

A tragedy on the edge of success

By Dan Bischoff
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Peter Cain was just beginning to taste the sort of art-world success that nice kids from the suburbs usually only dream about.

The young artist who grew up in Livingston and New Vernon had appeared in a few very competitive international group shows (including the Venice Biennale) when his work was selected for back-to-back inclusion in the 1993 and '95 Whitney Biennials. Last year, he was invited to show in Milan, Italy and Japan and was one of 18 artists who posed on a Manhattan rooftop for a January 1997 New Yorker spread on names in the art world worth watching.

On Saturday, the new Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea will open with a one-man show of Cain's latest work.

He won't be there.

Just after New Year's, Cain collapsed. He was rushed to St. Vincent's hospital in Manhattan, where he died Jan. 5 of a brain aneurysm. He was 37 years old.

"What really makes Peter's death so tragic is the great breakthrough in his work that he had had in just the past two years," says Marks, who had been Cain's dealer since 1992. "Until then, the work was 100 percent cars — that was all we had ever shown, and it was selling fairly well. It took enormous bravery on his part to break out of that and show something new. And I think the paintings in this show, the L.A. landscapes and human figures, were the best he ever made."



Livingston artist Peter Cain, who died Jan. 5, in his Manhattan studio with one of his oil paintings.

Marks is referring to a distinctive evolution in Cain's work. His early paintings — oils that were at once Minimalist, Photo-Realist and Surrealist, with a little Pop stirred in for flavor — were large canvasses that featured strangely amputated, candy-colored automobile parts rearranged to form driver-less, mutant machines. In these pieces, Cain seemed to be mining the anomie of New Jersey's suburban car culture. His work had a vaguely goofy menace, like the opaque windshield of the giant truck in Steven Spielberg's "Duel."

Nonetheless, after the 1995 Biennial, Cain began working in an entirely new manner. He produced large figural compositions and haunting landscapes, most depicting empty parking lots or

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facades in Los Angeles. Like the car paintings, these were stylized but recognizable images, done on a scale that emphasized their abstract formalism.

By the time of his death, his canvases were selling for up to \$25,000 each.

"Nobody makes work like this," Marks says. "And it is the hardest thing in the world to take traditional tools, like oils and canvas, and make something different and new. I was really so proud of him. His death, coming when he was in perfect health and working at the top of his form, is more than tragic, it's horrifying, really."

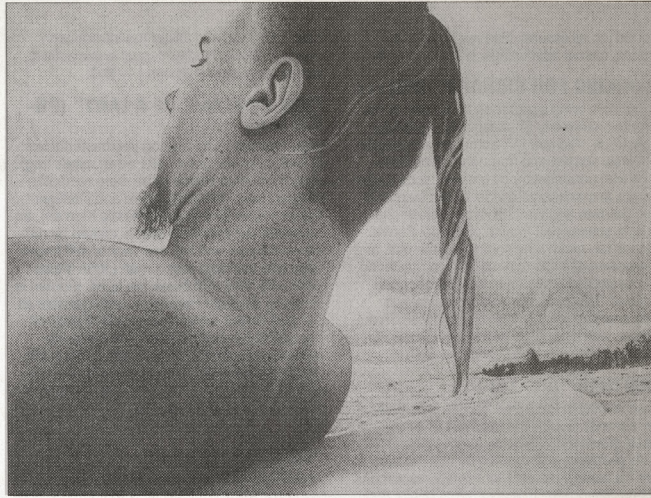
But those who knew Cain believe he left more than just his relatively small oeuvre of work behind. They remember an unassuming artist with a gentle nature.

"Peter wasn't in a rush to become someone, to make himself famous," says his sister, Margaret Hynes, who lives in Novato, Ca., just outside of San Francisco. "He painted slowly, at his own speed, because he loved it. I think he felt like he should paint faster, to provide work for his dealer and for shows, but that wasn't Peter. He cared very little for material things — he never needed a lot from life in that way."

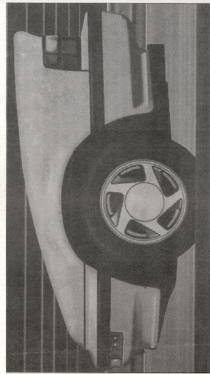
Nan Goldin, the well-known photographer and documentarian of the Lower East Side scene, said much the same thing in her eulogy at Cain's Morristown funeral.

"Peter was very special ... an All-American boy, a dreamboat, shy, quiet, self-contained. Although he was a bit withdrawn and claimed to be anti-social, he was known for his great sense of humor. But his dry wit was without malice, and he was incredibly kind and generous and without pretense. In spite of his solitary nature he inspired enormous loyalty in people ... For someone who by nature was so private, he revealed and shared an enormous amount of himself through his art. His making and showing his work was an act of generosity and his form of communication with the world."

Like Modernism's School of Paris — which was made up mostly of Spaniards, Hungarians and Italians, but very few Parisians — the art world centered in New York City is mostly populated by out-of-towners. De Kooning was born in Rotterdam, Jasper Johns in North Carolina, David Salle in Wichita. Julian Schnabel grew up in Brooklyn but moved to Texas when he was 14 and came back to



Peter Cain's graphite on paper 'Giant' will be on display at the Matthew Marks Gallery beginning Saturday.



Cain's oil on canvas, 'Prelude,' reflected his fascination with car culture.

New York as a full-fledged Texan painter, complete with a black velvet sensibility and a flare for overwrought, south-of-the-border folk imagery.

