

A photograph of Lisa Yuskavage in a church in Rome. She is sitting in the foreground, looking directly at the camera. She has dark hair and is wearing a dark top. Her right hand is resting on her chin, and her left hand is resting on her lap. In the background, there is a large, ornate statue of a figure, possibly a religious figure, and a dark, rectangular structure, possibly a tomb or altar. The lighting is warm and dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

WHEN IN ROME: LIVING AND WORKING IN THE ETERNAL CITY, LISA YUSKAVAGE WAS CAPTIVATED BY BOTH SMALL PLEASURES AND GRAND WORKS OF ART.

Lisa Yuskavage at the church of Sant'Agostino in Rome, in front of one of her favorite paintings in the city, Caravaggio's *Madonna dei Pellegrini*.



I've lived in Rome twice. The first time was as part of Temple University's Tyler School of Art study abroad program. I was 19 and a junior. The experience profoundly affected me and changed the way I experienced the world. When my parents picked me up from JFK afterward, I remember almost crying in the backseat on the way to our house in North Philadelphia. It had never occurred to me before that things were so ugly in New Jersey—at least the part we were going through. That experience awakened in me a desire to see beautiful things and art. It was the opposite of Stendhal Syndrome. Is there a name for that?

For years, I was afraid to go back. I traveled around Europe and visited other places in Italy, but Rome now loomed in my consciousness as something completely ideal. It was like planning on visiting your high-school sweetheart after so many years. Would he turn out to be a bloated alcoholic?

Twenty-two years after my first visit, I returned. My husband, Matvey Levenstein, was awarded the Prix de Rome to study at the American Academy. I had applied twice myself, but didn't make the cut. I was finally getting in, but sideways, as what the academy calls a "fellow traveler." It was a great way to go.

We arrived in the fall of 2003 with our two dogs. The academy provides living and work space for grant winners, but it doesn't allow pets, so, via e-mail, we had rented an apartment near the Trastevere train station. The neighbors were sweet and the neighborhood, the working class area of Rome, had wonderful trattorias, but the building was even more depressing than what we had been enduring in the East Village. I was startled to realize that even Rome has ugliness and poverty.

Matvey and I decided to move. We found a tiny, beautiful apartment at 195 Via Giulia early in the winter. It was like going from one extreme to the other. Via Giulia is a fantasy. The apartment's windows looked into the gardens of Galleria Spada, home of Borromini's great perspective gallery.

The academy was kind enough to rent me a spectacular studio, and I found myself getting very into my work and spent a great deal of time painting there. There are a few words that pop up in the Roman vocabulary over and over: *basta* (enough) and *tranquillo* (peaceful). These concepts had not rated high in my New York life. The Romans I met really cherish their quality of life. I eventually connected to Rome's timing. I slowed down and made work both more freely and slowly, simultaneously.

One great advantage of the academy was that Matvey and I could join the scholars and art historians to see the special, hidden things they were researching. We got to go inside the Farnese Palace, now the French Embassy, which is not open to the public, and see the frescoes by Annibale Carracci. (You can often catch a glimpse of the frescoes at night when you walk through Piazza Farnese if the ambassador is working late.) We also tagged along to see the ceiling painting *Jove, Neptune, and Pluto* by Caravaggio in the Villa Boncompagni-Ludovisi.

UPON RETURNING TO ROME, I was pretty sure I wouldn't be "good" at Rome. New Yorkers pride themselves on being good at New York (which is why we're always so shocked when we screw up). At first, I was totally discombobulated. Before, I'd been in school, so I'd been taken care of. Now I had to try to speak Italian and go to the post office to pay bills. But within a few months, I had it down. I knew where to get the best coffee, at Sant'Eustachio, near Sant'Ivo, which is not far from San Luigi dei Francesi, which holds the San Matteo cycle by Caravaggio. The best days consist not just of moments but a sequence. You look at a couple of pictures, you sit in a café, you have the best pasta you've ever eaten, and you stop into a gorgeous stationery store. And I achieved that comfort in Rome after about seven months.



Yuskavage's *Easter*, a 2004 painting inspired by one of her favorite memories of Rome.

LISA YUSKAVAGE'S FAVORITES

Artist: The advantage of living in Rome for a year was that I was able to go over and over again to see churches when friends and family visited. One of the most wonderful connections that developed was with the **Caravaggio** paintings in the churches of Sant'Agostino and San Luigi dei Francesi. I must have seen these paintings twice a week, and over time I began to really feel Caravaggio's humor and his compassion. In *Madonna dei Pellegrini* (known as "Madonna with the Pilgrims with Dirty Feet"), Mary is shown as a very young mother trying to keep Jesus from a couple of dirty strangers who are acting strangely and praying to the baby. The baby Jesus is huge, and Mary is having trouble holding on to him. Oblivious, the baby is totally happy to

greet the dirty pilgrims. The dangling foot of Jesus and the praying hands of the pilgrims appear to be almost touching, though only illusionistically. In the artist's time, the painting caused an uproar because of the lowly setting and the tattered pilgrims. I am guessing Caravaggio was the first High/Low artist.

