his viewer’s to see in an unorthodox manner.

Saul loosely began the Vietnam series with *Mickey Mouse versus The Japs*<sup>59</sup> in 1962, but more actively pursued Vietnam as subject matter as a series in 1964 with the

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<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978. p. 138

<sup>59</sup> Figure 1

creation of *Donald Duck versus The Japs*<sup>60</sup>, *Society*<sup>61</sup>, and *CO Itchee Bitchee*<sup>62</sup>. Saul says of these early works,

I decided to bring “politics” into my art, partly because it was already there in *Hitler’s Bathroom*, 1960, *Mickey Mouse vs. The Japs* 1961? 62 and *Donald Duck vs. The Japs* 1964, (which was in my show in 64’)—so it represented something new to concentrate on but not exactly a new area of concern. But more important, it was un-Pop and represented breaking the same sort of taboo as I broke when I got into Pop imagery in the late 50s, (56-59).<sup>63</sup>

Despite the historicity of the subject matter, Saul’s artistic intentions are clear. He saw Vietnam as a new direction, a means for him to turn away from Pop and remain relevant. It is not that Saul is cold and calculating, but that he is aware of society’s pulse and is willing to engage with their interests. This subject matter allowed him to continue to look at America through his critical lens. He is not particularly interested in remaining true to historical events, even saying that he is no journalist, but he is more inclined to satirize the situation in order to create a dialogical community, a dialogical collaboration. Saul elaborates,

So, I’ve decided to make my pitch direct to the viewer, cut out the role of the professional interpreter, and by necessity that means to ignore as well the special art-loving audience that is his domain (turn away from them emotionally, not ignore them). I do feel that there exist people who have not previously shown much interest in modern art because it just seemed an expensive (or prestigious) way to decorate, rather than being vitally interesting, and they will perhaps wish to look at my work at length, if not agree.<sup>64</sup>

Saul was not interested in dialogue with what he perceived to be the closed, uppity world of art. More true to his character, he wanted to engage in dialogue with the

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<sup>60</sup> Figure 4

<sup>61</sup> Figure 3

<sup>62</sup> Figure 2

<sup>63</sup> Peter Saul. Letters to Robert Storr. May 22, 2000. George Adams Gallery, New York. p. 24

<sup>64</sup> J. Martin, *Peter Saul*. New York, Allen Frumkin Gallery, 1987. p. 8

broadest audience possible. His penchant for making a satire of America, is not a direct criticism of the United States, but more of a criticism of humanity in general. It is in this vein that Saul's work can be seen to engage with the discussion of "the Other." Whether it is his Vietnam series, his self-portraits, or even his art on art series, his work is about sensing the world anew. By creating a space where the Other is neither same nor radically different than the I, he gives his viewers the chance to engage with the nuance, the liminal, the in-between in the world. By not seeing simply good or bad, same or other, there is the freedom for significant dialogue.

Through the representation of extreme satiric violence, Saul is able to convey the absurdity of attempting to assimilate the Other. As stated, the dismantling of barriers and insistence on uniformity results in chaos. In *Beautiful Yellow Mother*<sup>65</sup> of 1966, Saul paints a scene of primarily bright yellows, reds and greens on a black and dark blue background. To the right of the canvas the would-be beautiful image of a generic Asian concubine is immediately offset, first by the awkwardly exaggerated breasts that are busting out of her shirt, and then completely shattered by her small arms that end in bombs for hands. The smirk on her face as she looks disdainfully at the virtually disintegrated bodies of two soldiers befits the Chinese-like character caption, "Button your pants white boys this is China." Anachronistic palm trees seem to have the consistency of gummy bears. The faces of the soldiers are totally deconstructed, leaving them useless for Levinas's *face to face*. What is left of their face has become phallic, and they are assaulting the prostitute. Through his characterization of the Other, the Asian woman, Saul is able to destabilize common notions of the Other and reestablish a connection with a receptive viewer. Bernstein comments on the tendency of assimilation,

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<sup>65</sup> Figure 7

“This imperialistic gesture—this gesture to conquer, master, and colonize ‘the Other’—reveals the violence that is implicit in the reduction of ‘the Other’ to ‘the Same.’”<sup>66</sup> The painting reveals this exact kind of imperialistic gesture using violence. Saul uses this over-dramatized violence to diminish the difference between the Asians and the American soldiers, but it is Saul’s use of satire that prevents him from falling into the trap of assimilation. Through his comic characterization of “the Other” Saul is able to destabilize common notions of “the Other” and reestablish a relational connection with the receptive viewer. By both recognizing the alterity and the ego of “the Other,” Saul is able to strike much the same philosophical balance visually as Derrida’s writing does in philosophy. Visually and by using satire, Saul destabilizes the struggle of good vs. bad, and forces the view to take into account the nuance in the situation. There is no longer an us vs. them, or a same vs. other, the audience is simply left with an alter ego.

A similar use of satire and sadistic imagery works throughout the series to create a comparable deconstruction of preconceptions. In *Human Dignity*<sup>67</sup> of 1966, Saul even employs Christian imagery, portraying a soldier on the cross evoking Christ with the sadistic figure of the fighter. The soldier barely has a recognizable human form. The image has two biomorphic arms and one semblance of a leg nailed to Saul’s depiction of a cloud shaped cross. The soldier has a strong red chest visible through his green army uniform. He wears a large red belt that serves as an unmistakable phallic symbol. His jaundiced eyes protrude from his face with nails tortuously bearing into them. The communistic red sun rises forlornly behind the cross. The soldier’s mutilated eyes bug out of his head as he, despite his pain, ogles a green vampire-like Asian woman with

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<sup>66</sup> Eliot Deutsch, editor. *East-West Philosophic Perspectives*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991. p. 95

<sup>67</sup> Figure 6

huge breasts, wearing a superhero red jumpsuit with the caption “Human Dignity” written across her ample chest. Her skin is green, leaving no doubt that she is ill both psychically and physically. Behind her stands, a Vietnamese soldier who also wears a red jumpsuit and shares the woman’s green tinted skin. He also exudes a sexual aura as he, too, ogles the woman and reaches around both her and the Western soldier, with devilishly unnatural colorful hands. The figures intertwine and it is difficult to determine whose limbs belong to whom. The background is colored with a variety of lurid clouds. The whole image is perpetuated through destabilization. While a bit of sympathy could be evoked for the soldier on the cross, he is certainly not the clear “good guy.”

