



🌀 holy innocents by tamara jenkins

SOMETIME IN THE MID-SEVENTIES, a pre-teen Lisa Yuskavage and a group of her girlfriends from North Philadelphia's Juniata Park unearthed something that would change their lives forever.

Drawn to the dark corners of their families' homes, the girls were on an unconscious collective quest. They stood on chairs and rooted around the otherwise unreachable top shelves of their parents' closets. They dug through drawers. They opened trunks. Their small hands burrowed deep into household file cabinets, reaching past the mundane paperwork—the aging insurance policies, cancelled checks and boiler instructions—into the mysterious darkness beyond.

One by one they found what they were looking for. It appeared in the form of Bob Guccione's *Penthouse* magazine, apparently the preferred men's magazine among the fathers of Juniata Park. There were hardly any *Playboys* to be found.

The interviews with Evel Knievel, Groucho Marx and George C. Scott held little interest for the girls. They quickly flipped past the advertisements for English Leather and Cutty Sark, slowing down

only when they found the "pictorials" that distinguished this *International Magazine for Men* from the copies of *Good Housekeeping* and *Reader's Digest* that sat out in the open, cluttering the coffee tables and nightstands of their row houses on Claridge Street.

They knew they were getting warmer when the names appeared:

SANDI BRANDE PAULA
MAGGI JOHANNA SHAWN

Each "Pet of the Month" was introduced unencumbered by her surname, creating a sense of mystery and familiarity at the same time. The girls figured out pretty quickly that the Pet's pictorial had special status within the layout of the magazine. She was the star. Her arrival necessitated the magazine equivalent of a drum roll. Every month it was the same thing. First there was her name in fancy type, floating on a glossy title page. Then, artfully placed elsewhere on the page, was the Pet's introductory picture, which was always smaller than the other pictures in the magazine and functioned as a sort of a photographic appetizer.

Something to stimulate the reader, but not satisfy him. And finally, there was the quote. Something the Pet said that summed up her philosophy. A soft-core mission statement.

Some were enigmatic:

*Sex is the giving of something precious that cannot be given or taken away in any other way.*¹

Some political:

*I'd like to see a time when there is no crime and no violence and no inhumanity . . . just sex.*²

Others, simply informational:

*My bottom is the center of my eroticism. When I touch myself there . . . it feels good.*³

The Pets inhabited drowsy rooms styled in a Victorian-hippie-brothel kind of way. There were satin pillows, hanging tapestries, ostrich feathers, flowers and ferns. Pets could be found posing on wicker furniture, stretching out on unmade beds or lounging on lush shag carpeting. Their bodies were marked by tan lines left behind by bikinis, making their private parts seem even more private. They were never totally naked. They wore rings and bracelets and scarves. Skimpy lace robes, shrugs⁴ and old-fashioned stockings instead of pantyhose. They looked naughty as they nibbled on long strings of pearls or lifted up their shirts to admire their own glorious bodies.

The girls from Holy Innocents School gathered together in a kind of unofficial study group to examine the illicit material. Hunched over the magazines,

fascinated and repelled, embarrassed and aroused, they feasted on a smorgasbord of female sexual anatomy, devouring a whole year's worth in one sitting. The women pictured in the pages of *Penthouse* were not much older than the Juniata Park girls themselves. That Alice Petrosino, a fourteen-year-old eighth-grade girl, was only four years younger than Marie Ekkore, the March 1974 Pet of the Month, seemed to the girls an almost impossible fact—one that lingered in the room like an unwanted guest.

After gorging on piles of *Penthouses*, the girls fell silent and introspective. They knew that they had been exposed to something important, but they didn't know what. A mysterious knowledge seeped deep into their consciousnesses and lay dormant for months and months, maybe years, until the day that it could be retrieved and finally understood.



I met Lisa Yuskavage in 1998 on Avenue A in a grungy café standing in line waiting for coffee. Lisa pulled me out of my morning stupor by introducing herself, "Hey," she said, "didn't you make a movie about a girl growing up in Beverly Hills with big tits?" I had, so I said yes. "I really liked it," she added cheerfully. I was grateful. Sometimes it isn't so pleasant. Sometimes it goes more like this:

"Hey, didn't you make a movie?"

"Yeah."

"Down and Out in Beverly Hills, right?"

1 Sandi Creco, "What Makes Sandi Run?" *Penthouse: The International Magazine for Men*, May 1973, p. 65.

2 Juliet Morris, "Juliet of the Spirits," *Penthouse: The International Magazine for Men*, January 1975, p. 67.

3 Marie Ekkore, "Bottoms Up," *Penthouse: The International Magazine for Men*, March 1974, p. 65.

4 After several male readers confused the meaning of the word "shrug" with its homonym, I thought I should clarify my usage. Here, a "shrug" refers not to the gesture of lifting and dropping one's shoulders, but to a woman's garment—a shrunken waist-length jacket or sweater designed to be open down the front. Originally intended to be worn layered on top of a blouse, like a vest or a bolero, the shrug, which consists basically of a pair of sleeves, serves no other purpose than to cover the arms and draw the shoulders back in order to emphasize what it does not cover—the bust.

"No, actually, it's called *Slums of Beverly Hills*."

"Yeah, right, that one. That's what I meant. But you made it, right?"

"Yep."

"Huh. I thought so."

An awkward pause.

And then, with nothing further to say, the person walks away, leaving me where they found me, alone—but now, oddly, even more alone.

