

# GLADSTONE

Saul Ostrow, "Peter Saul: Peter Saul's Art History," *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2026

## BROOKLYN RAIL

### Peter Saul: Peter Saul's Art History

Saul Ostrow



Peter Saul, *Better than de Kooning*, 2008. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 84 × 72 inches. © Peter Saul / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone. Photo: Anthony Flores.

*Peter Saul's Art History*  
Gladstone Gallery  
March 7–April 18, 2026  
New York

Though Peter Saul had gained recognition in the 1960s and '70s, it was not until the 2010s that his re-emergence took institutional form, as museums and a younger generation of artists, critics, curators, and dealers came to understand Saul's wedding of high to low art, which he had stubbornly pursued for decades as a postmodern project. In the space of a few years, retrospectives and major surveys reframed him not as a bad-boy outlier, but as a crucial link to politically saturated figurative

painting. Early on, he was loosely identified with the Chicago Imagists and “wild style” painting, though he had no real association with either. In the late 1950s and early ’60s he was living in Europe—France, Italy, and the Netherlands—where he developed his lurid Pop-Surrealist hybrid style through his Vietnam War, Civil Rights movement, and satirical caricatures that clearly aligned him with the anti-authoritarian mood of the 1960s counterculture, positioning him less as an outlier than a provocateur.

This exhibition at Gladstone Gallery, though titled *Peter Saul's Art History*, is less a sweeping survey of Saul's interpretation of art history than a concentrated, slapstick chapter on Western modernism and perhaps his influences. It is composed of a sampling of works which Saul, over the course of his career, has revisited. To these, he has applied three distinct strategies: amplification, recontextualization, and assimilation. So we have a number of variations on Willem de Kooning's women and Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Saul's version of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* is given center stage, not having been exhibited since the 1980s. Meanwhile, paintings based on Salvador Dalí's watch, Jasper Johns's maps and Picasso's women in a mirror appear in walk-on roles.

The de Kooning women, in most of their versions, are rendered as monstrous, bordering on misogynistic, while retaining their status as avatars of painterly aggression. Long read as brutalized erotic objects, de Kooning's women are pushed further by Saul: their bodies are inflated, their limbs splayed, their faces frozen and fragmented into grotesque grimaces. The painterly torque that once gave these figures a tragic, existential weight is replaced by a kind of graphic polish, as if Saul were turning de Kooning's abjection into a form of visual inflationism, in which the violence is not denied; it is simply displaced from the field of expression into the realm of stylization, the misogyny no longer masked by abstraction but laid bare.



Installation view: *Peter Saul: Peter Saul's Art History*, Gladstone, New York, 2026. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone.

Meanwhile, Picasso's *Guernica* is treated differently. Saul recontextualizes it in a manner reminiscent of one of Ad Reinhardt's "trees," cartoon diagrams of art's genealogy. He turns *Guernica* into a schematic of its own iconography, retaining Picasso's primary vectors—falling bodies, upraised arms, ruptured planes—and adding a portrait of Picasso, with each element labeled with a seemingly phonetic spelling of an art movement, while translating its greyness into high-key color. In doing this, Saul shifts *Guernica*'s primary message about the horrors of war into an image of artistic cultural contention. In a more neutral register are the variations based on Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the Johns map, and the Dalí clock; these are rendered with a kind of dead-pan clarity, their significance neutralized, not by mockery but by a measured demonstration of the distance between the canonical and the cartoonish. Together, Duchamp's *Nude*, Dalí's clock, and Johns's map are merely cartooned up—appropriated and brought into line with Saul's own graphic style.

While much has been said about Saul's iconography and about how his paintings are formally wacky, rhetorically loud, and often crudely vulgar, far less attention has been given to the technical precision and structural control underpinning his work. In this show, works from different periods appear side by side, ranging from early canvases to more compressed, graphic later works. What seems to remain consistent across the decades is Saul's control over the terms of pictorial construction: drawing, color, and spatial orchestration. Across stylistic and technical shifts, the distortions and rubbery anatomies recur, but they are held in check by precise drawing, by classically legible staging, an exact sense of interval and technical abilities.



Peter Saul, *Surrealist Facial Recognition*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 60 × 60 inches. © Peter Saul / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone. Photo: Anthony Flores.

Over the decades, Saul's cartoon-derived figuration has hardened into a stable repertoire of motifs and pictorial strategies, forming a self-conscious pictorial language whose logic is articulated through color modulation, graphic economy, and an unrelenting sense of structure. Saul is not just a provocateur, but a sophisticated painter whose coarseness is a deliberate and controlled artistic strategy. The irony is that the very academic and compositional traditions one would be least inclined to associate with his work supply the technique and organizational intelligence that he then turns against themselves, so that his paintings operate at once as demonstrations of mastery and as arguments against the conventional uses of mastery. In this sense, Saul's stylistic concerns do not contradict his vulgarity but enable it. The result is a stylistic evolution whose painterly grammar is capable of sustaining both satirical force and a kind of formal refinement. This evolution is less about tidying up his method than about leaving it in a state that can sustain the unresolved friction between form and content, between being an outsider and an insider, and between the logics of modernism and postmodernism.