

Re-Make / Re-Model:
The Car Paintings of Peter Cain
by Bob Nickas >

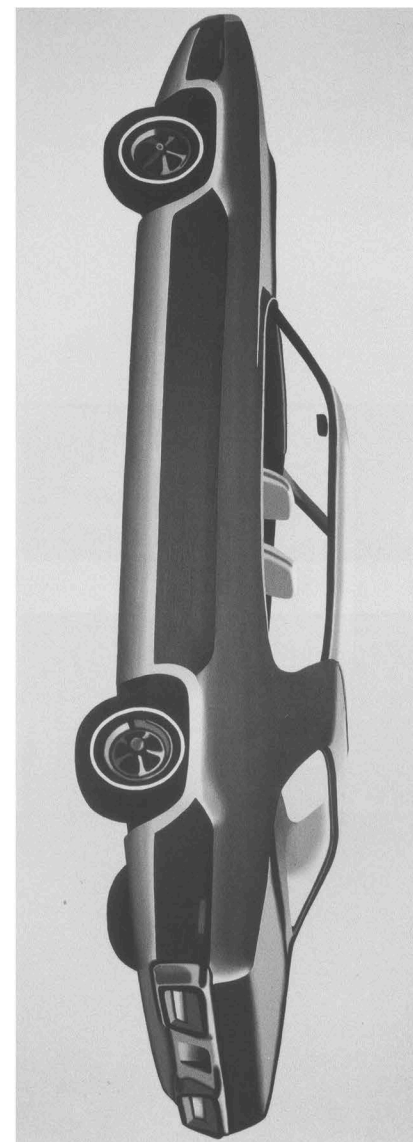
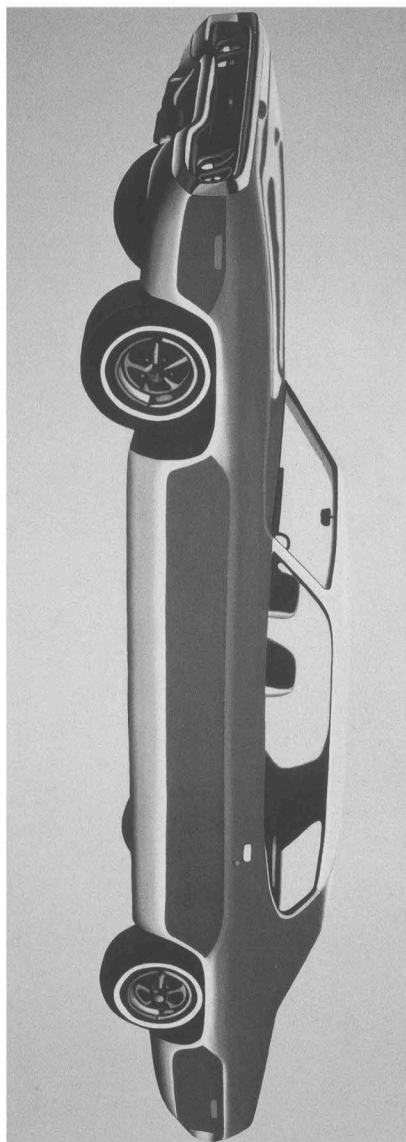
In the Roxy Music song “Re-Make/Re-Model,” Bryan Ferry declares, “Next time is the best time we all know,” and then turns to wonder, “But if there is no next time where to go?” At the time of Peter Cain’s death in 1997, he had produced only sixty-one paintings in little more than ten years, and fifty-four of them are of cars. Of the remaining pictures, the very last he was to paint, three are large-scale portraits and four depict gas stations and convenience stores, which are of course the places you always end up on the road. These pictures have come to represent more than what was painted because they are the last; they make us pause to wonder where the artist would have gone from here. This is and will always be the question we ask with every artist whose life is cut terribly short, and in the case of Peter Cain, an extended period of work—his fifty-four car paintings—comes to be seen as a life’s work.

Speculation on what might have followed leads nowhere, really. To look back on these paintings now, however, affords not only an opportunity to move from one to another and be struck by how they retain every inch of their strangeness and still feel new, but also to see what this body of work represents in its entirety: an engagement with the act of painting so focused as to have surely continued throughout the artist’s career, regardless of where his eye might have turned in the world.

PRELUDE

Peter Cain’s first car painting, made in 1987, is also the only one in which a person appears. In the source photo, taken from a glossy magazine ad, most likely from the mid-’60s, a man wearing sunglasses guides a white convertible towards us on a road rising above a sandy beach; the ocean shimmers beneath a perfect blue sky. So much more than a car is being sold here, as we well know, and the entire image acts as a mirror; being able to put yourself in the driver’s seat is the key to owning this whole glorious view. The late ’60s models that Cain went on to paint, like the Satellite and the Barracuda, are considered the classic “muscle cars” of the day, and representing them, for both the advertiser and the artist, was first and foremost an act of seduction. The various source materials upon which the artist drew for his earliest work often show young couples leaning against gorgeous car bodies as well as their own, with copy that refers to “a totally new skin” and “the driving force behind the beauty.” In the paintings that follow, Cain’s instinct was immediate: he eliminates every human presence and nearly any trace of location, and from here on contains each car’s interior. The car becomes the solitary object in an unfamiliar space, and not one into which we can easily project ourselves. There is only the body of the car held in a state of suspended animation, and yet there is no ebb of sexual energy or desire. On the contrary, by creating a less mediated, unnatural space around each car, Cain opens up a potentially greater intensity for the viewer.

Among the cars he painted in 1988 there is a pair that has been elongated and given vertical orientation (2, 3). Cain’s initial denial of gravity was to be the first of many turns, and cars would eventually hang from one side of a picture or another, completely on end, and even upside down. These two vertical paintings have a uniform, neutral background, the better in which to float. The brown car has





1



4

been stretched to the point where driving seems almost impossible. The front seat may be too far back for the driver, but no matter: look closely, the steering wheel is completely absent. These are clearly vehicles for something other than physical transportation. With nothing to distract one's view, the eye moves upward along pure form and color. These cars occupy a space somewhere between monochrome painting and pop, their totemic presence suggesting artifacts on display in a museum of natural history: objects unearthed for study and contemplation.

With sleek, sexy, and fluid forms inviting you to slip inside them, offering the promise of escape, car design from the mid-'60s and early '70s can now be seen in stark contrast to the boxy, alienated sculpture of that era. To a teenager growing up at the time in America, as Peter Cain was, car culture and all its masculine trappings played a large part in the psychic and physical contours of the landscape. Even the forms of highway design, with spiraling ramps, ascending rows of pillars, and roads that soar like runways into thin air—which Catherine Opie captured in a spectacular series of photographs in and around L.A. in the mid-'90s—can be seen to represent some of the most beautiful vernacular sculpture of its time.

PATHFINDER

Another pair of cars painted by Peter Cain, one from 1988 that is purple and one from '89 that is blue, appear naturalistically within the picture plane, but deceptively so (1, 4). There is an erotic charge and a mystery that is achieved almost entirely through his infusion of color. The purple car appears to be set upon a dense carpet of darker purple, as if the color had seeped down from the auto body to spread through the space below; the blue car is immersed in a pool of even deeper blue. In both the flood of color is offset by a pristine white background. These muscle cars, alternately aimed provocatively out from and in to the picture, seduce the viewer from each end, coming on directly and playing hard-to-get. The interior space of these cars is almost impenetrable at first glance, the glass of the windows, the windshield, and the rear window is suffused with color and heightens an already cool but phantom remove. That mood suggests one way of thinking about the artist's application of paint, not only in these pictures, but in all his work. Just as new cars are evenly sprayed for a seamless finish, the surfaces of Cain's paintings reveal a handling that is always carefully measured and assured, with subtle coloristic shifts and invention appearing in the details one finds on closer inspection, and in the blurred color bands that appear in the background of later pictures, such as *EP110* from 1992 (10). And yet for all their formidable graphic and compositional strength, Cain's paintings, like people, often open up slowly, revealing more of themselves in their own time, even after that first immediate hit. The space behind some of these later cars may seem to streak by, but the flatness and stillness in which he envelops each car holds it in place so that we can examine and experience the object itself.



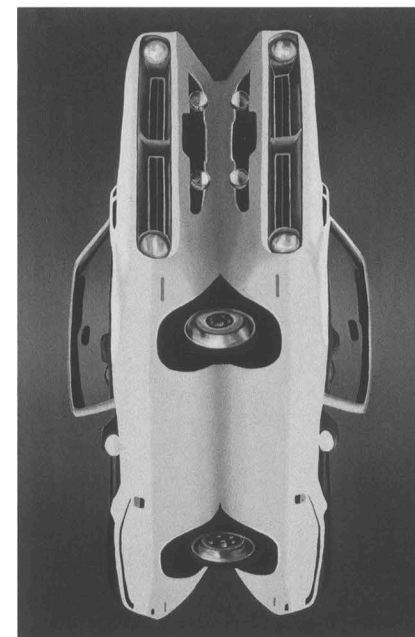
A series of paintings dated 1988–89, based on pictures in *Collectible Automobile*, where rare and vintage cars are advertised for sale, have a darkly ominous presence, no doubt due to the sepia tones the artist carried over and intensified from the original reproductions. Cain's browner-black shades, which serve as well to mask an

unfathomable inner space, give these cars an uneasiness that can only be described as haunted. Around this time he also produced a large painting with two cars that mirror each other from opposite sides, both nose-diving into the bottom edge of the picture, separated by a wide expanse of deeply saturated brown. The painting is a spooky monochrome in which the cars are signs of disaster. Although the painting is untitled, as so many of Cain's early works are, it calls to mind a list of titles the artist kept in a small notebook. On the first page you encounter "Cracked" and "Smashed," crossed out and ultimately unused, but on the very next page is "Saturday Disaster." That title, which Cain eventually adopted for a painting of his own, comes from a 1964 Warhol, one of his particularly gruesome car-crash scenes. Another painting of Cain's from 1988, of an old black Cadillac rendered in shadowy, almost melted grisaille, is intensely spectral and could easily be parked on the periphery of Warhol's *Gangster Funeral* of 1963.

In this period, as well as in a later series of small black-and-white paintings from 1992–94, such as *Mustang* (12), the strongest affinities Cain's cars have are not to be found in painting, but in the photographs of William Gedney. The nocturnal scenes he shot as he traveled around the country present us with a world emptied of people, with cars as the only visible signs of life. In both artists' work there is a dreamlike quiet and sense of foreboding. This darker shade of pop ends for Cain just as the '80s come to a close, and he begins to develop, mutate, and transform his work at an increasingly rapid pace between 1989 and 1990. It's curious to take note of another painting from the same year as that somber black Cadillac, a muscle car titled *Cuda*, which can be seen to mark a pivotal point, a sign of what lay ahead (*). That these two wholly different paintings were made so close together suggests Cain's instinct for exploring divergent but tandem paths, and then returning to the one that promised to yield even more dislocation and the thrill of getting lost, without ever really knowing what might be found there.

VANISHING POINT

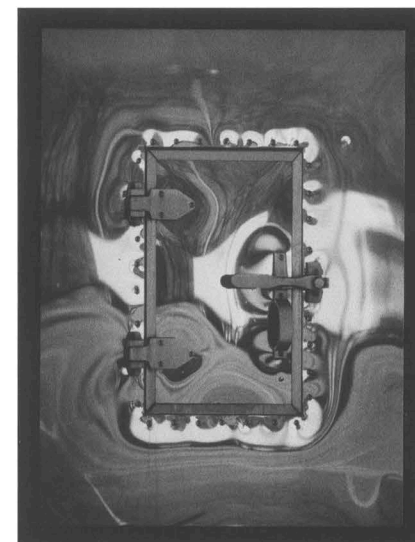
Cuda merges two yellow Barracudas, side-by-side, the body of one pressed against the other in the form of a Rorschach. The cars, like Siamese twins, appear to have morphed out of each other yet remain connected, with two wheels in the middle pulled like taffy into inverted hearts with oval centers. They are incredibly suggestive biomorphic forms that invest the image with an undeniable erotic pulse. This work prefigures the cars the artist would paint in the '90s, vehicles that, with all their radically re-modeled deformations, were somehow rendered unfamiliar and recognizable at the same time. *Cuda* is linked as well to ideas surrounding surrealist representation, where the mutability of figurative elements leads ultimately to an inhabited abstraction. In this respect the painting has much in common with the artist's subsequent photographic experiments, in particular *Untitled*, 1995, in which a highly reflective surface becomes the site of a swirling, fantastical abstraction (14). This surface is in actuality the side of a tractor-trailer, identified by the door and hardware of a small compartment around which reflections turn and dissolve. Another truck is eventually visible; its blanched and skeletal reflection wavers and bends about the handle, hinges, and frame. Where the interior space of cars in Cain's paintings can be thought of as cloaked, contained by the body of the



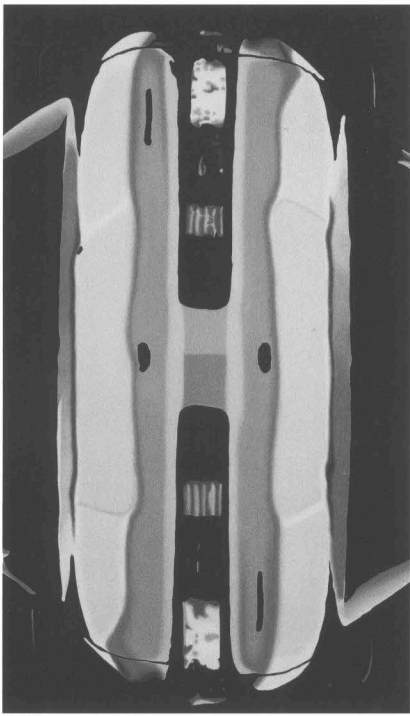
* *CUDA*, 1988, OIL ON LINEN, 40 x 26 INCHES / 101 x 66 CM



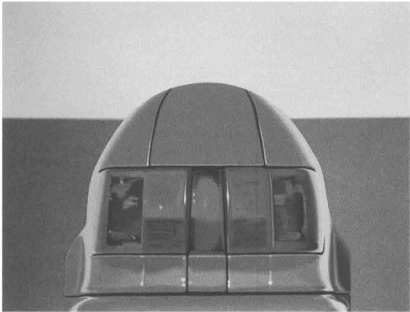
12



14



5



15

car, here he bounces us off the surface of the truck and makes us wonder—as perhaps he had himself—what, if anything, is inside that compartment, and invests the image with a sense of deep libidinal mystery.

This bending of reflected light and color can also be found in many of Cain's paintings and is related to the phenomenon in which extreme heat tricks the eye of a driver into believing that the road has liquefied and undulates hazily in the distance. His attraction to this effect is most apparent in his treatment of taillights. The taillights in *Untitled*, 1989, are almost molten, glowing orange-yellow-gold embers inside a dense black frame (5). In *Glider*, 1995, a car has been reduced to a frieze of five pink-and-red taillights held in place between a cadmium orange dome and bumper (15). The Audi 90S has been transformed into a hybrid of helmet/candy/lipstick (imagine them as spliced together in a Rosenquist), while the lights seemingly incandesce. Cain heats up color to a heightened pitch in *Glider*, and as he so often does, offsets it with a lightness of touch, with a pale green background that meets the horizon of a pink-gray sky. The line "It's not just a car, it's your freedom" may have been invented by ad execs for the sole purpose of selling cars, the car, the ultimate object of desire, but it applies to Peter Cain's identification with his subject and to the liberties he took with its representation. From there he could do whatever he wanted, go anywhere he wished, and did.

SATELLITE

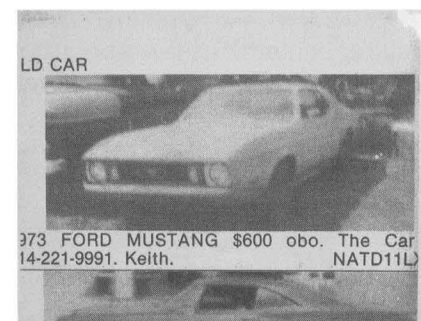
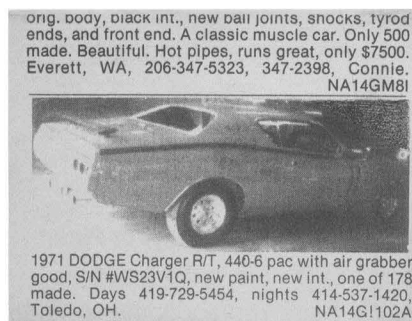
All of the cars Peter Cain painted are based on photographs, as is true of the photorealists of the '70s who painted cars, of whose work he was surely aware. Ralph Goings and Robert Bechtle painted suburban station wagons, jeeps, and pick-up trucks, while John Salt was attracted to abandoned heaps and an air of desuetude. Each of them located their vehicles in the landscape, in front of a highway diner, in parking lots, or left to rust in the woods. In this respect they rely on the kind of locations we associate with the photo-based work that conceptual artists such as Dan Graham and Ed Ruscha were making at the time. The photorealists rely on a grounding in reality the source photograph provides, and are faithful to its rendering. Cain's backgrounds are a form of pure atmosphere, an unreality created almost always out of fields and bands of color. Where shadows are painted, they appear as essentially dark, abstract forms, particularly when "beneath" a car that hangs upside down. The contention has been made that the photorealists were less interested in the object itself than in its photographic representation, that they painted in a "styleless style" likened to "sex without the weight of love."¹ Peter Cain's painterly engagement with a subject to which he was repeatedly drawn allows his cars to transcend their previous lives in photographic reproduction. While the photorealists wanted as little distortion as possible, Cain positively delights in bending every line and curve to his own ends. Moreover, as opposed to the impersonal, detached attitude the photorealists may have had towards the objects they painted, Cain's involvement with his subject is more

1. H. D. Raymond, "Beyond Freedom, Dignity, and Ridicule," in *Super Realism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1975), p. 129. The earliest reception of this work on the part of realist painters was in fact hostile, shouted down as "obscene" and "pornographic" by audience members attending a 1971 lecture by Ivan Karp (see Linda Chase, "Existential vs. Humanist Realism," in *Super Realism*, p. 82).

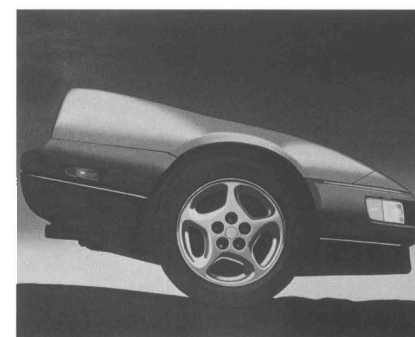
personal, as the source material for the 1992–94 series of black-and-white paintings suggests (◊). All of these images are based on pictures of cars offered for sale, with a grainy, snapshot quality that accounts for the soft-focus style in which he went on to paint them. The original photos are accompanied by the phone number and sometimes first name, usually male, of the seller, giving them vaguely the feel of a personals ad. In considering them you have to wonder if for Cain there might have been someone, whether real or imagined, behind each car he painted.

Working in series, on Honda Preludes, Mazda Miatas, and Porsche Carreras, between 1990 and 1992, Cain subjected cars to endless transformation. They are characterized by an extreme cropping and radical reconfiguration, as if they had been neatly collapsed in on themselves. And in fact they were. Cain's collages from these years demonstrate his eagerness to develop new forms, often through the simple folding of a magazine ad to eliminate the entire midsection of a car. Front and back ends are fused, at times balancing a car on only a single wheel or, though no less disturbing, on two. The process is almost the exact inverse of how a stretch limousine is created, where an addition to the middle section increases the overall body length, as explored by Cain in the pair of vertically oriented cars from 1988. In the following year he would paint Z, the first picture in which the disorienting process of removal is enacted, which he elaborates from this point onward (6). In almost all of his previous work, people either do not appear in the cars or the interior is to various degrees impenetrable; with these extremely compressed cars there is no passenger compartment at all. You can imagine them as having been involved in accidents that left them oddly and even elegantly compacted, but with no outward signs of violence. An even more disturbing effect. It's worth noting that in contrast to the models Cain painted that we might still encounter ten years on, whether in mint condition or in a junkyard, the vehicles in these paintings seem only imperceptibly aged, a direct result of the artist's abstraction of form and its realization with paint alone. Time appears barely to have touched them.

Looking again at Peter Cain's paintings, not only in relation to the work of artists who precede him but to artists working now, suggests that the mutations to which these cars have been subjected make them highly open to any number of connections. In the 1993 Whitney Biennial, for example, his paintings shared a room with Charles Ray's sculpture *Family Romance*, which presents us with a mother and father linked by hands to their son and daughter, all naked, the children enlarged to the same height as their parents, but with awkward proportions intact. The pairing was so perversely perfect that the family might have arrived in one of Cain's cars. But what if that same installation was completed by a superrealist figure of Duane Hanson's? Or by one of Alex Brown's recent paintings, which situate one image on top of or inside another to fantastic perceptual effect? Or by machine paintings of Picabia's? Or perhaps encircled by sections of Cady Noland's chain-link fencing and her stripped-down pole pieces, with their dread sense of mobility cut short: an abstract amputation not so unlike the one enacted upon those Porsches and Hondas? Given their fluid mutability, Peter Cain's car paintings offer any number of possibilities for mutual exchange,



◊ BLACK AND WHITE XEROX ON PAPER, EACH 8 1/2 x 11 INCHES / 21.5 x 28 CM

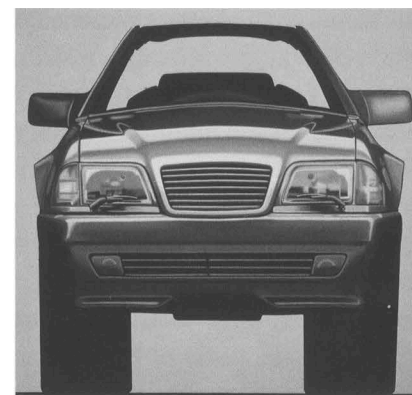


where the spaces opened up between one work and another may tell us something new about both, even with works from entirely different periods. Possibilities will surely multiply with art that's not yet been made.

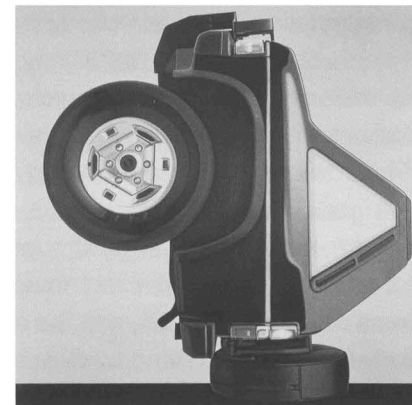
PAINTING THE FUTURE

The curious thing about spending time with the car paintings of Peter Cain is what happens when you step outside the gallery-bubble, back into the street and the light of day. It's there you encounter cars moving through or at rest in time and space, people getting in and out of their second skins, cruising around each other, and sometimes—in an entirely unchoreographed moment—making sudden contact. With the memory of the painted cars still vivid, you're likely to notice just how odd these "real" cars appear. And aren't they constructions too? Risen from drawing boards in other places with an entirely other purpose in mind? Confronted with these real cars, you're reminded that artists, whether they harbor figurative or abstract tendencies, or slip between the two, have always in some sense aimed to show us how the world looks and, increasingly, how it feels. Although not a particularly recent development, the speed of life runs counter to how a person, in a room by himself, slowly and in a private world of his own making, creates something like a painting. Of photography it's been said that people take pictures of each other to prove they really exist, but can't we say the same of paintings, and even if no one is in them? With the series of portraits he made towards the end of his life, although he didn't know it was, Peter Cain did put someone in his paintings, and the things he loved, cars, were replaced by someone he loved.

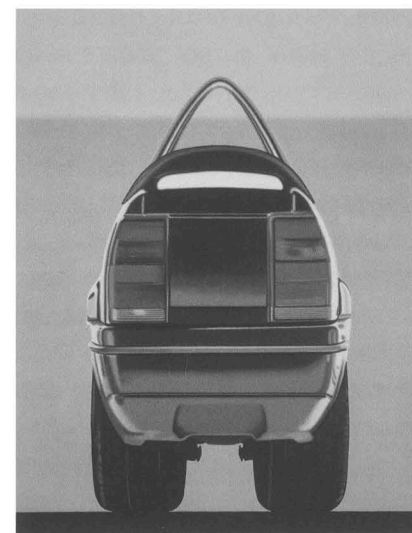
As you continue along the street your recollection of the painted cars comes up against their real-life counterparts over and again: those cars Peter Cain painted in the early '90s—from the most alien of vehicles, *Omega*, to the most bombastic, *500SL #1* or *Pathfinder*—have arrived (13, 9, 11). Today there are podlike "smart cars" and convoys of tank-sized SUVs; plans for things that will be able to climb in near vertical ascent must be on someone's drafting table as we speak. More and more, the cars that emerged from Peter Cain's brush seem to be turning up in TV commercials one day and pulling up alongside you on the highway the very next. And crowding you out. While predicting the future has always been a dodgy proposition, painting the future might be possible after all, and as time goes by we can identify a handful of artists whose work somehow retains an uncanny sense of presence. Peter Cain was ahead of his time, and his work continues to come true.



9



11



13