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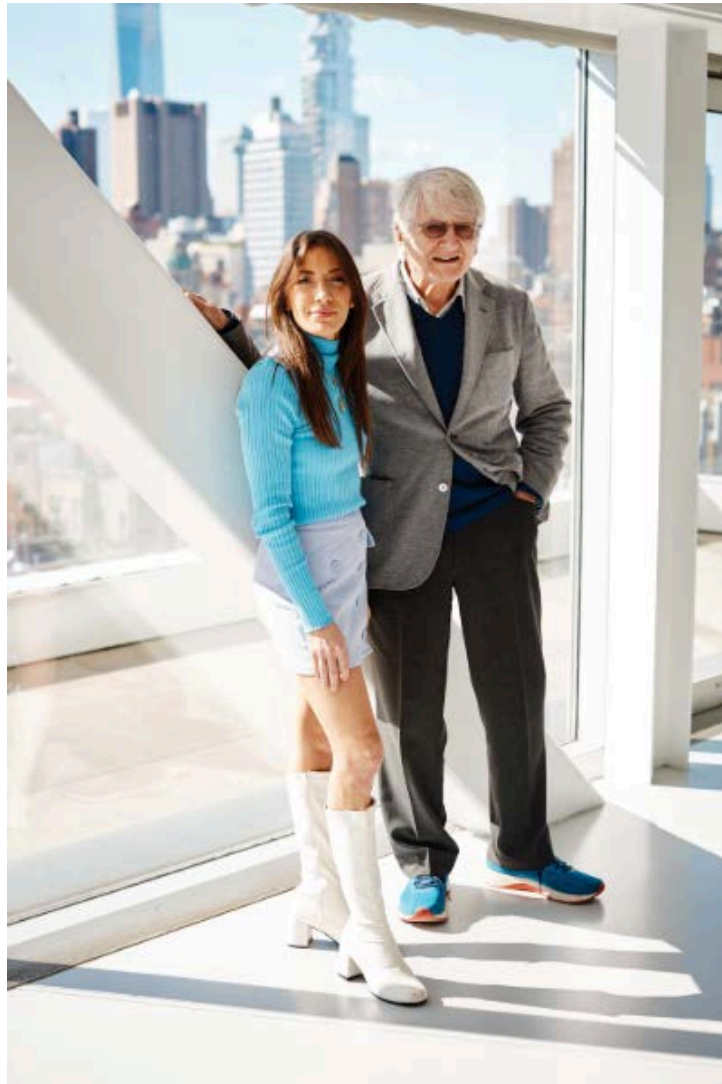
Andy Battaglia, 'The ARTnews Accord: Painters Peter Saul and Jamian Juliano-Villani Talk Humor in Art, Life in the Studio, and More', ARTnews, February 2020

[home](#) • [artnews](#) • [artists](#)

The ARTnews Accord: Painters Peter Saul and Jamian Juliano-Villani Talk Humor in Art, Life in the Studio, and More

BY **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Jamian Juliano-Villani and Peter Saul in the Sky Room at the New Museum.
WESTON WELLS

Peter Saul's pointed and provocative style of painting has been raising brows and hackles since the late 1950s. On a long list of influences that counted as outliers within the fine-art tradition he transgressed were comic books and absurdist antics of the kind popularized by *Mad* magazine, mixed with an appreciation of Surrealism and other perhaps surprisingly stately painters throughout the ages. After decades of underground appreciation as an “artist’s artist,” Saul has been cited by a growing list of young painters for whom his lively and playful vision has proven influential. The market for his work has also swelled, with a recent auction record of \$575,000 for *Saul's Guernica* in 2016 and sales led by the galleries Venus Over Manhattan and Michael Werner. Later this month, the New Museum will mount the first museum exhibition of Saul's work in New York, with some 60 paintings spanning his decades-long career on view until the summer

Jamian Juliano-Villani has emerged as a visionary painter in New York starting with her first gallery show in the city in 2013. A native of New Jersey, the 32-year-old artist participated in the 2014 group exhibition “Puddle, Pothole, Portal”—curated by Ruba Katrib and artist Camille Henrot—at SculptureCenter in Queens. The following year, she presented her first show of phantasmagorical paintings at JTT, the Lower East Side gallery that currently represents her.

In October, Saul and Juliano-Villani joined *ARTnews* for lunch (with more than a little alcohol to loosen the mood) at Floret, a few doors down from the New Museum on the Bowery. For Saul, a cheeseburger and red wine; for Juliano-Villani, whiskey, neat (with a Coke on the side for appearance's sake)

ARTnews: What was a formative early experience you had with an artwork?