But that's not how it went on this day. There were smiles. We stood next to each other sipping foam from our paper cups. "My name is Lisa," she said, "I'm a painter. There are big tits in my work, too." Suddenly I recognized her from somewhere. "Wait a minute. Wasn't there just a thing about you in the *New York Times*?" Yes, she nodded. "You're one of those 'Bad Girl' artists they keep writing about." Lisa gave me an amused look and rolled her eyes. "I read about you," I told her, "Your work looks amazing."

Our friendship seemed inevitable.

It's weird when you begin to be friends with someone new and you're getting to know them and you're going along doing what friends do together: seeing movies, going out for dinner, talking on the phone, meeting for coffee, etc. . . . everything is humming along nicely and then suddenly—SPLAT—you are catapulted headfirst into the wet, dripping psyche of your new friend via their artwork. The intimacy is so abrupt it can be dizzying. It's kind of like getting drunk and losing control and having sex with your nice next-door neighbor—afterward everything is different and you can never return to the simple cordiality of the old days.

Entering my first Lisa Yuskavage show was like falling into a candy-colored female fever dream—room after room of colossal paintings of gigantic, naked women depicted in a range of mouthwatering colors you might find in a package of Smarties. In this strange psychosexual universe, female figures stand alone, baring their breasts in fields of peachy pink, lemon yellow or minty blue. Others bask in



Slums of Beverly Hills by TAMARA JENKINS



Detail from *Dgy* by LISA YUSKAVAGE



Split 1997 OIL ON BOARD 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches

colored lights of cherry red, while one frightened-looking blonde, wearing only what looks like a pair of control-top panties, emerges out of an orange marmalade fog holding a tea cup and saucer. No, I wasn't in some newfangled acid-tinged Wonderland. I was in Philadelphia at the ICA in the Land of Yuskavage.

Different kinds of female species populate Yuskavageland. Pink doll-like women with open mouths wait to be orally penetrated. A worried pre-pubescent blonde with Keane kid⁵ characteristics holds her shiny glossed lips in a disturbing little pout that could be construed as sexually knowing. In the painting *Split* (1997), the suggestive gymnastic move is performed by a female creature sitting in a diagonal band of light, naked except for an orange shrug. A sinister pink ribbon—or leash, or is it a creepy rubber hose?—tied too tightly around one of

her ankles appears to be cutting off circulation to the attached foot. How else does one explain its withered, sickled appearance? The remaining length of the tether lies on the ground like a snake, ominously leading to an unseen place beyond the edges of the canvas. The subject's perverse predicament, along with her platinum blonde hair, plastic looking flesh and her impressive flexibility bring to mind a wayward Gymnast Barbie. This might seem to be a black comic invention on the part of the artist, until you learn—as I recently did—that Barbie herself was “knocked off from a German porn doll.”⁶ According to author M.G. Lord, the doll called Lilli “was never intended for children: She was a pornographic caricature, a gag gift for men.”⁷ The Mattel corporation used Lilli as a model for Barbie. After cleaning up her act a little—softening

⁵ I am referring to the work of Walter Keane, whose portraits of big-eyed waifs were ubiquitous when Lisa and I were growing up. Today they have become a staple of twentieth-century kitsch, but in the 1960s and '70s you couldn't walk into a respectable middle-class home without seeing one—or more often, two Keane reproductions tastefully hung side by side on the wall of either a powder room, foyer or den.

⁶ Lord, M.G. *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll*. Preface to the paperback edition. New York: Avon Books, 1995: p. viii.

⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

her face and filing off her nipples—she became the most beloved of girlhood accessories.

Lisa did not have the skinny on Barbie's untoward origins at the time of making *Split*—but like many of us who grew up playing with Barbie, she no doubt intuited the sordid subtext. Among my childhood friends, there was something about that doll that inspired us to act out highly sexual scenarios that sometimes involved Ken, or—if you had brothers around—GI Joe. Sometimes even both at the same time. Perhaps unconsciously we all detected the latent, twisted erotic content of our Barbies. Or maybe we were just playing.

In a series of Lisa's paintings called *Bad Habits*, a mutant race of swaybacked women appear with bloated bellies, missing limbs and nipples pointing impossibly skyward. Others are cursed with nightmarish deformities that prey on women's fears about

losing control over their bodies. For instance, what would happen if you stopped obsessing about your weight and your caloric intake and just let yourself go? Take a look at *Hamass* (1996), where female creatures loll about in what looks like a bathhouse from an alternate universe. In the background, a seemingly normal female figure sits naked on a bench in a hazy, baby blue fog staring off into space, her legs wide open. But the real subject of *Hamass* is the creature in the foreground. She's of the swaybacked, bloated-belly variety, except in her case a distinct trait makes her stand out from the rest of her kind—her massive derriere—which defies gravity by growing out horizontally, creating what some people have colloquially termed a "shelf butt." The figure stands in profile wearing fishnet stockings that dig deep into her ample flesh creating a crosshatched effect. It's hard not to notice that the subject's gluteal



Hamass 1996 OIL ON CANVAS BOARD 6 x 8 inches

region has become so disfigured with fat that it bears a striking resemblance to a baked ham. Lisa literalizes the association by garnishing it with what look like cloves or olives. All that's missing to complete the presentation are a few Del Monte pineapple rings. *Hamass's* real-life analogue might be saddlebags and cellulite gone amuck. Whatever it is, this grotesque fantasy about female neurosis, alienation and the betrayal of the body is a hilarious anxiety dream worthy of Kafka.

