

Lisa Yuskavage: Fleshed Out

In her controversial paintings of languid young women with outsized breasts and backsides, Lisa Yuskavage explores what has, throughout art history, remained an almost exclusively male domain.

BY CAREY LOVELACE

In Lisa Yuskavage's exhibition of recent paintings at Marianne Boesky Gallery in Manhattan, the subject was a partly clad female posed in an elegant, modern-day parlor, her Victoria's Secret-style lingerie loosely open to expose midriff and breasts. From canvas to canvas, her appearance differs slightly, as she strikes various poses. In one painting, she lounges in languorous indolence; in another she stares out the window at a glowing dusky sky. Throughout, she seems to be waiting for something not quite specified.

The interior, with book-lined walls and plush sofa, seems an updated version of those salons favored by 19th-century portrait painters. Typical of Yuskavage, the rendering is not strictly realist; instead there is an illustrational quality, the volumes weightless, tonalities so pristinely rendered that the canvases seem done by a Disney animator in a pensive moment. But there is also a hint of melancholy in these paintings, as well as evidence of a dialogue with the art-historical past. In one work, the woman is arrayed on a sofa as if she were a contemporary courtesan, bringing to mind Manet's *Olympia*, the huge gathering of flowers at her feet reminiscent of the bouquet offered by *Olympia's* maid. In the most poignant image, a blonde woman, looking as if she has had an extremely hard day, slouches, resting her toes painfully on a cushion, legs splayed. Her world-weariness brings to mind the ballerinas and absinthe drinkers of Degas.

This mood of reflective domesticity seems new for Yuskavage, best known for her aggressively wacky, jarringly transgressive universe populated by women, real and surreal, with outlandish body parts (in particular, enormous breasts). At times these works ring with parody, at others with in-your-face vulgarity. The Boesky show ran simultaneously with a concise, selective exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, in Philadelphia, the artist's hometown. Together, they provided a chance to chart the progress of a gutsy painter, admired and reviled for her over-the-top images of excessively well endowed females in various states of undress. These are technically ambitious works, much of whose content



Manifest Destiny, 1998, oil on linen, 110 by 55 inches. Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.



Lisa Yuskavage: One of six paintings from the "Northview" series, 2000, oil on linen, 77 by 62 inches. Private collection. Photos this article courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

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seems to be an exploration of bodily self-loathing. Overall, one sensed a gradual shift in the direction of a more traditional realism, with a hint of poignancy and even, here and there, of narrative emotional content.

