

The Overwhelmer

The Art of Lisa Yuskavage

by Robert Enright

In a conversation Lisa Yuskavage had with Chuck Close in 1996, she came up with a characteristically colourful way of describing her tendency to put her talent to such poor use: "like a nun with a foul mouth." Raised in a working-class, Catholic home in Philadelphia, she briefly entertained the possibility of becoming a nun, but ultimately decided to go to art school. Whether she retained the other half of the description she offered to Chuck Close, only her intimates can know with certainty, but there are critics of the art she has produced since the mid-'90s who wouldn't be surprised to hear the figures in them utter language as colourful as the canvases they inhabit.





preceding page: *Changing*, 2005, oil on linen, 77 x 68". All photographs courtesy David Zwirner Gallery, New York.

Viewing Lisa Yuskavage's painted world is a confusing experience. We are presented with all manner of possible gazings, from the teasing liquidities of girl on girl, to the delicate performance of looking and touching that constitutes the act of masturbation. Hers is a woman's world (more accurately, a girl's world), where chronology hasn't caught up to groinology. And while the upper bodies of her females don't match the extravagant proportions of the women in the art of her friend, John Currin, there is still a noticeable degree of exaggeration in her paintings. She is capable of pushing certain portions of the body beyond conventional depiction. "I have an interest in full-throttle, full-on engagement," she says. "I like the idea of overwhelming."

Early in her painting career, she let her tributary side show; there are works that have the sensual insouciance of Bonnard, like *Sleeper (Fragile)*, 1984; or the cheeky concupiscence of Balthus, like *Girl with Skewer*, 1996, and *Cookie*, 1998. In these works, Yuskavage was trying out both styles and subjects: she has been concerned in equal measure with *how* she paints and *what* she paints, although she would have us believe that "all my paintings seem to be about painting." They are also about looking and desiring; it's just that we're never really sure how much tongue we should have in our cheek when we focus our attention on the operation of desire in the work. It would take an unusual degree of objectivity to appreciate only the aesthetic qualities of paintings like *Shirtwaist* and *Nipple*, both from 1999 and both lifted from the uncomplicated domain of soft-core porn. Nor would she be satisfied with that narrow a reading. She doesn't think anyone should ever be praised for their technique; being a painter without technique "would be like saying you're a pilot but you don't know how to fly a plane."

Yuskavage has remarked that one of her intentions was to combine Rembrandt with colour-field painting, to which she might have added, and the sensibility of early *Penthouse* magazine. Among her most notorious paintings is *Screwing Her Pussy on Straight*, 1997, in which a very busty blonde, naked except for a shrug, pays reverent attention to her very bushy nether region. The interior is a reprising of Bonnard; the subject mimics Bob Guccione; and the mark making pays tribute to Rembrandt. The final picture is classic Yuskavage.

In offering a counter-argument to the baser provocations that arise from her work, Yuskavage asks us to consider that what we're looking at is the exact opposite of what we think we're seeing. What if, in gazing at the way the heavy-lidded *Tiffany*, 2002, cups her breasts, or at the self-absorption of the blonde who has her hand inside her panties in *Dusk Delight*, 1998, we are "looking in on something that is purely intimate," rather than at something occasioned by the presence of the viewer? In soliciting this kind of reconsideration, she may be engaged in "fighting the losing battle for the possibility that all things, even opposites, can exist in the same thing," but it is a battle she is prepared to wage. Her sense of painting is that it is an "unbroken history, when I look at art I realize I'm communing with the dead." It is in the context of communication of this nature that she can claim the patchworked aesthetic that constitutes her practice: "painting is taking parts of the dead and making a living thing."

Yuskavage has made clear her admiration for the paintings of De Chirico, especially his "Gladiator Series" (she has her own paintings with the same name). Her assessment of what he was able to achieve in this bizarre body of work is a description that could as easily be applied to what she has been doing over the last dozen years: "They're kind of horrible, kind of beautiful and they're kind of perfect." They're kind of Yuskavage.

Lisa Yuskavage spoke to Robert Enright by phone from New York on May 24, 2007.

BORDER CROSSINGS: *People seem to be perplexed by your work. Are you surprised by their constant vexations?*

LISA YUSKAVAGE: I'm not sure what to say. I'm so in the midst of what I'm doing that I'm not really paying much attention. Making the work is so central to my being, it captures so much of my time and attention, and I'm so involved in the present and what's coming that I don't look back. That's an honest response to the question. The other thing is that it's a real privilege to have anybody care at all because there was a period of time where I didn't have that. You know the old joke, as long as they spell my name right. In my case, that's quite a challenge. But it feels invigorating to be a part of a dialogue and what's wonderful about the way the system is set up is that I'm not out there. I'm sequestered and

I've worked hard, learning how to protect myself from what people say.