The experience of standing in the presence of some of Lisa's large paintings is thrilling and visceral and deliriously fun. The sheer scale of her female subjects exhibiting such forthright sexuality reminds me of 1950 science fiction B movies about Amazons ruling the world, or films like *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* whose tag line could easily be used to promote a Yuskavage show:



COME SEE A FEMALE COLOSSUS. . . . HER
MOUNTAINOUS TORSO, SKYSCRAPER LIMBS,
GIANT DESIRES!

But unlike the Amazonian vixens of these novelty pictures, the female subjects of Lisa's paintings are not seeking revenge—at least not in the traditional B-movie sense. You won't find Lisa's subjects straddling highways and crushing cars in the palms of their bare hands. And "giant desires" aren't exactly boiling to the surface either.

The ladies of Yuskavageland might be sexual, but their sexuality seems to have very little to do with their own desires. Even *Dusk Delight* (1998), whose female subject is splayed out on a rusty-red overstuffed chair, masturbating in the warm glow of a sunset, doesn't seem to be about a woman satisfying herself. Her sexual groping feels more like performance—the display of desire for the pleasure of someone else. How else do you account for the fact that her hair is sprayed stiff and she's perfectly made up, with false eyelashes augmented by what looks like pounds of mascara—not to mention those long potentially hazardous nails dangling between her legs. If she is trying to arouse herself, it doesn't look like she's going to get very far with that set of talons.

Many of the female inhabitants of Yuskavageland appear passive, resigned and tired. In a group of paintings called *Northview* (2000), Lisa does away with the monochrome backgrounds characteristic of much of her work and animates the space around the figures. In these paintings, both young and middle-aged women mope around in airless rooms with oppressively feminine décor. You can practi-

cally smell sweet perfume emanating from the paintings. Female subjects slump in chairs or congregate around a tufted, velvet covered sofa and stare off, lost in their own private reveries. The women of *Northview*, some with bared breasts, others in long romantic nightgowns, seem to exist in a kind of sexual purgatory where they eternally prepare themselves and wait for lovers who never seem to show up.



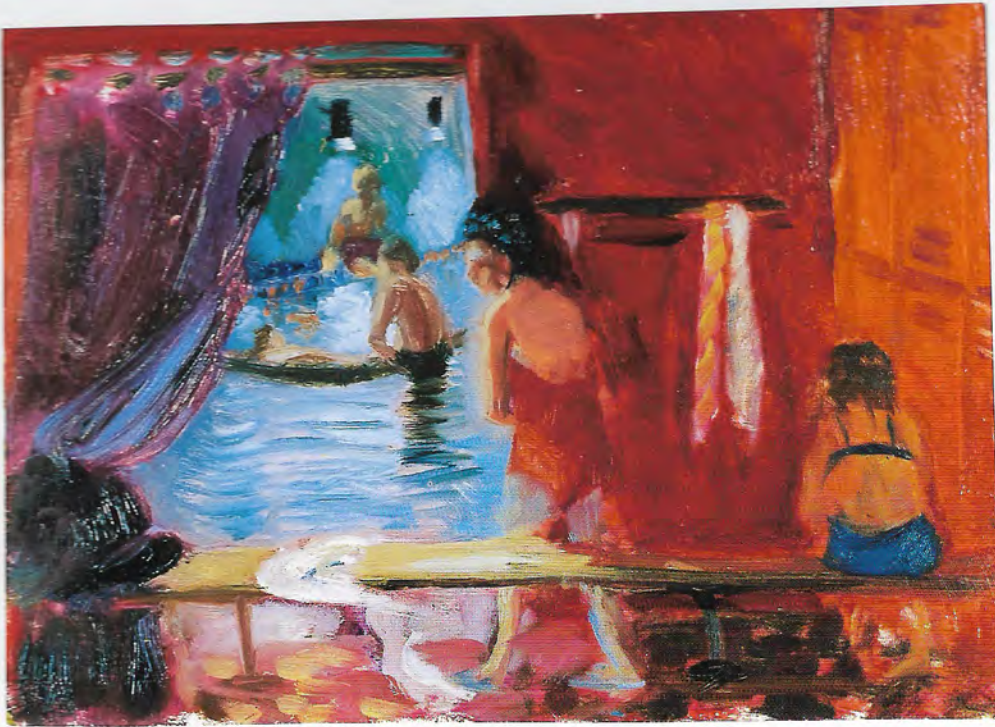
Lisa Yuskavage didn't always want to be a painter. Her first inclination was to be a nun. She grew up with nuns. She went to Catholic school. Her aunt was a nun and she liked the idea of marrying Jesus. "I was drawn to all kinds of intensity," she said. Without going into any details, Lisa told me that she started "getting into trouble" when she was around thirteen years old and soon thereafter her ambition for a life sequestered in a convent faded. When Lisa acted up, her parents, Marie and Eugene, sent her to her room.

After the requisite flopping on the bed and feeling misunderstood, Lisa would prop herself up on an elbow, click on the clock radio and begin to occupy herself. She was a content prisoner. She made up things to do. She wrote little dramas: "I had lots of toys like puppets and put on lots of shows for the neighbors. My plays got too racy after a while. I used lots of Barbies." She wrote a book of poetry and started drawing in the margins in order to decorate it. In the process of illustrating her

book, Lisa became more entranced with the making of drawings than the writing of poems. "I used to draw naked people," she says, "whenever I went to my Grandmom's house. And I remember the perverse thrill of ripping them up and putting them in the trash so no one would see. I imagine everyone knew what I was doing anyway."