Peter Saul: Mine was a gay masterpiece by Paul Cadmus. My mother got a book from the Book of the Month Club on American art—the only art book my parents ever owned—and his *Coney Island* (1935) was in there. I was really attracted to it at age 5. My mother was upset with my choice of art, but, you know, what the hell. All of my influences came to me from reproductions mostly. The first picture I saw in person was Larry Rivers's *Double Portrait of Berdie* (1955), of his mother-in-law naked. That I liked.

Jamian Juliano-Villani: I used to love Andrew Wyeth. It's pretty corny, but that's OK. Also Giorgio Morandi, because it was so boring. It looks like what art should be, but you can totally ignore it at the same time. I liked that. Then I was looking at Robert Rauschenberg and reading *The Andy Warhol Diaries*. It's really big and is a good bathroom book. I got really into how he had all these time-capsule boxes and would save everything. I started doing that with printed materials. I am a hoarder. When I found out *Playboy* was going out of print, I bought every *Playboy* I could—because the ads are so good.



Jamian Juliano-Villani, *Born This Way*, 2018.
COURTESY JTT, NEW YORK

ARTnews: Both of you work with a pointed sense of humor, which is not especially common in art. How did you find that register?

Saul: I thought I was a follower of Francis Bacon actually—a gloomer. But then when I had my first show in Paris, I walked into the opening and, of about 30 people in the room, two were laughing. At what, I don't know—but I took that to mean my paintings were funny. I decided then that I was a funny artist instead of a gloomer. That was it. I changed my self-definition to being a funny artist, and I have been one ever since. I laugh at everything. I'm not supposed to say that, but it's true that I have *too much* of a sense of humor.

Juliano-Villani: You know how you have all the different areas for tastes on your tongue? In paintings I've got to hit those marks—and humor is one of them. When I make a painting, I like to start out with something stupid, then bring it somewhere to cancel that out—then bring it back to something else . . .

Saul: . . . to be *more* stupid . . .

Juliano-Villani: . . . so aggressively stupid that you can't even talk about it!

Saul: That's when you know it's a good idea.

ARTnews: Is the art world more or less receptive to humor now than in the past?

Saul: The audience has reacted differently, mostly negatively, until recent years. Now it is becoming a little bit OK. But if you were buying a new car and you handed over the check and the salesman burst out laughing, how would you feel? That is the thinking behind the seriousness of art—avoid humor because it interferes with serious collecting. People try to be serious, and it makes sense in a way because people are teaching this stuff. But I don't give a damn.

Juliano-Villani: I would never teach.

Saul: It's an advantage. It gives your voice gravity.

Juliano-Villani: I just feel like once you start teaching, you have to justify everything and then your work will suck because you have to give reasons for everything. I will do it when I am really broke in a couple of years.

Saul: I enjoyed it. I just asked each student what they were trying to do and helped them do it. I treated all paintings the same: spooky realistic pictures and big zigzag-y things—they're all the same to me. It also helps with the conversational ability you need as a modern artist. You need to sound convincing, because if you look at modern art from a certain distance, one thing is pretty much as good as another.



Peter Saul, *Girl Trouble II*, 1987.

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ARTnews: What do you think people are looking for in painting right now?

Juliano-Villani: I think it bounces back and forth. It feels like everyone is down for whatever, and then all these other things get involved and that changes. Figurative painting came back in at some point—Dana Schutz and all that. There was a context, but then came a lot of shitty figuration. I don't know—I would be painting the same way no matter what.

Saul: I think it's best to not pay any attention to art appreciation.

Juliano-Villani: I would be so pissed off if I were you [because of decades of insufficient attention].

Saul: I am not pissed off at all. I'm relaxed, always, because I don't pay attention to other people's opinions. This is a sign of a lack of ambition maybe, but I feel very lucky to get through life doing only what I want to do. It is a blessing. I started at age 16, and here I am. I haven't had to compromise. The last "job" I had was selling the *Herald Tribune* on the streets of Paris in 1959.

ARTnews: Jamian, about your process of envisioning and then making a painting, you once said, "I'm trying to deliver a baby. The baby has eight arms and is really fucked up, and I don't know how to deliver a baby." You described searching for a state when a "painting can change from an image-based narrative to something else." What is that *something else* you're looking for?

Juliano-Villani: Once you get to the point where no one can decide anything and even you are unsure of what it is, that is what I like. Not just: here is my stupid dumb narrative idea that is basic as fuck. I like it when it becomes more confusing and hard to explain. The way I work is intuitive. I will make lists and whatnot, and I will try to re-create ideas visually that sometimes won't look good. I wanted to paint a tumbleweed going into a garage—that sounded great as a painting idea, but it didn't look good.

Saul: It has to look good. That's the bottom line.

ARTnews: Do the parameters for that stay the same, or is it a painting-by-painting kind of appraisal? Some of your works are very direct and immediately clear in terms of what they depict, while others you could look at for years and still feel disoriented.

