

Hail and Farewell

Peter Cain
 Matthew Marks Gallery
 523 West 24th Street
 Through March 15

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

I am riveted by that foliage, which calls strongly to mind the "blurred" Photorealist landscape paintings of Gerhard Richter. ("Out of focus" and "blurred" go in quotes, because what does it mean to ascribe photographic

prayerful concentrations of a brush directed from the heart. What joy to see it connect with flesh and blood! By his Mercedes fenders and other automotive quiddities, Cain surely always meant what he came to express with the freckles, goatee, and other calling cards of Sean-ness. Except in the painting that is reproduced on the poster, Cain's Sean pictures hadn't yet dispensed with his previous compulsion—which strikes

of pure color. A shocking sparseness results. I think I never realized before how very little there is to commercial strips in the way of physical substance, so peremptory is their glut of language. Take away the verbiage, and an odd and flimsy pop-up world looms.

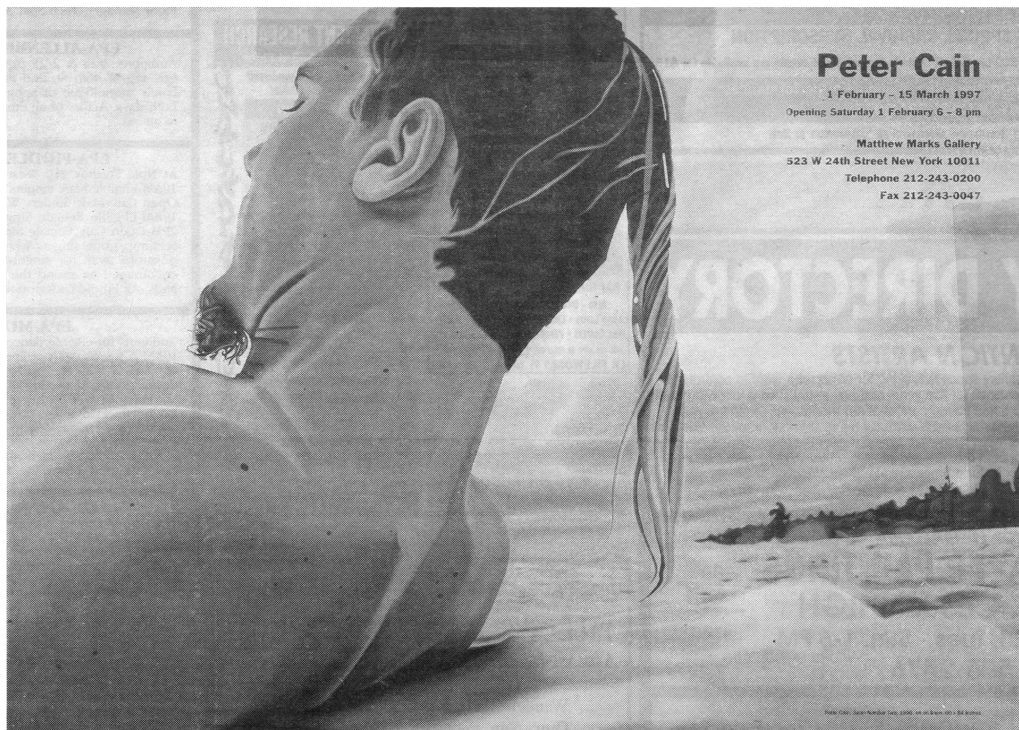
It is a world that in geometry, color, and frontality is practically an idea of painting in itself. All a painter need do is remove depth, and the subject

New York art worldlings ploughing through our daily curse of not-invariably-100 per cent-useless art mail last month unfolded copies of a modestly sized poster and instantly reacted in ways that caused anyone who was in the room with us to stare quizzically. My wife heard me laugh from sheer startlement. Then she saw the poster and was wowed, too. Many exhibition announcements are intended to do this, and maybe two or three a decade do it: go off in one's hands like letter bombs of unique, original beauty. It was—and is and will be, as already a classic—the painter Peter Cain's announcement for his present, posthumous show.