Lisa turned her adolescent pastime into an academic pursuit. After graduating from the Philadelphia High School for Girls, she went to Tyler School of Art, the state art school in Philadelphia. "It was inexpensive and my mom wanted me to get a degree," Lisa says. Her laissez-faire attitude changed as soon as classes began, "I fell in love with my teachers at Tyler. I wanted to soak up everything." Lisa describes herself as a very serious student. In a figure drawing course, Lisa says, "We were learning how to develop visual memory. It's a systematic approach to looking at something so that you can later recall it. You imagine a grid in front of what you're looking at. We'd study a live model and then go away to draw her." The studio was located a few doors away from the room where the model posed. "I remember running down the hall as fast as I could. I would never socialize along the way. It was the one time in my life that I didn't talk. The task of trying to remember what I had just seen was the most fun thing I had ever done. I was totally engaged."

Because Tyler was only twenty-five minutes away from Juniata Park, Lisa continued living at home, creating an almost seamless transition from her



Changing Room 1983 OIL ON MASONITE 16½ x 12 inches

bedroom doodles to her formal art education. Despite this cost-saving arrangement, Lisa still needed to work in order to support herself and buy the necessary art supplies. During high school, she'd worked as a lifeguard and spent many summers with a whistle around her neck patrolling the neighborhood public pools. Now in college, Lisa found a private pool that needed her services. "There was this 'chop shop' auto body place called Body Beautiful and they built a spa right next door, complete with a swimming pool, that went by the same name. The spa was actually attached to the car shop," she emphasized. "This was Juniata Park trying to be 'classy.'"

Lisa says Body Beautiful was "the first and the last health club ever to spring up in the neighborhood." Kathy, Lisa's best friend from high school, also got a job there. This was 1981. She taught aerobics. But

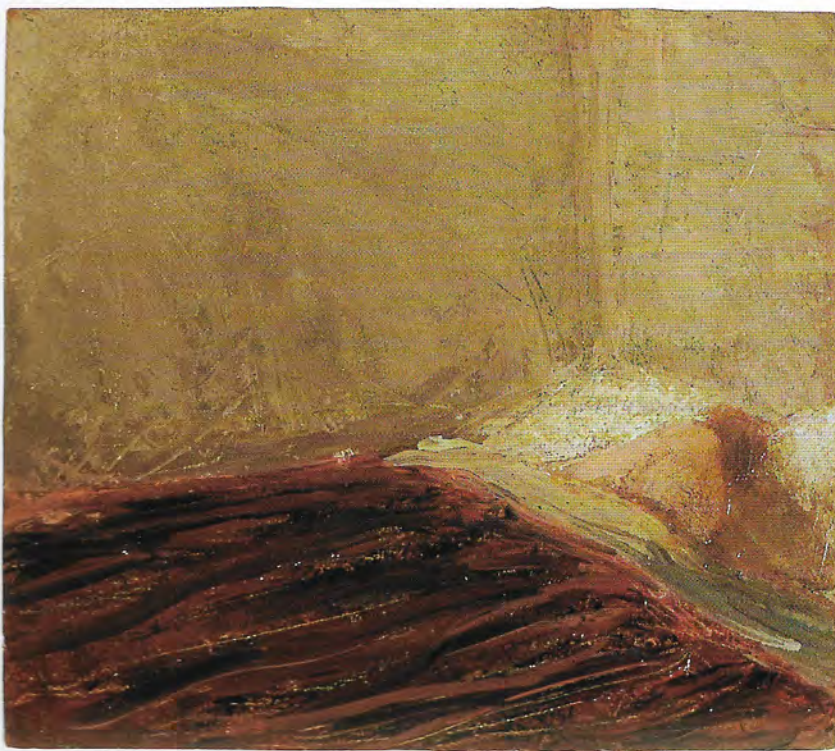
Body Beautiful was not like the brightly lit gyms we think of today. Lisa describes it less as a health club and more as a "swinger, pick-up joint." There were colored light bulbs and curtains. "There were always things going on," she says, "I wouldn't go into that Jacuzzi, that's for sure."

Every evening after her classes ended, Lisa drove back to Juniata Park to perform lifeguard duties. While idling around the pool, she practiced the visual memory techniques she was learning at school. She tried to freeze various tableaux in her mind so she could "bring home images" to work with. Once upstairs in her bedroom, Lisa made small oil sketches inspired by what she saw. "Watching all these men and women hanging around the pool brought to mind the atmosphere of boredom in the work of Degas's ballet schools and whorehouses. So that's what I started doing—

transposing Degas's ideas and compositions to the swimming pool."

These were quick, loose little paintings that were done without preliminary drawings. Beginning immediately with the brush, Lisa worked out the compositions in full color—a technique described as "wet-into-wet painting," meaning the artist paints the entire picture from start to finish in one sitting. These fast, urgent oil sketches began to serve Lisa the same way jotted-down notes serve a writer. Functioning as visual Post-its, the small paintings became a place for Lisa to store and explore ideas that she would later expand upon in larger paintings. As an undergraduate, Lisa latched on to this process of utilizing oil sketches as a first step in the creation of larger, more imposing pictures and she continues to work this way today.