The pervading effect of this work of Saul’s is chaos emphasized by the flashy and vulgar colors, intertwining biomorphic mutilated figures, and the rampant violence which Saul uses to create his altered universe. This representation is not the exception for Saul. Everything in his paintings is deliberately fractured, sadistic, and destabilized, which is exactly how Saul is able to recreate a world where “the Other” is simultaneously ego, albeit alter ego and radically alterior.

The last work of Saul’s Vietnam series, *Pinkville*<sup>68</sup> completed in 1970 is worth noting in particular. First, it is one of the few of the series that deals specifically with a historical incident in the Vietnam conflict. Pinkville was a code name for the hamlets in the area of My Lai, a small village in Vietnam. On March 16, 1968 American soldiers killed, raped, and mutilated over 400 unarmed villagers, many of whom were women and children.<sup>69</sup> The public did not find out about this massacre until a year later. According to those in the know, this war crime inflamed the public’s outrage, increased opposition to

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<sup>68</sup> Figure 12

<sup>69</sup> John A. Fitzgerald, A. Tom Grunfeld and Marilyn B. Young, Editors. *The Vietnam War: A History in Documents*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. p. 111-112



the war at home to a fever pitch and hastened the United States troop withdrawal. Saul created his reaction, *Pinkville*, two years after his last serious artistic engagement with Vietnam in 1968. Done five years before the conflict officially ended, *Pinkville* remains a great final protest to the horrors of Vietnam.

In contrast to Saul's earlier work, the chaos featured in *Pinkville* is moderately more stabilized. He pares down the number of characters in the painting to one American soldier and four Vietnamese. The background consists of two mountains with a road composed of wood-like material that serves as a phallic symbol. This road leads to the forefront of the picture where the action takes place. An Asian-inspired blue archway stands over the road, and in the backdrop the clouds in the sky loom like lava into the heavens, or perhaps hell. The figures occupy the foreground of the painting. One of the women is naked and tied on top of the blue arch. Her hair cascades down and spells "big murder," perhaps making the rapist feel like more of a man. She is being further victimized, for from her mouth there is a pink, flesh-colored protrusion coming from the soldier's phallic gun. He is stepping on the two other women, lighting a fire to the buttocks of one while violating another with two different guns. One of the women he is stepping on is forced to lick the soldier's pants. The last woman he steps on with his free foot, as he cuts her vagina with a pocketknife he wields with one of his four arms. The soldier looks cool, calm, and collected. While his evil hands are at work, his face is oddly disengaged. He is shirtless and the viewer can make out some tattoos that read, "arson and torture," "sadistic rape," and "U.S. corruption." He also wears a chain with a cross around his neck, which reads "mother" and "father" on each arm of the cross. His pants are too small, ripped, and his penis protrudes from the top; his pubic hair is in a long

skinny line that goes up to the middle of his chest, mimicking the tail of a devil. The soldier's skin is the same color of the red sky and red wooden road—not a far stretch from representing Satan incarnate.

This work contains one of the few instances in which Saul stabilized the image enough to make a clear picture of the face of the soldier. Perhaps this is one instance where Saul demands the viewer to engage in a *face to face*, an 'ethical relation' with "the Other." According to Deleuze, "The face itself is redundancy,"<sup>70</sup> the face of the soldier becomes any and every face. The face is a major *destabilizing* factor of the painting. Deleuze aligns himself with Derrida considering the face the best outward manifestation of the self, the soul, the subjectivity.<sup>71</sup> The face of the soldier becomes "the Other," despite its obvious ethnic identity as an American. His visage communicates poverty and the entire composition expresses ethical corruption, simultaneously making the viewer take a perverse responsibility for "the Other" in the ego/alter ego and making sure there is no opportunity for reduction of "the Other" to "the Same". This complicated image is perhaps the most indicting of the whole series. The clearness of the soldier's face is the first time both the viewer and Saul come so clearly and somberly in contact with the atrocities of the soldier.

## Technique

Saul's technical development can also be followed through his Vietnam series. As noted, *Mickey Mouse versus the Japs*<sup>72</sup> of 1962 was Saul's first foray into adding politics

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<sup>70</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2003. p. 168

<sup>71</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978. p. 90 and Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2003. p. 168

<sup>72</sup> Figure 1

to the subject matter of his work. But his work was still filled with a certain amount of youthful naïveté. By 1964, however, Ellen Johnson saw Saul's work *Donald Duck versus The Japs*<sup>73</sup> also known as *Japanese versus Americans*, as a significant milestone and turning point in Saul's work. This is a more cohesive picture and narrative. The painting has a yellow and dark blue Japanese World War II rising sun flag as a background. In the forefront there are four Donald Duck soldiers with bats, American flag covered bullets and pseudo Asian-language symbols scattered throughout the painting. Johnson takes note of this work,

Instead of the former tendency to rotate movement across the surface like a swastika perpetually pushing itself around, there is now a coherent movement of large blocks in and out of space. Some passages of the recent pictures, for example the interweaving arms in 'Japanese versus Americans,' make one think of the complex design of tubes bridging space in Duchamp and Picabia.... Where previously floating, the forms are now more securely anchored in a space which is three-dimensionally occupied, approaching a sculptural concept.<sup>74</sup>

Throughout the painting there are American flags, as well as the previously mentioned Asian word symbols. Here Saul is already adding symbols of both "the Same" and "the Other" trying to destabilize the viewers understanding of the painting's narrative.

