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Peter Saul

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

The wonderful exhibition “Peter Saul: From Pop to Punk”—challenging, engrossing, troubling—which consisted of sixteen ambitious paintings and five equally ambitious drawings from the 1960s and ’70s, was woefully mistitled: There was nothing waywardly adolescent about this show, nothing *punk*, as I understand the meaning of both word and style. Indeed, with the passage of half a century, these paintings seem even more centered and gravely pertinent—prescient, even—given the ghastly world we now live in than they did when they were first championed by Allan Frumkin, the placid but remarkable dealer who impulsively took the artist on, surely with no hope of profit, considering the unrelenting aggression reflected in Saul’s amalgam of surrealist cartooning and the day’s politics.

Think back to the many contrapuntal divisions of the ’60s—abstract painting versus provincial representationalism, or an unyielding Minimalism ascending coincidentally with its evil fraternal twin, Pop art. Or, as another example, consider the last gasp of a humanistic political art (as manifested, say, in the disparaged “New Images of Man,” Peter Selz’s 1959 curatorial debut at New York’s Museum of Modern Art) versus the supposedly apolitical nature of AbEx, at least according to puritanical period formalist readings. Saul’s paintings, in retrospect, seem the meeting place of these antipodal encounters. I can bear witness to all this, since, as a graduate student in art history at the University of Chicago, I first encountered Saul’s disconcerting



Peter Saul, *The Government of California*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 68 x 96".

works chez Frumkin, who would later open in New York, a move underscoring yet another either/or—that of New York versus Chicago, the latter denigrated, locally and otherwise, as the “second city.”

Chicago aside, Saul hails from San Francisco, city of Haight-Ashbury, and Berkeley’s neighbor to the west. The archvillain of his work is Ronald Reagan, back then only the governor and, perforce, the regent of the University of California system and the guy who called in the cops to quell the student antiwar uprisings at a moment when free speech and freedom of conscience meant something acutely real. Reagan sits deep in Saul’s Dantean circles of hell, his placement particularly visible in the ambiguous *The Government of California*, 1969, wherein we discover the future president pinioned against the Golden Gate Bridge alongside Martin Luther King Jr., who had been assassinated the previous year; against all reason, Dr. King is here disturbingly “memorialized” as a creature with dangling tentacles. Indeed, Saul’s work

frequently includes distressing ethnic stereotypes—of African Americans, of the Vietnamese, of Jews. See *All the Money in Palestine*, 1969, with its slogans reading FUCKING MILLIONAIRE, USURY, SYPHILITIC PROFITS, NOT to mention the big noses of the painting’s stereotyped central characters. What to make of such ostensibly left-wing agitprop?

Despite the confrontational nature of Saul’s potty-mouthed paintings, a virtually pastoral mode marks his earlier art, works pleasing in their scoured surfaces of delicate coloration: The artist’s plangent, whistling neon only fully ignites by 1966. This early output reveals Saul’s struggle with indecision and piecemeal discovery, though the imagery remains that of the virulent propaganda germane to his whole enterprise (if not the entire history of the cartoon tradition). Some of the early work may strike certain viewers as a trifle perfumed—*Sex Boat*, 1961, particularly so. With its obdurate and crude imagery—check out the ballooning yellow phallus rising in the upper right—the painting’s gentle palette also registered in *Superman in the Electric Chair*, 1963, with its eccentric yellow water-closet shape that fills half the composition.

These were the years of the American misadventure in Vietnam, spurred by a self-deluding domino theory; the ’60s were marked by a disastrous loss of life and treasure (both American and Vietnamese), as emblemized by the 1968 Tet Offensive. Thus was set the background for Saul’s acerbic, dreadfully painful, funny canvases, premonitory works acquired by a uniquely comprehending art dealer who held them dear for a lifetime. Here reassembled, these paintings were recontextualized as national masterworks by a veteran artist who may now be seen as an unanticipated Emanuel Leutze (of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* fame): political satire as history painting.

—Robert Pincus-Witten

Claudia Comte

GLADSTONE GALLERY

On a frigid day in March, Claudia Comte’s exhibition “NO MELON NO LEMON” provided a welcome respite from the gray of overcast skies and concrete construction. The yellow-and-white-striped paintings hanging on yellow-and-white-striped walls made the room feel sun blasted, the burnout effect pleasingly tempered by charred plywood panels banded by vertical cuts. Lustrous wood totems à la Jean Arp and Brancusi stood on plinths that seemed to have folded out from the panels, revealing the white wall beneath. These plinths, the strongest component of the exhibition, reinforced the tactility of both the smooth sculptures and their rough bases, even as they lent the installation a provisional character, as if the entire structure could have been flat-packed for shipping. They also drew attention to the artist’s commanding sense of scale: Their proportions made the cavernous gallery space feel refreshingly domestic. (Beware the description of Comte’s work as “site-specific,” however. Though technically accurate, it is misleading: The forms here were tailored to Gladstone’s site but they are not inherent to it—Comte has made similar installations since 2009.)