The coziness of painting in her girlhood bedroom while earning her BFA could not have been further away from Lisa's experience at Yale School of Art where she received her MFA. She describes her time in graduate school and the years immediately following as miserable. "I came from a much less privileged background than a lot of the people I went to school with." At Yale, "I couldn't access myself. I became deeply ashamed of who I was." Lisa says, "Coming from where I came from, going to Yale was very fancy. Everybody in my neighborhood imagined I'd be on the lawn tossing footballs with the Kennedys or something. Painting began to bring out a class hang-up in me. It was rarefied." While in graduate school, "I experienced a sort of breakdown in my ego as an artist. The process of getting in was so difficult—and then you get in and



Sleeper (Fragile) 1984 OIL ON BOARD 5 x 7 inches

you're told you're good, because you got in . . . but the method of teaching was highly critical. Professors taught aggressively. I was extremely young and I took things too seriously. Grad school made me very paranoid about doing something wrong." At Yale, "They teach you how to make 'gourmet' art."

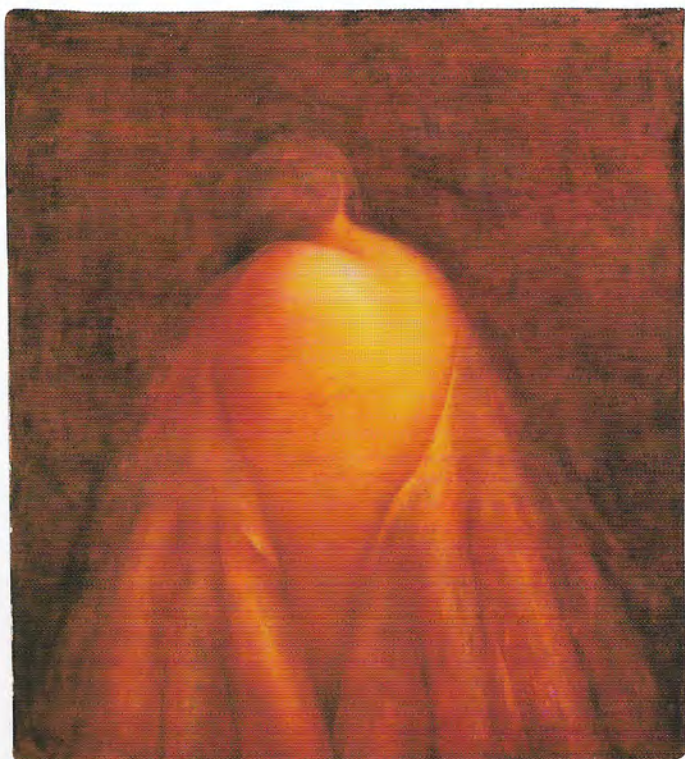
In both *Sleeper* and *Sleeping*, paintings she made as a graduate student in 1984, a female figure lies on a mattress that sits on the floor in the corner of an empty room. The figure is buried under drab blankets and sheets and her face is pressed into a pile of pillows. In both paintings, the subject almost disappears into the walls, which are painted in the same tones as the bedclothes. All that can be seen of the figure is a shoulder, part of an arm and a tangle of messy brown hair that Lisa evokes with a smudge. These paintings are tiny. But unlike most of her small works, these are not preparatory sketches for future large creations. These sad little images never grew to be any bigger than a few inches in size. They appear anemic next to her lively, red pool paintings. Lisa describes *Sleeper* and *Sleeping* as "genuine expressions of depression. They say, 'I can't take it anymore.' They were an unconscious message to the faculty. I didn't want to be looked at. They were very effective. Everybody left me alone after that."

Four years after graduating from Yale, Lisa was still seeking invisibility. It was only in 1990, at the opening of her debut solo show—ten paintings of abstracted female backs at the Pamela Auchincloss Gallery in New York—that it dawned on her: "I walked into the

gallery . . . and it wasn't until that moment that I saw what I had done. I had created an entire show that said, 'Don't look at me.' And it worked very well. Nobody did." In all the paintings the subjects are turned away from the viewer—hiding.

Painted in deep reds and greens, these easel-size paintings feature women with rounded backs, swathed in folds of fabric. In *Truly Yours* (1990), a highlight bounces off the top of what might be a bulging shoulder—or is it a hunchback where a cleft has formed? The tiny heads and the enormously enlarged backs of the figures in this series of paintings bring to mind the sculptures of Henry Moore. But whereas Moore seems to revel in the round, sensual forms of the female body, Lisa's mournful figures are twisted away from us in a posture of modesty or shame. Although the face is hidden in *Truly Yours*, we can make out the woman's hair, which is rolled into a messy old-fashioned bun. There is a stuffy, melancholic, propriety about the painting. It makes me think of a deep, dark, rich, fancy chocolate that has been left behind in the box—overlooked because it was too decorative and too filling for anyone to actually eat.

There are formal elements in the "back paintings" that forecast Lisa's later work, primarily her interest in singular female figures floating in monochrome fields. But the similarities pretty much stop there. The thing that is missing from these paintings is Lisa Yuskavage herself: her wit, her bold expressiveness, her blondes, brunettes and redheads, her



Truly Yours 1990 OIL ON LINEN OVER PANEL 20 x 18 inches

cotton candy colors, her beautiful, grotesque comic-tragic female universe. Where is the naughtiness? Where is the fun? Where is the flesh?!

