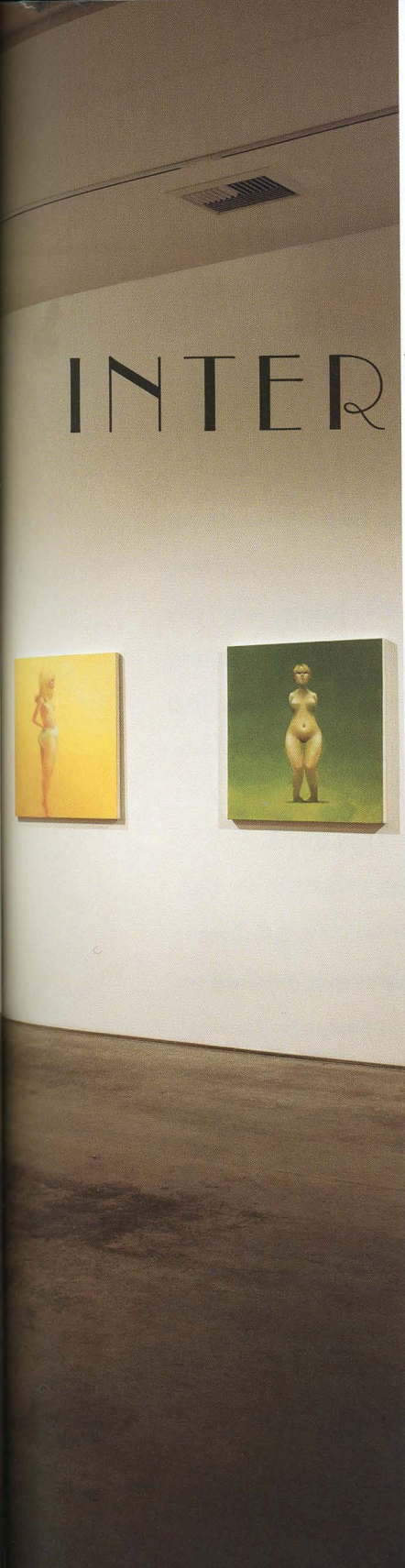


INTERVIEW

Chuck CLOSE

talks with

LISA Yuskavage

Big Blonde Squatting, Blonde with Diapers and Toothpick, and *Sweet Thing.*
Installation view, 1994, Christopher Grimes Gallery.

CHUCK CLOSE: I want to tell you a story. I remember being on a grant jury, and it was a stellar jury, really tight. Everyone was sophisticated and knowledgeable. We didn't know what to make of your work when it came on the screen. We were trying to decide who could have made these things. Had we looked at your resume and seen that you'd gone to Yale, we certainly would have known this was someone—

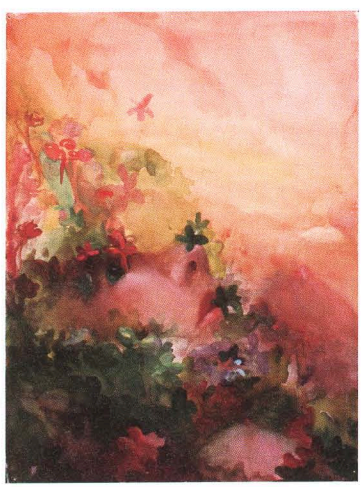
LISA YUSKAVAGE: —who'd been beaten down a lot, right?

CC: Yeah. We really didn't know what kind of work this was. And afterwards, my assistant, who'd walked through the jury room but was unable to say anything during the process, said, "Oh yeah, this is really a terrific painter who you shouldn't have had any problems about." We were very taken by the work, but were afraid to make fools of ourselves by putting our Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval on it.

LY: That makes sense.

CC: We felt like chickens afterwards.

LY: Chickens because you saw the work afterwards?



Tit Heaven #1, 1991. Watercolor on paper. 15 x 11 inches.

CC: Yeah.

LY: So, you think they're that different when you see them in person?

CC: Absolutely. It was really great to see the actual paintings, which I saw almost immediately afterwards at Elizabeth Koury Gallery. I loved them. I remember talking to Rob Storr about them later, and we were reassured by the sophistication of the paint handling when we saw them, because the work

verges on—trades on, on some level—a kind of kitschy, Keane Kids bug-eyed-baby kind of thing.

LY: I love courting that stuff.