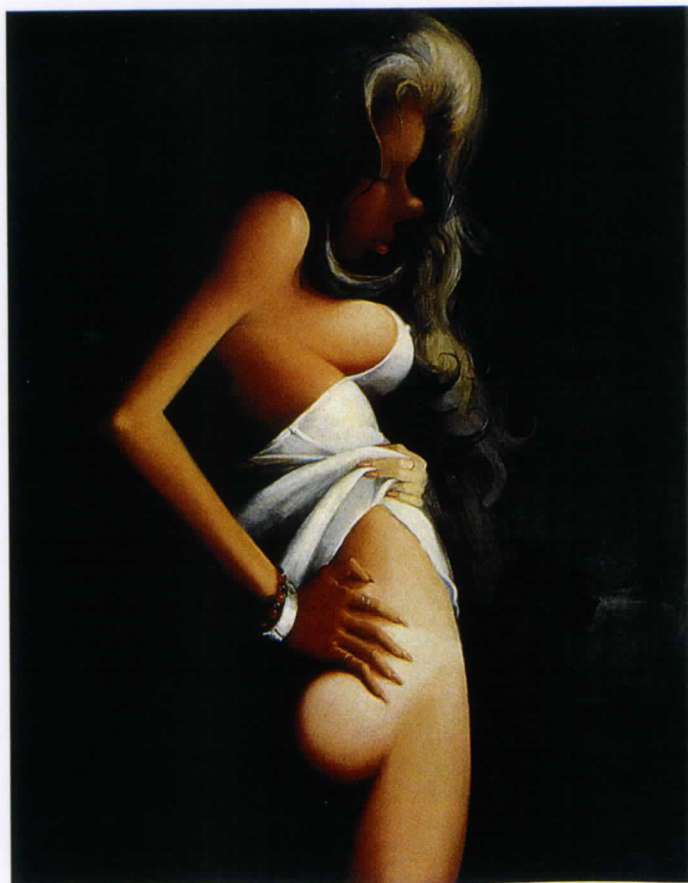
The ICA show comprised 18 large oil-on-linen paintings and numerous supporting works. Spaciously arranged in three high-ceilinged downstairs galleries, it reflected many, but certainly not all, of the approaches with which the artist has made her reputation in the last few years. These included her more controversial, straightforwardly sexual images that in some quarters have sparked accusations of pornography. In the large-scale *Day* (1999-2000), a nubile, wasp-waisted ingenue, bathed in egg-yolk yellow light, (teasingly?) lifts up a chemise to gaze at her breasts, as if in wonder. *Day* hung next to its pendant, *Night* (1999-2000), in which a dark-haired young female dreamily caresses her backside—perhaps erotically, perhaps as a gesture of self-assessment. Other currents represented included the quirky, surreal works Yuskavage did in the mid-1990s. In the nightmarish *Faucet* (1995), with its overtones of pedophilia, a girl-woman with pointy, unevenly shaped breasts stands beneath a spigot, everything washed in an otherworldly, flesh-colored light. Also included were the masterfully painted, cartoonish canvases that seem to address painfully mixed feelings about body image. The unforgettable *Good Evening, Hamass* (1997), for example, is a long horizon-

tal painting in which an Afro-coiled woman's absurdly elongated buttocks jut out into a dusky sky. A string net crisscrosses her distended behind, making it resemble a glazed ham, while squares of flesh bulging through the net resemble a cascade of tiny breasts, reminiscent of the Artemis of Ephesus.

It is this sort of libidinous, breast-obsessed imagery that brought the artist her succès de scandale. Such works are laden with mixed messages—equal parts sexist, feminist, psycho-autobiographical and satirical. Yuskavage has had a steady stream of solo shows in New York and Europe since 1990 [see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '97]. However, for the ICA exhibition, curator and director Claudia Gould chose to limit herself to the last five years of the artist's production. Even within that short span, though, one could see a surprising variation and a quick evolution in terms of both subject matter and technique.

Opinions divide sharply on Yuskavage's work—many loathe it. The works people seem to find the most approachable are those dating from around 1996 through 1998 that can be given a metaphoric, quasi-feminist reading. In the towering *Manifest Destiny* (1998), for instance, a naked siren in boots, grasping a wedding bouquet, hurls herself against a stylized (and very phallic) Ionian column looming over her. But it is the more technically accomplished, ambiguous paintings based on 1970s *Penthouse* magazine images (*Day* and *Night* emerged from this source material) that cause people to become unhinged. In *True Blonde* (1999), an attractive, fair-haired nude seated on a couch lowers her eyes with staged modesty while cupping her hands over her genitals (thus perhaps concealing the "true" color of her hair). In this postfeminist age, we are used to having images of desire that feature women "captioned" with a sense of the artist's awareness that, yes, this is a sexist image. Yuskavage declines to do this (although in even her most alluring women she includes body flaws, such as the "true blonde's" uneven breasts).

Certainly, in treating hypersexualized images of women, the artist is



Night, 1999-2000, oil on linen, 77 by 62 inches.
Collection Donald L. Bryant Jr. Family Trust.



Day, 1999-2000, oil on linen, 77 by 62 inches.
Private collection.