BC: *In all the criticism I've read about you, the one consistent thing is the high regard critics have for your painterly skills. I assume that the quest for beauty in a painterly way has been something that you've pursued?*

LY: I would say not a quest, but a struggle with beauty. There's a quote by the scientist, Gregory Bateson, that seemed hokey when I first read it, but it stuck with me. It's something like, "Art is a man's quest for grace, sometimes his ecstasy in partial success, sometimes his rage and agony at failure." I think when I read the quote I was particularly aware that as much as I may have wanted beauty—"grace" is a better word—I knew I didn't have direct access to it. Because the thing I could paint was the failure of that. There are paintings like *Rorschach Blot* or *Bad Babies* that were, for lack of a better word, vulgar.

BC: *Were those consciously bad paintings or was it a question of a failure of technique?*

LY: No, if you're a painter and you don't have technique, it would be like saying you're a pilot but you don't know how to fly a plane. Painters should be able to paint. I don't really think that anyone should ever be praised for technique. I actually have no interest in my own technique. What I'm interested in is a conversation about the formal progression, or the pictorial language, that has evolved in the painting, and the way in which an element like technique has had to evolve. I think more in terms of process than technique. Even though I had plenty of art school, my real education began when I started painting on my own. I think everything I do is a way of learning. I make a series of small paintings and then find a way to use them to open up something in a larger painting. Using one-to-one scale drawings to paintings is something I'd never done before, but it does come from the past. Leonardo made one-to-one ratio drawings that were literally called cartoons because they were punctured with holes. I didn't need to poke the holes because we have other ways now

Sarah II, 2005, oil on linen, 9 x 12"



of making the transfer, but what I'm interested in is how these shifts open up certain passages in my head.

BC: So, is the dialogue you're conducting with yourself and your own work essentially self-referential?

LY: There is a lot of that, yes. It's definitely open to other things and there are people to whom, when I see their work, I have to tip my hat. Neo Rausch recently opened a wonderful body of work at the Met. Maybe that work has nothing to do with me but 10 years from now, it might. I try not to force anything. You know, I lived in Rome on several occasions and the first time there were things I saw that in no way



Empathy/Apathy,
2006, graphite on
paper, 12 x 9"

was I skilled enough or mature enough to use. But, emotionally and psychically, those things have stuck with me. Many years later, as I began to shed a lot of the youthful stuff that gets in the way of being able to think clearly, I started to notice some of these things popping in.

BC: In paintings like *Marie Smoking* and *Cookiepuss*, I notice visual echoes of *Balthus*. You've talked about your admiration for Balthus's lack of self-consciousness, which I assume is something you also wanted to use in making a painting. Those echoes wouldn't be problematic for you?

LY: No, because my work is forceful and it seems very cognitive. That's the paradox and anything worthwhile is paradoxical. I see something and I try

to forget about it. Then, if it finds its way back to the surface, I'm thrilled to let it live, especially if it's in a weird new way. But it has to have been processed. It reminds me of a joke my grandmother used to tell. You should know that I was born on a farm in Ireland. Paddy and Mickey are having a glass of whisky at the pub and Paddy says to Mickey, "When I'm gone, would you mind pouring a bottle of whisky over me grave?" And Mickey says, "Yeah, if you don't mind me passing it through me kidneys first." So I have to pass everything through my kidneys.

BC: You consciously didn't set out to be uncategorizable, did you?

LY: Not at all. I had been making paintings that were extremely categorizable, paintings that were really boring, what a woman artist who went to Yale might make. Certain scales, certain colour. I had a show because I was being rewarded for playing the part. I walked into the exhibition and I thought I was going to die. I couldn't believe how much that work did not have anything to do with me, and I had made it. I had bought a dress and shoes, I did the makeup and the hair, and I hated the work and wanted to leave. I said, I'm going to die if I paint this way; I literally think it's going to kill me. Nothing made sense to me because, when you're a painter, the activity is like air, water and calories. It was a way of propelling myself in space. I said, this is something I don't recognize, I can't see the point. I wasn't talking suicide. I was talking about radically rethinking my paintings. But, then in another way, they're markers of a real emotional moment in an artist's life. There's no joking around. What occurred to me was that perhaps painting itself was the problem. I felt that somehow class had entered the picture. This country is very odd about class; they deny it exists because you can come from the Projects and become a millionaire by being a rap star or basketball player.

