

THE ART OF LISA YUSKAVAGE

# BLONDE AMBITION

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**Call it the mind/body problem.** If I were preparing a slide comparison for class, I probably wouldn't pair Jasper Johns and Lisa Yuskavage. He is a notably cerebral artist who traffics in reflexive visual puns and sets up intricate perceptual conditions. She is all T&A, turning to cultural flashpoints to make her trademark fleshpots. But, just as Johns reveals erotic subject matter on closer examination, a roomful of Yuskavages reveals what you would more likely expect from Johns—meaning of a deeply hermetic sort,

much of it linked to formal features. Despite the fact that she is often saddled with some variation of the “bad girl” title—a mantle she shares with Cecily Brown and Sue Williams—Yuskavage has traced and played with a more complex set of issues that bridge the material, the personal, and the art historical.

In the wake of the harsh reception of Yuskavage's 1990 solo debut, figures such as that in *Bad Baby*, 1991, personify the paintings' vulnerability before our prying eyes. She pouts, wide-eyed and underdressed, a parody of submission. The body of work from the first part of the decade, characterized by the apparent exposure of figure, painted object, and, by extension, the artist herself, culminates in the much-reproduced *Rorschach Blot*, 1995. This doll-like figure flaunts herself, asking for it, spreading her legs and opening a hole in the flat yellow canvas simultaneously. The represented erogenous zone intersects with a literal painterly hot spot, playing at showing everything and making us into voyeurs, willing or not. Unsurprisingly, this exploitative direction dead-ended—not only because it courted

an endless escalation of titillating imagery, but because the painter overcame her own youthful thin skin (as much as any artist ever does).

As attention-getting as these images were, the genesis of Yuskavage's interests is quite conventional. As a student at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia and Yale, she drew avidly from life, looking admiringly to the European representational tradition. In the art-school milieu, Degas's images of women (which she loved) seemed suspect, even a bit kitschy. Somehow, like forbidden sex, the fact that they were in questionable taste (at least in terms of art-school fashion) just reinforced their desirability; the pastels and monotypes and drawings of bathing women were beautiful and masterfully realized, and now they were naughty, too. Still, it's difficult to draw and paint the nude today without looking like an academic hack. Yuskavage married her interest in the great art of the past with authentically déclassé contemporary taste and the vulgar sexuality of popular culture. *Bad Baby* is “bad” not in its overt sexuality, but in mixing genres (representational painting and kewpie-doll cuteness being equally suspect). The figure emerges from the deep, smoky space of sfumato, but a sfumato that is an inappropriately hot hot-pink.

Even after the frustrations expressed in her early-'90s work, Yuskavage's attachment to her subject made it difficult to leave

behind. The details of how she moved on are worth looking at. Late in 1995, she made a group of small maquettes, female figures rendered in Sculpey. The five figurines exaggerate the mannerist distortions of earlier work—the bloated bellies, the elongated necks, the giant butts; in fact, some of the figures are lifted directly from her previous paintings. After she had finished with each figure, Yuskavage (who talks to her art, although she is quick to point out that it doesn't talk back) wagged her finger, chastising the little sculptures as, variously, “asspicker, foodeater, headshrinker, social-climber, motherfucker.” After the fact, she began to associate each, by virtue of physical or assigned behavioral characteristics, with specific people. These figures may be as far from kitsch (which never lacks propriety) as any of Johns's iconic signs, but they move in the opposite direction, toward the emotionally and sexually charged and away from Johnsian neutrality.

The whole affair might seem terribly precious, like playing with dolls, but Yuskavage was in fact resorting to a venerable artmaking strategy employed by Poussin and Tintoretto, among others, particularly the use of maquettes, or even life-size figures, as a tool to make paintings. The maquettes materialize a model for an image, such as the *Motherfucker* figure, originating in the artist's imagination, and sometimes mediated by another representation. Here, the three-dimensional object borrows the flip hairdo and strange little jacket from her oil painting *Faucet*, 1995. The cartoony features of the painting carry over into the broad features of the maquettes; as subject matter, they would seem ready made to suit the artist's style.

But, perversely, she uses the maquettes to draw from life, to gather specific information, to make her images more realistic and less cartoony. There are oils, watercolors, pastels, prints, and drawings done after *Motherfucker*, such as a pencil drawing in which the figure is handled with a beautifully refined touch, right down to the glinting pearl necklace. The device also allowed Yuskavage to study light by photographing the maquettes under different conditions. She plays with various genre conventions of composition, illumination, and atmosphere in works such as *Still Life with a Landscape*, 1999. Where Yuskavage's early drawing style tended to generalize—despite a level of academic skill, she simply didn't have a personal way to draw close to nature—working from a physical object made the rendering much more varied and explicit. Even more than that, the images taken from the maquettes became almost endlessly dense, formally accumulating a rich history that paralleled the



Opposite page:  
**Lisa Yuskavage, *True Blonde Mountain Top*, 1998–99**, oil on linen, 55 x 55".  
This page: **Lisa Yuskavage, *Bad Baby*, 1991**, oil on linen, 34 x 30".



# PERVERSELY, YUSKAVAGE USES THE MAQUETTES TO DRAW FROM LIFE, TO GATHER SPECIFIC INFORMATION, TO MAKE HER IMAGES MORE REALISTIC AND LESS CARTOONY.

artist's developing awareness of their more personal references.