Saul: Sometimes I don't bother with my own rules. I start and see what happens. It is nice to have no rules. It's good to have each picture be its own boss, as much as possible. It is not possible all the time. I just go with it. I have a very 19th-century approach. I have zero assistants. It's just me, sitting there.

Juliano-Villani: You know how many assistants I've had for a day and then fired them because they sucked or couldn't hold their liquor or something else? Whenever I get an assistant, I put them through hell the first day. I make them watch people die online, do poppers, and see if they can wake up the next day at 9 a.m. If they do, they are hired. Also if they can paint hands—that's all I need.



Jamian Juliano-Villani, *Hand's Job*, 2019.
COURTESY JTT, NEW YORK

ARTnews: Why hands?

Juliano-Villani: Because nobody wants to do that shit.

Saul: I don't want anybody around in the studio that I don't know. That 19th-century stuff is what I want: just calm and live light, like Monet and all those people used to have. Just be in a room with a painting.

Juliano-Villani: That's a nightmare. I need a TV on.

Saul: I think the future is likely to contradict me. Realistically, I take a month for a painting. Or even longer. Why not. The hell with it. I am not ambitious. I am sort of negative about getting ahead. I'm working hard on a painting now for Miami that I hope I get done in time. It's going to be really good. I am doing a female *Soft Watch*. There is actually kind of a resemblance between a vagina and a *Soft Watch*.

Juliano-Villani: It kind of depends on the vagina.

Saul: But I did not put it over an erect male member—I did not do that.

Juliano-Villani: Too easy, too easy.

Saul: Also, it is not commercial. I'm not going to torture the gallery with these things. I wanted to do a normal picture that a person could have in their home.

Juliano-Villani: That's what I think about whenever I make something, like: who is going to put this in their house? Who would want to?

Saul: Well, probably nobody—it just goes in expensive storage.

Juliano-Villani: In storage, collecting dust. Do you look at contemporary art?

Saul: I go to these huge shows at the Whitney and MoMA and take note of the good paintings, and then I don't deal with that area of art.

Juliano-Villani: You don't want to know?

Saul: I want to know so that I don't deal with it. If you don't stand out, you're dead. All these people don't seem to know that. I don't understand why. They don't want to stand out—they want to be like everybody else.

Juliano-Villani: They just want to be accepted.

Saul: Are you still projecting images when you paint?

Juliano-Villani: Yeah. I have a puppy and when the puppy eats the projector, I am fucked. I call the projector my boyfriend.

Saul: There's an idea. It leads to a certain intimacy.

Juliano-Villani: It's funny—if somebody wanted me to do a residency, I could never do one in the woods. I need to be hooked up. I need the fucking internet. I want to do a painting of me trying to do a plein air painting in the woods without a projector—that would be my nightmare. Do you use a projector too?

Saul: I don't. I bought a projector, but my wife, Sally, and I had an argument over it. I said I've got to write down what wire goes to what opening, and she said, "No, you're going to memorize it—you have to remember it." I suddenly thought, Hey, I don't want this in my head. So I put it to the side. If anything causes an argument between Sally and me, forget it.

ARTnews: How do you feel about the political prospects for work of the kind you do now? Can art resound at that scale in an oversaturated media age?

Saul: I attempt liberalism, but it doesn't work usually. Art can't do anything for politics, but politics can help art. It can make a great subject. I've used it enough times and I hope it's been interesting. But as far as being convinced by a painting? Anyone who is influenced by a painting is an idiot.



Peter Saul, *Donald Trump in Florida*, 2017.
COURTESY HALL ART FOUNDATION

ARTnews: You once said you feel as if there is a group of people out there waiting to see if you can still offend them.

Saul: I was very lucky to find something people weren't wanting to do. It allowed me to be distinguished. I am always trying to separate myself from a muddle of high-quality people—intelligent, connected, wealthy people who have major galleries. There are so many. Who *are* they? With Trump it's especially difficult. . .

Juliano-Villani: Can I say one thing? I always say whoever paints a Trump painting is an idiot, and then you painted a Trump painting! I hate that painting—I'm sorry. I love all your other stuff, but I hate Trump paintings so much.

ARTnews: We published a story recently in which KAWS talked about how paintings like *Double De Kooning Duck* are very important to him. Are you aware of how much he and other artists of his kind have come to adulate you?

Saul: I've never had any awareness of that. Having ignored negative criticism for 30 or 40 years, what's the point of suddenly latching on to the positive? I just continue my life the way it is.

Juliano-Villani: You're from a different generation, I will tell you that! I'm always looking at all this stupid stuff: who bought what and *blah blah blah*.

Saul: Well, it is probably a good idea. There is a change now because art is accepted as an actual career path.