By 1967, Saul's painting *Saigon*<sup>75</sup> had established his use of dots to blend color, his scale, his use of neon day glow colors, and had firmly entrenched the psychology of "the Other." *Saigon* embodies Saul's three major technical evolutions, and was his first large scale canvas measuring twelve feet, which took Saul five to six months to complete. Saul says, "For that picture, I decided to draw out the image completely before putting

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<sup>73</sup> Figure 4

<sup>74</sup> Ellen Johnson. *Recent Paintings by Peter Saul*. New York, Allen Frunkin Gallery, 1964. p. 9

<sup>75</sup> Figure 9

the paint on. I had been previously sketching on the canvas with markers, but not ‘exact’, just to sort of get the idea in the right place. In ‘Saigon’ I wanted an ‘exact right’ kind of drawing so I would have room for all the imagery to be there (various symbolic figures getting killed in Symbolic ways).”<sup>76</sup> That framework alone took him more than three months to complete. Saul was also experimenting with elements of Psychedelic posters, as well as a new take on advertisements and comics. Like the Mexican muralist Siqueiros, Saul became interested in the use of dots of color, or more specifically the effects of the airbrush.

He comments, “I used ‘dots’ for the first time to blend (the few people who saw my work then kept recommending a spray gun).”<sup>77</sup> Saul rejected the literal idea of the spray gun, citing as deterrents its cost and how long it would take him to learn to use it properly, but decided to continue creating the effect by hand. He loved the commercial gloss, and smooth transitions the “dots” gave the work. He enthusiastically described, “what interested me about commercial painting was the little dots as a technical convenience, as a way to blend fast drying acrylic. It was more a question of how to blend these new fast-drying paints than of how it would look aesthetically. By little hand-done dots, one could blend yellow into blue without getting green in the fuzzy edge.”<sup>78</sup>

Saul saw that the dots contributed to the cartoon illusion and finish of the paintings, and much like the Pointillists before him, he enjoyed the method of optically mixing the colors. He was always in search of ways to keep pushing the outrageous style of his work. For example, Saul discovered his most vivid and assaulting colors on a trip with his family. On his move back from Europe, Saul’s children got sick and he went to

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Saul. Letters to Robert Storr. May 22, 2000. George Adams Gallery, New York. p. 25

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 26

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 26

the five and dime store to buy crayons and coloring books. He came across day glo crayons and borrowed them to use in some drawings which he sent to his art dealer Allen Frumkin. When his dealer encouraged him to continue using this technique, Saul remembers thinking, “So I did, took his advice, and actually day glo is still in my work, though less than in the Vietnam pictures. By the time I made *Saigon*, in 1967, I had been using day glo for a couple of years.”<sup>79</sup> *Saigon* remains a prime example of these three main elements of Saul’s technical style coming together for the first time.

As for the subject matter, Saul’s vulgar thematic representations reinforce its psychological chaos. “But the main thing about the Vietnam pictures,” Saul quips, “was the psychotic frenzy they were a good excuse for.”<sup>80</sup> Saul became familiar with these “shrink books”<sup>81</sup> while in California. His marriage was failing apart and he was looking for answers. Reflecting on his interest in these books, Saul writes, “Perhaps I was actually looking for some reasons why my marriage was so lousy, but the ‘use’ was in my pictures of war. I only read the ‘getting sick’ parts of the books and skipped the ‘getting well’ parts (which I was completely contemptuous of).... Then, as now, I wanted to read the dirt and discover the secrets of wrong behavior.”<sup>82</sup> Saul found use for this imagery in his war images. The psychology books allowed Saul to sharpen his indictments within his work, taking them from odd, perverted childhood images to biting social criticism.

Other artists were working on war or activist art at the time but, Saul explains,

Their work was of the dignified and thoughtful variety. For instance—one I remember was a big picture of Pres. Johnson giving a speech into a

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 27

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 28

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 28

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 28

microphone, and then pressed up against it, a canvas of the same size of a child burned by napalm. The idea was that the viewer would think about it and connect the two images; same kind of pictorial idea as Jasper Johns, where things are just placed next to each other on the same surface and thought to be therefore related (in the mind of the viewer anyway). I scorned that idea as weak and suggestive.<sup>83</sup>

Saul acknowledged his work as gutsy and therefore resented artists who didn't share his gumption. Saul understood the hypocritical nature of America's presence in Vietnam, and never shied away from exploiting it in his own sadistic way. He criticizes the attitude of other "activist" artists saying, "There was this unfortunate urge in the Vietnam protest artists to be fair-minded. I didn't share that urge. I did eventually paint Pres. Johnson with a napalm bomb up his ass, exploding, circa 1969, after thinking the thoughts related here."<sup>84</sup> Since he saw these artists as dancing around the subject, he went ahead and painted the narrative that would get the point across and leave no room for question.

