

ART IN REVIEW

Peter Saul

*George Adams Gallery
41 West 57th Street
Through Jan. 31*

It's useful to recall that Peter Saul was living in Europe when he was painting and drawing these frisky, raucous pictures from the early 1960's. At first they can seem in perfect tune with American Pop and the works of Warhol, Lichtenstein and Rivers, circa 1960. But other links suggest themselves after a while, not just to de Kooning and Twombly but also, even more so, to Francis Bacon and to European Surrealists like Matta, who, it turns out, introduced Mr. Saul to Allan Frumkin, Mr. Saul's longtime New York dealer.

Years ago, Donald Judd disparagingly pointed out the mix of Pop, Expressionism and Surrealism in these early works, and Mr. Saul himself came to regard the style as something of a liability (too ingratiating, he thought), so he abandoned it for the more direct, declarative, confrontational style of sharply contoured forms and acid colors for which he has become best known.

It's true that these early pictures do have a cheeky, slapdash, hand-made quality, a kind of cheerful anticness, that's appealing in a way Mr. Saul doesn't want: his aim has

been to outrage and court bad taste, and in the process to deny any connection to a particular movement, like Pop. He wants to be an independent.

But I'm not sure that the later work is really more idiosyncratic (one thinks of its connections to the Chicago group called Hairy Who and to Californians like Robert Arneson) or that it delivers its message more successfully. The message has always seemed to involve his outrage about commercialism, prudery, violence and politics (both real world and art world politics). In these early paintings, all this comes across vividly.

Mr. Saul has spoken of his need at the time to reconcile de Kooning with Mad magazine. The result, as one sees here, also brings to mind late Guston, and for a reason: Mr. Saul's early work influenced the cartoonists who created Zap Comics, which in turn influenced Guston. So whether Mr. Saul likes it or not, his work is, in various ways, woven tightly into the fabric of the art of the last 40 years.

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN