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Psychedelic 'Pictures with Problems'

In August 1970, civil rights activist Angela Davis became the third woman ever to be placed on the FBI's "Ten Most Wanted" list. Due to her alleged involvement in a deadly California courthouse takeover, Davis was hunted by police, smeared in the media and called a "dangerous terrorist" by Nixon before, finally, being acquitted at trial. The Los Angeles *Sentinel* referred to Davis's ordeal as a sort of "crucifixion." Painter Peter Saul, then, went a step further, making an image of a wooden cross with a distended, dark-skinned female body splayed and bleeding against a hot pink sky. Atop a stretched and sinuous throat is Angela Davis's agonized face and her famous Afro, and on top of that, a halo.

Crucifixion of Angela Davis (1973) is one of 21 works on view in "Peter Saul: From Pop to Punk," an exhibition of paintings and drawings from the 1960s and early 1970s. That title is a little misleading, though: Saul's work never quite feels "punk," fitting instead into the sort of churning, dark-edged post-pop of the Viet Nam era: an artistic territory that emerged as '60s utopianism started to erode.

Saul's cartoonish grotesques and rubbery, biomorphic figures recall — and in many cases, predate — works by Philip Guston, Jim Nutt, Llyn Foulkes and contemporary painters Sue Williams and Inka Essenhigh, but with a political ferocity not often found on gallery walls. Really, these works feel like nothing so much as political cartoons — cartoons from some acid-drenched Bay Area weekly of the psychedelic era.

Unlike most political cartoons, though, some of these paintings send hard-to-read messages: The politics here are "complex" or "multifaceted" if you're feeling generous, "muddled" or "incoherent" if you're not. *Crucifixion of Angela Davis* feels pretty direct, as does the similar *San Quentin #1 (Angela Davis at San Quentin)* (1971), in which Davis's body is, this time, being violated by a trio of white pigs — though here, the pigs are the ones pinned to crosses. *G.I. Christ* (1967) shows a crucified white American soldier — in case you hadn't guessed, Saul is into crucifixion imagery — with the massive cross rising high over a swanky

California bachelor pad, the words “I died for you guys” etched into a tag on the soldier’s wrist. Meanwhile, *The Government of California* (1969) includes a pink-hued Ronald Reagan slug-monster, a ruby-lipped Martin Luther King, Jr. with octopus-like tentacles, a giant heroin needle and the Golden Gate Bridge as a sort of oversized toilet-paper dispenser. This painting may or may not have felt pertinent to the goings-on of California 46 years ago; it feels pretty arbitrary now.

Saul’s aesthetic — of sickly bright colors, violently contorted bodies and nasty power struggles — is most alive in his paintings of the war in Viet Nam. Based on this show, I’d say that Saul developed his distinctive style as a way to respond to the Viet Nam War; his work from before 1966 feels a bit sleepier. In the show’s most arresting image, *Pinkville* (1970), another white American soldier — this time with a broad chest and insect-like limbs — is shown sexually mutilating a quartet of caricatured, exoticized Vietnamese women; the cross, in this one, is around the soldier’s neck.

Saul’s work, naturally, presents a whole host of difficulties. Depictions of violence against the oppressed can risk reinforcing elements of oppressive ideologies, perpetuating the common understanding that Group X or Group Y is, simply, bound to suffer. Discussing the show with a friend who thinks a lot about issues of race, she mentioned that images like those in the Viet Nam paintings — of mangled, sexualized, over-ethnicized Asian women as imagined by a white, Western man — can’t help but take on aspects of colonialism, no matter if the intentions are good. Looking at the paintings myself, I couldn’t help noticing the apparent glee with which Saul depicted brutalized women; I kept thinking, “wow, this stuff would get torn apart on Twitter.” But of course, there was no Twitter. The works in this exhibition come from a time before the Internet, when there were fewer ways to get the word out and fewer platforms to shout from. If Saul was speaking for those suffering and dying on the margins, he may have been under the impression that they had no real way to speak for themselves.

Of course, Saul was never aiming for political correctness; his paintings are difficult by design (he calls them “pictures with problems”). It’s worth noting, though, that Saul’s images don’t feel nihilistic or dumb — they’re not pushing buttons just for the sake of pushing. The daily conflagrations of Viet Nam, the demonizing of civil rights activists: to anyone reading the news at the time, these events surely must’ve wielded a sort of blunt, staggering horror. It’s that moment of horror — some of it — that comes through in these paintings, peeling away some of the dead skin to reveal cultural wounds that, half a century on, still haven’t quite healed.