



Preemptive Strike

Lisa Yuskavage's
very weird women
Francine Prose

SHORTLY BEFORE THE 2004 US presidential election, I travelled with a group of American writers to the south of France. There we spent a few days participating in panel discussions and entertaining an audience of appreciative French people with our critiques of the United States. What I quickly realised during the course of all this was that our complaints did not come out of any anti-Americanism, but rather out of love and worry for the ingenious, beautiful experiment of American democracy. Whatever there was to be said about our country at this perilous moment, we wanted to be the ones to say it first – before the French did.

During a period when the word 'preemptive' has in itself become suspect, I realised that (as long as no one is being killed by it) the idea of preemptiveness can have another shade of meaning. It can describe a fierce tenderness for something, and a consequent protectiveness that inspires little jolts of barbed aggression (or at least the desire to say something before someone else does).

I thought too of how aggression can manifest itself as humour, and of how, in her diaries, the novelist Dawn Powell once complained (I know I am misquoting her, perhaps completely) that too few people understand the relation between satire and the love for the thing that one is satirising.

Looking at Lisa Yuskavage's work, I find myself thinking about all this again.



Opposite page
Preening, 2003,
oil on linen,
61 x 45.7 cm
COURTESY MARIANNE BOESKY
GALLERY, NEW YORK

Right
Fuck Face, 2004,
oil on canvas,
24 x 18 cm
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND
GREENGRASS, LONDON

Although because she's such a good painter I don't actually think about any of it right away. The first thing I respond to is the skill with which her paintings are made, how beautiful the surfaces are, and how pleasing they are to look at.

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painter'. So what, then, are we looking at? Naked women, for starters. And not high-culture art-history-naked women, not *permissible* naked women, not Titian or Manet or Picasso, nor any of the representations that we're so used to seeing on museum walls and that even religious people routinely let their children go to see on school trips. These women have a porno edge, but of a very strange sort. 'Soft core' doesn't begin to describe the gauzy miasmas of schoolgirl heat with which these women evoke the intimate narratives of the centrefold. Because they are so dramatic and so beautifully lit, the paintings locate you in the ether of an extraterrestrial space somewhere between the world of Fragonard and that of the airbrush wizards of 1950s and 60s *Playboy* cartoons.

The film director Tamara Jenkins' lively and amazingly readable text (a rarity in art writing) for Lisa Yuskavage's last book, *Small Paintings: 1993–2004*, contains a section about Lisa and her school friends from North Philadelphia stumbling onto the sources of a parallel education:

'The girls from Holy Innocents School gathered together in a kind of unofficial study group to examine the illicit material. Hunched over the magazines, fascinated and repelled, embarrassed and aroused, they feasted on a smorgasbord of female sexual anatomy, devouring a whole year's worth in one sitting. That Alice Petrosino, a fourteen-year-old eighth-grade girl, was only four years younger than Marie Ekkore, the March 1974 Pet of the Month, seemed to the girls an almost impossible fact – one that lingered in the room like an uninvited guest.

'After gorging on piles of *Penthouses*, the girls fell silent and introspective. They knew that they had been exposed to something important, but they didn't know what. A mysterious knowledge seeped deep into their consciousnesses and lay dormant for months and months, maybe years, until the day that it could be retrieved and finally understood.'

