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A New Surge of Growth, Just as Death Cut It Off

By ROBERTA SMITH

When Peter Cain died of a cerebral hemorrhage last month, he was 37 and in the middle of a great leap forward in his chosen field, which was painting. He gained visibility in the late 1980's as a "car painter," a maker of cool yet oddly visceral, if not sexual, images of disturbingly truncated Mercedeses and other cars.

Depicted floating above the horizon, minus their passenger compartments and all but one wheel, these hovering bull's-eye forms were caught simultaneously in suspension and rapid motion. They were embryonic, which is to say vulnerable and also sinister, and beautifully painted.

Stylistic hybrids, they related at once to Photo Realism and to abstract art, including the encyclopedic reliefs and refined drawings of Lee Bontecou. And they were among the early warning signs of a generation of younger realist painters that includes Elizabeth Peyton, John Currin, Richard Phillips, Karen Kilimnik, Lisa Yuskavage and Peter Doig.

The paintings Mr. Cain completed in the year before his death were intended for his fourth solo show in New York, which has now opened on schedule, at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea. It is a beautiful, unavoidably sad affair, as well as an inspirational testament to art-making as a growth process. These new, last Cain works show the artist shedding the "car painter" label, expanding his subject matter and the content of his art while also applying the weirdness of the car images to larger chunks of the world.

Three of the paintings are large-scale images of the head and shoulders of a man named Sean, shown in close-up profile as he lies on a white towel on the beach. He is seen intimately, from the viewpoint of someone on the adjacent towel. Either his neck arches back or his head cranes forward in an animated tension that suggests laughter, pain or perhaps orgasm.

The remaining four paintings are urban landscapes, images of generic American gas stations whose pavements are devoid of cars and whose various signs have been rendered blank, devoid of lettering, numbers or logos.



Matthew Marks Gallery

"Sean No. 1," an oil on linen by Peter Cain, at Matthew Marks.

Both series fine-tune the hallucinatory power of the car paintings so that they are more about painting than objects, and each does this by a slightly different balance of abstraction and realism. The giant heads are cropped by the canvas edges with an abruptness similar to the cars' truncations. Two of the images are also tilted on end or inverted, an approach that recalls Georg Baselitz, while the blurry painting style brings Gerhard Richter a little to mind.

These gravity-defying shifts further break the image down into big abstract areas: the shadowed pink of flesh dotted with brown moles, the gray of sky, the tan of beach. Details assume a life of their own: the tumbleweed stiffness of Sean's goatee growing vertically out of his jutting chin, the cablelike strands of hair and, in two paintings, the rather strikingly voluptuous treatment of distant trees, small swirling patches of green that can recall Munch.

These little patches of far-off, far-out green make one think about the

kind of painting Mr. Cain might have moved on to had he lived longer. Some of their contained exuberance is also present in the gas station images. In these classically American scenes, descended from Ed Ruscha, the blank little signs function as bright monochrome paintings within paintings.

In "Mobil," a solid red circle, provisionally part of a gas pump, occupies the exact center of the canvas, like the heart of a Kenneth Noland target. At the same time, the reflections in various plate glass windows here and in "Glendale Boulevard" are occasions for the carefully contained gesturalism of the trees.

Mr. Cain was clearly interested in slowing and breaking down the act of painting, and therefore of looking, creating a kind of visual silence in which the viewer would be forced to consider the nature of perception, both inside and outside art, in addition to the meaning of the image. He did this by making seemingly whole images constituted of incongruous parts. His new paintings fit together a little like puzzles whose parts are a series of autonomous pleasure points in different scales and degrees of focus, their varying textures and colors occupying shifting locations on the sliding scale between abstraction and representation.

Mr. Cain's last paintings represent a tremendous effort to develop, to bear down on, examine and evaluate the elements of his art with the kind of disinterested yet passionate intent that can make some artists their own best critics. In the last year or so he had dismantled and reconstituted his approach to painting. He was in the process of taking it from there, and he was off to a great start.

Peter Cain's new paintings are at the Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 24th Street, Chelsea, through March 15.