To be sure, with Comte’s work, the references come fast and heavy; there is something for everyone, whether your point of entry is Constructivism or cartoons, Op art or pop music, Frank Stella or fashion. Her use of installation as form, as opposed to environment, entertainment, or pedagogical exercise, has its roots in twentieth-century avant-garde practices and recalls El Lissitzky’s *Demonstrationsräume* (Demonstration Spaces) in particular. In Lissitzky’s *Room for Constructivist Art*, 1926, and *Abstract Cabinet*, 1927, museum walls were lined with thin vertical slats, each painted white on one side, gray on the front edge, and black on the other side, so that as one moved from left to right, the



View of "Claudia Comte," 2015.

color of the support wall itself changed. Comte's alternation of black and white functions similarly to Lissitzky's lattice relief, shifting the perceptual backdrop for the paintings and sculptures on view and encouraging the viewer to notice the ways in which such shifts differentiate the exhibited works.

Where Comte's project is most resonant in form, however, is also where it falters most in concept. Lissitzky aimed to create a revolutionary mode of display by which to activate the viewer through phenomenological and physical means. Comte's aim, by contrast, seems more prosaic: to create a seductive backdrop in order to prime the viewer for easy consumption. It is good enough to recognize that the point is to walk around the room; you are not actually compelled to do so. Any potential for criticality is occluded by our resolute ability to remain passive in the gallery. The sense of humor key to Comte's illustrated comic book *Welcome to Colorful*, 2010, or her sculpture on ice for "Elevation 1049," a 2014 group exhibition in Gstaad, Switzerland, have been less apparent in this show, but hints of it emerged in the dissonant juxtapositions of time and place her allusions suggest. Such hints do little, though, to dispel a gloomy hint of aesthetic foreclosure, sun-drenched though it may be.

—Rachel Churner

Lutz Bacher

GREENE NAFTALI

One summer evening in 1964, at the suggestion of his friends, Andy Warhol trained a rented 16-millimeter camera on the Empire State Building, shooting the monolith for hours on end. The resulting film, *Empire*, 1964, is a study as much in cinematographic looking as it is on the properties of film itself; though the image of the building at night is otherwise fixed, small dramas play out through exposure, the shifting of light over time, and the slight jumpiness of the image as the celluloid passes through the projector.

The centerpiece of Lutz Bacher's exhibition "For the People of New York City"—a selection of sixteen works made between 1999 and 2014—was the expansive two-channel video installation *Empire*, 2014, a piece similarly predicated on the properties of a time-based medium. Turned on their sides and strapped awkwardly to propped-up wooden benches, two video projectors on opposite sides of the gallery cast the image of the iconic building lit up at night toward ten sculptural Plexiglas surfaces weighted down with sandbags. Refracted by the plastic and bouncing onto the walls, columns, and other Plexiglas surfaces,

the light from the projectors multiplied the image, which rocked unsteadily as a droning tone filled the space. While pulling apart the properties of projected light, the installation also seemed a lo-fi diagram of digital space and the circulation of images: The picture was duplicated, diluted, and dislocated, losing resolution as it moved through each flat screen. Fifty years after Warhol pictured the city's majestic authority through the ESB, Bacher shows us a tarted-up, LED-light-spangled tourist attraction, broadcast like a Jumbotron ad for New York City and its people today.

Like Warhol's, Bacher's work is often effortless but rarely easy, which is why a comparison between the two artists leads us to a fuller understanding of the latter's multifarious practice. While Bacher's most recent work trades on opacity—embodying shifting styles, techniques, and media that masquerade as facile reactions to contemporary life—during her more-than-forty-year career, she has consistently taken up the politics of power and gender; alongside such artists as Cady Noland and Elaine Sturtevant, Bacher was critical in bridging the media savvy of the Pictures generation and the slacker neo-Conceptualism of the early 1990s (take, for example, her joke prints and appropriated Vargas-girl paintings). But as this sizable exhibition made clear, Bacher's work relies as much on the denial of meaning as it does on the denial of authorial power (via her use of a pseudonym). *A Song of Ice and Fire*, 2013, for example—a color photo that was hung low to the ground in a back gallery with the scatter piece *Marbles*, 2012—depicts a diorama-like scene of three figures around a faux fire, two covered with snow and one a flat, cutout photographic representation of a woman. The mysterious picture seems lifted from a children's book and indeed points toward an obscure narrative that only a child might understand (hence, presumably, the low hang).

Children or their toys appeared elsewhere in the show—in the scanned and enlarged photo *The Baby*, 2012; the video *Fog*, 2014; the stuffed-animal-like sculpture *Pillow*, 2014; the doodled animation *Spud*, 2001; the twenty-nine ink drawings of *Knots*, 2010; and even in the installation *How Will I Find You*, 2014, a massive pile of empty and broken casts used in the manufacture of tchotchkes. This exhibition—Bacher's ode to the inhabitants of her city—at once addressed the adult world of New York (its structures, buildings, and facts) and its more imaginary, or childlike, realm. Perhaps Bacher proposed that when we gaze at tall buildings and handheld screens, our direct experience of the world gets mediated by digital light and we are denied something of the "real"—and yet the real has become spectacle, its dreaminess no less an authentic way of looking.

—Catherine Taft



Lutz Bacher, *Empire* (detail), 2014. Plexiglas, sandbags, two-channel digital video (color, sound, 43 minutes 1 second), dimensions variable. Installation view.