Just as the psychology of the images played a large role in his shaping of subject matter, the free love era of the 1960s, ironically helped Saul focus in on the violence within his paintings. Dan Cameron notes the paradoxical nature of Saul's inclination toward violence during a period of time so focused on love and peace, "Saul describes his life during the years of 1964 to 1974 as 'living ...in the San Francisco area, where the dreamy love-soaked quality of the residents helped focus my attention on hate and violence.'"<sup>85</sup> While the sixties inspired most to express notions of free love and peace,

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 28-29

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 29

<sup>85</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 9

Saul was urged more than ever to portray the dark underbelly of the American military complex and our conflict in Vietnam.<sup>86</sup>

### **Artistic Lineage**

Saul's artistic lineage and his place in modernism has been debated considering he has roots in both figuration and abstraction. There is of course Surrealism and Pop, but there is also an allusion to both Mannerist *figura serpentina* and the lurid ornamentation and chaos of the Baroque. His sexual content relates him to Surrealism but his colors and sense of humor connect him with the Pop Movement. Yet his serious subject matter and moralistic undertones are foreign to both those styles. Other than the Mannerism Baroque allusions, Saul owes much to Hogarth's late 18<sup>th</sup> century series on Modern Moral Subjects. He is also indebted to Thomas Hart Benton, Max Beckmann, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Francis Bacon. While Benton may be the artist with the most parallel artistic path, Michael Duncan notes, "Most pertinent to Saul, however, are the works of Missouri-born Thomas Hart Benton, who abandoned abstraction in favor of narrative paintings with subjects inspired by the American heartland."<sup>87</sup> Perhaps William Hogarth is the most unlikely of the artists mentioned. But his concern with a moralistic narrative-esque structure is a precursor to Saul's albeit much more acerbic and vulgar, but much less obvious narrative, while the dismantling and overall deconstruction of the figure is owed to Benton and Bacon.

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<sup>86</sup> There are several other series of Saul's that employ violence in order to specifically show the moral shortcomings of the United States including his work on California, and civil rights.

<sup>87</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 64

Saul understood that it was paramount for his art to break rules and forge a singular path. However, he also realized the importance of endowing his work with a solid foundation of artistry upon which to build his images. He was able to do so to such an effective degree that according to Cameron, “Saul’s work, perhaps more than H.C. Westermann’s, provides the bridge between the twisting serpentine compositions of Thomas Hart Benton, circa 1940, and the surreally tinged Midwestern Pop figuration that the Hairy Who represented during the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s.”<sup>88</sup> Despite the fact that Saul never actually had any contact with the Hairy Who, his work can be seen as a definite precursor to their pseudo surrealist political pieces, and his vivid colors and unapologetic vulgarity can still be seen in contemporary works today.

By citing these respected and canonical artists within his work, he gives himself an artistic lineage and technical heritage for his viewers as well as his critics to draw from. Peter Saul considers mastering technique a necessity, because it allows those who do not like or connect with his subject matter to “at least appreciate” his technical ability.<sup>89</sup> Saul considers technique and subject matter equally important, “I want to take some low-down image and bring it up, up, up to the highest level by painting it as glamorously as I can. This seems to me both democratic and romantic in intent.”<sup>90</sup> Through his philosophical use of “the Other,” along with his integration with the dialogical community of the artists who have gone before him, Saul forged a singular path that is arguably unrivaled in boldness and ambition for his time.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 142

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 142



### III.

*The best reading is not different in kind, but in quality, from the other readings: it illuminates the poem in a more powerful and persuasive way. —Michael Walzer*<sup>91</sup>

Peter Saul's work stands alone in his brand of iconoclasm, violence, and madness. He seems to relish to this day his reputation as both a "maverick aesthete" and a "scathing ironist,"<sup>92</sup> and he aggressively cultivated and pursued these qualities in his professional vision. In addition to his personal experiences as a child and adolescent that must have had a definitive impact in the framing of his point of view, among the most influential times of his life were the years spent in both Canada and Europe. These years abroad not only gave him an actual physical, but an emotional and intellectual distancing that permitted him to engage in a more objective critical dialogue with American mores and ideals.

From this distance, Saul is much more easily able to identify the hypocrisy and create an incriminating image of "the Other." Many times in Saul's work, "the Other" is manifested as a caricature of "the victim," the one who should ordinarily be garnering the sympathy, not the ridicule or smirks. Michael Duncan says, "Politics in Saul's work is depicted as a melodrama of victimization and exploitation. The persecution of blacks, and annihilation of Vietnam, oppression of women, and abuse of artists by critics are all struggles with a sadomasochistic system that thrives on the oblivious dominance of

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<sup>91</sup> Michael Walzer. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 30

<sup>92</sup> Donald Kuspit. "Peter Saul: George Adams Gallery," *ArtForum* (2004): 42

power and the hapless martyrdom of the oppressed.”<sup>93</sup> While at first glance this may come across as a random cruelty on the part of the artist, it is actually an integral element of Saul’s process of destabilization. Shocking, even revolting imagery still allows informed viewers to recognize the “victim” but also to simultaneously see the image as satire. Viewers become aware of Saul’s intention to subvert, projecting the image of “the Same” onto “the Other,” while still identifying its radical and absolute otherness. Saul then interprets or reinterprets the historical events in a non-historical manner, entering a threshold space where he is neither assimilating nor rejecting “the Other.” Indeed it is plausible, given the intensity and intentionality of Saul’s work through the decades, that it is precisely the anticipation of engagement and communication between his work of social criticism and the informed viewer that has driven Saul to create such startling, lurid and violent imagery.

### **Interpretation as Moral Philosophy**

In exploring Peter Saul’s life-long emphasis on his integrity as an artist to be a recorder and commentator of social issues, Michael Walzer’s *Interpretation and Social Criticism* has proven helpful. Walzer posits that in much the same way as the poetry of the ancient prophets of the Old Testament, the social critic through his interpretation of society, historical events, and social ethics is able to engage with a contemporary audience and in the process create an ideal mode of moral philosophy. He explains the role of the social critic, “Though later critics rarely achieve the angry poetry of the prophets, we can recognize in their work the same intellectual structure: the identification of public pronouncements and respectable opinion as hypocritical, the attack upon actual

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<sup>93</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 70

behavior and the institutional arrangements, the search for core values (to which hypocrisy is always a clue), the demand for an everyday life in accordance with the core.”<sup>94</sup> So the role of the social critic or prophet stands as identification, judgment, and the search for a more ethical existence. While Saul’s interpretations actually do everything but follow through with the demands “for everyday life in accordance with the core,” he certainly does demand a critical engagement with core values, whatever we consider those to be.