Honeymoon, 1998, oil on linen, 77½ by 55 inches.
Private collection.

entering an artistic territory where few other women have dared to tread, an unsettling realm full of free-floating lust and troublesome sexual politics, with few reassuring moral landmarks and a history laden with images reflecting male desire. Actually, it is a rarely discussed fact that, with exceptions, there is almost no history of women painters providing their own interpretations of that staple of Western art history, the female nude. In the 1970s, Joan Semmel and Sylvia Sleigh were known for series depicting the nude from the woman's point of view, but one has to go back to 1940s Surrealists such as Leonora Carrington, Frida Kahlo and Dorothea Tanning to find women painters depicting the female body with erotic overtones. For the most part, the female nude inhabits a region women have sidestepped, for numerous reasons—not the least of which is that three decades of women's studies have made artists all too aware of how inextricably the representation of women in paint is interwoven with issues of power. The female nude has been used as a tool of sociological manipulation, buttressing prejudices and an unequal power structure that casts her in the role of property.

In photography, performance and installation art—mediums with much less history to contend with—women artists seem to have felt more freedom to engage this subject matter. Certainly, in photography, we see it starting even before the turn of the last century and continued into the present by artists such as Tina Barney, Sally Mann and Renée Cox. But the closer one moves to traditional genres, such as sculpture, the more it seems women artists avoid erotic overtones. Even such body-conscious artists of the 1990s as Kiki Smith, Rona Pondick, Janine Antoni, Annette Messager and others influenced by Surrealism, treated the body not in terms of the erotic but rather the abject, emphasizing dysfunction, fragmentation, even abuse, as in

Louise Bourgeois's metaphors of psychic pain or Smith's vulnerable bodies with their fluids exposed. Interestingly, even with the current return to painterly figuration, women who take up this subject matter tend to do so in order to address the "grotesque." One thinks, for example, of the English painter Jenny Saville, her marvelous photographic self-portraits showing her body pressed against glass so the flesh looks elephantine [see *A.i.A.*, Apr. '00].

It is performance artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Yayoi Kusama and Hannah Wilke, women who used their own very attractive bodies as subject matter in the 1960s and '70s, who are the closest to Yuskavage, both in merging sexuality with art and in the reaction they provoked. Currently viewed as feminist icons, they were at the time dismissed by the overwhelmingly male art world, derided by many as narcissists and viewed by feminists with the same kind of alarm now directed at Yuskavage.

"My work has always been about things in myself that I feel incredibly uncomfortable with and embarrassed by," the artist has remarked. She describes herself as starting off as a conservative painter infatuated with European tradition (she, too, drew from the female nude in art classes). Even as an MFA student at Yale, studying with William Bailey, she remained, she



Faucet, 1995, oil on linen, 72 by 60 inches.
Collection Howard Rachofsky.

says, sheltered from contemporary art. She describes a coup de foudre in the late 1980s, when she moved to New York and encountered the work of Mike Kelley and Jeff Koons, two artists who were exploring the socially unacceptable, taking content from their experience. She became interested in work dealing with the id, as she put it, reading authors such as Kafka and late Thomas Mann, becoming intrigued by the films of Fassbinder; she moved from idealized, escapist representations to ones addressing more challenging parts of the psyche.

It is possible to detect the source material from which Yuskavage derives many of her visual constructs if one surveys the arsenal of Western images, high and low, for erotic representation. She uses poses reminiscent of

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Ingres's odalisques, 1940s Vargas Girl pinups, TV ads. Yuskavage often fuses these references with her own innate bent toward parody, making freewheeling use of time-worn conventions painters have drawn upon to imply sexuality—those rococo sunsets, for example, or the baubles and beads that roll through other paintings like ripe breasts. Often she compresses her references to marvelous, ambivalent effect, as in *Honeymoon* (1998), in which, with a fully bloomed flower ready for the plucking in the

involved in making each work, assertions borne out, in the corner of one gallery, by a display of nearly 40 wonderful small monoprint studies and works on paper that offer insights into the evolution of some of her large canvases.

