

# bootylicious

*Motherfucker, Asspicker, Foodeater.* Does it make any difference that these images were painted by a woman? JANE SCOTT exposes Lisa Yuskavage's art.

**W**hen viewing Lisa Yuskavage's controversial paintings, it's hard not to consider the artist's gender. For some, her treatment of her subject matter seems to teeter upon the precipice of degradation and misogyny. Why would a woman wish to paint such banal and insulting images? Like the pneumatic nymphettes depicted in many of her works, Yuskavage's motives remain cloaked in humour and ironic device. When pressed on the matter she quips, "I was listening to a bit too much rap music at the time."

Her use of familiar, invitingly soft imagery and her painterly aesthetic makes for an enticing combination, of which she is well aware. "I prefer to work from the point of view that what I am doing is wrong rather than right," she says, "and I also like to keep in mind that it isn't truly dangerous, it's just fiction."

Yuskavage is not particularly worried by feminist reactions. She is interested in art, not politics, admitting that she is daring the viewer to look on her work as "just a painted thing". Why, then, is it so difficult for us to remain impassive when this is precisely the imagery we confront in pop culture everyday? Is it more disturbing to see this imagery on a gallery wall than a billboard or in a magazine?

Yuskavage's ambiguous fusion of the personal and the provocative has led to critics labelling her a quasi-pornographer—intent on making a mockery of her medium—whilst others praise her virtuosity. The discomfort and uneasiness we may feel opens the floor to debate and forces us to deconstruct notions of good girl/bad girl cultural archetypes. In some ways, the images themselves are surprisingly conventional, the positioning of the nudes not differing too greatly from those of Degas or Renoir. Whilst the fertility signifiers are all there—big tits, big hair, big arse—they differ from those depicted in men's magazines. Yuskavage's images may appear lifted from the pages of a soft focus *Playboy*, albeit one with Alice in Wonderland proportions, but they are hardly erotic.

Bolstered by the worthy tradition of the medium, they are no longer disposable babes but strange bedfellows with their contextual forebears. A marriage of classic and pop art that perfectly encapsulates the virgin/whore paradox. Regardless of cultural politics, her work commands attention on the merit of technique

alone. Working in the contentious field of feminine identity and male fantasy, Yuskavage is not seeking to perpetuate existing stereotypes, but rather to deflect them by means of parody and compassion, inviting us into the female psyche for a little while.

Yuskavage makes it clear that technique is all-important in the message of her work. She elevates her supposedly low subject matter by virtue of her painterly skill. Cleverly executed, these are pictures that look pretty but won't sit quietly above the mantle. Yuskavage is irritated by the constant tags of 'Lolita' and 'bimbo' her subjects attract, yet she continually emphasises the chasm between the work of the old masters she seeks to emulate and the cutie-pie kitsch of her palette and model. We are not allowed to forget this divide; she even includes a Giovanni Bellini reproduction in her catalogue as an historical art precedent.

Although she is reluctant to be drawn too far on feminist rhetoric, Yuskavage is not completely guileless. Nothing in the finished work is a by-product of chance or accident. Studied, thought out and workshopped through a laborious process of sketches and drawings, her embryonic subjects gestate. Like the Italian masters from whom she draws her inspiration, Yuskavage makes clay model figurines in order to study light. Light is the all important key in reading the mood of her work. She effectively manipulates and casts its source to imbue mood. This way she can study the composition and remould the figure to control the outcome.

Much of Yuskavage's work is about control. Her women may seem strange, passive creatures—all vacuous stares and downcast eyes, propelled into this contextless space and none too sure about moving—but she insists they are not to be seen as bimbos. She does not wish us to be distanced from her subjects by labels; insisting she is more empathetic than ironic in her paintings.

"I think you can see that if you look at the light and how they are painted. I don't work from an elevated place looking down: if they are low, then I am in the ditch with them, and by painting them, I am trying to dig us out together," she says. Never bitter towards her female subjects, Yuskavage seeks to celebrate their sexuality whilst holding up a mirror to all who condemn them as vulgar.

Yuskavage is also plagued by the niggling personal curiosity her



**“When an artist paints portraits exclusively, there is the temptation to look for the artist in the canvas”**



*Day* 1999-2000, oil on linen





pictures evoke. Whenever an artist paints portraits exclusively, there is always the temptation to look for the artist in the canvas. Does Lisa have blonde hair? Does she hate her sexuality?

The women in her portraits never sit easily with their sexuality; there is always a degree of discomfort involved. Their feminine attributes are grotesquely proportioned. Like a bowl of fruit left out too long, they are over-ripe and excessively fecund. A heady bouquet of cloying, overblown roses. Their childlike faces, devoid of any real character or conviction, hint at the children they once were before the encumbrance of puberty. Before jiggling appendages set them apart and hindered their physicality. Before their sexuality became a tool, and a standard by which they are gauged and by which they must compete. These works are as self-conscious as Yuskavage is about them.

"My work has always been about things in myself that I feel incredibly uncomfortable with and embarrassed by. I exploit what's dangerous and scares me about myself". Self-loving and self-loathing in equal measures; works such as *Rorschach Blot* 1995 offer up plenty to be uncomfortable about. A blow-up doll of a woman is posed stiffly, legs spread and goods on display, appearing for all the world to be nothing more than an ergonomic chair. The woman's face is obscured by a mop of blonde hair, the only facial feature Yuskavage has bothered to ascribe, a small round, open mouth. Is this all she fears she can be?

A lot of Yuskavage's work is disarmingly personal. "The impulse toward self portraiture runs through the work from beginning all the way to the end," she states. Having openly drawn parallels between herself and her portraits, she changes tack and calls the viewer's bluff, by bringing her therapist into the fray. Titles such as *Transference Portrait Of My Shrink In Her Starched Nightgown With My Face And Her Hair*, must surely be humorous. The therapist is depicted as a classic statue. In another painting, she is an imposing Ionic column against which a tiny female figure (naked, save suspenders) is thrown back, offering flowers. The suspenders, the perspective, the phallic column and the fertility offering of flowers are crude but amusing signifiers. Yuskavage likes to pack some punches but she offers a little tragicomedy along the way.

Contradictory and compelling, the power of Yuskavage's subject-matter is inescapable. It sucks us into a vacuum, into which artist,

subject and viewer are forced to contemplate one another. Who are these women? Why are there so many blondes? Curiously, Yuskavage's high school friend, Kathy is the model for many of her paintings (and yes, Kathy is blonde). This disclosure complicates things and makes it harder to view her work as "just painted things," knowing that her good friend has been the model and in some part, the inspiration. This hasn't always been the case. Yuskavage's early paintings, such as *Blonde Brunette Redhead*, were fictitious musings pulled from the realms of her imagination. From 1996 onwards, to broaden her scope, she began to work from the model figures or photographs taken of carefully arranged life models. She also borrowed images from popular culture and found photographs. The progression from works such as *Faucet* 1995, to *True Blonde* 1999, shows an increased poignancy and introspection. The women seem more aware of their exaggerated sexuality, and all the more saddened by it.

The more time we spend with Yuskavage's works, the less about T&A they become. Yuskavage does not intend to titillate, and the male audience isn't really part of the equation; men certainly aren't the protagonists in her discourse. Perhaps her works are about women's own narcissism; the way in which women view one another and their place in the world. Looking at glossy magazines, we see images of exposed breasts and buttocks and we barely raise an eyebrow. Who is the intended viewer: seedy men in raincoats or women looking at fashion, looking for an ideal, looking for an identity? This in turn creates a dichotomy of moralising and cultural complicity. Women of Yuskavage's generation were told that sexuality was crass and exploitative, whilst the media and real life experience showed them the power of sexual appeal. If anything, this is an area post-feminist artists seem keen to explore rather than chastise. Yuskavage's blatant trajectory of flesh may initially elicit a conditioned reflex, but it is more about our response to that. The emphasis is placed upon the viewer. By appropriation, she claims the male fantasy, transforming it into a hybrid of kitsch and horror. A licentious Pygmalion that transgresses the norms of visual convention. Yuskavage raises plenty of questions, but is the first to admit she "doesn't know all the answers." •

*Images reproduced courtesy of Lisa Yuskavage, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.*



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*True Blonde* 1999, oil on linen