Juliano-Villani: But nobody actually makes anything good. It's all a circle-jerk. It is not like 1962. It's like 1991—like Kim Gordon. Kim Gordon is *the worst artist in the world*. What do you hate?

Saul: Gosh, I'll have to think about that.

Juliano-Villani: I hate too many people. I hate Francis Bacon, no offense.



Jamian Juliano-Villani, *Three Penny Opera*, 2018.
COURTESY JTT, NEW YORK

ARTnews: Jamian, how do you feel about KAWS? Your 2018 gallery show “Ten Pound Hand” poked provocative fun at male graffiti culture of the kind he reveres.

Juliano-Villani: His collection is amazing. He is not an idiot. I think he knows what he’s doing. Whether we like the work or not, I think he will have a sort of [critical] resurgence later when no one expects it, in like 30 years. When I first met him, I was, like, “Oh my God, you are not a douchebag!” You’d expect somebody like KAWS to be an asshole, but he was so nice.

ARTnews: Peter, how much attention do you pay to the market around your work? There didn’t used to be as strong a market for it as there is now.

Saul: Well, there was a market—actually, everything was OK. I can’t complain. It is much better now, it’s true. I am sort of a little bit wealthy, and that is just fine. Sally said it was perfectly good and we’re on the way. I am simply interested in two things: my art that I’m working on and my marriage that is ongoing.

ARTnews: Do you see anything you like these days?

Saul: If something is worth looking at, I will look, but I don’t have likes and dislikes at all.

Juliano-Villani: Yes, you do. You just don’t want to say.

Saul: I am focused on my own work. At 85, let me be focused on my own work. I look at Monets. I go to the Musée d’Orsay and I look at that wonderful Monet with a bird on a fence post in a snowy scene. I look at that with pleasure. I like Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) and Rosa Bonheur’s *The Horse Fair* (1852–55), a big painting of a horse market with muscular guys leading horses around. It was better in the old days because subtle oil glazes were better when you were looking down, but now the paintings are out to impress you, hung up high to let you know they are important artifacts.

Juliano-Villani: You know who the best is? Grant Wood.

Saul: Oh, god, I didn't like his show. *There's* something I didn't like. I thought it was lousy.

Juliano-Villani: He had some good paintings. One of the best paintings of all time is *Death on the Ridge Road* (1935). It's crazy. He was doing all these parodies, like Leslie Nielsen-level. I think he bangs. And I love Impressionism all of a sudden. I can't tell if it's good or bad. Someone needs to bring it back because it is so far from anything important or cool.

ARTnews: Peter, your survey show at the New Museum this coming spring will be fairly extensive—60 paintings. How active have you been in organizing it?

Saul: I have a couple of money people arguing for me—if it wasn't for them, it probably would've been condensed into three paintings on the top floor. Fortunately, it hasn't been. But I don't pay any attention. I'll let it happen, and what happens is beneficial. It'll be called "Crime and Punishment."

Juliano-Villani: What about "Gay Bed Bugs"? That would be a good title.

Saul: Too sophisticated. We don't want to put that to the average museumgoer.



Peter Saul, *Ethel Rosenberg in Electric Chair*, 1987.
COLLECTION ZOE ALLEGRA DIAZ

ARTnews: Have you had conversations with the curators about what to display and what to hold back?

Saul: I've had other museum shows in Europe in recent years and my opinion now is that it's best to just leave the curators alone. They are going to do what they are going to do, and you shouldn't mess them up. They know what they can do and what they want to do. They will find reasons for all that, and you can forget it if you're trying to influence them. I'm just going to let it be and see what happens.

ARTnews: Is there anything from the past that you'd rather not remember?

Saul: I've made mistakes in the past—there's no question. One is taking Abstract Expressionism seriously long after I should have, and the other thing is being misled by living in California [in the '60s]. There was so much psychological honesty going on, which was a nightmare. I decided to make fun of it. A friend of mine at the time and I were driving across the Golden Gate Bridge and he said, "Why don't you let anything happen? Just let anybody fuck anybody and with everybody fucking everybody, just let it all happen."

ARTnews: What was your response?

Saul: I made a series of 30 works on cardboard of this sort of thing happening, with Robert Kennedy and the Queen of England and also myself and some other artists all doing it—without anatomical knowledge. I realized after that it was a mistake. The art world wasn't ready for that, and they were not ready for Angela Davis as a subject of psychology. They were not ready for any of that stuff. Now those works are part of the art world and, when I was in Germany for a museum show, a young woman said how much she liked them. I was amazed.

Juliano-Villani: You have no ego.

Saul: I am very relaxed because I am enjoying my life. I've enjoyed it all. I am still pretending that I'm 14 years old. I don't like to depend on intellectuals, because they can let you down.

A version of this article appeared in the Winter 2020 issue of ARTnews, under the title "Peter Saul & Jamian Juliano-Villani."