BC: But as a working-class girl from Philadelphia at Yale, class distinctions were clear to you?

LY: I was very sensitive to it and I felt very alienated. It took me a long time to even recognize that. But I began to realize in those paintings that I had been aping to be somebody I wasn't, which was, in essence, to deny my class. With art, you have to be aware of the past and the premises of the past, but at the same time, you're pretty much cooking this stuff up from scratch.

BC: Let's talk about the capacity to make things up. In *Tiffany* or *Nipple*, you've deliberately eroticized the paintings and they've become enticements to the gaze. You seem to be encouraging a straight male response to the work. Those paintings might have come out of a standard skin mag.

LY: Maybe the best way to approach my work is to recognize what it makes you think about and then think of the opposite. Maybe they can exist at the same time. *Tiffany* is a little oil sketch that, let's say, is a particularly self-involved one. I like that term. After all, there's nothing more self-involved than masturbating. But if we start with your premise that these are about the gaze, I would say fair enough. But what if it's the other side; what if we're looking in on something that is purely intimate? And it's not about any of those things. It's really about the act of painting itself. All my paintings, whether they're about abuse, about one chick climbing another chick, or about masturbation, always seem to me to be about painting.

BC: I'm not going to let you get away that easily. Of course, they're about painting. But they're not Hans Hoffmann paintings with a different recognition of what the push-pull theory might mean. Because you're dealing in representation, your works open themselves up to readings that no abstract painting could ever imagine.

LY: I love that. I remember reading somewhere, I think it's in Rob Storr's book on Guston, where he talks about Guston as somebody who literalized the struggle between being a figurative and an abstract artist, how the mark becomes one thing when it's in a field painting and another thing when it's attached to a Klan head.

BC: Yes, Guston talks about the battle between form and subject matter.

LY: That's the quote I'm thinking of. That battle is part of what the representation is about. Guston was this guy who changed his name from Goldstein to Guston. So you can't tell me that showing a man painting with a Klan head on is just about painting. It's either a self-aware, self-hating Jew or you're hiding out.

BC: But you talk about the real you and one of the things you said was how you didn't recognize the paintings you made coming out of Yale. So I assume your quest has been to find subject matter and a way of rendering it

that expresses you. You've been remarkably successful in doing that by choosing what I think Schjeldahl calls "this vexatious notion of the female nude," which is so loaded with art history. People talk about you, Cecily Brown and Marlene Dumas as artists who have forced a new way of thinking about the nude that becomes even more problematic. You can dismiss the problem of the male gaze, but the female gaze at the female is altogether more complicated.

LY: Then there's the female gaze of the female via the male gaze via the female gaze. I used to get this a lot when I would give a lecture. Somebody would talk to me and say, "I'm really shocked to hear that you



Swamp, 2005, oil on linen, 9 5/8 x 8"

don't have a manifesto." But I don't obfuscate, so I'm going to bring the word up: I'm riding in on a feminist horse. And that must have a manifesto, which is about righting the wrongs of the past. And either I'm a self-hating woman and I'm aping to the rich fat cats, I'm sure you've come across the stroke material for the patriarchy comment. So I'm just aping, I'm almost like the painter as stripper. Or, on the other hand, I'm taking that all down, I'm dismantling that. The truth is I wouldn't be interested in what I do if either extreme were true.

BC: How do you feel about irony? I guess what I'm asking is does a sense of the ironic inform the work?



Cookie, 1998, oil on
linen, 35 x 30"

LY: I wouldn't deny irony exists. As a person, I'm a smart aleck and I enjoy a good joke. And I also spent a lot of time looking at Caravaggio. He was pretty much a wise guy and he made jokes and his work has a lot of irony. At the same time, it's extremely devout. I'm not comparing myself to Caravaggio. I am merely saying this kind of thing exists and has existed, and I would simply like to continue to fight

the losing battle for the possibility that all things, even opposites, can exist in the same thing.

BC: *I think of a painting like Little Honeymoon from 1998, which has this extraordinary, I would even say breathtaking, nipple that seems to take off from the end of this runway of flesh. That's clearly a conscious move on your part to seduce the viewer into the painting.*

LY: The thing I remember about doing that painting was finding a grey that I had premixed out of ultramarine blue, raw umber and lead white, and how good it looked next to this deep, light it created. Somehow it felt right to do it with an interior exterior. And then that grey seemed to evoke snow; it was almost like a cold exterior with the peaks of a mountain. So I was thinking about the mountains and skiing.