We also learn that the artist has undergone a development that has involved moving from the generalized image to the specific. She started out painting exclusively from her imagination (as in the dreamlike *Faucet*), but soon became dissatisfied and turned to external sources to foster greater inventiveness. For example, around 1996, to heighten her control over composition, she began making Hydrocal maquettes based on the figures in her own paintings—much as Renaissance masters created sculptural models to allow them to study effects of light and dark. In an interesting feedback process, she photographed these figurines, made studies from the photographs, then paintings from the studies. Ten of these 10-inch-high maquettes were on view at the ICA, anatomically distorted figures striking a series of insolent poses. When she first created them, she christened each one after a “bad habit,” in tribute to an eponymous 1970 Philip Guston painting. They were shown at the ICA as one work: *asspicking, foodeating, headshrinking, socialclimbing, motherfucking bad habits*.

Another effort to achieve greater specificity in her work came when Yuskavage began searching for life-based models (though without necessarily bringing a live model into the studio); this is when she turned to the *Penthouse*-derived series of images. A further shift becomes evident with another choice. A few years back, she began to use a childhood friend, Kathy, as a live model. (She refers to her friend by her first name only.) According to Siegel, Yuskavage noticed a figure recurring in her early paintings, a blonde with an upturned nose. She asked herself if that mental image was based on an actual person, and she eventually realized that it was. *True Blonde Draped* (1999), cast in a shadowy, cinnamon-colored light, is a depiction of her friend shortly after she had given birth, and was probably the most richly textured painting in the Philadelphia show. It is full of empathy for the sitter, who gazes out at the viewer, extremely unsexy, her breasts drooping and enlarged, her face expressing a complex vulnerability. This is one of the only paintings in which the subject seems to have an internal life that overpowers that of the artist.

Kathy was also the model for the women in the oil-on-linen Boesky Gallery paintings, although these more effervescent works have a markedly different feel. All six are called “Northview,” after the mansion in which they were painted. The series marks the first time the artist has dealt with a fully articulated interior instead of a fantasy or neutral space. In addition to the art-historical references, other layers of meaning emerge. Yuskavage has implied that in using her friend, who is (like her) from the “wrong side of the tracks,” as a model in posh surroundings, she intends to create a kind of social disconnect, a class dissonance. Also, the women in these paintings seem to show incipient signs of aging, so that an air of melancholy often lingers over them. As if to underscore this sense of time passing, two small paintings were hung facing each other in the gallery's back room: the fatigued woman with her feet on the cushion, and *Brande* (2000), in which the figure is equipped with a cute upturned nose and the Japanimation look that characterized the pert nymphets in the artist's earlier work.

The “Northview” series seems less likely to offend viewers than Yuskavage's earlier works. Maybe the fact that these maidens are losing some of their youth makes them seem less threatening. And maybe it's reassuring—to both sexes—to have our females, even in painting, in a kind of captivity, here signaled by these rather conventional domestic interiors. Yuskavage has made the world take note by rattling people's cages, and while the maturity of these works might be a good sign, it also might not, signaling that the provocateur is entering safer, more familiar, even academic territory. Nonetheless, although the women in these paintings are more or less on good behavior, one senses that it may be just temporary, that they bear within them the potential for future transgressions. □

Recent paintings by Lisa Yuskavage were shown at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York [Jan. 5-Feb. 3]. The exhibition “Lisa Yuskavage” appeared at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia [Dec. 2, 2000-Feb. 9, 2001].

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True Blonde Draped, 1999, oil on linen, 38 by 29 inches. Private collection.

foreground, a blonde maiden, her peignoir open to reveal breasts with extremely erect nipples, stares tentatively out the window at a dizzying array of phallic mountain peaks. Of course, the original purpose of such sexual iconography was to describe, even to stimulate, male desire, but Yuskavage cops them for her own psychosexual ends. This strategy creates a strange amalgam.

The ICA show was accompanied by a handsomely produced, informative catalogue, including essays by critic Katy Siegel and art historian Marcia B. Hall that stress painterly development. These writers elaborate on the degree to which Yuskavage is grounded in classical technique, which she absorbed as an undergraduate at Tyler School of Art, from a formative junior year abroad in Rome, and later at Yale. The essays describe the considered process



*Painting from the "Northview" series, 2000, oil on linen,
70 by 40 1/2 inches. Private collection.*