Although thinking through her drawing was an ongoing project, Yuskavage has always had a very specific sense of color—specific to her, and to our cultural moment. In the 1995 triptych *Blonde, Brunette, and Redhead*, for example, each panel corresponds not only to a hair color but to a primary color as well: yellow, blue, and red, respectively. Each painting is composed of seventy percent one color, twenty percent of a second, and ten percent a third color. Still more eccentrically, she borrowed this particular palette from



Lisa Yuskavage, *Blonde, Brunette and Redhead*, 1995, oil on linen, triptych, 36 x 108" overall.

Laura Ashley's color charts, because at the time she fantasized that her therapist wore Laura Ashley clothing. The color formulas are a game in which Yuskavage engages to stay challenged and interested, not unlike those for which Johns and Chuck Close are known. But it isn't only paint that inspires this play.

*Blonde, Brunette, and Redhead* also, and more obviously, invokes cultural archetypes to which we commonly assign various characteristics—the smart one, the sexy one, the funny one, etc. Having painted so many blondes in particular, though, Yuskavage began to ask herself, *which* blonde? Who is the blonde? She gradually realized that all three figures could represent people she knew: Yuskavage herself as the redhead, a high-school friend as the brunette, and another old friend, Kathy, as the blonde. As one looks back at her blondes, seeing through the cultural generality of the images, Kathy was recognizable in *Bad Baby*, *Faucet*, and *Motherfucker*. The painting that seems to picture Kathy most directly, *True Blonde Draped*, belongs to the 1999 "True Blonde" series. The woman sits, turned toward us in a three-quarters pose, draped in a classical-looking sheet. This painting stems from a photograph the artist took shortly after her friend gave birth; in the photo, Kathy looks a little like one of Yuskavage's earlier girls. Even when Yuskavage works from life or a preexisting image, she tends to choose slightly eccentric-looking women, dreamy photos that already resemble something she conjured up. In imitation of *Motherfucker*, one of the figure's breasts is larger than the other; conversely, the *Motherfucker* figure was in some ways Kathy. And in the context of more realistic rendering, this imbalance also acts as a reality effect: No pair of breasts is ever the same in size. Finally, the image is still further overdetermined by the rendering, which pushes

the distortion to create the illusion of spatial recession.

As in *Bad Baby*, the figure and ground are bathed in a field of color, but the quality of line has changed markedly. Yuskavage permits, even encourages the distortions of the camera and her own drawing mistakes (she never projects or traces her images) in order to fill in the incidentals. In circular, complex reverberations, *True Blonde Draped* mixes a real person, the artist's imagination, art-historical references, and past images in her own oeuvre. For someone who has followed her work, it has something of the tightly woven, self-referential effect of a '60s Johns.

This last painting of Kathy probably isn't the end of anything; this isn't a story about an artist learning to draw, or excavating the real. Rather, it is a story about an artist working, and working to figure out what she is doing, and then doing it on purpose. Returning to the beginning, to Degas: His women, like those of Vermeer (another Yuskavage favorite), have most often been viewed as objects for us to contemplate. In her own early work Yuskavage used a female figure to embody the painting as something to be looked at. But the women alone in interior spaces could also be seen to indicate an act of aesthetic attention, even meditation. Perhaps because Yuskavage is a female artist, for her the solitary figures also represent her experience alone in the studio.

It would be a mistake to dismiss all of this as the much-criticized romance of the studio. Although many artists remain attached to place (Brice Marden, James Turrell), increasing numbers declare with pride that they don't even have studios (Gabriel Orozco, Kendell Geers). Actually, however, you don't need a room or a place to have a studio—it's a metaphor. Your practice, your references, your interests and preferences are your studio, and you carry it with you; it's a world, not a room.

Despite the current art-historical emphasis on contextual explanation, the twentieth century has produced an unusual amount of hermetic, highly personal art. So many artists work alone, resisting all manner of political ideologies, especially where they dictate proper behavior in the social realm—how to think, how to make art. Most people wouldn't think of Lisa Yuskavage as a particularly inward-looking artist, but it is in making her own world that she defies social expectations—not by tweaking our nude-proof, seen-it-all sensibilities.

Does Yuskavage do herself any favors by joining her intellectual use of the medium with such flammable imagery? Probably not. Out of ten Pop painters, two may be complex, serious artists, and eight just lift advertising imagery to easy or startling effect; the same goes for artists who use sexualized nudes. The problem is making the distinction. The hot-button nature of Yuskavage's subject matter will always provide the option of a quick take, despite her many levels of meaning. It all depends on how long you want to spend with these works, how much you want to enter their world as it opens to you, slowly. Give it time. □

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Clockwise from top left: **Lisa Yuskavage, *Asspicking, Foodeating, Headshrinking, Socialclimbing, Motherfucking Bad Habits*, 1996**, cast Hydrocal with artificial flowers and pearls. Installation view.

**Lisa Yuskavage, *Still Life with a Landscape*, 1999**, watercolor on paper, 35½ x 52". **Lisa Yuskavage, *True Blonde Draped*, 1999**, oil on linen, 38 x 29". **Lisa Yuskavage, *Untitled (Kathy)*, 1992**, black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8". **Lisa Yuskavage, *Motherfucker II*, 1995**, pastel on paper, 12½ x 9½".

