

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

Press Release

PETER SAUL: EARLY WORKS ON PAPER (1957-1965)

November 14, 2022 – January 21, 2023

Opening: Monday, November 14th, 6:00 - 8:00 pm

Venus Over Manhattan

120 East 65th Street

New York, NY 10065



What would you think of that sort of work, I wonder? Small paintings that resemble pages out of comic books. It seems to me that nothing could be more realistic for a small painting than to resemble the pages of a cheap magazine – directly from experience, life-size: making the word “life-size” a joke itself.

– Peter Saul writing to his parents from Paris in 1959

(New York, NY) – **Venus Over Manhattan** is pleased to present Peter Saul: Early Works on Paper (1957–1965) the first exhibition to spotlight the colorful, comical, and complex works on paper made during the first decade of the renowned American artist’s career. This focused presentation includes more than forty important and rarely seen works on paper and board, that together illustrate the importance of what Saul termed “small paintings” to the development of the irreverent, no-holds-barred style that has made him an icon of modern and contemporary art.

Peter Saul: Early Works on Paper (1957 – 1965) will be on view at Venus Over Manhattan’s uptown location at 120 East 65th Street from November 14th, 2022, through January 21st, 2023. The gallery will publish a catalogue in conjunction with the exhibition, featuring new texts by **Max Hollein**, Director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and noted curator **Robert Storr**.

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ABOUT THE WORKS ON VIEW

On a cold January day in 1957, Peter Saul was in Amsterdam, where he wrote a letter to his parents. "A small picture, like a pastel, must have an idea because there is not room enough for 'good technical performance' to take the place of 'idea.'" This early and earnest statement by the 23-year-old artist—today a revered 88-year-old maker of outlandish, bravura, large-scale paintings—evidences the importance of the small picture to Saul's early artistic evolution. It was the limitations of the intimately sized picture that pushed Saul to prioritize the ideas he wanted to convey.

Works on view at Venus from the years 1957 to 1965 reveal this period as pivotal to Saul's artistic project. He traveled to Europe in 1956 after graduating from Washington University in St. Louis with a degree in fine arts. For six months he lived in various hotels and rooming houses in and outside of Amsterdam, visiting the galleries of the Rijksmuseum and contemplating the faults of his own oil paintings. Describing his position at the time as "obscure[,] and isolated" from the art world, he turned to pastels, promising his parents that he would "work up a superfluity of them in two months' time." His comments identify the small pastel on paper as an important working ground for new approaches, expressions, and techniques. On view in the exhibition, the chalk on velour paper drawing *Yellow Car* (c. 1957) showcases the subject matter that preoccupied Saul's earlier oil paintings: the front view of an automobile. Only by experimenting in the small-scale format over the next three years was the artist able to reach new creative terrain and focus on an expanded vocabulary of subjects, mixing mundane objects, comic-book humor, and politicized brutality to shocking effect and laying the path toward his future large-scale work in oils.

In 1958, at the age of 24, Saul moved to Paris, where for the next four years he would jump from hotel to hotel, and paint in an Abstract Expressionist style at the American Students' and Artists' Club. During this time, he became a repeat visitor to the Louvre, studying the masterworks he found in its vaunted galleries. It was not the canonical canvases there, however, that inspired a remarkable shift in Saul's little paintings. Instead, it was a chance encounter at a Left Bank bookstore.

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When Saul wandered into the Mistral Parisian bookstore in 1958, he was struggling with the lack of unity in his pictures, which, like *Yellow Car*, featured abstract backgrounds centering realistic common commercial objects—an automobile, a cigarette, or an ashtray. On a large table in the center of the bookshop, he came upon magazines like *Photoplay*, *MAD*, *LIFE*, and *Confidential*. These immediately reminded the artist of the comic books he had loved in his childhood and adolescence, and as he perused their humorous and dramatic pages, he realized that the American cultural cast of characters, expressive graphics, and talk blobs provided him with a buffet of subversive motifs for his own work. While his contemporaries were pursuing a pure abstraction that dominated the dialogue of the moment, the pages of *MAD* and *LIFE* magazines were replete with stories, iconographies, and expressions. Within their radical pages were signs toward, in Saul's words, "a rule I could break."

The blatant consumerism of modern life, embodied by the images of refrigerators he found in the pages of *LIFE* magazine, began to appear in Saul's paintings with colorful, improbable food products, as in the exhibition's *Untitled (Ice Box)* (1959), *Untitled (Kitchen)* (1959), and *Untitled* (1960). They take center stage in the 1960 oil and pastel works on paper *Ice Box* and *Ice Box (Yogurt)*. Soon, Saul's commentaries on American life extended past the threshold of the refrigerator door, to the kitchen, bathroom, living room, and office. Related to larger paintings and yet commanding in their self-contained power as small masterpieces, works such as *Untitled (Bathroom)* (1960) and *Untitled* (1962) enabled Saul to infiltrate the seemingly safe space of domestic life with swastika-adorned submarines, floating speech bubbles containing phrases like "Ha Ha!," and a riot of other absurd and brightly rendered symbols and objects. In what art historian Richard Shiff describes as "Saul Art...not Pop Art," the artist is here forcing his viewers to contend with the ludicrousness of modern life's latest conveniences and essentials.