Like a precocious overactive child who's been forced to sit on her hands in church, Lisa suppressed her natural impulses and created well-behaved art. "I was being dutiful instead of being myself," she says, producing "introverted, inoffensive paintings. . . . Between Yale and the vibe of the gallery, I felt clamped down. I didn't like what I was doing. It didn't feel like me." After her debut show, Lisa sank into a depression and gave up painting for over a year.

The way a bookish, depressed teenage girl might reach for *The Bell Jar*, Lisa looked for solace by turning to Patricia Bosworth's unauthorized biography of Diane Arbus. During her year of abstinence from painting, Lisa visited her mother who was

vacationing on the New Jersey shore and found herself sitting on the beach, hiding under a massive sunhat, compulsively reading the book. It's hard to say exactly what it was about the life and work of Diane Arbus that roused Lisa from her gloom and emboldened her to re-engage with painting. Was Lisa identifying with Arbus's own creative struggle to define her artistic territory? Was it the idea that Arbus, according to Bosworth, "extended the range of what can be called acceptable subject matter" in art, thus liberating Lisa from notions of propriety? Or maybe it was something Arbus said, like, "I really believe there are things that nobody would see unless I photograph them."?

Whatever it was, Lisa eventually found her way back to the studio. "I figured I was making terrible paintings nobody cared about anyway. . . no one was

looking, I had nothing to lose. So one day I went in and—" here she makes an awful retching sound, like she's trying to dislodge something deep inside her guts, equating her new approach to painting to vomiting. "The first thing I painted were the eyes—breaking every rule—eyes in the middle of the canvas." This was definitely not how she was instructed to paint at Yale. "I was following the rules of The Gene London Show, not high art," she says, referring to the local Philadelphia kids' TV show from the '60s and '70s where the host, Gene London, used a large drawing pad to illustrate stories.

By beginning with the subject's eyes front and center, Lisa deliberately forced herself to approach the portrait head on. No more backs. "I had this schlocky idea that the canvas itself was a body with feelings. I became interested in the idea that a painting could be anthropomorphized like in Greek mythology where all the elements are personified." Circling the canvas, Lisa kept asking herself, "What is it feeling? How does it feel to be hung up in a gallery and looked at?"

This experiment led to *The Gifts* (1991). Lisa calls it her transitional painting. The first of its kind, the forebear of what would become her mature body of work, it is a disturbing portrait of a young woman with bared breasts who is bound and gagged by a mouthful of flowers. There is no hiding here. The female figure stares out at us from a hazy green fog with pleading eyes, begging the viewer to release her.

Lisa has said that autobiography runs through all her work. So it's not hard to imagine this painting as a kind of self-portrait depicting Lisa's own creative struggle. Or perhaps, more broadly, this painting—of a distressed, half-naked girl made mute because she is choking on a bouquet of red roses (the ultimate symbol of idealized femininity)—might be read as a metaphor for the dilemma any female artist confronts when she takes on the tradition of the female nude—a tradition historically dominated by male artists whose images of women do not necessarily conform to a woman's own experience of being female.

After *The Gifts*, Lisa started trusting her unconscious more and more, producing wild work that was aggressively antithetical to her "introverted, inoffensive" paintings of yore. Her new body of work, which included titles like *Smacked Ass*, *Tit Heaven* and a series called *Bad Babies*, was extroverted and downright disturbing. As the titles suggest, there is an in-your-face, screw-you impulse behind the paintings. If Lisa was a band, this would be her punk rock phase. "The well behaved work that I had been doing was killing me. I was suffocating. I deliberately changed my work in order to save myself. Being in touch with 'the vulgar' was like finally breathing air. I was free and I knew that no matter how offensive the work might be, there was no turning back."

In the lengthily titled *The Ones That Don't Want To: Black Baby (Bad Baby II)*, a troubled little black girl



The Gifts 1991 OIL ON LINEN 30 x 26 inches

stares out at us from a deep blue field where she stands with her thighs squeezed tightly together, tugging at her short baby-doll dress in order to hide her pantiless pudendum. With this group of paintings, Lisa had suddenly located a direct pipeline from her unconscious to the canvas. And in 1993 at the Elizabeth Koury Gallery in New York, she unleashed her id on the art world.

In the process of making these insistently naughty, sometimes funny, fiendishly surreal paintings that came straight from the soup of her unconscious, Lisa stumbled onto something: "I noticed that a blonde female character kept reappearing in my work." Like a psychotherapist trying to interpret her own dreams, she kept asking herself, "Who's the blonde?" This blonde fixation happened to coincide with Lisa's growing restlessness with her subject matter. "I had only worked from my imagination

or my little plaster maquettes⁸ to generate imagery. Making up work is limited to what's in my own head." To gain specificity in her paintings, she wanted to work from life.

In order to achieve this, Lisa needed to find a model. "I was scared. For ten years, I had worked by myself and managed to avoid dealing with people altogether." If only she could figure out who that blonde was that kept traipsing in and out of her work. Maybe she was the muse Lisa was looking for. She began putting the pieces together: blue eye shadow, blonde flipped-back hair, sexy. "I realized I was drawing a Juniata Park girl," she says. "I had several blonde girlfriends when I was growing up. It could have been any one of them."