BC: So is that breast a ski slope?

LY: Well, You have a form and then there's another form reacting to it. So that nipple probably came out of a reaction to the forms behind it, that she's looking out this window with a kind of yearning and the length of that nipple just started to look better and righter in the painting. It's really about intuition. I'll be stoned alive before anybody will believe how much it's about intuition.

BC: In *KK Thinking*, the nipple on the woman is like a rich, dark coffee bean; in *Little Laura* it's a sort of firm, juicy grape. My guess is that, for the viewer, these are not paintings in which colour mixing would be the primary area of speculation or appreciation.

LY: I did something similar in an interview with Chuck Close. He asked me a question and I started on about complementary colours and primary colours, and he said, "Yeah, but there are some hard little nipples under that shirt." The point is that what the paintings are for me and what they are for the general Not Me are not the same thing. I watched a little bit of a movie the other night called *An Interview with Alfred Hitchcock*, where he talks about being the only person who didn't get to enjoy his own movies because he's crafting them.

BC: Are you still avoiding the making of well-behaved paintings?

LY: I think it's always better to annoy the society that is closer to you than one that is more distant. So if I judge American museums, I guess I'm doing a damn good job because they're having a real hard time with me. I think if Rembrandt lived in our times, or Vermeer, they'd be involved in this kind of stuff too. Because I think the people in my generation are responding to the world around us. I think if Caravaggio were around, he wouldn't be restricted to the mores of his time, up in America, world, the plastic world, the post-human-condition world. I think of Rembrandt and what he exaggerated, or where he emphasized. There were things that were within his own

time, we're a product of this time.

BC: But when he also paints his wife Saskia urinating, he's obviously in more disputed territory. I guess what I'm saying is that all painters must have some level of intolerance of society inside their practice; they're always pushing at the edges.

LY: Well, it just depends upon what you mean by "society."

BC: Painting what's acceptable as opposed to what's taboo or transgressive.

LY: In the end I think museums still need to please a board of trustees and an attending public. I think that's fine, but it's not like I'm living in my car. So where's the resistance? I don't feel like the common person is having a problem with my work because I have plumbers and electricians coming into my studio. I did a funny project one time for *Art Forum*, which never got published. We were to take our work, in my case it was a painting called *Helga*, into places that would not normally house a painting. *Helga* is a torso of a woman, looking hard to the left and it looks like she has a walleye. And then her nipple is doing exactly the same thing on the

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breast that's facing you. So it's a funny painting. But I loved this idea of taking the painting into the world and I really got into it. I worked with a photographer named Kevin Landers whose artwork was street art. He would take pictures of panhandlers or puddles and he did one series where he went up to women all over the city and asked them very nicely—he was a sweet kid—if they would let him take pictures of their breasts. And it's amazing how many of them did. Anyway, I live near Thompson Square Park in the East Village and back then it was a bit rough. So we took this easel-sized painting inside the park. My first idea was to lean it against a tree and get pigeons to shit on it. I remember we put out birdseed, but we couldn't get the pigeons to come near the painting. Then we took it to another part of the park to show to these homeless teenager punkers, who call themselves anarchists, he would be a p
falafel and drink Colt 45. They hated the high-end art of he would
it and one guy said, "I'll put my boot through the fucking painting." I was like,
we got a cab to drive us around and the driver looked at the

painting, then looked at me and said, "Why would a nice girl like you want to be involved in something as sordid as that painting?" What I found interesting was how the birds had one reaction, the punkers decided they hated me and they hated the whole thing, and then the cab driver had this other blended reaction. Then we found a beat cop who was probably 19 or 20 years old, a bit chunky, big cheeks, red hair. He



was Irish. I asked him if he would hold the painting and he said to me, "This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." I had the whole range, from the birds that wouldn't even shit on it to the cop who said you're so talented and this is so beautiful. Then we dropped in on a movie set, where a NYU class was making a movie where they pretended to kill a girl and the girl looked a lot like the figure in the painting. They were simulating blood so we stuck it in the background. It was kind of obscure. Sadly, the project never happened. But what I liked was this feeling that it really depends upon the viewer. It had different vibrations determined by the person and I think that's still pretty true.

BC: When you were looking for a way to find subject matter that would allow you to express yourself, why didn't you look at people like Eric Fischl and David Salle? Balthus makes a lot of sense, but weren't there American models you might have considered?