CC: The reason I think your work is interesting is that what I've always been chasing as an experience as someone who cares about art, someone who goes to galleries a lot and is very interested in why other people are making the work they are making *right now*, what makes this time different than other times to make art in, is that every once in a while you see something that doesn't look like art. I first felt that way when I walked into the Stable Gallery and I saw all of Warhol's Campbell's Soup boxes stacked up; it looked like a grocery store warehouse. Or the first Stella black paintings that I saw: "This doesn't look like art." And that's always a great feeling. So, the fact that your work seemed to have another inference and could be confused for something else other than high art by a sophisticated artist was the real kicker.

When you're right on the edge of that, the work can be misunderstood. And we misunderstood it. So the thing that's interesting is how, if we don't like something, we tend to say it isn't art. But when I look at your paintings there's no question that this is somebody who really knows how to paint, which I find amazing, considering a review of one of the first shows, in which it says "Not since the days of 'bad painting'"—a term that I happened to coin—"has someone tried as hard as Lisa Yuskavage does to make a travesty of the medium. In her saccharine portraits of prepubescent nymphets, girlish innocence and sexual awakening are given thoroughly ham-fisted treatment." One of the things I do find believable is that people are troubled by the way young girls are presented in your work, but I really, really don't understand how anyone could describe the way you paint as ham-fisted. Ham-fisted means—

LY: I've got lunch meat for a hand?

CC: Yeah, that you would just shove some brush into this crude hand that would have no facility. The reason I mentioned the review was not to bring up an unpleasant subject, but I thought it was interesting just how irritated people could get with your work. Your paintings are diametric. As far as subject matter goes, you can read it one or two ways and you can be confused. When you see the painting and you see the touch—how beautifully painted—and all of the stuff that goes into your work . . .

LY: After that review I looked up the word "travesty" in order to get an exact definition. I was excited, 'cause I didn't realize that "travesty" is *such* a negative term. Yet I really liked it because I am more worried about making well-behaved paintings, which I know all too well.

CC: It's great your work got that reaction. I live in fear of a positive review from Hilton Kramer.

LY: Well yes, that's what I thought. When I first got the review, I could hardly believe that anyone was giving me such an awful lot of credit.

CC: It's amazing that your paintings have the power to upset people that they do. There seems to be this assumption that you are celebrating this behavior by depicting it.

LY: Especially because my work does not contain any moral lesson. A friend of mine once commented to me, "Where's the hairy hand?" I said, "What hairy hand?"

CC: I don't understand that either.

LY: Well, he's very sophisticated and is also pretty hip, but he said that the work made him feel guilty and implicated.

CC: People seem to want you to take a position, editorialize.

LY: And I've also been told people would feel much more comfortable with my work if I had an LED sign running across the upper part of the gallery that said, over and over again, "Lisa Yuskavage *does not approve* of this work, and *neither should you.*" It seems that the thing people are wrestling with is, *who* am I and how do *I* feel about this stuff? I try to suspend ideological posturing while I am working. I try really hard to be a person who makes a painting that is not about ideas that I already know and believe as much as making something that you *look* at over time and that can change throughout the process of looking. This is reflective of the lengthy duration involved in making paintings. While working, I allow all kinds of things to run through my head: dirty little songs, the passage about peeing in the bed from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist,* corny moments from a Shirley Temple movie, or the light in a Giovanni Bellini painting. Some of it's base, some of it's elegant. It's a Frankensteinian way of putting a painting together. The parts of the corpse come from different bodies.

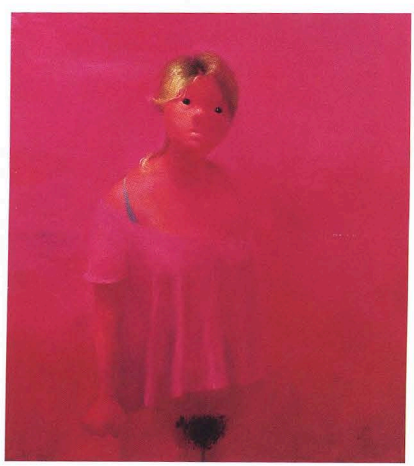
Dancer with Blue Tutu, 1994. Pastel on paper. 20 x 16 inches.

CC: I think what's happening in America right now is scary. I'm old enough to remember Joe McCarthy, and the unbelievable repression and censorship during *that* time. This is a much scarier time than any I can remember, in terms of the thought police, and it's just as strong from

the left as it is from the right.

