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## Transference: Two Exhibitions of Lisa Yuskavage at David Zwirner

by Matt Mitchell

Lisa Yuskavage: *Babie Brood: Small Paintings, 1985-2018* and *New Paintings* at David Zwirner Gallery, New York

November 8 to December 15, 2018

*Babie Brood*: West 19th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues

*New Paintings*: 34 East 69th Street, between Madison and Park avenues

New York City, [davidzwirner.com](http://davidzwirner.com)



Lisa Yuskavage, *Split*, 1997. Oil on panel, 7 7/8 x 9 7/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London © Lisa Yuskavage.

# David Zwirner

A treasure trove of provocations, David Zwirner's twin exhibitions of Lisa Yuskavage consolidate her leadership in new figuration. At 19th Street the gallery hosts 91 of her oils in a survey spanning three decades. These small works are mostly problematized depictions of women executed with a virtuosic handling of color, body language, and composition. But a dramatic departure occurs at Zwirner's 69th Street townhouse where eight large new works include some with an uncommonly tender sense of romantic intimacy.

Yuskavage frequently invokes the idea of Freudian transference, declaring that everyone will simply see a reflection of their own needs when viewing her art. With that in mind I declare that I see her sexualized females as representing an alchemical process by which she transforms vitriolic critique into creative power. This idea can help make sense of her abrasive portrayals of women. It is also based on her own stories.

The complex female figures first appeared in 1991 when it struck her that the spirit of a painting is like a faultfinding idea of a woman's allure. A painting can't help but draw validation from its looks. Yuskavage conceived of a series of female forms as metaphors for painting itself and then, in her own words, she was "mean to them".

This story, as told, is useful for deciphering her depictions of women. Yet a question lingers: why was it necessary to be 'mean to them'? I wonder if she was acting out a darkly comic version of the life of an artist. Was she performing both roles: that of the creator birthing the hopeful character of a painting and that of the critic turning it into something pathetic? If so, that ritual could allow her to see her life from the outside, giving her a psychological advantage. It could help her transcend her many scathing reviews, turning what could be a leaden drag into the gold of future subject matter.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Hamass*, 1996. Oil on canvas board, 6 x 8 inches.  
Private Collection, Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London © Lisa Yuskavage.

Her symbolic process is most evident in her early works. In *Hamass*, (1996) what might have started as a *derrière* in colorful fishnets ends up as an unhappy protuberance of candied pig meat. In *Split*, (1997) soft porn tropes are twisted into a new awfulness: light, color, costume, and pose are all shifted off key. As in many of her images the face calls into question the cult of youth as it is warped into an indecency of infantilization. Later works in her "Pie Face" series play out humiliation in a direct process. Creamy white paint is slapped on the figure's face in *Chrissy* (2008) in an act of the work itself being pied. Yuskavage employs a stunning variety of means to make her figures wrong. Subtleties of body language convey exhibitionism or too much self-regard. More than a feminist critique, it becomes

an examination of all kinds of pathos in sexual presentation.

# David Zwirner

This survey also makes clear her obsession with formal questions of painting. Significantly, she keeps a Philip Guston quote in her studio: "The figuration must be understood as another element layered over and working against the abstraction." Considering this, it is vital that her females first sprang from her imagination so that she can alter them at will. Her sense of color is also far from literal. As a way of conveying contemporaneity she uses only recently invented hues. Theorists from the mystically inclined Johannes Itten to the textile designer Laura Ashley steer her palette. Her devotion to chroma calls her to tame fickle modern dyes, such as the phthalos, by pre-mixing and tubing up desired shades (now counting 700). This yields assertive fields and subtle variations of vivid hue.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Home*, 2018. Oil on linen, 80 x 80 inches.

Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London © Lisa

Yuskavage.

Over the years Yuskavage has added to her visual vocabulary: interiors, landscapes, males, and babushkas now occupy her mythic realm. But none get the rough treatment of her sexualized women. Apparently, they don't share the dubious honor of being a metaphor for painting itself.

Uptown, her tilt towards gentler allegory culminates in *Home*, (2018) a square composition centered on the clasped hands of a youthful couple exuding id and innocence in their nakedness. They stand within a gray domestic space as rainbow-hued light spills forth from the room beyond. One can fail to see that the girl lacks a thigh, the boy his feet. When I asked the artist about this she replied, "You can do anything you want in a painting."

Transference strikes again. I am left to wonder if anyone else will see these characters as ghosts, and as a deep rebuttal

to sexual aggression? I can only say that for me they have become the memories of youthful physical union that forever echo through the aging of a happy couple.