LY: I'm surprised nobody's ever asked me that before. The answer is I didn't know their work. I know it sounds hard to believe but the people who knew me back then could to-

tally attest to this: I was extremely unaware of contemporary art until the day that I went out and looked at it. Then I saw shows by Jeff Koons and Mike Kelley, shows that just happened to be what was there. I remember being surprised by it. When I finally saw an Eric Fischl painting, he was past the point where he was making those really vivid paintings. I wasn't into art magazines, I still don't read art magazines. But when I did finally get a chance to understand his painting, what I liked about it and Salle's work is that they were wrong, not right. I think what is always interesting about contemporary art is its wrongness, not its rightness, and the way in which it creates an inevitability. It's something that none of us wanted, but it landed and shoved itself in and then suddenly you can't imagine a world where it doesn't exist.

BC: Do you think your work occupies that same kind of space?

LY: I definitely hope so. I can't imagine taking them out of the equation. I felt the '80s were very interesting but one of the things I found un-nourishing about them is that I wasn't interested in collage. And obviously Salle was working a cut-and-paste collage way of de-

veloping subconscious connections between things.

BC: *Picabia* was a significant influence, which has not been much talked about because America tends to ignore Europe. But American painters don't.

LY: That's interesting because what I wanted to say about Fischl has to do with Europe. He and Salle went to school together at Cal Art but they didn't study painting the way my generation studied painting. My painting education really was to go to Europe

BC: You did your own grand tour, did you?

LY: I did. I went to every museum. I really wanted to see things *in situ* because it matters to see where things came

from. I couldn't make heads or tails of it at the time but, when I came back, nose what you don't like than to decide what you do like. I had got out of grad school, crappy body of work, to do next. I was looking around, trying to figure it out. I hadn't yet seen a lot of contemporary painting, but, because I'd come from Philadelphia, about realism. It's a town that is invested in realism.

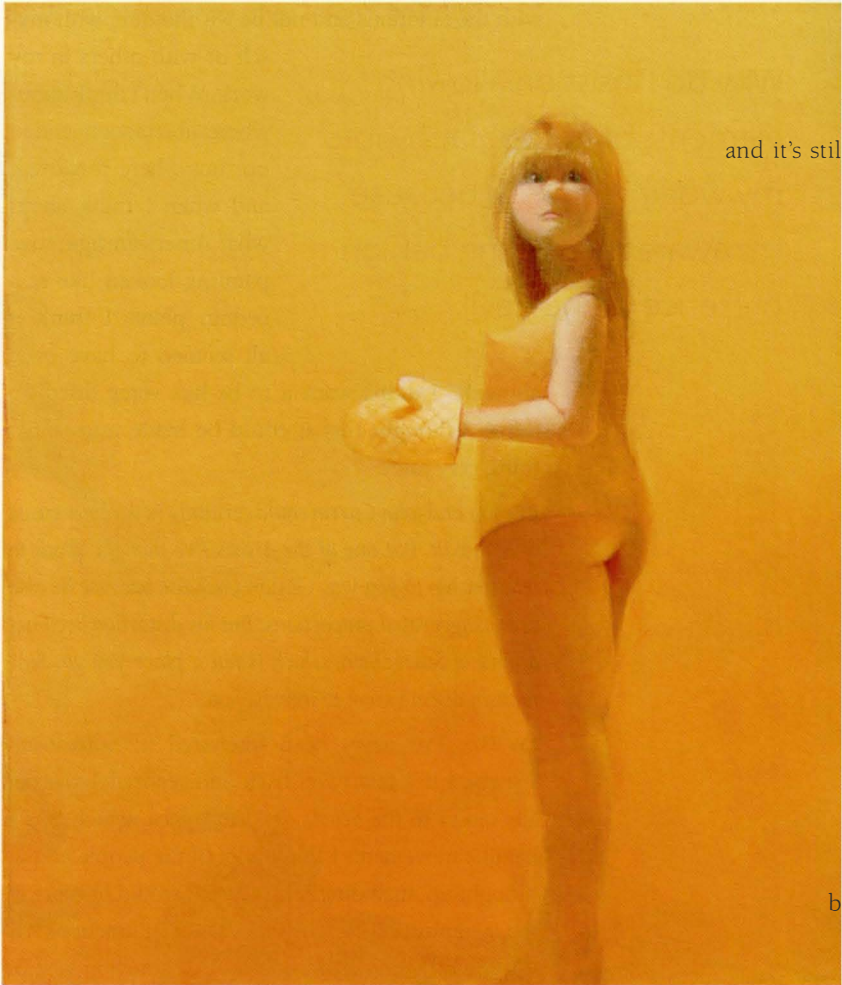
BC: *Thomas Eakins and that whole tradition of realism is located there, isn't it?*