The lovely surprise of this show, by far Cain's best, renders very hard to bear the sadness of his death on January 5 of a cerebral hemorrhage (reportedly out of the blue, the sneak attack of a previously unsuspected congenital condition). He was 37 years old. Not knowing him personally, I had assumed he was younger, because he began exhibiting only a few years ago—with a bang. He appeared in the last two Whitney Biennials and won a nearly cultish following with his surreal paintings of car parts congealed into hybrid car-things against suave abstract grounds.

Like some other people I know, I had trouble with Cain's car pictures while being enchanted by the promise of his painterly gifts and obvious ambition. Now we see the beginning of the promise's fulfillment in the same instant as its end: an exceptional talent nipped in midblossoming, just short of full bloom. Even more than usual in an era almost accustomed to untimely losses, the unfairness of it infuriates. It makes for a singularly upward occasion of celebration and mourning, hail and farewell.

The great poster reproduces a large painting of a young man's head and shoulders in three-quarters, monumentalizing close-up from behind. The young man, Cain's companion Sean Leclair, lies on his back on a blanket at a beach. The brown hair of Sean's raised head dangles in a blond-streaked ponytail. His freckled, orangish-pink skin—an incredible color, virtually tasted and smelled as much as seen—conveys incipient sunburn. There is a tangled, adorable goatee. Under a tremulously pale, hazed sky, a sliver at the horizon of dark green foliage subtly communicates, by being "out of focus," the picture's source in a photograph.



Capturing intimate nuances of contemporary Eros on a public scale: the announcement poster for Peter Cain's show

flaws to a painted image?) Meanwhile, the laconic modeling and crisp contours of the figure have a cutout air sharply reminiscent of Alex Katz. This blending of Richter-esque, epistemological mystery and Katzian, positivist elegance feels impossible, like a circle squared. But there it is. I feel present at the creation of a new high style able intelligently to capture intimate nuances of contemporary Eros on a public scale.

With this and other Sean images, Cain solved at a stroke the problem I had with his distorted cars: eroticism sublimated to a fault in techno-fetishistic icons. (The tone of the cars somewhat recalled Sacher-Masochian notions by Richard Lindner—and does anyone remember another once popular German mooner over sexy mechanisms, Konrad Klapheck?) I believe that Cain loved cars. I sort of do, too. But there was something depressing about the investment of so much sensitive passion in mere machines as love substitutes. I sensed that Cain had more to offer than a peculiar flavor of racy perversity.

He had love to offer, in a word: the

me as a very American syndrome of insecurity—to employ arch formal gimmicks, such as orienting an image sideways or upside down. But plainly he was getting over it.

As further heartening and thus frustrating evidence, there are several streetscapes in the show: rather plain but excitingly suggestive views of gas stations, a convenience store, and some sort of showroom, all from photographs taken in Los Angeles. I get from these modest pictures the inception of a decidedly immodest project to take on the visible world with a fully considered and responsive, smart brand of Realism. Stay with these paintings, which grow stranger and stronger the longer they are contemplated.

What does it mean today to gaze out a car window at a passing suburban commercial strip and to believe that one sees what's there? Cain hints, profoundly, that the looking should be a negative exercise, a disciplined determination first and last *not to read*. Surveying jungles of signage, Cain blanked out the signs, rendering them as shapes

arrays itself on the picture plane with the alacrity of a puppy jumping into a lap. Observe the enthusiastic roughness, the tough love, with which Cain handled the vision: vigorous brushwork, spanning shapes, yelping colors. The L.A. topics point up how New York-ish a painter he was. A Southern Californian would never allow the tonal jumps and bold textures with which Cain made these pictures proclaim the self-conscious, sweaty, rejoicing work of painting.

The current level of art in our town was about to rise markedly, on account of Cain. That much is clear, though little else is. The emerging style of Cain's maturation is too preliminary, which is how it will remain. Not since Moira Dryer's death at age 34 in 1992 has contemporary painting suffered more hurtful a loss. But there is this one thing to be said for pain: only the living feel it. It is a proof of life. To miss something is an act of imagination by which one aspires to be worthy of what is missed. While we live, we may show that Cain's goodness was not wasted on us. ❖