But Peter Cain was a near-native, living just across the Hudson in Livingston until he was 10, then moving to New Vernon after his parents divorced and his mother, Jean, remarried. His stepfather, John Barry, was a specialist trader on the New York Stock Exchange, and Cain had by all accounts a comfortable suburban upbringing, graduating from Madison High School in 1977. He enjoyed a large extended family; in addition to Margaret, there is another sister, Teresa Sedgwick; a brother, John Cain, and a half-sister, Mollie Cain (both of Brielle), as well as five Barry stepbrothers and a step-sister.

"We had an utterly normal childhood," says Margaret. "New Vernon was very pretty place to grow up, and we all had just a typical youth, going for walks around the lake, hanging out, meeting kids to get something to eat, that kind of thing."

"There really are no other artists in our family and no history of artists that we know of," says Teresa, who lives in Lake Tahoe, Ca. "But my mother says that whenever she went

in to school to see Peter, and they had the kids' drawings up on the wall, she could always tell which ones were his, from the earliest age. ... He won a scholarship for a summer drawing program in fourth grade, and after that, I don't think he ever had any doubt that he wanted to be an artist."

It was during this happy childhood that Cain developed the love for cars that would inform his later work.

"When we moved to New Vernon, I can remember Peter going to the antique car shows held there every year," Teresa says. "When he was 13 or 14, he would draw the cars he'd seen, from every possible angle."

"Peter was very close to his grandfather," she adds. He "loved Gumpy's big old Cadillac. When Peter became successful, he bought himself a big red, 1960s-era Cadillac, one with fins, which he loved, too. It didn't matter that it flooded all the time. He'd drive it out to the country with his dog, Cronus, a black mutt, in the back, and play with Cronus for hours on the lawn."

With his family's encouragement, Cain attended Parsons School of Design in Brooklyn from 1977 to '80, then spent two years at the School of Visual Arts on the Lower East Side, where he eventually rented a loft. It was an exciting time to be a young

Peter Cain exhibition

Where: Matthew Marks Gallery, 523 W. 24th St., New York

When: Saturday through March 15. Opening reception from 6 to 8 p.m. Saturday. Gallery hours: noon-6 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday

Admission: Free. Call (212) 243-0200

painter — fellow SVA alums Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf and Jean-Michel Basquiat were making headlines, selling work for unheard-of prices, being written up by downtown 'zines, even painting murals on the walls of hot new dance clubs. Money was flowing through contemporary art as never before, and artists were being treated like rock stars. Art world success, like the ego of its new stars, seemed to be nine parts brass.

If Peter Cain stood out against this background, it was for his shyness. He hated crowds and went quiet in social situations. Even later, when the New Yorker was setting up its group shot, he carefully drifted to the back, standing as far from the lens as possible.

"Peter excelled at intimacy," Margaret says. "At Thanksgiving, with all the family around, he'd go for a quiet walk with you outside, and that's how you'd get to know about him and what he was doing. Even at his own openings, he seemed a bit embarrassed by all the attention and didn't want to make a big deal out of it."

Adds Teresa: "I never felt he struggled with his work. I think Peter was always comfortable with what he did. By the same token, he never bragged to us about what he was accomplishing, either."

After college Cain worked for a while at odd jobs — elevator operator in the Sherry-Netherlands Hotel, studio assistant for more established artists. After appearing in a few group exhibitions, he had his first one-man show at the Daniel Weinberg Gallery in Los Angeles in 1990.

But within a year, the boom in contemporary art went bust. Prices plummeted, careers stalled, whole galleries disappeared, some overnight. Only a handful of new dealers, the sharpest and clearest-eyed, succeeded in the teeth of this collapse — notable among them, Marks, who took Cain on in 1992.

"It's hard to say exactly why I chose him back then," Marks says. "It's very much an intuitive process. Actually, as I remember, I wasn't really drawn to his painting at first."

"When you work with an artist, particularly such a young artist, you are really deciding to side with him for the future," Marks says. "Peter's work immediately made me uncomfortable. Something about the sliced and truncated cars, the claustrophobic feeling the work gives. And I knew that that's a good feeling, when you

first see new work. It tells you this is something real.”

But he was even more impressed by the artist’s demeanor.

“When I met Peter, he just seemed so special,” Marks continues. “He had a quiet presence that in the art world is unusual — an intensity and integrity that I liked. And then, when we talked about art, about other peoples’ art, I found to my surprise that what he was into (among older artists was very much the same sort of work that was important to me: De Kooning, Phillip Guston, De Chirico — painters whose influence seems at first to be very far away from what Peter did. And that made me see his work differently and to place it in a wholly new context.”

The retrospective at the Matthew Marks gallery that opens Saturday will inevitably focus attention on Cain’s latest works, particularly the large figural compositions, which bring a new sensuality to his work.

“It was in his new work that he

really emerged as the great artist he promised to be,” Goldin said at the memorial service. “For the first time, he painted a person. Flesh replaced chrome, and the new work had an added dimension of vulnerability and tenderness and emotional attachment.”

The subject of these works was Cain’s companion, Sean, whom he painted over and over. “Like his cars, he rendered Sean in extreme close-up, close to the touch but monumental, the boy as an icon, a love poem American style,” Goldin said.

“I’m only now learning how large Peter’s world was,” Matthew Marks says. “Since word went out about his death, I’ve had calls from all sorts of distinguished people — other artists, curators, many well-known — to say they were touched by his work and saddened by his death. I just wish I could call him up and share this with him.”

Artist Dan Bischoff writes frequently about the visual arts.