In contrast to the prophets of old, Saul does not propose that there should be a return to a set value system, but rather that there should be a reconsideration of values in general. Saul does not pose the answer; he simply asks the question. Much like Thomas Hart Benton, “he (Saul) has self-consciously attempted to grapple with particularized American subject matter and to shape outsider recognition of American themes. But the idealism they espoused is clearly no longer possible for him.”<sup>95</sup> Not only does he want to interest the outsider and engage him, Saul also seeks to challenge and perhaps reframe the manner in which the insider recognizes his or her world. In the same way that he remembered people reacting in his youth at the Picasso exhibit of 1939, Saul wants his viewers to rail against the barricades in either support or protest of his works. The point is that there be a response.

Walzer distills moral philosophy into three basic categories: discovery, invention, and interpretation.<sup>96</sup> Walzer privileges interpretation over discovery and invention saying,

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<sup>94</sup>Michael Walzer. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 87

<sup>95</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 72

<sup>96</sup> Walzer acknowledges that there are many paths to moral philosophy, but reduces this broad subject down to these three basic categories for the intensions of his short book.

“The experience of moral argument is best understood in the interpretative mode. What we do when we argue is to give an account of the actually existing morality. That morality is authoritative for us because it is only by virtue of its existence that we exist as the moral beings we are.”<sup>97</sup> Interpretation prevails on the basis that only existing morality will cultivate a significant contribution. Both, “Discovery and invention are efforts at escape, in the hope of finding some external and universal standard with which to judge moral existence.”<sup>98</sup> Discovery and invention seem, for Walzer, to be an attempt to break free from the trappings of the pertinent moral situation. It is not necessarily an attempt to find a universal standard, as it is an attempt to buck the current system, whatever that may be. Walzer recognizes that morality is most times built upon the foundations of the past, making true invention or discovery rare at best.

### **The Practice of Social Criticism**

Once Walzer establishes the primacy of interpretation as a path to morality, he turns his focus to social criticism and the role of the critic in society. Walzer says, “No doubt, societies do not criticize themselves; social critics are individuals, but they are also, most of the time, members, speaking in public to other members who join in the speaking and whose speech constitutes a collective reflection upon the conditions of collective life.”<sup>99</sup> Another part of the main criteria for an effective social critic is an analytical distance, which Walzer argues is better characterized as marginality. Walzer qualifies, “The description has become conventional in part because of a confusion

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<sup>97</sup> Michael Walzer. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 21

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35

between detachment and marginality.”<sup>100</sup> As an upper middle class white male, Saul may not be an obvious candidate for being considered disenfranchised or marginalized by society. However, on closer examination, Saul does succeed considering the life-altering alienation he felt from his father, the prejudice he suffered at Shawnigan because he was mistaken as having Jewish heritage, ending with his decision not only to be an artist, who are notoriously, if not romantically considered on the fringe of society. Even within the art world, Saul has constantly sought difference, pursuing an anti-avant garde direction, for example.

“Criticism requires critical distance,”<sup>101</sup> and Saul both inadvertently and by choice has become a marginalized figure. According to Walzer, “Marginal men and women are like George Simmel’s stranger, in but not wholly of their society. The difficulties they experience are not the difficulties of detached men but of ambiguous connection. Free them from those difficulties, and they may well lose the reasons they have for joining the critical enterprise.”<sup>102</sup> Detachment implies a lack of empathy. Therefore the critic can be a part of society, invested while still being set to the side and not in the midst of the criticized activity. Walzer says, “When our country behaves badly, it is still ours, and we are, perhaps, especially obligated to criticize its policies.”<sup>103</sup> Saul takes this call most seriously. Through subversion and destabilization, Saul is able to paint a satirical portrait of the follies and foibles of American life, both at home and abroad. While the critic is not detached from society, he is unconcerned with his place in the margins of society.<sup>104</sup> Saul stands in the self-imposed margins, detached and deconstructed, in a land that is

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 37

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 36

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 37

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 36

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 37

fertile with creative activity. The critic is “one of us”<sup>105</sup> and Saul tries to reach every person, not just the “art snob.” Perhaps he has traveled and studied abroad, but his appeal is to local or regional principles. If he picked up new ideas on his travels, he tried to connect them to the local culture, building on his own intimate knowledge. He was not intellectually detached.<sup>106</sup> In fact, Saul has often been described as critically engaged with society. “Understanding waits upon conversation,”<sup>107</sup> Walzer says, and Saul is constantly interested and preoccupied with response. As previously stated in chapter one in reference to Collingwood’s theory of collaboration, Saul works in active and conscious dialogue with both past artists and his viewers. This is shown in his Vietnam series, his Art on Art series, and his Art History paintings, where he did variations on major artworks of the past. Most ardently, Saul is in a constant dialogical collaboration with his audience. It is integral to understand that he does not consider the art world to be his audience. Saul tries to reach out to a popular audience and engage with as many people as possible.