She narrowed it down to two: either Maryfran or Kathy. Lisa assumed that if Maryfran was anything like she was in school, she would be too shy to pose

⁸ Borrowing an old masters technique from Jacopo Tintoretto, Lisa made little plaster sculptures of female figures from her early paintings and used them as models or "maquettes" to study the effects of light. She made five of these maquettes and named the group *Bad Habits* (1996) after a Philip Guston painting of the same name. Primarily she used the maquettes as a tool to make new paintings such as *Little Asspicker* (1996), *Food eater* (1996), *Wee Moth-e-fucker* (1996) and many more.

nude. Kathy, on the other hand, never had a problem with shyness. "She was often 'objectified.' She was the sexy, blonde bombshell of the Philadelphia High School for Girls." The boys' school was located directly across the street and Kathy was the draw. "I wasn't the one guys were immediately going for," Lisa says, "I was wholesome looking. Kathy would get the guys to come around and I'd help her with homework. It was a symbiotic relationship."

Lisa got in touch. The plan was to take some pictures of Kathy that Lisa would later use as a source to paint from. "I would have preferred to draw her, but she was a mother of two small children and she didn't have time to stand around."

Along with a camera, Lisa packed some props—based on the objects that kept cropping up in her work: tea cups, shrugs, cigarettes and beads—climbed aboard a train at Penn Station and headed to Philadelphia where Kathy still lived.

"When Kathy took off her clothes and started posing it was amazing to me how much her body looked like things that I had made up," Lisa said. "She had just had a baby and her nipples were like flying saucers. It was so incredible to me that people could say my work was cartoony—reality is much more cartoony." The first paintings to come out of what would become a long ongoing collaboration between Lisa and Kathy—*Portrait of Kathy* (1998) and *kk* (1998) are surprisingly unsexy, compassionate portraits of a tired woman in her mid-thirties just days after childbirth. These paintings are unlike any

others in Lisa's repertoire. She describes them as non-fiction because she had yet to succeed in transposing the image of Kathy from the real world to her fictive heightened all-female universe. In these paintings, Kathy, like an out-of-character actress, seems to be standing backstage waiting for her cue to go on.

Around this time, Lisa began searching for what she calls her "primitive impulse." She was looking for imagery that had a formative impact on her imagination, prior to her extensive art education. She began to research her own visual past, mentally excavating images from her girlhood. She wanted to know what would happen if she brought her high-art education to her world—painting Kathy was one instance of this. But to delve deeper into this self-examination, Lisa had to more fully explore her formative influences in Juniata Park, where it all began.

Lisa describes her neighborhood as "blue collar and Catholic for the most part," with "endless rows and rows of red brick attached houses—like long red walls." I asked Lisa what her house looked like on Claridge street. "Very '50s," she replied, "lots of paneling and wall-to-wall carpeting. Cluttered in a way, but very clean. Loads of tchotchkes." Lisa especially remembers two Paint-by-Numbers⁹ paintings that were done by her mother, Marie—one was *Pinkie*, the other was *The Blue Boy* and they hung over the couch in the Yuskavage living room. "I am still obsessed with those images," Lisa told me, "*Pinkie* was on a hilltop with the wind blowing. *Blue Boy* seemed gay."

9 A fun fact: In the 1950s, the Paint-by-Numbers box top proclaimed, "Every Man a Rembrandt!"

THE YUSKAVAGE LIVING ROOM CIRCA 1967

A PORTION OF THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH'S
"BLUE BOY" (1770) AS INTERPRETED
BY LISA YUSKAVAGE'S MOTHER, MARIE,
CAN BE SEEN HERE



THE PAINT-BY-NUMBERS
RENDITION OF SIR THOMAS
LAWRENCE'S "PINKIE"
(1794) IS FRAMED
OUT OF THIS SNAP-
SHOT, ALTHOUGH
WE COULD
ASSUME IT
WAS
LOCATED
SOMEWHERE OVER
HERE



LISA YUSKAVAGE, AGE 5,
HER GRANDPARENTS &
A GLIMPSE OF HER
SISTER, MARYBETH, AT AGE 7

During her journey into her visual past, Lisa was reminded of something else: "In art school we were always given models to draw from. They were almost always female models. Nude. Almost always young, thin, pretty women. They would pose and the poses would always be like, you know, someone sort of standing around . . . killing time, and they reminded me of these 1970's *Penthouse* pictures."

Lisa followed her instincts. "I went and found this magazine store somewhere near the train station." They sold vintage magazines and Lisa found herself digging around, searching through piles of old *Penthouses*. "I decided that I would only buy the ones that I sort of remembered." She brought a stack back to her studio and looked through many of the very same *Penthouses* that she and her friends had once scrutinized as young girls back in Juniata Park.

Lisa told me that after her original encounter with her first "Pet of the Month" in the 1970s, she remembers thinking: "If that's a woman, what the hell am I? I'm like some third species. I'm practically a guy. . . I mean, who looks like that? I didn't know anybody that looked like that . . . I thought they were freaks or I was a freak and it created this sense of a third sex."

Revisiting *Penthouse* after twenty-five years gave Lisa new insights into the pictures: "They're very soft and there is a lot of obscuring and a lot of privacy in the *Penthouse* pictures of a certain period. Bob Guccione's photography was incredibly good . . . I like his lighting. It reminds me of Vermeer."