LY: I have no interest in pointing the finger anywhere but at myself, and telling about my crimes. I am interested in making work about how things *are* rather than how they should be. I exploit what's dangerous and what scares me about *myself*: misogyny, self-deprecation, social climbing, the constant longing for perfection. My work has always been about things in myself that I feel incredibly uncomfortable with and embarrassed by. There's a Paul Thek quote that I read in one of his sketchbooks, "Make a list of all your fears, phobias . . . Xerox it and pass it out." Guston's late paintings do this kind of thing: he identified himself, the artist, as the enemy.

Also, my work comes out of very formal impulses. I want to make color field paintings, a la classical modernism, I want to make paintings that are lit with color, and sculptural, like those of Pontormo. I'm thinking about a lot of different positions within art history to make them. But then I'm not going to say that I didn't think about the Keane Kids. That's the first kind of art that I ever responded to; I even related to it. I made this painting a few years ago called *The Ones That Don't Want To: Bad Baby*. What I set out to do was to make a painting that combined my interest in Rembrandt with that of field painting. I thought, what would happen if I created an image where the



The Ones That Don't Want To: Bad Baby, 1991. Oil on linen. 34 x 30 inches.

most inappropriate color, hot pink, were to be combined with this concept of making a painting using colored light to construct a surface with an image emerging out of it. I wanted the sense that if the internal light went out in the painting, and then you reached inside, you wouldn't feel sculptural form anymore—you'd just feel a bunch of paint soup at the bottom of the painting. I didn't set out to make a painting of this abused-looking little match girl. I really wanted to make a very formal painting.

CC: I certainly understand the connection with modernist painting and color field painting and stuff like that, but those are real hard little nipples sticking through that shirt that stops immediately an inch or so above the pubic area, so that's going to make those formal aspects the last thing anybody looks at.

LY: The whole world is obsessed by hard nipples. Even those who are well past taking food from a breast stare if a woman walks down the street and her nipples are erect—*everybody's* gonna look. Everyone: men, women, children, and of course *I* look. I look partially out of the impulse that causes anybody to look, I look at it as an erotic thing. I think, "good for her!," "I hate her guts," "I wish I was her," and "how come I'm not more like that?" and then I usually scope out the guys' reactions. I have about a zillion feelings, ranging between compassion and contempt. This information helps me as a woman who is painting paintings that take the point of view of a man.

CC: That male gaze thing is interesting. A lot of people talk about paintings of women made for that male gaze. Clearly most of those paintings were made by and for other men's pleasure, though that's not entirely the case with your work. I like the fact that you're mining that urge.

LY: My work, like yours, is obsessed with human beings. Yet neither one of us paints with live models in the studio. Conjuring these beings in isolation is what allows my work to become a kaleidoscope of who I am or who I fantasize that I am: the gas-sniffing Dennis Hopper from *Blue Velvet,* or one of Hans Bellmer's traumatized dolls. I am fascinated with the whole voyeuristic power struggle.

CC: I wanted to ask you about this triptych: *Blonde with Diapers and Toothpick*, *Sweet Thing,* and *Blonde with Oven Mitt.* The center one is a very different kind of sex machine than the other ones.

LY: I may be in a great deal of denial—but I don't think about them as sex machines. I am aware other people will perceive them that way. So what I'm trying to do is include how they feel about their own predicament.

CC: The formality of them, too, heightens the reading, because whenever someone makes a triptych we will always have an association with altarpieces. In the center, where we normally have Christ on a cross, you have this woman in this very symmetrical pose. And then the side paintings become like stories in the life. Does that make any sense to you?

LY: I like that association and I want that. I think this whole group is about posing. It's also about coming out toward making things completely explicit to myself. If I show you something more recent, like this *Rorschach Blot* . . .

CC: This is the one you describe with the vagina as an exclamation point?

LY: Yeah, and I really didn't want to make such a bombastic painting. But I could see that I had to. It was hard to get up the nerve to make a painting about *that.*

CC: What is "that"?

LY: Telling the viewer, "Eat me." She's really quite grotesque. She's roadkill and a brick shithouse. Plus she's been standing around for so long she's losing the blood from her blonde-afroed head. The reason why I made that painting is that I got tired of answering the same question I'd been posing to myself all along, which was "Lisa, what are you hiding?" I thought that it was getting a little problematic that I had done three bodies of work where I was sort of pushing that concept. I *really* wanted to get to the end of it. And I thought the best way to get to the end of making work about hiding was to show the thing that was always hidden: her genitalia. I don't think of sex as sex in these paintings. Sex is shame, power, powerlessness, and it's the most direct and convenient way for me to embarrass myself. Typical Catholic. Plus that's actually what I saw when I took a Rorschach test.