### **The Prophet as Social Critic**

Not only does Walzer engage with ancient religion, making it relevant in contemporary politics, but he also confirms the need for the prophet as social critic in modern society. Much like Saul’s critique, “The first thing to notice is that the prophetic message depends upon previous messages. It is not something radically new; the prophet is not the first to find, nor does he make, the morality he expounds.”<sup>108</sup> While it is simplistic to reduce Saul’s engagement with “the Other” to an interest on the artist’s part

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 39

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 39

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 44

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 71

to expound the Golden Rule and to preach a message of equality, his paintings do, in fact, promote basic virtues and mores, all of which are not new to the cannon of ethics and morality, yet they are ideals that our nation had lost sight of in the mid 60s.

Another point of connection that Saul shares with Walzer is the rejection of over intellectualism, in favor of reaching the broadest audience possible, “Prophecy is a special kind of talking, not so much an educated as an inspired and poetic version of what must have been at least sometimes, among some significant part of the prophet’s audience, ordinary discourse.”<sup>109</sup> Saul makes a concerted effort to reject intellectualism for a forum with the largest possible audience. He explains, “It’s the intellectual dignity of Modern Art that upsets me, excites me to paint as I do.”<sup>110</sup> Staying true to his non-conformist ways, Saul does and has always done everything in his power to go against the grain. For example, he actually cultivates a narrative in his art—a narrative, literary style for communicative purposes.

Continuing with Walzer’s identification of the dire need for modern prophets, it is critical to note that he dispels the overly-romanticized heroic characteristics of a prophet. He does not believe that the prophet’s role is to deliver Truth—some infallible message. Walzer comments, “The truth is that there is not guarantee, any more than there is a guarantor. Nor is there a society, waiting to be discovered or invented, that would not require our critical stories.”<sup>111</sup> The prophet builds on the past, on the established morals of his society. As a member of his society, as a product of his upbringing and environment, Saul is invested in the direction of the nation, and while he does not pretend

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 75

<sup>110</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 54

<sup>111</sup> Michael Walzer. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 66

to bring truth or answers, he analyzes, asks, urges, even metaphorically yells through his works at his audience to engage with the moral and ideological dilemmas of our time. According to Walzer, “Prophecy aims to arouse remembrance, recognition, indignation, repentance.”<sup>112</sup> Prophecy does not create a solution, it does not seek answers from the future or discover answers that were buried in the past; its use is to simply provoke response whether it be shock, dismay, anger or atonement. Saul says, “My pictures always give me a hard time psychologically, (They) are meant as a kind of “cold shower” for other people, to make them aware of their own feelings, or ‘social skin.’”<sup>113</sup> It is this desire for social awareness that urges Saul to keep creating, fueling his imagination.

The American’s in the 1960s, reminiscent of the ancient Israelites, were dealing with the moral ambiguities of war, and the brutal and merciless atrocities committed during war times. Amos, as did Saul, tried to address societies turn from ethics in his acerbic poetry. Similar to the American’s trespasses in Vietnam, the Israelites used extreme cruelty in warfare, took slaves, oppressed foreign citizens, violated treaties, raped and pillaged, killing both women and children. The poetry of Amos was created to inspire the leaders to reflect upon their decisions and actions.

Like Saul, Amos was an invested citizen who was born and raised in the area and who had critical social questions to ask. At this juncture, Walzer makes a distinction between a “particularistic” versus a “universalist” social message: “The rules against violence arise from the experience of international as well as internal relations; the rules against oppression arise from internal relations alone. The first rules regulate our contacts with all humanity, strangers as well as citizens; the second regulate only our common

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 75

<sup>113</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakaacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 57



life.”<sup>114</sup> It is the contracts of the common life that interest Walzer most. He acknowledges that of course the international relations are important, but if a society understands and adheres to the internal social contracts, then the international trespasses will cease as well. Walzer continues, “The first rules tend toward universality, and the second toward particularity. It is a mistake, then, to praise, the prophets for their universalist message. For what is most admirable about them is their particularist quarrel, which is also, they tell us, God’s quarrel, with the children of Israel.”<sup>115</sup>

In the particularist message, that which is most effective comes from their own citizen, that is, “one of their own.” It is the commonality of the prophets that makes their voice so effective, yet in Saul’s case so abrasive. For unlike Amos, Saul works in a counter-mode. One of his most notorious quotes still makes listeners sit up and take notice. He quipped, “There’s a tremendous need to not be seen as a racist, nor seen as a sexist. So I want to make sure I am seen as those things.”<sup>116</sup> By doing exactly what seems most egregiously inappropriate, Saul is able to show the absurdity of our collective actions. Instead of verbal poetry, Saul works in paint, not using words on a page, but abrasive imagery and paint strokes that produce elegant lines.

In juxtaposing the disturbing, even disgusting nature of the subject matter with the fluidity of the technique, Saul is able to produce the loudest, most resonating statements on society. Walzer statement about Amos could have been made about Saul, “[his] prophecy is social criticism because it challenges the leaders, the conventions, the ritual practices of a particular society and because it does so in the name of values

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<sup>114</sup> Michael Walzer. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 93

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93-94

<sup>116</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakaacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 30-31

recognized and shared in that same society.”<sup>117</sup> Through Saul’s vivid, acerbic, sadistic imagery, he also challenges the leaders, conventions, and practices of the United States. Caricaturing American soldiers doing the most despicable actions of war, acting as barbarians, Saul begs his audience to recollect these recognized values. Despite the fact that Saul likes to deny any intentionality with his Vietnam series, Saul says, “As I dirty up my art thinking, I’m cleaning up my social thinking, and hopefully intensifying its use and power.”<sup>118</sup> There is clearly intentionality in his social criticism, and a correlation between the intense vulgarity and Saul’s moralistic message. Saul and Amos have a similar message concerning related iniquities, as well as wanting a parallel result. Writing about Amos, but again, considering how this could apply to Saul, Walzer notes, “What he invites is not application but reiteration. Each nation can have its own prophecy, just as it has its own history, its own deliverance, its own quarrel with God.”<sup>119</sup> This interpretation is a reiteration of past values, a reincarnation, a new critical engagement with the values that are both familiar to society and within recollection for the people they are aimed towards. There is no less than a revolution at stake, there is a complete reevaluation that is possible at the point at which society takes into account the social critic. The prophet serves the purpose of facilitating a new understanding, one where all is destabilized, tearing down preconceptions and misconceptions.

