

One of my favorite interviews with one of my favorite artists, the legendary and amazing PETER MAX



Peter Max, who created the original artwork for this month's cover, relaxes in his favorite place in the world: his Upper West Side studio.

Feature Story

GETTING PERSONAL WITH PETER MAX

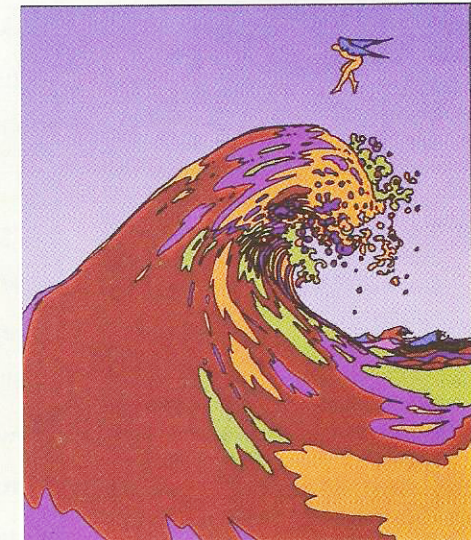
The reclusive pop icon talks with Robert W. Cabell about the serenity of meditation, the power of hard rock, and his love affair with the Internet

Peter Max's industrial-sized artistic enterprise is ensconced on four floors of a large, brick doorman building just off Central Park West. As I entered his seventh floor gallery, I was struck by the intense lashings of vibrant color indigenous to his diverse works. Electrically alive, energy pops off his art. In one mammoth work, a giant swirling tsunami wave is frozen in its perilous pre-crash pose as a naked angel hovers above on teal feathered wings. An in-your-face portrait of Mick Jagger catches the perennial rocker's outrageous magnetism. Iris, one of the many assistants of pop art's self-styled guru, flashes a sans-attitudinal smile and leads me through a gallery crammed with posters, sculptures, mobiles, silk-screened T-shirts, an eclectic assortment of "Max"ified ephemera from Coke bottles to Grammy statues. Seated in an antique velvet armchair, I am shown a "promo" reel of the prolific artist's work, projected on an 18-screen multi-media wall.

As I sip coffee from fine white and silver-edged china, a dozen equally smiley helpers scurry about with energy to match the surrounding art. Though the king of commercial art has gone on record innumerable times discussing his work, journalistic archives reveal little about the man himself. And though I'd met Mr. Max at the occasional parties and openings, I had never sat down to talk to my favorite living artist. That was about to change.

Peter, you've been such a remarkable, across-the-board influence in art since the sixties and you're bigger than ever. How do you keep that joy alive?

I've been meditating since 1966, when I met a very wonderful swami, Satchidanana. I met him in Paris and I've been into yoga ever since. I paint positive images and think positive thoughts. I love the world, I love people, and I do lots of charitable work. Someone who knows yoga will definitely say, "To love all and serve all is the reason we are here."



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Yoga is a very peaceful, calming center of your life, but music is very much a part of your life and your work, too. What kind of music do you like to work to?

When I paint, I've got really powerful music playing. I love hard rock. I really like this album that came out eight or nine months ago on Madonna's label called *Prodigy*, it's really fantastic and I just got a great new disc called *Rage Against the Machine*.

Tell me about the celebrity and political portraits you do. When you do five or 50 portraits of one person, what is it like?

I'll never forget the day I showed Gorbachev the 40 paintings. It was at the Waldorf-Astoria, where the installation took up a whole wall. Gorbys: ten across and four high. When he walked in with his wife and saw all of them, right there in front of him, he jumped a foot into the air, landed in a squat, and started doing these Russian kaztkas. He was slapping his knee shouting, "Macha vet hata yupul!" It's a Russian thing, and it was amazing. I did a show down in Soho and I wanted to do a poster, so I tried five different ways and I came up with 40 Gorbys. I liked the way it looked and sounded. I preprepared them in various color combinations — warm colors, cool colors — and then we screened the drawing on to it and I over-painted on and around it. For instance, I printed blue on top of orange, then used other colors to fill it out just like I was painting something abstract, even though he was the leader of a country. I wanted it to be a little bit out there. Not too conservative.

What about content versus formula? Do the personalities you paint change it for you?

Yes, take Clinton. He was even more interesting at the beginning, because I loved him as a new president. I felt like he was one of my generation, someone I could relate to. I got to meet him later on. These portraits came about because I was requested to

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One of the Clinton Centennial