LY: Exactly, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts had done a show called "Contemporary American Realism," and other than Chuck Close's painting, it so much. I said to myself, "I guess I want to be a contemporary American realist, of these paintings." After that I went to Europe and I came back diagnosing for myself what the problem was: these painters were forced, because of their times, to reject Europe. America was so invested in not being Europe. These people were also naughtily still painting representationally during a time when you were supposed to be painting abstractions. It was stupid to paint representationally. You did have Clement Greenberg saying what was right and what was wrong; flatness was our thing. We reject Europe and we're American and we are coming out of different things. It's a rejection of the history of painting. But I looked at that stuff and I thought, this is not what I want to do with my life. I can't believe I had the gall to even think, what I wanted to spend my life doing. I felt that Philip Guston was the one person who had struggled through this. He's a model and also somebody who had failed in his own time. I mean, he was not a success. He had to believe in those paintings. He was doing them for himself. And he was a painter who looked to Europe and it wasn't to make anachronistic, the Piero della Francesca in his paintings. He was staunchly a contemporary person and he did not forget his past, which was the cartoon world. And he did not forget he was an American. But he knew that painting is an unbroken history. And that was something that really guided me. Also, I was thinking, how do you do this without making paintings that look like Philip Guston, because he is a very

strong siren and a lot of people have crashed their boat against those rocks?

BC: *Because he's such a fabulous painter.*

LY: There's a factor that is hard to talk about, have to be a fairly strong person and have a fairly potent inner life to make all this work. You can't be



a pushover because all the forces of history, the combined power of the past, the present and the power of painting, can overwhelm who you are.

BC: *You must find art intoxicating to make. One of the things you mentioned earlier was how much fun was involved. I sense there's a lot of self-delight, to use Yeats's term, in making these paintings.*

LY: That's true. I think that's why I continue to develop different ways of creating processes to get into it. The delight comes from different aspects. I'm not a Puritan by birth and I'm not a WASP and I don't have the need to be prissy. I have an interest in full

Blonde with Oven Mitt, 1994,
oil on linen, 34 x 30"

facing page: *Brood*, 2005–06,
oil on linen, 77 x 69"

throttle, full-on engagement. I like the idea of overwhelming. That's one of the things I learned from Guston. The thing about him is that it's too much. It just doesn't end. I think the delight in those paintings is pretty apparent. And the paintings that were the least liked when he was making them are the paintings that you can look at the longest today. I want to turn on lots and lots of switches and not be cheap with the emotions and not be withholding with my-

self or with others in my work. When I think about where abstraction ended up, not where it started, and when I think about what American figurative painting looked like at a certain point, I think it all seemed to have been

Why do I insist on allowing elements of pornography into my work? I think it's because I'm aware that it's the benign presence of the devil.

anorexic. I didn't want it to be like some dried-up thing, I thought that it could be made into something very juicy.

BC: *You and John Currin could certainly never be accused of anorexia. But one of the artists I've thought about in relationship to you was Gaston Lachaise because he also uses exaggerated proportions. But his distortion becomes a kind of Surrealism, which is not a place you go. Surrealism doesn't seem to interest you.*

LY: No, I've never been interested in Surrealism. I studied it a few years back and realized I was really closer to the *Scuola de Metaphysica*, which was a parallel movement. I think a lot of the people you've brought up, including John Currin, would fit more in the metaphysical category and how that functions has to do with automatism in a way. Abstraction is supposedly automatism, what Surrealism was at its purest point. I'm going to try to encourage people to think more about painters like De Chirico. Guston was a big De Chirico fan and I find that these things line up historically as points of influence. What I find interesting is this idea of dipping back into the past, from a very firm sense of yourself in the present and without becoming one of these goofballs who make backward-looking art. Your work starts looking like some idiotic version of Michelangelo. I went to visit De Chirico's apartment in Rome, which is something that anyone can do. At first you're a little disappointed because it's got low ceilings and it's a lot more modest than you think it would be. But it very slowly begins

to reveal itself. The thing that really stuck with me was there's a television set and a chair, almost an Archie Bunker chair, with one of those free-standing ashtrays and a remote control. It's all still there. There's the door to come in and the television set is across from it, which is really an awkward setup. Very bad feng shui, you would say. Obviously, somebody sat in the chair and smoked. All of a sudden it occurred to me that De Chirico's wife didn't like his smoking, so he had to sit in that chair almost out the door. The thing about the TV set was that it was a real dinosaur from the '70s. De Chirico would sit there with the sound off, hour after hour, smoking, and watching these movies about Roman gladiators. I thought, well, he doesn't want to be with his wife, and the homoerotic moments in those late paintings make you wonder. I was very interested in that, which is why I allowed for something similar in my most recent body of work.

