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PETER SAUL

San Francisco

January 13 – February 26, 2022

Berggruen Gallery is pleased to present *Peter Saul: San Francisco*, an exhibition of paintings and works on paper by American artist Peter Saul. This show marks Saul's first exhibition with the gallery. The presentation will be on view from January 13 through February 26, 2022. The gallery will host an opening reception for the artist on Thursday, January 20, from 5:00 to 7:00 pm.

Peter Saul, whose exciting and turbulent visions of American culture have shocked viewers for nearly sixty years, was born and raised in San Francisco. The city and its environs have appeared frequently and consistently in Saul's work, both as subject and as context, or background. This exhibition in his hometown represents a kind of homecoming for the artist and assembles a major group of works that depict the city of San Francisco, including five monumental paintings, four works on board, and two related prints. The works cover a wide, 30-year period of Saul's production, and range in date from 1966 to 1996. The works reflect Saul's stylistic and conceptual development as an artist, and similarly trace the evolution of San Francisco as both an urban location and an idea in the collective conscience. Moreover, they constitute a history of Saul's relationship with the city, as it developed from the city of his youth to the subject matter of his mature work. Indeed, in addition to works that depict San Francisco and its landmarks, the exhibition also considers the city's recognition of and support for Saul's practice: the presentation will feature *Still Life #1* (1996), which the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco have generously loaned to the exhibition.

Two monumental paintings and a related work on paper—*View of San Francisco* (1979), *View of SF/Red Plane* (1985), on loan from the di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art, and *San Francisco* (1986)—take San Francisco's urban landscape as their primary subject. Saul has made five monumental works on canvas that depict San Francisco, one of which is held in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In describing this series, Saul has said:

The idea behind [these pictures] was to combine the art style of Abstract Expressionism with the San Francisco earthquake. The earthquake did actually happen, in 1906, and another big one will certainly happen again within the next 10,000 years, whereas the art style only happened once, after WWII. In the art style, the artist flings around paint, here, there, or where it looks good. In the earthquake things get shaken up — the Golden Gate Bridge could end up on top of the building. So I loosened up my thinking and put things I could remember from growing up in San Francisco in the wrong place, which certainly made the picture more fun to look at.

What motivated [these pictures] and a number of others I've painted is an almost complete lack of humor in "Modern Art" since WWII. Where are the jokes? Even if it's wrong, I prefer to add something that wasn't there before to doing the same old thing, even if it's highly praised.¹

These paintings equate an art style with the natural phenomena of an earthquake, and feature Saul's signature style that references cartooning and technical mastery/facility.

An earlier group of works from 1969 address the idea of San Francisco in our cultural imaginary, along with many of the sociopolitical events that contributed to or constituted that idea. Both on the ground and in the media, San Francisco was a lightning rod for conversations around race, gender, socioeconomic inequality, and injustice. Saul's paintings from this year,

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including *Self-Defense*, animate these tensions in a visually extreme manner. *Self-Defense* features a member of the Black Panthers defending herself against a pair of lecherous white police officers, whose distended forms reach across a caricatured version of the Golden Gate Bridge, the trusses of which are labelled “Rich Shit” and “Poor Shit.” Porting a gold hoop earring and a natural hairdo that reads “Panthers,” the central figure holds a comically scaled pocketknife labelled “self-defense.” Along with *Frenchin’ in Frisco* and *Frisco*, *Self-Defense* illustrates Saul’s position at the forefront of the counterculture, a spot from which he produced paintings that addressed many of the most pressing questions of the day.

A final group of works on board, along with a set of related prints, date from 1966 to 1968. Saul produced these works immediately upon his return to the Bay Area, following six years living and working in western Europe. A pair of works on board from 1966 evidence Saul’s early style, notable for its use of ballpoint pen and colored pencil and incorporate the Golden Gate Bridge as a compositional device to link a diverse set of topics. For instance, a neoclassical building labeled “Bank of China” supports one of the bridge’s trusses, which itself supports a roadway that leads toward a drawing of the earth labeled “Upper Class.” These thought-maps of interconnected symbols testify to the continued importance of Saul’s madcap vision and align his creative abandon with the aesthetic uniqueness of San Francisco. Indeed, Saul’s rebellious pictures continue to evade categorization—a position well known to a city celebrated for its iconoclasm.

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 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.

Peter Saul: San Francisco, January 13 – February 26, 2021. On view at 10 Hawthorne Street, San Francisco, CA 94105. Images and previews are available upon request. This exhibition is presented in collaboration with Venus Over Manhattan, New York. For all inquiries, please contact the gallery by phone (415) 781-4629 or by email info@berggruen.com.

¹ Hainley, Bruce, Peter Saul, Richard Schiff, Annabelle Ténèze, *Peter Saul* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2021): 204.