

## NOTES ON A PAINTING

Jerry Saltz

# Wild Thing

## Peter Cain's *Untitled*

Peter Cain makes paintings of cars that are not cars but which convey the essence of “car-ness” (whatever that may be). His paintings operate in an area bordered by Photo-Realism, Minimalism, Pop Art, and Surrealism. With incredible realistic precision Cain presents the car as either a sleek abstract form or a strangely truncated, disturbingly amputated “thing.” In *Untitled*, he turns something that is known and familiar into something weird and unfamiliar—painting a kind of visual oxymoron, he creates something that is perfectly imperfect.

Cain is tantalizingly difficult to classify. Going against the prevailing winds of taste, he is decidedly *un*-Neo-Geo and *non*-Simulationist (though in some ways he does relate to Ashley Bickerton), nor is he a tasteful painter of Neo-Nostalgia. Cain is a strange, unorthodox, and odd young artist. Employing techniques more in keeping with industrial and graphic design than fine art, Cain's paintings have non-surfaces of carefully blended and rendered painted areas that are both obviously handmade and airbrushed or otherwise mechanically applied. Half perfect and focused, half blurred and confusing—Cain's paintings create highly disjunctive, border-to-border, edge-to-edge effects. The centrally pierced, off-kilter, imperfect paintings of James Rosenquist come to mind. Rosenquist painted food, body parts, and household items—but he also painted cars and car parts, though almost always life- or larger-than-life-sized. The connection between the work of these two painters lies in the mysterious irrationality and inconsistencies in common things both bring out. Cain, however, is never as abrupt or jarring as Rosenquist—preferring simple, less visible solutions.



Peter Cain, *Untitled*, 1989, Oil on canvas, 58" × 70". Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery.

The skeleton key to understanding Cain may be the paradoxical moving target Gerhard Richter. Richter peripatetically throws his audience off balance with visual curveball after psychological screwball. Cain attempts to negotiate the same aberrant gap between what is real and not real, painting and photograph, photograph of a painting, and painting of a photograph.

Cain paints in a way that, if not executed just right, will slip off into one of two surrounding styles and be critically sucked up and immediately neutralized—banished to some nether world of bad art, an eternity of suburban artfairs and Greenwich Village sidewalk shows. Cain seems to have a built-in early warning system, because in *Untitled* he avoids these two nearby and hazardous traps: the pit of Pop, on the one hand, and the pen-

dulum of Photo-Realism on the other. While the styles and names of the Pop artists are not only remembered and all but canonized, the names of the Photo-Realists have all but been forgotten. (With the exception of Chuck Close—who never really fit the label, what with his ways of converting marks into images, his gargantuan scale, and his defiant techniques.)

Photo-Realism was a kind of phantom or dream movement of the '70s. In a decade permeated with pluralism and art that was resistant to dealers and collectors alike, Photo-Realism came along—almost prepackaged, ready to be bought up by hungry collectors. A return to any kind of Realism is never really far off—because the desire for a recognizable image is never far off. It could be argued, in fact, that the headlong rush to

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Neo-Expressionism was due in some small part to this ever-present temptation—this wish to return to the Garden of Realism. But Photo-Realism never really got off the ground. Many of the artists sold their works for what, at the time at least, were good prices. Nevertheless, it never caught on critically. It was just too neat—it fit right in, which in turn caused it to just sort of slip right back out again.

This is not to say that some of the artists were not of interest—it was just hard to remember who did what. I can remember Robert Cottingham, Tom Blackwell, Robert Bechtle, Don Eddy, Richard Estes, Audrey Flack, and Ralph Goings—only which one did parts of new cars and who did old trucks, diners, and dying towns? Who did old cars and who did still lifes of gumball machines? Who did New York Streets and store windows and who just did oldish neon signs? And didn't one of them just do women's underpants? Like many of the mini-movements of the '70s, Photo-Realism came and went—a dinosaur the day it was born.

Peter Cain's *Untitled* is more uncanny, inexplicable, and multifarious than anything that came out of Photo-Realism. In a hybrid image so farfetched and outlandish that it begins to appear normal, Cain paints a "thing" that is simultaneously coherent and incoherent, whole and fragmented, ordered and deranged. A mutant "thing" unprecedented and yet so everyday that it is instantly recognizable.

*Untitled* is an image not so much of a car as of a car run amok. Looking for all the world like a living film-splice of a car, Cain has joined the front and rear ends (side view) of some late-model shiny metallic-red car to make one attenuated, eccentric, inverted, smashed-together form. A big, beautiful, black radial tire with a gun-metal gray hub cap is placed in the center of this form—like some black and silver eye of a cyclops. The whole thing hangs or is suspended upside down from a blacktop-looking road substance—like some bat. As realistic and painstaking as *Untitled* is, there's something quite casual about it. While Cain had gone to great lengths to portray this just as it is, he doesn't appear obsessed with the finish of the picture, or in fetishizing the process. The tools he employs may be technical, i.e., opaque projector, airbrush, photographs, etc.—but his technique minimizes the artiness of the painting, thus grounding the whole thing in a menacing neutrality and non-style. Formal issues of front, back, side, right side up, upside down, left, right, top, and bottom are addressed not only in the splicing together of all these pictorial elements and their composition—but in the peculiar, if bizarre, anthropomorphic quality of this shape turned "thing," as well.

Nothing is more commonplace than pictures of cars. The car is seen as a sexy, sleek, beautiful thing—a thing that gives pleasure and takes you to faraway places. Cars, along with war scenes and buildings, are the early drawings of many little boys. So the car is a primary channeling-reflecting device and an early image around which roughly half the culture "acts out"—drawing, manipulating, and converting the car into images of pre-adolescent desire. Cain has taken this "ordinary" thing and refashioned it into something vested with longing and awareness.

In *Untitled* he has brought out something not only sinister but provocative and even seductive. There is a phallic-tantric quality to the painting. A two-headed phallus with an eye, or an opening at each end is suggested

—with the tire doubling as a giant scrotum. Or A stump, a vacuum cleaner or prosthetic device, a cartoon character or Robo-cop, a wheelbarrow from Hell, an R-2 D-2 robot that runs on the ceiling and might just start spinning around at any moment—or an athletic supporter for a warrior from another dimension. Cain has created a painting that seems to defy and overturn simple natural laws like gravity, symmetry, and motion. *Untitled* cleverly questions the nature of intelligence by presenting the image of a "thing" that is unknowable and unclassifiable in a painting that is like a filmstrip of a painting all collapsed and run together into a single dense frame. Misrepresented to a tee, an exoskele-

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ton of mysterious origin, *Untitled* creates a kind of gravity and orbit for itself, dictating its own set of rules and laws. Organic, yet neither flora nor fauna; a protoplasmic force caught between vitality and extinction—a killer/butcher/heat-seeking/lover/observer—*Untitled* is a strange amalgam of a painting.

Its almost as if John Chamberlain, who took cars and car parts and crushed them into blocks of abstract sculpture, and Lee Bontecou, with her centric, symmetrical, ocular floating works, had to make art together and retain the image of the car. If these two artists were combined and had added the fur-lined tea cup of Meret Oppenheim, the spirits of Richter and Rosenquist, a dash of Surrealism and a pinch of evil—they might make Peter Cain's *Untitled*. □

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*Jerry Saltz has edited several books on contemporary art. His column, which concentrates on a single work, appears regularly in Arts.*