CC: Really? I assumed that the Rorschach test referred to the fact that the genitals and the asshole make an exclamation point. I thought you were giving a Rorschach test to the viewer: "Do you see this as an exclamation point or a sex organ?"

LY: That too.

CC: There's also a sort of inflated-doll-receptacle quality to it, especially with the open mouth, and the fact that the body seems almost to be blown up, inflated.

LY: I thought about that after the fact. Earlier I had come across the definition of the grotesque body in Bataille—as the body with everything projecting outward, with all the orifices open. Nothing hidden. A total release. She's in a state of perpetual orgasm. When you're having an orgasm, I don't think that you're thinking about

what you look like. Your stomach is *probably* sticking out.

CC: People who worry about what they look like don't end up having one.

LY: Actually, the companion piece to this, *Transference Portrait of my Shrink in her Starched Nightgown with my Face and her Hair,* I thought of as someone who can't come and probably can't shit. All the orifices are closed.

CC: The lack of noses also reminds me of the way organs are removed from children's dolls. All the stuff where a vagina would be in a doll is just sort of smoothed over in plastic. It's strangely more sexual by leaving it out.

LY: I became quite interested in taking out whatever wasn't vital. When I painted the *Blonde Brunette and Redhead,* I decided to eliminate the body. I was intrigued to find out how much the heads alone could still be disturbing.

CC: Which leads me to believe, finally, that the thing that disturbs people more than overt sexuality is taste.

LY: I think what offends some people is that I have this "talent," and I'm putting it to such *poor* use—like a nun with a foul mouth.

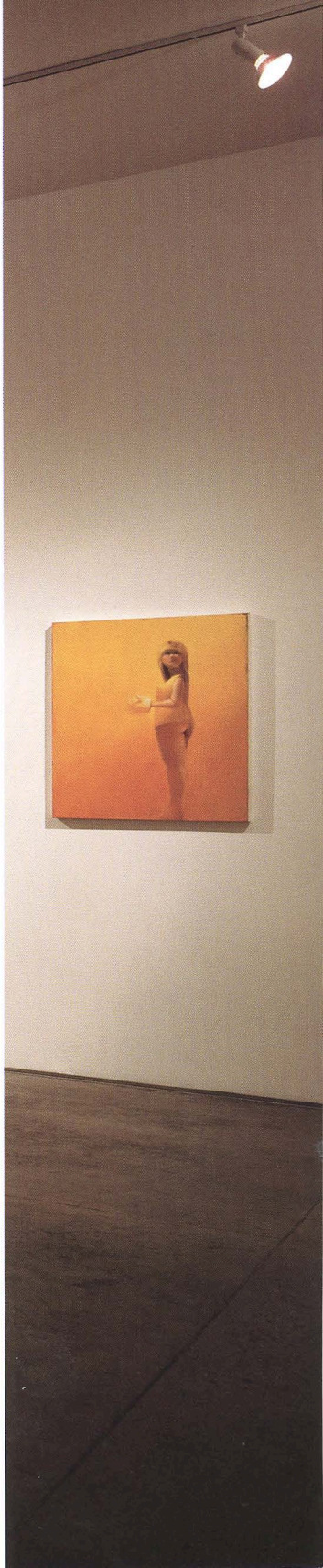
CC: I'm terribly surprised that you were raised Catholic. What do your parents think of your work?

LY: My mom says, "Beautiful, Lisa, very nice. Can I have one?" My father likes them too, but at first he said, "What's with the big tits?"

CC: You seem to have open-minded parents.

LY: I think so. My parents talk pretty openly about all kinds of stuff, and they have a fantastic sense of humor. They are also practicing Catholics. Kitschy things are something I feel a great deal of compassion towards. People that I love have mirrored walls and plastic slipcovers all over their velvet lampshades, and their statues

of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I want to combine that nostalgia with my painting knowledge and not judge one as better than the other. My work seems so obvious to me. In *Blonde Brunette and Redhead,* I really wanted to make a painting based on the triadic color scheme: red, yellow, and blue. I automatically started thinking blondes, brunettes, and redheads. It kind of completely attached itself to the concept. If I keep my mind on a plan for a very formal painting, automatically these nasty bits just find their way in. When I think about different types of painting, I automatically anthropomorphize it into different types of women. Different colors, different shapes become different haircolors and styles. The way the paintings *themselves* behave between being good/bad is really so much about how I operate in the world. The impulse toward self-portraiture runs through the work from the beginning all the way to the end.



Blonde with Oven Mitt.
Installation view, 1994, Christopher Grimes Gallery.