

PAMELA WYE

DESIRING MACHINES AND EXQUISITE CORPULENCE: LISA YUSKAVAGE'S GIRLIES

With a gorgeous old-master technique, Lisa Yuskavage creates oil paintings with titillating content and scintillating surfaces. In her most recent paintings from 1996, strong light sources emanate like a scorching sun from the painting itself (as in "Bad Habits") or from a window outside the painting's range (as in "Foodeating Hardplace"). In both cases, the light molests her female figures with the bleaching glare of a powerful spotlight. Singular and luminously singled out, her figures have the look of chosen ones—sparkling highlights in the hair, sun-kissed nipples, and large expanses of engorged flesh, carved by light into absurd volumes. Like Vermeer, Yuskavage uses light to create a psychological mood, a moment of contemplation, albeit perverse. And, again, like Vermeer, her use of light implies a larger space outside the claustrophobic interior of the painting. While Vermeer's space is generally a hyper-defined upper class domestic interior, Yuskavage's space is generally diffuse and undefined except for the expanse of a single sugary color, like soft emerald greens, turquoises, and pinks. Yet, paradoxically, this expanse of color, which extends as reflected light onto the bodies themselves, has the sickeningly sweet claustrophobia of a self-absorption so complete that no outside world can, in fact, exist. Yuskavage carefully creates the illusion of volume but not the illusion of spatial depth. The viewer can gaze at the voluminous girls but can sustain no illusion of occupying the space with them. These girls (and they are girlie in the most ribald way) live, think and feel only to the limits of their own flesh. Their own discomfort in their bodies seems to make them incapable of caring about the gaze we fix upon them. Or is it, perhaps, that they are so enthralled by the gaze they imagine perpetually aimed at women's bodies that they have literally made themselves sick playing up to it?

In Vermeer's paintings, there's a complex coded symbolism popularized in 16th and 17th century European "emblem books" through mottoes and illustrations that required deciphering. Many emblem books dealt with issues of love. A letter implies a love letter. Love is a sea. Calm seas were good omens, rough seas were bad, etc.

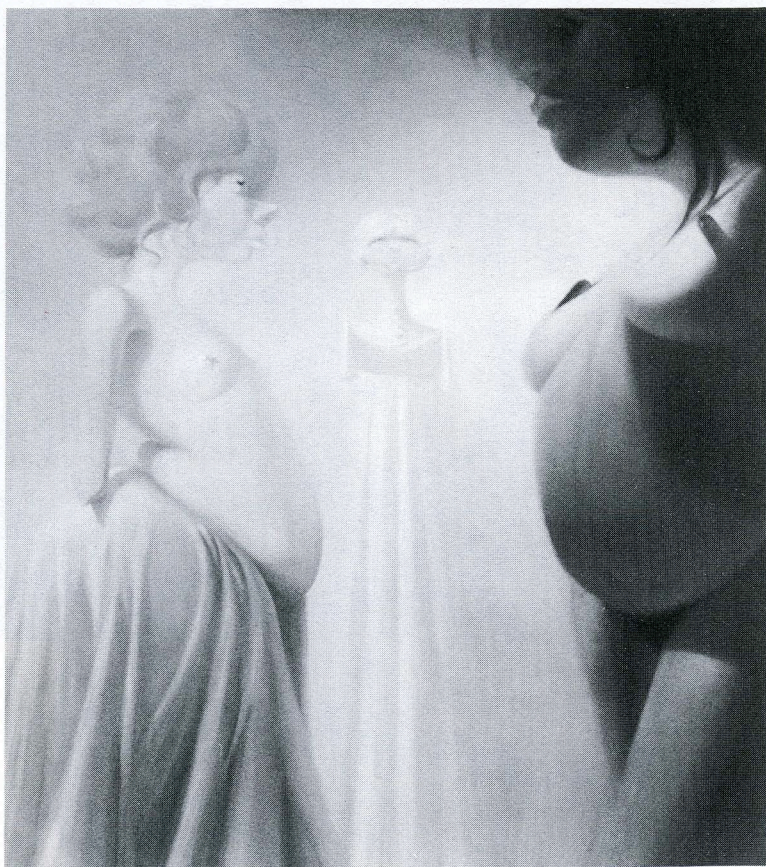
So an image of a woman reading a letter near a painting of a calm sea (as in Vermeer's "Love Letter") implies the happy twist of a love bond. In Yuskavage's paintings of girls, we can read a coded language of love in our own time. The bulbous bodies imply a satiation that is oral and food-related rather than sexual. We don't read these big-bellied girls as pregnant. They don't have the impersonal self-contentment of fertility symbols. By circuitous means—narcissism, self-absorption, fear, longing, self-loathing—love is detoured. It is as though desire is so intense, yet so confused, that it literally twists the body into grotesque shapes and postures when it can't get out. Yuskavage is on to something akin to the zeitgeist of enraged morphing one can witness weekly on "The X-Files" when unsuspecting bodies are possessed by mysterious forces and begin to violently change form.