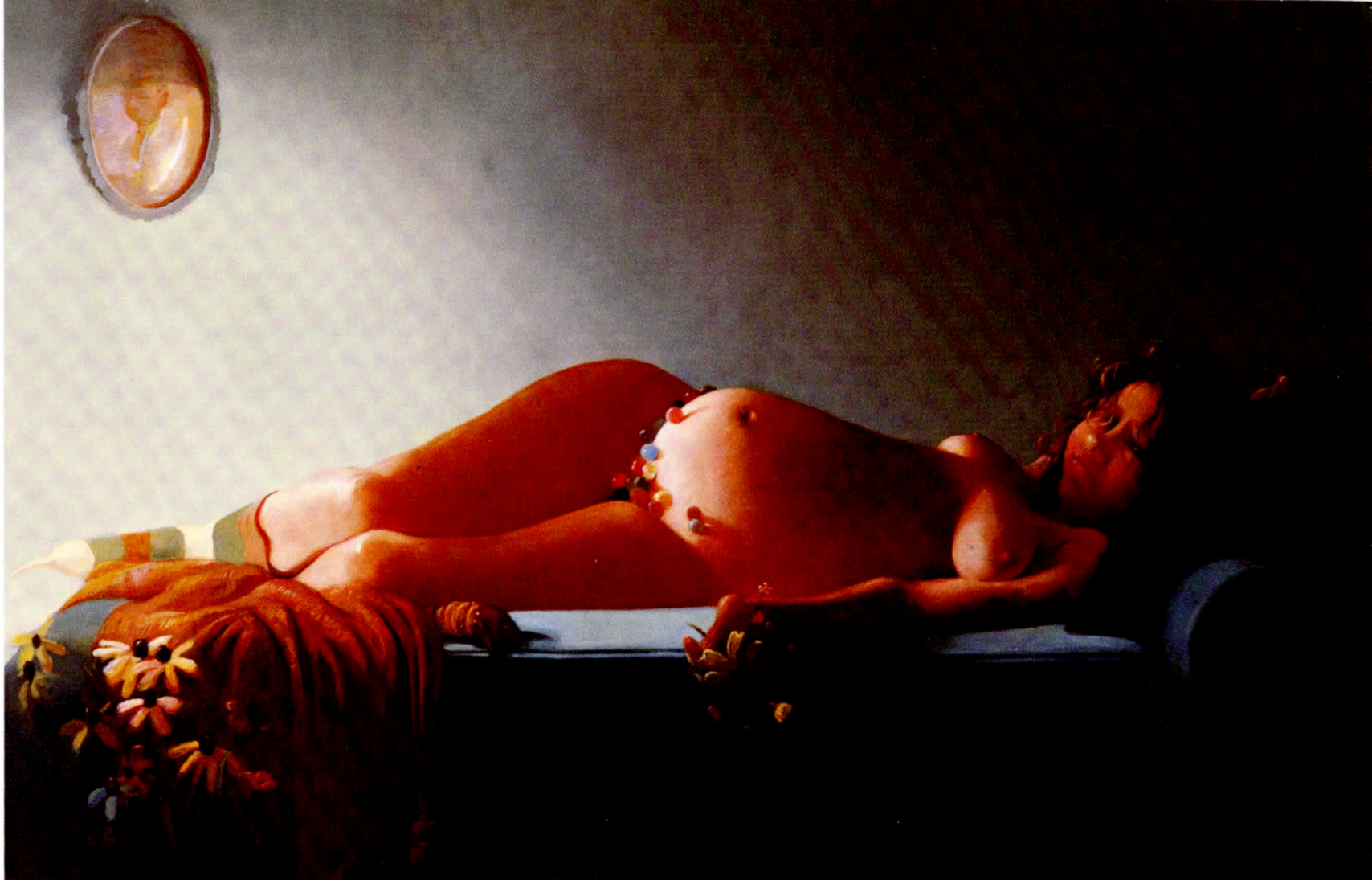
The women in Yuskavage's paintings have loads of personality but very little in the way of faces. Their big brains and complex psyches are not what you look at first. What has come burbling up from the artist's id is a gender without eyeballs – or is it pupils? I mean that part of the eye that might reflect anything other than what the most anxious frat boy wants to see in that *terra incognita* between the female body and the female brain.

Lisa Yuskavage has talked about her admiration for Diane Arbus's work. Both artists, clearly, confront what our culture considers upsetting and even 'freakish'. But perhaps more importantly, both Arbus and Yuskavage give you the sense that they are telling you a secret. Of course, a lot of art does that

From left
 Lisa Yuskavage
 by Jason Schmidt
 COURTESY JASON SCHMIDT

Red Room, 2003,
 oil on linen,
 52.1 x 53.5 cm
 COURTESY MARIANNE BOESKY
 GALLERY, NEW YORK





– Vermeer and Bonnard, for example. It might even be possible to divide great works of art and their creators into those that seem to shout and those that whisper. Both Arbus and Yuskavage are among the more subversive whisperers, at once intense and aware that what they have to whisper might not be what you want to hear. Against all odds, both artists have held on to a bad-girl impulse, that perverse urge to make art out of something that you know you are not supposed to mention. As Yuskavage told Chuck Close in an interview: ‘I exploit what’s dangerous and scares me about myself... My work has always been about things in myself that I feel incredibly uncomfortable with and embarrassed by.’ Which may be part of the reason why her paintings feel at once so personal and so coolly distanced.

The little dramas of nutcase intimacy that these paintings enact come to us out of men’s magazines, funnelled through art history. No one else could have made these paintings, yet Yuskavage cleverly removes herself from the work, disappearing into the luminous space into which the sheer radiance of these women has made the world outside disappear.

Her paintings acknowledge all that, and at the same time are smart enough to be funny about it. They get the joke about women, the joke about the subconscious, the joke about the body. Maybe

it’s not their favourite joke, but there it is. It exists. They understand that one way to diffuse the joke is to tell it about yourself. And yet, at the same time, the paintings move away from all this, back into the more purely pleasurable space of a painting, where they celebrate the desire to make something that will seem funny, beautiful, illuminating or moving to another human being – in other words, to make art.

Walking their soft-focus, foggy line between the shaman and the bimbo, Lisa Yuskavage’s women are proof (I almost wrote living proof) of how many contradictions can be captured with a brush and paint and canvas – the beautiful and the horrifying, the seductive and the repellent, the innocent and the knowing. Her paintings almost seem to have their own soundtrack: an otherworldly giggle floating up from the depths of a stew composed, in equal parts, of fury and forgiveness for everything we humans can’t help being, thinking and doing. ●

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From top
Balls, 2004
oil on linen, 152.9 x 97 cm

Weee, 2004
watercolour on paper,
31 x 41 cm

Sneaky, 2004
watercolour on paper,
31 x 41 cm

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