Saul is easily seen as a social critic in Walzer’s sense. He is both a part of American society yet disenfranchised and pushed to its margins. Saul works through interpretation. The interpretation of “the Other” through satire allows him to make

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<sup>117</sup>Michael Walzer. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 79

<sup>118</sup>J. Martin, *Peter Saul*. New York, Allen Frumkin Gallery, 1987. p. 8

<sup>119</sup>Michael Walzer. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 94

effective and biting commentary on the America of the 1960s. Through his satire he is always able to extract truth. Dan Cameron understands Saul's work in this context. He comments on Saul,

as powerfully as the Vietnam paintings forty years ago, and perhaps more convincingly than the work of any other artist active today—that nothing that can be summoned from the dregs of the individual imagination is anywhere near as terrible as the actual horrors taking place right now, in our name somewhere on the opposite side of the planet. For Saul, the point isn't to be against the war, or inhumanity, or even boorish behavior, but to exorcise those demons in the most public way possible, by holding up a mirror to the face of an enemy who looks a lot like him and us.<sup>120</sup>

Through his mad interpretation, Saul works as a prophetic voice in our contemporary times. While Walzer wrote the following quote in regards to Amos's words, it can easily be seen in dialogue with Saul's work: "He knows one nation, one history, and it is that knowledge which makes his criticism so rich, so radical, so concrete."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 28

<sup>121</sup> Michael Walzer. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 94

## Conclusion

*The Instant of Decision is Madness. —Kierkegaard*<sup>122</sup>

While Peter Saul has been known for thwarting the “art snob,” aesthetes, and generally those prone to over intellectualized art, Saul has sought out relationships with some of the most influential people in the art world, most notably art critic and historian Robert Storr. This may be surprising considering the fact that Saul repeatedly emphasizes his disdain of the art world sophisticates. Historian J. Martin characterizes the tendency toward anti-intellectualism in Saul’s work, “Saul’s work never pulls a long face, is never solemn or grim, and never invites intellectual theorizing, in fact it positively thwarts it.”<sup>123</sup> Saul even did a series mocking the revered critic Clement Greenberg and the likes. Yet it is this very paradoxical behavior that makes both Saul and his work so completely engrossing.

As one of Modernism’s most ardent admirers and advocates, as an art historian, curator, and critic, Storr is typically more drawn to the works of Gerhard Richter, Louise Bourgeois, and Robert Ryman. But since their meeting almost thirty years ago, Storr and Saul have been ardent friends, often communicating in writing. Saul’s letters to Storr, as well as to Frumkin (his art dealer) have been an invaluable key in understanding Saul’s biography and the psychology behind his paintings. When asked about their unlikely friendship, Storr himself seems to wonder at first,

Why should I, who work in a museum of modern art, paint minimalist paintings and stand transfixed in front of the work of Mondrian and

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<sup>122</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978. p. 31

<sup>123</sup> J. Martin, *Peter Saul*. New York, Allen Frumkin Gallery, 1987. p. 1

Ryman, keep up this lop-sided correspondence with a man who scratches his head at the very thought of such preoccupations and then goes home to see what can be done to twist them into punchy phrases and derisive images? The answer is quite simple. He got my attention. That's the first part. The second part is that Peter's capacity for doing so pinpoints the cracks in my consciousness, and the inconsistencies in the articles of faith to which I adhere. To the degree that I am 'typical' of the art world against which he launches his assaults, then my inability to dismiss him, indeed my pleasure in his contrariness, transcends our friendship and identifies a more essential dynamic. For any system of thought, any ethical or aesthetic doubt and especially laughter, had reached decrepitude and can only be maintained by solemn disingenuousness. Modernism can endure Peter. In fact, it needs him. Badly. After all, think of the gargoyles on the cathedrals, the grotesques on the pews and the devils in the prayer books.<sup>124</sup>

Storr's quote sums up perfectly why the art world as a whole is in need of Saul, why, despite being vastly overlooked, he is one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. Saul has located "the cracks" in both Modernism and contemporary society. Yes, Saul is significant even to those like Storr who worship at the altar of Modernism, who are part of the cult of the Avant-Garde.

In addition to Saul's contributions to the art world in the aesthetic sense, there is the legacy of his narrative discourse. Our actions, our taste, our willful naivety are all called into question by Saul's images. Dan Cameron notes that in the reflection of Saul's paintings "we are exposed as a nation of sadistic, dull-witted brutes."<sup>125</sup> Saul does not want to purposefully stand as a moral arbitrator or pious mystic, but subscribes to the concept of interpretation as social criticism. Whether Saul's destabilization is purposeful or incidental, his work accuses one and all and challenges viewers to reevaluate long-held mores and ideals.

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<sup>124</sup> Beniot Decron, Robert Storr, and Anne Tronche. *Peter Saul*. Paris: Somogy Editions D'Art, 1999. p. 25

<sup>125</sup> Dan Cameron and Michael Duncan, Forward by Denis Szakacs and Interviews by Robert Storr. *Peter Saul*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. 2008. p. 9

Saul's solicitude and refusal to compromise his vision in exchange for wider critical appeal from the art world have surely not endeared him to the powers that be, but it has given him the license to follow his own path and forge a singular identity in a community where style and *ism* defined the time. Dan Cameron says, "An artist who, like Saul, gleefully sails his boat to the end of the world, not appearing to stop once to catch his bearings relative to what other artists are making, represents an extreme position of independence from art-world conventions while also serving as a kind of case study for the career dangers implicit in an extended self-imposed seclusion from those conventions."<sup>126</sup> Saul has thwarted these conventions at the cost of superstardom.