Yuskavage's earlier paintings from 1993, like "Big Blonde with Teacup" and "Blonde with Oven Mitt," played with the stereotype of coy, sexy innocence—a retro-sexuality, in fact. Her childlike women were partially clothed in blouses that grazed bare rounded butts and exposed pubic triangles. The women emerged in a soft light from the background of the paintings. In "Kelly Marie," the sweet green of the girl's blouse emerges like a dream from a similarly green-colored background as she moves toward our presumably desiring gaze. In "Big Marie," the plump girl's skimpy green baby-girl dress also emerges softly from the green background, while her pointed toe and self-possessed pose flirts coolly with the desirous viewer. These girls have the cartoony computerized slickness of a composite boy-toy meets Toy Story. These earlier images are about a coy complicity (with the slightest twinge of suspicion, mockery or skepticism). While these girls pose themselves for, and are viewed from, the outside gaze, Yuskavage's recent nude rude girls ("Wrist Corsage," "Bad Habits" and "Foodeating Hardplace," all 1996) expose, perhaps unknowingly, the pain and perverse experience of being inside these bodies. These are no longer parodies of desirable pinup Betty Boop bodies. No longer flirtatiously clothed but psychologically stripped. These recent paintings are powerful and empathetic portraits of murderously desirous, needy, greedy bodies, infantile in the implacability of their desire. No longer girlies, these bodies in their pain have become polymorphous and boldly embody the rages we can all relate to, however dimly we admit it.

Jersey City
January 13, 1997

LISA YUSKAVAGE

FIVE PAINTINGS



Bad Habits

Oil on linen, 84" x 72", 1996.

(First three Yuskavage paintings: courtesy of Boesky & Gallery Fine Arts, NYC.)



Wrist Corsage

Oil on linen, 42" x 84", 1996.



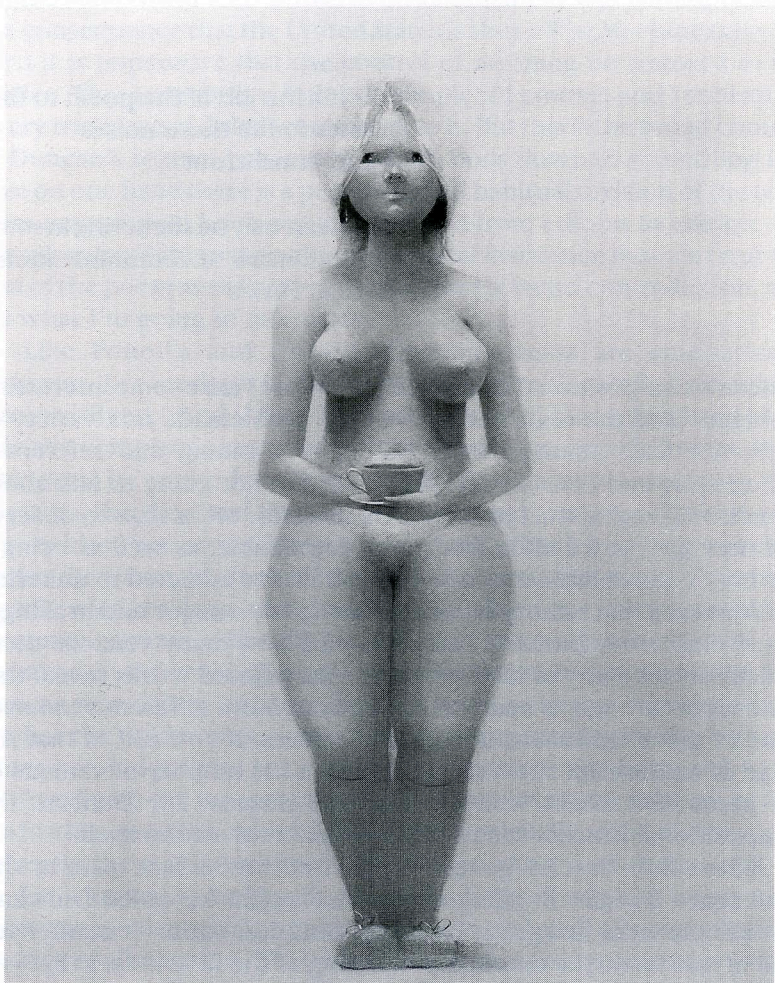
Group
Oil on canvas board, 6" x 8", 1996.



Blonde with Oven Mitt

Oil on linen, 30" x 30", 1993–94.

(Last two Yuskavage paintings: courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.)



Big Blonde with Teacup
Oil on linen, 64" x 50", 1994.