BC: *You mean in your women-on-women works?*

LY: Yes. There are many, many reasons why those paintings ended up the way they did, but things began to merge and I really didn't expect De Chirico to pound away at my head with these gladiator paintings. If it's not homoerotic, it's because it's a struggle with the self.

BC: *Is that the source of your idea that these aren't two figures, but two aspects of the same character involved in either wrestling or consoling or trying to deal with the self? It's self-talking, then.*

LY: And that could allow for the fact that when Chuck Close said, "Those are some hard nipples under that shirt," lesbians to me, or that looks like a lap dance. I like all those readings.

BC: *So one of the things you're doing in that painting of the two women is you're reflecting De Chirico was doing in the gladiator paintings. It creeps into the sensibility, as if by osmosis.*

LY: Absolutely. I walk right by some things in museums. Either there's nothing there for me, or at that moment there's nothing there for me. Then, at another moment, it stops you and draws you in. For me, art is actually a séance. Young people don't want to hear any of this mystical shit. But when I look at art, I realize that you're communing with the dead. Usually, they call that a séance. And I have truly laughed at paintings made by people 500 years ago

and it's not because of something I'm just throwing in. With Caravaggio, I think of the intensity of the kind of person he was. You feel like you catch a whiff of him. And it's not just that he murdered somebody. He was a bad boy. Looking at art is an experience that is full of life, not of death. It brings people into the present and you laugh at jokes. I think that good art is this big long conversation among all of us.

mould when he made them. They're kind of horrible, kind of beautiful and they're kind of perfect.

BC: *Do you think of your work as being brave?*

LY: I think I have nerve, which is different from being brave. I'm not in any danger. I think people who are brave are truly in danger. I mean, if this was the Soviet Union and I was doing this in the face of the threat of death or imprisonment, then I would be brave.



BC: *Where does De Chirico fit into this extended conversation?*

LY: The De Chirico paintings are very hard to see because they're all in private collections in Rome. But they just seem to be something beautifully backward- and forward-looking, and inward-looking, too. They seem brave in some way and they were also these crazy-looking paintings. He broke the

BC: *When you talked about Eric Fischl and David Salle, you said you can't take them out of the mix. Clearly, people like you and John Currin have changed painting. It can't be the same because of you, too. Now you have to be reckoned with.*

LY: I like that. I think that's because we're doing something wrong and making it a right. My mom used to say two wrongs don't make a right, but in art

Small Morning, 2004, oil on panel, 7 5/8 x 9 3/4"

they do. This sounds like a fucking socialist realist story, but it is true and it's one of the great influences in my life. If I was brave, it was because I was risking poverty in making things that people didn't want. People were telling me, nobody wants this work, and I'd say, I need to do this work. That was the brave part as a young person. At this point I've got enough of a support system. No matter how far out on the limb I go, I know I'm not going to break it. I created the limb that I'm hanging out on. At the time, I really didn't know what was going to happen, but going in that direction without knowing how it was going to turn out felt right to me. My father had a job delivering milk and then he switched and started delivering pies. He drove a truck. He had to wake up at midnight and he worked until noon. He was an intelligent guy and he hated his job but he did these very dull, safe jobs because he believed in protecting his family from risk. It was always about the children growing up in a place that was stable and peaceful enough to study. And it wasn't about his ego, which he subsumed. I'm very happy to say he's still alive, living in Florida and playing golf, but, back then, I figured he was going to drop dead. He'd leave in the middle of a snowstorm or rainstorm or hailstorm, he'd be sick and would go to work. The guy just ploughed through. I remember one night when we were all getting ready to go to bed and he came downstairs. My father looked at me and said, "Whatever you do, just do what you love, and I will always be behind you. It's too late for me but I want you to make good on what I've done. Don't worry about safety, do what you want." I didn't realize he was throwing down a bet to me, saying you have to risk everything. It's this sense of roots and wings; he threw down the roots and it was up to me to fly. I was an artist coming from a place where there's no art and no education, and, in spite of the fact that they both wanted me to go beyond them, it was very traumatic for my parents and for me, too. That's why I had those class issues. My mother is one of nine children and her mother is one of 13 children. They have a farm in Ireland that people are still farming. There are nuns and priests in the family and I asked this one woman who has been a nun all her life—one assumes she's a virgin—what she thought of my work. In a very sweet way, she says, "I really don't think God would give someone a gift like this

