

## Peter Cain

“I THINK that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals,” a breathless young Roland Barthes wrote in 1957. By that he meant “the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.” The quotation, minus the key bit about mass consumption, could just as well have been written about the paintings of cars by Peter Cain.

Nearly unknown today, Cain passed away, a budding treasure whose unfulfilled promise sadly overshadowed his significant gifts. Dead at the age of 37 from a brain hemorrhage, Cain had just managed to do what many thought was impossible: paint himself out of the tough thematic impasse he had set himself by picturing automobiles.

For his posthumous exhibition in March 1997, which he had been working toward until his death in January, Cain broke with the “car guy” mold and exhibited three large, awkwardly cropped paintings of his lover, Sean, lying on the beach with prize desuetude. Universally praised for their skill as well as their ambition, the paintings drew comparisons to the two irreconcilable elder statesmen of painterly figuration: Alex Katz and Gerhard Richter. Another four paintings of gas stations included in the show suggested Hopperish landscapes reconceived through the formalist concerns of Mark Rothko and Kenneth Noland. The sixth and last full-fledged show of Cain’s work, it left people wanting much, much more.

More, of course, is impossible to ask of Cain’s memory, his estate or his faithful dealer, Matthew Marks, who has long carried a torch for Cain’s place among the painterly notables of his and subsequent generations. An argument has steadily been made to connect his work with that of other better-remembered, albeit living, painters of the 1990s: John Currin, Peter Doig, Elizabeth Peyton, Richard Phillips and Lisa Yuskavage. The shoe, on first and second examination, appears to fit. But perhaps it has never done so as well as during the current mini-retrospective of Cain’s work at Matthew Marks’ 22nd St. gallery.

If it’s impossible to expand on Cain’s lifetime of production (only some 60 paintings), it is at least possible during the next few weeks to revisit his brief if brilliant career by actually studying the paintings in person. The current exhibition, enigmatically titled “More Courage and Less Oil” after a note found tacked to his studio wall, packs together 14 canvases made between the years 1988 and 1995. Their effect, individually and jointly, is one of bizarre contemporaneity. All other things not being equal, Cain’s paintings have never looked so “Now” as they do at this very moment.

In the words of Cain pal and fellow painter Carrol Dunham: “[I]n a relatively brief period, on a steep learning curve, Peter took an idea of questionable promise and drove it hard.” Anticipating not only the current resurgence of fine art painting but the real-life design of 21st-century smart cars and tank-like SUVs, Cain picked up and adopted a few creative leads that the art world had cruelly orphaned. Like other important artists, his influences appeared at once to be many and few. Shuttling unesi-

ly between pop, the meticulous renderings of photo-based realism, the sexy vapidness of finish fetish and the enigmatic appeal of Ed Ruscha’s photographic work, Cain established a practice that ran counter to most developments in art in the early 90s.

During a period in which art turned inward on itself and its myriad, warring identities, young Cain moved ever closer toward a sleek, male-dominated strain of vernacular culture. Whether through third-eye vision or out of perverse instinct, Cain was able to gain the attention of several notables, including Whitney curator Elizabeth Sussman. She became an instant convert and included his work in two Biennials, celebrated in 1993 and 1995. In one, his paintings of crab-like, cyclopic buggies shared a room with Ray Charles’ distortedly realist sculpture *Family Romance*. It was, without a doubt, the weirdest, most explosive pairing in an otherwise lousy, predictable exhibition.

Cain’s paintings of cars, of course, were always a carefully calibrated excuse to pick up a brush and paint something disturbing and lovely. Distorting the popular “muscle car” look until it became unrecognizable, he began by painting entire trademark autos, like the Charger and the Impala, in fields of purple and blue as if they were monochrome abstractions. He followed this first foray into car culture by upending a pair of wagons vertically in a shallow white space and stretching out their middle sections so that they appeared, in effect, totally undrivable. The distortions continued. Cain remodeled and mutated the familiar lines and swoops of classic car design, turning twin images of a Barracuda into an intensely cool Rorschach test, a Pathfinder into a folded up R2-D2 bot straight out of *Star Wars: Episode II*.

Accessible and erotic, obscure but undeniably totemic, Cain’s car paintings oozed advertising popularity while being, on closer inspection, subtle works that took their fluid forms and product colors as seriously as any minimalist sculptor might covet the purity of his materials. Precise in their facture and biomorphically suggestive, they reconfigured popular American culture’s vaunted normality while retooling the endgame of late 20th-century painting. His works were capable of speaking to various contradictory constituencies. All one had to do was listen.

Cain’s car paintings engage the culture’s fetishized nostalgia for the 50s and 60s worldview, though not nearly as well as they provide images to match the lingering insecurities of our brand-new century. These monstrosities, polished motorized pucks and time bombs in lipstick colors, are Cain’s obsequies to a time that harbors Humvee sports utility vehicles and unmanned missile drones. Drawn directly from the pleasant myths of pure design, they are, in Barthes’ words, some of the supreme artistic creations of our era, purely magical objects drawn from the most mundane, ubiquitous sources that make an unstoppable case for us to recognize them as our own.

“Peter Cain: *More Courage and Less Oil*,” through Nov. 23 at Mathew Marks Gallery, 522 W. 22nd St. (betw. 10th & 11th Aves.), 243-0200.



PETER CAIN, *PATHFINDER*, 1992-1993

Accessible and erotic, obscure yet totemic.