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Lisa Yuskavage: *New Paintings & Babie Brood*

by Eleanor Heartney

DAVID ZWIRNER | NOVEMBER 8 – DECEMBER 15, 2018

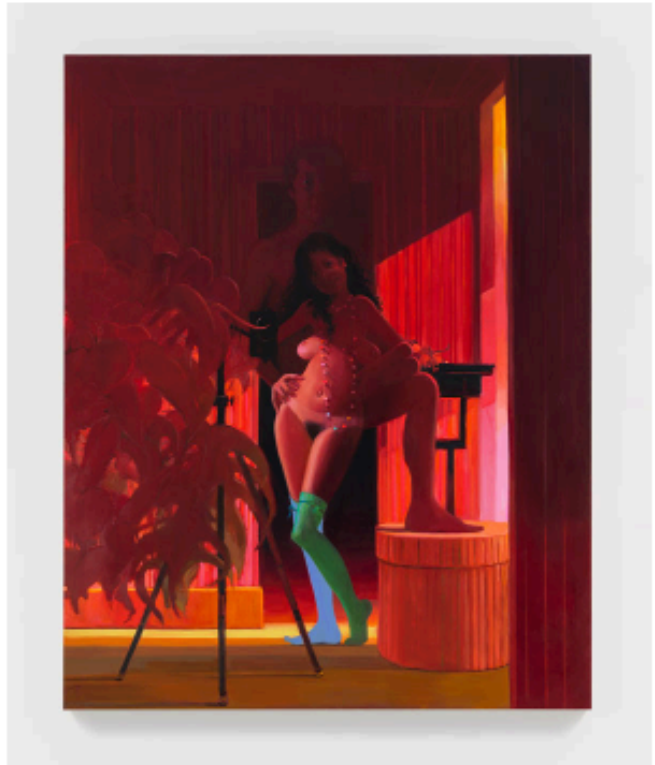


Lisa Yuskavage, *Golden Couple*, 2018. Oil on linen, 77 1/8 × 70 inches. © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.

Men have entered the world of Lisa Yuskavage's paintings. Of course men and boys have made fleeting appearances before, but in the past they always seemed to be there on the sufferance of the damsels, coquettes, witches, and Lolitas who are the native inhabitants of Yuskavage Land. In these earlier works men appear either as strange hippie misfits, as in the "Dudes" series, or as bit players in larger female centered dramas. But in "Couples," Yuskavage's most recent series on view this fall at David Zwirner uptown, men get equal billing. These paintings present men and women in a variety of erotic pairings as they wrap their arms around each other, share meaningful glances or arrange themselves with the deliberation of subjects posing for a camera.

With the coming of men, things seem greatly changed. The secret garden of Yuskavage's female imagination has been exchanged for a more prosaic naturalism. The figures, naked or nearly so, have lithe and well-toned bodies and they mostly inhabit well-appointed domestic interiors. Though still drenched in the buttery light and sugary colors that are the artist's trademark, these new works have more in common with the psychosexual dramas of Edward Hopper than with the confectionary fantasies of Watteau and Fragonard. Gone are the sprites, imps and magical creatures, the doll like girl-women luxuriating in their exaggerated breasts and spongy curves, the cartoonish faces that are more akin to sex dolls than painter's models, the polymorphous eroticism and the elision of maternal nurture and budding sexuality. Gone as well are the stern Russian peasant women lined up like disapproving sentinels in a futile stand against an excess of sensuality that swallows up figures and landscapes alike.

In this new order, women often seem to have the upper hand. In *Golden Couple*, (2018) a flirtatious young woman arches coyly away from an apparently besotted male admirer as she hides something (a playing card? a secret note?) behind her back. In *The Tongue Tondo*, (2018) an equally playful seductress undoes the kitschy romanticism of a double portrait by sticking out her tongue at her unsmiling male companion. Several works seem commentaries on the male gaze, the feminist trope that has so often been invoked to criticize or justify Yuskavage's work. *Bedheads* (2018) reverses the traditional perspective. Here a nearly invisible young woman lies in bed gazing at the viewer as the foregrounded man struggles out of his pants. *Home* (2018) presents a naked couple in the middle distance standing beneath an arch in their sparsely furnished home. They hold hands and he looks at her, seemingly for guidance, while she lowers her sunglasses to give us a wryly knowing glance. *Self Portrait* (2017) presents another nude couple. They pose in a room that is suffused with red, save for the woman's iridescent blue and green stockings. Shadows cut across the space, almost hiding the man who stands behind the woman and obscuring the tripod and camera that they are using to take a selfie. Her lower body is raked with light, but within the shadow we can watch her watching us. In all these works, the active gaze seems to belong to the woman who asserts her control even when she exposes her body.