and that it would be a sin." I said, "Oh, you just like me." And she said, "Yeah, I like you and I know your heart." And I said, "But if you didn't know me?" and she says, "I just think that art is a celebration of God." Her feeling was that you have to paint. I think that's something that has occurred to me a lot lately: that the struggle with grace in my work is a struggle between good and evil. Why do I insist on allowing elements of pornography into my work? I think it's because I'm aware that it's the benign presence of the devil. Whether I believe in the devil is really not the point. I'm talking about the idea. I think this idea of the sacred and the profane has always existed in art. It's a constant theme for me: the struggle between the desire to be right and the desire to be wrong. I think it's all just wanting to be true. And what is true and correct and right in art is often wrong in the world. I'm not advocating women going around showing off their boobies. I'm aware this is art and it isn't real life. I'm not a libertine. I'm actually more prudish than people would think I am.

BC: *Mutualism, with its phallic toe, is a fabulously cheeky painting. That foot comes out from the figure as if it were a cock.*

LY: I like that painting, but I think the really creepy thing about it is the idea of the monstrous monkey she's got on her back. It's a hard point to get to where you totally need and crave the idea that opposites are contained. There's no such thing as a yes or a no, especially when it comes to art. That's why at times I say I don't really know what my work is about. I'm not trying to avoid the issue; I just don't know. I know why I do it and I can tell you the things I was thinking about, but I can't tell you what it's about. I would take it one step further and would say that anything you think it's about, consider that it's also about the opposite. I would like to allow for that. I try to take anything out that leads me to an obvious end too quickly. I like to have contradictions.

BC: *So you tease yourself in the making of the painting?*

LY: Absolutely. If Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* were to be created today, it would probably have fake boobs, or it would have many more elements that are hypersexualized. It's connected to this idea of taking parts of a cadaver and putting them together. Painting is taking parts of the dead and making a living thing. ■

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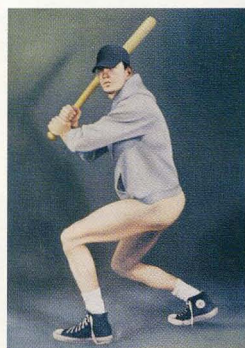
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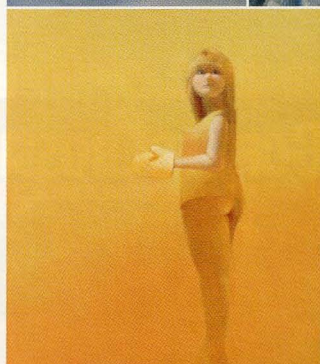
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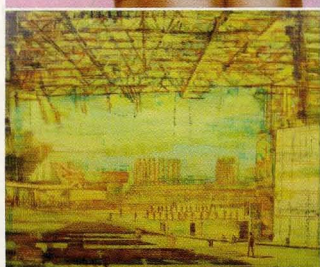
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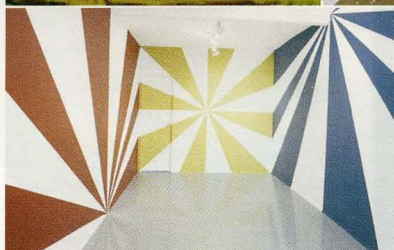
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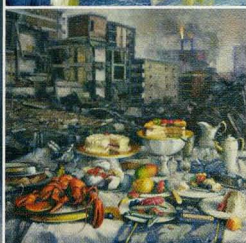
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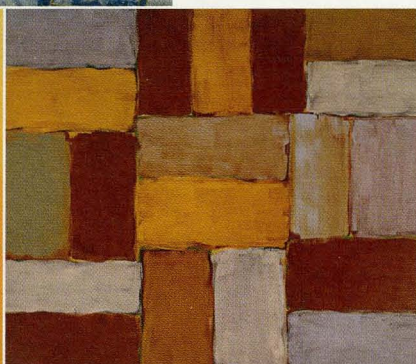
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