

Are These the Most Underrated Paintings of the '90s?

## CARPE DIEM

BY JERRY SALTZ

### PETER CAIN

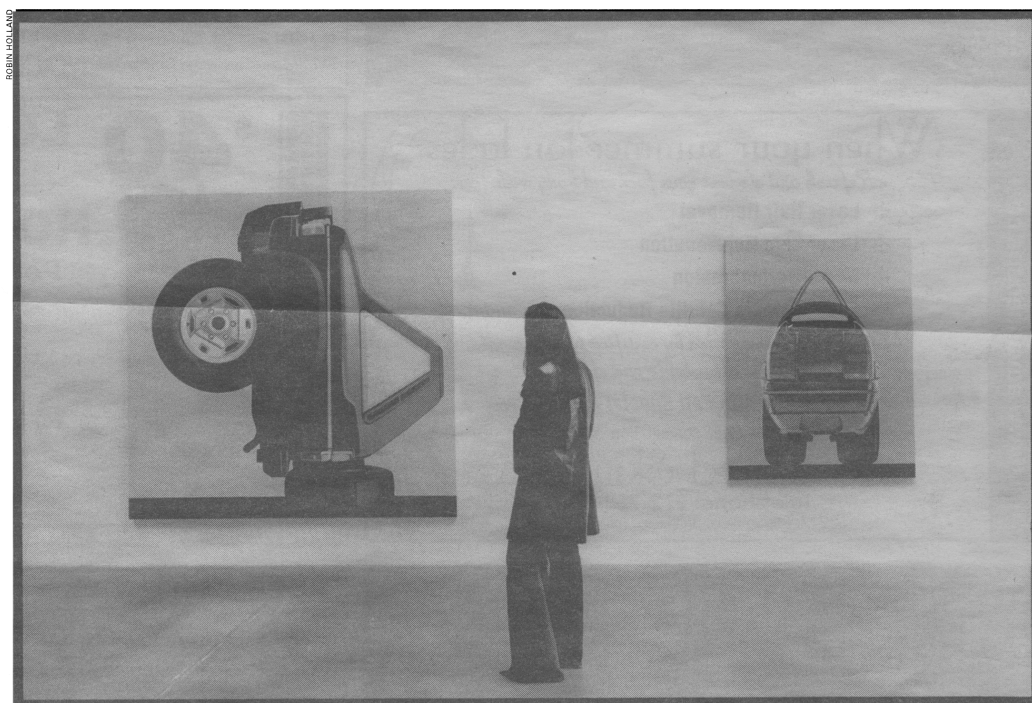
Matthew Marks Gallery  
522 West 22nd Street  
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Peter Cain's late paintings of his lover Sean on the beach, and several of his mutant car images—all made in the five years before he died in 1997, at the age of 37, of a cerebral hemorrhage—are among the sexiest, strangest, and most underrated paintings of the 1990s. Cain's great accomplishment is that although all of his paintings derive from photographs, none of them picture the world as if seen through a lens. Cain wasn't interested in the Gerhard Richter, Walter Benjamin, mediated-image side of things. Photographs weren't distancing devices to him or ways to comment on painting's relationship to photography. He used them in a Dr. Frankenstein manner—the way people show magazines to hairdressers and say, "Make me look like this."

Cain's work is a combination of photo-realism, Pop, commercial art, surrealism, and pornography—James Rosenquist and John Chamberlain by way of Magritte, Mel Ramos, and Robert Bechtle. He emerged at the end of the 1980s as the art market was collapsing, the art world was mired in a consumerist discourse, and painting, in John Currin's memorable words, "had become a laughingstock." Out of this morass came a promising crop of young Americans. In spite of a cultish following, back-to-back Whitney Biennial appearances in 1993 and 1995, and five solo shows in Los Angeles and New York in five years, Cain was an odd man out. Perhaps because everything is on the side of the living, by now he's almost forgotten. Today, when he's mentioned, it's disconcertingly as the "car guy."

This invaluable—and for those of us who admire him, moving—exhibition of 14 of his car paintings shows Cain was much more than that. Wedged into half of this good-looking space, however, the paintings are cramped and don't get to make their case as surely as they might have. It also would have been helpful to see some of his finely rendered graphite drawings, notational sketches, and wily photographic collages. Still, this show is not to be missed by anyone interested in understanding how painting got from the cul-de-sac it found itself in at the end of the '80s to where it is today. Cain is an American pivot point in that story.

"More Courage and Less Oil," as this exhibition has been wonderfully titled (after a note the artist scrawled and pinned to his studio wall; literally "Be brave and try to make the paint more viscous"), shows Cain to be a natural who tried hard and was trying harder. His color is Pop-y and uncomplicated. He liked cherry red, but was better with orange, black, and gray, and was in the process of nailing mint green and ocher. There's a tremulous depth to Cain's space: A car might look like it's underwater or in the ozone. His surfaces are thin-ish and smooth (but were getting thicker), and can be slick. His paint was always changing density. His edges started inconsistent, as if he reworked things a lot, or was a closet perfectionist. By the end, they were sleek and



ON THE ROAD WITH THE ODD MAN OUT: CAIN'S *PATHFINDER* (LEFT, 1992-93) AND *OMEGA* (1994) AT MATTHEW MARKS

sexy, as was his touch, which also lacked tenacity and was occasionally blurry, like Milton Avery's. Cain's initial, semi-photo-realist work was dull. The four 1988-89 images here, two elongated cars on white backgrounds and two blurry coupes, are unpromising. However, Carroll Dunham, who wrote one of the two excellent catalog essays (the other is by Bob Nickas), refers to them as "formalist paintings with Ed Ruscha punch lines," which opens them up. But they're still too industrial-design and "boy" for me. Then Cain started doing something he did for the rest of his brief life: He took his work to a much more optical, complex, and thrilling place—a place I am still trying to explain to myself.

Donald Judd said, "The big problem is to maintain the sense of the whole thing." Cain did that with a twist. His morphing skills are amazing. You can linger over details, imagine this piece of chassis is a phallus or that wheel is an anus. But no part ever separates from the whole. And the wholes are uncanny, iconic, totally familiar, deeply abstract, and often startling. Cain's cars aren't cars or critiques of them. Shapes may look like helmets, vacuum cleaners, or s/m devices, but like Mark Rothko's fuzzy, floating Buddhist televisions, Cain's shapes are things unto themselves.

If it's possible to divide such an abbreviated career into phases, Cain's had three (excluding the fabulous finale of the late paintings of Sean). The early cars account for the first, least interesting phase. Next comes a breakthrough, more in the ways he complicated his space, image, and technique than in the paintings them-

selves. These paintings, which date roughly from 1990 to '92, include the upside-down, sideways, or right-side-up surrealistic fenders with headlights mounted on wheels (e.g., *Prelude #2*, *Carrera #4*, and *Miata #9*). The largest painting here, *EP 110* (1992), represents a transition from the second to the third phase. In this work Cain, who had a great sense of how to fit things within a painting, introduces the element of movement via a

multicolored background, with mixed results. However, the scale and space are monumental, and the way the car is painted is richer, more solid and subtle. This canvas paves the way for his next phase and my three favorite paintings in the show: *Pathfinder*, *Omega*, and *Glider*, each better than the last. If any of these paintings were left on view at a museum, I believe it would be esteemed as a masterpiece of its period. Maybe more. ▮