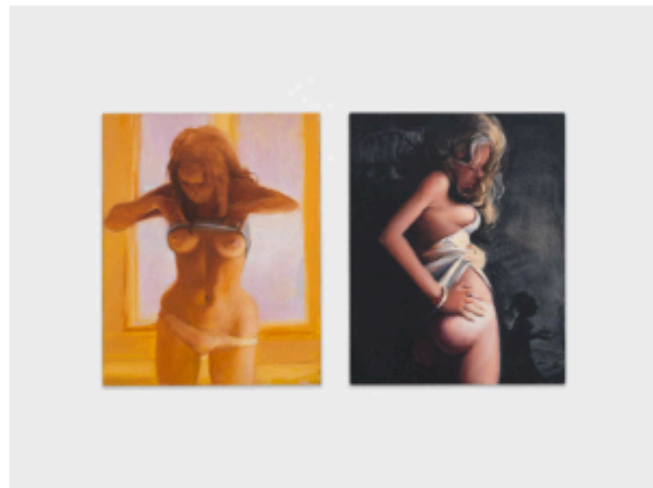


Lisa Yuskavage, *Self Portrait*, 2017. © Lisa Yuskavage. Collection of Susan and Leonard Feinstein. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.

“Couples” is part of a two person exhibition of Yuskavage’s work. At Zwirner Chelsea, a quasi retrospective of Yuskavage’s work appears in the form of *Babie Brood: Small Paintings 1985 – 2018*. The show presents studies for the larger paintings that have comprised Yuskavage’s oeuvre over the last three decades. They line the walls in roughly chronological order, thereby revealing the development of ideas and emergence of new themes over time. These intimate paintings are looser and less defined than the works that resulted from them and in some cases multiple versions of the same idea give us some insight into the artist’s working process. But the show also helps underscore the degree to which the new paintings on view uptown signal a departure from her longtime approach.

Babie Brood begins with early figurative works from Yuskavage’s student years. These are conceptually uncertain but already suggest her facility with paint. She soon hits her stride with the porn influenced sex kittens that stirred early controversies over her art. The paintings become more elaborate and the figures, with their shelf-like rumps and pointed breasts, become even more cartoonish. Gradually a soft core Penthouse sensibility

appears, and the female bodies, though still quite distorted, return to the realm of the possible. More detailed settings and multiple figures announce a more narrative intent. But even in these more complex compositions, the figures retain an inward gaze as they peruse their burgeoning bodies. By the time the Russian grandmothers appear, Edenic landscapes and complicated scenarios emphasize a dive into full-fledged fantasy. Nature becomes an equal partner in these mysterious narratives and pure landscapes also begin to appear. Pairs and multiple groups of girl-women offer support and comfort to each other. Through it all, one is conscious, even in these small sketches, of the fluidity of paint and the artist’s remarkable manipulation of light and color.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Little Day Little Night*, 1999. Oil on panel, diptych, 10 × 8 inches each. © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.

Throughout the evolution of Yuskavage's work one constant has been a haze of adolescent confusion. Her girl-women express a sense of wonder and disquiet at the uncontrollable morphing of their bodies and the eruption of strange new desires. In their sun drenched landscapes and fruit filled interiors, these characters have seemed caught between a longing for infantile security and their emerging sexuality. With the new paintings, we are dealing, by contrast, with women. Their desires are directed toward their male companions rather than their inward fantasies.

Are men the reality principle here? Do they drag women out of the realm of imagination and into the harsh glare of gender relations? Or does this change signal that Yuskavage's adolescent subjects have grown up and entered the outside world? If so, it is hard not to feel a twinge of regret. One thinks of William Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality* and its lament for the losses exacted by time. Like Wordsworth's radiant children, Yuskavage's girl-women came to us trailing clouds of glory. Now, like us, they have settled into the light of common day.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Little Hippies*, 2013. Oil on wood panel, 8 x 6 inches. © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.