The failures of the criminal justice system also became a preoccupation of Saul's after he witnessed the arrest of a shoplifter in Paris. In a letter to his parents detailing the incident

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in 1959, he remarked that “no decent person would equate life and property, yet the law does.” Works on view in the exhibition like *Untitled (I hav to kill)* (1963) and *Untitled* (1964) mock the police and capital punishment. And yet no one was safe from Saul’s assessing gaze. He wielded oil stick, colored pencil, and marker to mock such American pop culture icons as Buck Rogers, Donald Duck, and Superman in his works on paper from 1962 to 1964.

While developing the voice and expressive force of “Saul Art” in Paris and subsequently, Rome, where he moved in 1962, the artist was laboring to find exhibition opportunities for his oil paintings. It was his work on paper, however, that convinced Chilean Surrealist painter Roberto Matta (1911-2002) to introduce Saul to legendary art impresario Allan Frumkin (1927– 2002), who would become his gallerist in 1960 and remain so for the next thirty years. While Frumkin pushed Saul to show and develop his large-scale canvases, the artist regularly cited works on paper as the basis for those paintings throughout his correspondence with Frumkin in the early 1960s.

After the death of his father Bill in 1964, Saul moved from Rome to Mill Valley, California. There he worked diligently on a suite of Vietnam ink and color pencil pictures inspired by

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coverage of the conflict in such weeklies as *Newsweek* and *TIME*. In the Spring of 1965, he showed Frumkin these drawings, leading to the exhibition of his Vietnam Pictures at in both New York and Chicago. His entry into this subject matter is reflected in works on view at *Venus, GI with Machinery* (1965) and *Altar of Cold Cash* (1965).

After 1965, "Saul Art" was firmly established and the artist's career as a Funk, Outsider and Bad Painter ebbed and flowed against the currents of the official art world. In the 21st century, Saul has been anointed a major figure of American art, a master both technically and in terms of his radical figuration as a device to challenge societal complacency. However, and as this exhibition illustrates, the seeds of Saul's genius germinated many decades ago in the small paintings on paper he created between 1957 and 1965—works whose diminutive scale obscures the fact of their mighty significance.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Peter Saul was born in 1934 in San Francisco, California. He attended the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco (now San Francisco Art Institute), and the Washington University School of Fine Arts in St. Louis. Saul's work has been the subject of numerous international solo presentations, including recent exhibitions at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; les Abattoirs, Toulouse; the Deichtorhallen Hamburg; the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt; the Städtische Galerie Wolfsburg; The Arnold and Marie Schwartz Gallery Met, Metropolitan Opera House, Lincoln Center, New York; and the Fondation Salomon Art Contemporain, Annecy. Saul's work is frequently featured in major group exhibitions at institutions both stateside and abroad, including recent presentations at

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the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville; The Met Breuer, New York; the Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln; Kunsthalle Emden; the New York Academy of Art; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Marseille; the National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow; MoMA PS1, Long Island City; and the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus. His work is held in the permanent collections of numerous public institutions, including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; the Dallas Museum of Art; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Peter Saul lives and works in New York City and upstate New York.

For further information about the exhibition and availability, please contact the gallery at info@venusovermanhattan.com

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120 East 65th Street
New York, NY 10065

GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday – Saturday
10:00 am – 6:00 pm

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IMAGE CREDITS

Untitled, 1961. Pastel, color pencil on two sheets of paper; 25 1/2 x 36 in (64.8 x 91.4 cm) Private Collection • *Untitled (Bathroom)*, 1960. Pastel, crayon on paper; 19 7/8 x 17 1/2 in (50.5 x 44.5 cm). Collection KAWS • *Yellow Car*, c. 1957. Chalk on velour paper; 18 x 24 3/4 in (45.7 x 62.9 cm). Collection KAWS • *Untitled (Ice Box)*, 1959. Pastel, collage on paper; 12 x 11 1/2 in (30.5 x 29.2 cm). Hall Collection. Photo: Jeffrey Nintzel, courtesy Hall Art Foundation • *Untitled (Kitchen)*, 1959. Pastel, collage on paper; 13 1/2 x 11 1/4 in (34.3 x 28.6 cm). Hall Collection. Photo: Jeffrey Nintzel, courtesy Hall Art Foundation • *Untitled*, 1960. Pastel on paper; 21 1/4 x 24 1/4 in (54 x 61.6 cm). Hall Collection. Photo: Jeffrey Nintzel, courtesy Hall Art Foundation • *Untitled (I hav to kill)*, 1963. Acrylic, pen, pencil, and crayon on paper; 27 1/2 x 31 1/2 in (69.8 x 80 cm). Collection KAWS • *GI with Machinery*, 1965. Marker and colored pencil on board; 40 x 32 in (101.6 x 81.3 cm). Private Collection • *Altar of Cold Cash*, 1965. Watercolor and gouache on board; 30 x 30 in (76.2 x 76.2 cm). Private Collection.