

Collection in Focus
RELAX IN ELECTRIC CHAIR: PETER SAUL AT DI ROSA

March 4–July 26, 2015

“This style had already been condemned as bad so I thought I might as well proceed in the wrong direction.” —Peter Saul

A plane’s eye view of a cartoonishly metastasizing San Francisco on the brink of total destruction by earthquake. A psychedelic cowboy riding uphill in a cacti-laden desert, lasso extended, on the back of his deeply worried blue-gray horse. A chicken-faced criminal feeling the burn of The Chair as the blank-faced officer below flips the switch.

Peter Saul’s lush, lurid, troubling, and masterfully rendered paintings have been admired and derided far and wide for more than 50 years. A San Francisco native, Saul (b. 1934) has charted his own candy-colored course from California to Paris to Austin to New York, exploring sex, money, politics, self-loathing, food, war, death, and many combinations therein. Along the way he became something of an insider’s outsider artist, beloved among the few but largely ignored by tastemakers and collectors.

This presentation marks the first time all seven Saul works in the di Rosa collection—several not on view for many years—have been exhibited simultaneously. It is also the artist’s first solo Northern California exhibition in over 10 years. Saul’s distinct blend of pop art, surrealism, abstract expressionism and San Francisco funk are represented in this diverse assembly covering an impressive scope of the artist’s career from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s.

The early *Master Room (Hide a Bed)*, 1961, which can be found in di Rosa’s Main Gallery, introduces the suggestive semi-cartoon figures that anticipate the late work of Philip Guston. The locally relevant *Frisco*, 1969, and *View of SF/Red Plane*, 1985, pay tribute to the artist’s time spent residing in Marin County. These works embody Saul’s trademark Day-Glo distortions and love of the grotesque that played an important though often unacknowledged role in influencing the likes of West Coast artists such as Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and Raymond Pettibon.

Soft Watch Descending a Staircase, 1978, is reportedly the first in Saul’s extensive mash-up series riffing on Marcel Duchamp’s masterpiece. Joined by the extraordinary art-historical burlesque that is *Francis Bacon Descending a Staircase*, 1979, this pair represents the artist’s ongoing penchant for outré parodies of the classics of Western painting.

The exhibition takes its name from one of only two Saul sculptures in existence, is the seminal *Relax in Electric Chair (Dirty Guy)*, 1965 (restored in 1984). This work manifests the artist’s long-standing critique

against capital punishment in three-dimensional form. Its title speaks to the trademark blend of comfort and alarm that accompanies a typical Peter Saul viewing experience. Together, this arresting collection presents the outline of a singular career defined less by trends than by bucking them.

Text by Amy Owen and Jordan Stein

Exhibition Checklist:

Cowboy, 1976

Acrylic on board, 21 x 28 ¾ in.

Francis Bacon Descending a Staircase, 1979

Acrylic on paper, 58 x 38 ¼ in.

Frisco, 1969

Oil on canvas, 48 x 76 in.

Master Room (Hide a Bed), 1961 (on view in the Main Gallery)

Oil on canvas, 60 x 77 in.

Relax in Electric Chair (Dirty Guy), 1965

Styrofoam, fiberglass, and plastic enamel, 55 x 24 x 42 in.

Soft Watch Descending a Staircase, 1978

Acrylic on board, 40 ¼ x 30 ¼ in.

View of SF/Red Plane, 1985

Acrylic and oil on canvas, 67 x 109 in.

All works from the di Rosa collection, Napa.



Peter Saul
Relax in Electric Chair (Dirty Guy), 1965
di Rosa collection, Napa