While Saul would appreciate more recognition, he seems to understand most museums positions to stay away from his controversial work. Saul prefers to stay true to himself and his subject matter. Prizing the everyman over the approval of the art world has given him the chance to have more of an enduring effect. As long as there are burgeoning artists who want to blaze their own trail, Saul's work will endure.

The tension between Saul, the artist, and the art world proper has been part of his psyche and his work since his early years at Washington University. He has used this tension to draw inspiration and through fulfillment in his work he has found a way to assuage any need for critical acclaim. Cameron notes, "In this regard, Saul's career-long insistence on producing paintings that—with their bright colors, eye-popping compositions, and easy-to-read subjects—appear to be trying to bypass critical analysis and appeal straight to the lowest common denominator of pure optical entertainment is another way of saying to the critical establishment that while he may care about its

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 17

judgments, he will always behave as if he has risen above them.”<sup>127</sup> Like any artist, Saul secretly wants the approval of critics, museum curators, and academics alike, but, carefully, purposefully, Saul has maneuvered the stormy waters of the art world and declared his priorities, staying true to both himself, to his particular form of representation, and his pension for the narrative.

Despite Peter Saul’s rejection of the institutionalized and of intellectualization, his work is ripe for interpretation of all kinds, through many different methodologies, or even regarded as a prophetic voice of contemporary times. His biography and his artistic journey from childhood to his college experiences to his years abroad and finally to the more recent time at the University of Texas offer an intriguing trajectory of the man behind the wildly controversial work.

Through engaging in a theoretical or more appropriately, a philosophical analysis of Saul’s treatment of “the Other,” his work gains a nuanced, multi-faceted character. Saul destabilizes and “deterritorializes”<sup>128</sup> viewers’ expectations. The “good guys” become bad, performing deplorable acts, and the “bad guys” become the victims. Once Saul dismantles everything that viewers hold true, he takes advantage of this opportunity to interpret the subject matter. Saul then compels viewers to see the interface, that space “in between” that which we know, that which is the same, that which we are afraid of, that which is radically different than us, helping us to find the alter-ego but an ego, nonetheless. Lastly, Saul appropriates that understanding of the Other, and makes it useful as a form of interpretation. His paintings are a form of moral philosophy, which in

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 26

<sup>128</sup> Deleuzeian term, as understood in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s text *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* page. 174

turn leads to social criticism. It is particularly this role of social commentator that has won Saul the epithet of modern-day prophet.

J. Martin, editor of a catalogue of letters between Saul and Frumkin says, “By lavishing all his skill and talent on reaching a particular audience (eschewing ‘highbrows,’ ‘elitists,’ ‘sophisticates,’ ‘art snobs,’ and the ‘trendy’) Saul may turn out to be the first (and possibly the only) American painter to out-conceptualize the conceptual artists and to well and truly ‘epater le bourgeoisie,’ i.e., ‘stick it to ’em.”<sup>129</sup> To this day Saul does just that. Still a maverick, Saul continues to create violent, sadistic, and assaulting images in order jolt his audience into considering the moral and social implications of his paintings. There is no valiant heroism or intrinsic altruism in Peter Saul’s art; there is no heady reach for the transcendent. Saul’s work is for here and now; a prophet is no saint, just a voice in the wilderness, or perhaps even, a mad man in the desert.

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<sup>129</sup> J. Martin, *Peter Saul*. New York, Allen Frumkin Gallery, 1987. p. 16









Figure 2 CO Itchee Bitchee, 1964  
Pastel crayon and marker on paper  
21 ½ x 31 ½ in. (70 x 80 cm)  
Private Collection, New York;  
Courtesy of George Adams Gallery, New York





Figure 3 Society, 1964  
Oil on canvas  
80 x 75 in. (203.2 x 190.5 cm)  
Collection of Steve and Kathy Harrison, Illinois





Figure 4 Donald Duck vs. The Japs, 1964  
Oil on Canvas  
63 x 59 in. (160 x 150 cm)  
Private Collection





Figure 4      New China, 1965  
Colored Pencil  
40 x 48 in. (101.6 x 121.9cm)  
Private Collection, Urbana, Illinois  
Courtesy of George Adams Gallery, New York





Figure 6 Human Dignity, 1966  
Oil on Canvas  
59 x 59 in. (150 x 150 cm)  
Frumkin Collection, New York





Figure 7      Beautiful Yellow Mother, 1966  
Oil on canvas  
69 ¼ x 75 in. (176 x 190 cm)  
Private Collection, Geneva





Figure 8 Vietnam, 1966  
Oil on Canvas  
79 ¼ x 67 in. (201.3 x 170.2 cm)  
Collection of Peter and Sally Saul





Figure 9

Saigon, 1967

Oil on canvas

92 ¾ x 142 in. (235.6 x 360.7 cm)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,

Purchased with funds from the Friends of the

Whitney Museum of American Art





Figure 10 Little Joe in Hanoi, 1968  
Oil on Canvas  
90 ½ x 84 ½ in. (230 x 215 cm)  
Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris  
On loan to the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dole





Figure 11      Typical Saigon, 1968  
Oil on Canvas  
93 x 144 in. (236.2 x 365.8 cm)  
Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead  
Pavilion, University of Illinois, Urbana-  
Champaign, Festival of Arts Purchase Fund



Figure 12      Pinkville, 1970  
Acrylic on canvas  
90 x 131 in. (228.6 x 332.7 cm)  
Frumkin Collection, New York

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