Museums: The **Vatican** and the **Sistine Chapel** are certainly something you should see. However, crowds completely ruined my pleasure. If you can, avoid the busiest times, Easter, Christmas, and the summer, when lines can wrap around for a mile. One secret is that private viewing is available after public hours for some large amount of money, like \$1,200, and you can bring up to 25 people. We were thrilled to be guests a couple of times. It was great to be able to stand and look at the Sistine Chapel and the Stanze of Raphael in peace. [mv.vatican.va]

With the criteria of not wanting to be shoved and not having to pay tribute money to the Vatican, these are my ideas of great collections:

The **Galleria Borghese** holds at least four great works by the Baroque sculptor Bernini. Also Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* and several important early and late Caravaggios. I cannot recommend this place highly enough. You need timed tickets (get them online or ask your hotel concierge to book them), which is a bit of a drag, but the upside is that the place is never crowded. Walk in the surrounding park before or after. [www.galleriaborghese.it]

Another big favorite is the **Galleria Doria Pamphilj**. I dislike audio guides, but the one here is incredibly amusing. The great-great-grandnephew of Pope Innocent X, Jonathan Pamphilj, talks you through the rooms with great humor and in a droll British boarding

school accent. I enjoyed it so much that I listened twice. The gallery has a wall of early Caravaggios, all in perfect condition. It doesn't close for siesta, so is a great place to go in the afternoon when all the churches are closed. [www.doriapamphilj.it]

I also really liked the **Barberini Collection**. No crowds—just important paintings. [www.galleriaborghese.it/barberini/it]

Contemporary Art: The interesting thing about Rome to me was how many contemporary Italian artists dislike the city—too much history, too big a legacy, too suffocating. They prefer London, New York, or Berlin. Rome is still an adjunct to Milan when it comes to contemporary art, but that seems to be slowly changing. The **Galleria Lorcan O'Neill** is a place I often went to see contemporary art. O'Neill is actually Irish and worked for Anthony d'Offay for many years in London. There is a great energy around his sweet little space. He shows Italian artists and also has an international program. The location is a bit challenging but worth finding, for it is on a wonderful street. [Via.Orti.D'Alibert.1/E; 39-06/68-89-29-80; www.lorcanoneill.com] (When visiting O'Neill, look for **Villa Farnesina** on Via della Lungara. It is a wonderful building and has many great frescoes, but the real treat is Raphael's *Triumph of Galatea*. Usually open only in the morning.)

Church: The most satisfying architecturally is **Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza** by Borromini, all white on white. Go inside the church, not just the courtyard.

Café: For coffee itself, visit **Sant'Eustachio**. They will never let you see exactly how they make the espresso, and the baristas who work here sign a confidentiality agreement. [Piazza.Sant'Eustachio.82; 39-06/68-80-20-48] I learned about this place and Sant'Ivo while on an excellent tour of the city given by Dana Prescott [dprescott@tiscali.it].

For hanging out, drinking aperitifs, and people-watching: **Café Campo** on Campo dei Fiori. You will get gypsy music and pigeons, too.

Restaurants: **La Tavernaccia da Bruno**. This is really, really off the beaten path. As a matter of fact, good luck finding it. However, we always took people there, and it is the place everyone remembers. Bruno can often be found slicing prosciutto. His wife runs the register,

while his daughters, son-in-law, and grandchildren all wait on tables. The food is amazing. But the real reason to go is to see what the Rome of 25 years ago was like. [Via.Giovanni.da.Castel.Bolognese.63; 39-06/581-2792]

Hostaria da Paulo is a wonderful, simple place helmed by Paulo and his charming wife. It's located in the same piazza as **San Francesco a Ripa**, the church that holds the Bernini sculpture called *Beata Ludovica Albertoni*—the other sculpture Bernini made of a saint in ecstasy. The painting above it is by Baciccio. And if that is not enough, Giorgio de Chirico is buried there, too.

I also loved **Da Sergio**. Excellent food in a great area near Campo dei Fiori. You will get some attitude, but it's cool. [Vicolo.delle.Grotte.27; 39-06/686-4293]

Pizza: The place I loved is **Gizzi Simone**, near the American Academy. In the fall, it serves a mushroom pizza so delicious that I still crave it. [Via.Giacinto.Carini.50; 39-06/581-4980]

Art Supply Store: There is absolutely no contest: **Ditta G. Poggi**. Memmo Poggi is a piece of history. He made all of Balthus's stretchers, and he will show you a picture of himself and Balthus to prove it. If you pass some mysterious test, he will sell you some of the linen preparation he made for the great man. I shipped three rolls home. It is right around the corner from the Pantheon. [Via.del.Gesù.74/75; 39-06/679-3674; www.poggi1825.it]

Shops: I'm not really a shopper, but I loved the religious vestment stores near the Pantheon. For my dad, I bought official Vatican Cardinal socks (hot pink) and for my Jewish husband, Bishop socks (scarlet).

Bookstore: I don't speak or read Italian in any meaningful way, so I have to list an English bookstore, the **Almost Corner Bookshop**, though I am sure there are great Italian ones. [Via.del.Moro.45; 39-06/583-6942]

Memory: Walking along **Via Giulia** in April around 5 p.m. The sun was casting long shadows and suddenly white petals cascaded like snow from the overhanging flowering vines on the Farnese bridge. It is understandable why this city had been the location of such profound expression by artists. Beauty is just a way of life. ■

For more information on Rome, see *Dossier*, pages 138-143.