A little skeptical, I did some research and I came across this Guccione photograph of Susan Ryder, *Penthouse* "Pet of the Month," March 1975:



Susan Ryder by BOB GUCCIONE

Which is surprisingly similar to this:



The Girl with a Pearl Earring by JAN VERMEER

... and also this:



Portrait of a Young Woman by JAN VERMEER

"The first time I worked with photographs, I really hated it," Lisa says, "because the photographs seemed so authoritative." Lisa soon figured out how to use the photos as "a starting-off point . . . a place of departure. Whether the 'model' is generated from my imagination, a plaster maquette, a found photograph or a live model—they're all just a place to begin. In the end they all have to be re-imagined through painting."

Using *Penthouse* as a source was a segue into figuring out a way to work with live models besides Kathy. Eventually, Lisa got up the nerve to approach women and ask them to model for her. She would prowl around looking for real women who resembled the fictitious women she invented in her early paintings. And she found them. All over the city. In restaurants, coffee shops, the streets.

Sometimes she approached friends. She even enlisted a woman who worked as her assistant—turning her employee into a subject.

She was, in a sense, recreating the "aesthetic of *Penthouse*," she told me. Along those lines, she costumed the women, gave them props, wigs and accessories. Sometimes she built little environments in a corner of her studio. Other times she brought her models to locations. Maybe a mansion. Maybe a field. And just like Bob himself, she posed them. And she photographed them. But then, in a dramatic departure from the *Penthouse* program, Lisa made drawings and small oil studies from the photos—moving further and further away from the actual images until she was finally able to liberate herself from the photographs altogether in order to create paintings all her own.



about this book

AFTER BRIEFLY FLIRTING with the idea of asking Sister Wendy—the nun with the art show on public TV—to write the introductory essay for this book, Lisa asked me. Once I got over my competitive feelings about that hot-shot art critic nun, I started getting down to work. When I began to interview Lisa, I very quickly noticed that every time she talked about creating a book exclusively of her small paintings, she used the word “intimacy”—“The book is about intimacy,” she said time and time again. I only started to understand what she was talking about when she explained that for her, making small paintings is like writing in a diary. By painting small, Lisa says she tricks herself into making personal work, even though eventually people will see it.

As her biography suggests, Lisa has had to work hard to give herself permission to be uninhibited in her painting. It didn’t come naturally. Like an actor with stage fright, Lisa had to figure out ways to overcome her self-consciousness in order to practice her art. Painting small is one of her techniques. Working on a big canvas is a very public thing, she told me. It’s hard to keep it private. “If

someone walked into my studio right now, it would be pretty difficult to hide *that*,” she says, pointing to an eight-by-six-foot canvas of a painting-in-progress that leans against a wall. “Small paintings allow me to pull things out of myself and take risks with images.” By working small, Lisa creates the illusion of secrecy that enables her to express herself without inhibitions.

When Lisa describes the pleasures of painting small, she hunches over an imaginary canvas and mimes that she has a small brush in her hand that she paints with feverishly, not unlike the way a kid hunches over his desk in class, bringing his nose very close to the page while taking a test, in order to assure his work goes unobserved.

People who know Lisa’s work, might find it amusing that this artist—who is famous for making bravura paintings of voluptuous naked women in colors that are anything but discreet—struggles with inhibitions. When you meet Lisa, she—like her art—is bold and funny and assertive, but if you spend any significant time with her, you will discover that underneath this confident exterior lurks a very

modest and thoughtful woman. In a lively interview with Chuck Close, Lisa said, "I exploit what's dangerous and 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.'"¹⁰

Perhaps Lisa was following Thek's advice about confronting your fears when, as an undergraduate, she augmented her income from *Body Beautiful* by modeling for life drawing classes at Tyler. Always careful not to find herself standing naked before her fellow classmates, Lisa had a policy of only modeling for incoming classes filled with anonymous freshmen. Her plan worked perfectly. To the freshmen, Lisa was just another body in the long parade of models that offered themselves up as subjects. For Lisa, this job—which none of her friends or classmates knew she was doing two times a week—provided her with a little extra cash, and more importantly, the valuable experience of learning firsthand what it feels like to be on the other side of the canvas.

As a senior, Lisa was highly regarded among the faculty of Tyler. Because of her star student status, one of the professors invited her to speak to an incoming class. Lisa was thrilled to play the role of visiting artist. She showed slides of her work and discussed her process. She fielded questions and

advised the young aspiring artists how they might best exploit their art-school experience. Her lecture was well received. The professor and students thanked Lisa with a hearty round of applause.

As Lisa collected her things, she felt an enormous sense of pride. This was the beginning of her artistic adulthood and she enjoyed the sense of dignity that accompanies such a milestone. The students were preparing for the second part of their class and Lisa was hurrying off to work in another class where she would be modeling. On her way out, she noticed that the number on the classroom door was the same number she had scrawled down in her date book. Wait a minute. *This* was the room where she was expected in five minutes. The implications of this seemingly benign coincidence sunk in quickly.

Soon thereafter, Lisa found herself back inside the classroom with the same group of students that she had so thoroughly impressed only minutes ago during her lecture—only now, instead of standing behind a slide projector discussing her work—Lisa removed her clothes and stood in front of them—stark naked.



This book covers more than a decade of Lisa's small paintings, and in most cases they are reproduced at actual size. Although not all the paintings presented here were created as studies for larger work, many of them were and the book gives you an unusual opportunity to see Lisa's working process unfold.

¹⁰ Lisa Yuskavage. "Interview: Chuck Close Talks with Lisa Yuskavage," Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, vol. 2, no. 14 (1996), p. 26.

If you look closely at Lisa's body of work, you can sometimes trace the genealogy of certain images. In an effort to illustrate this, I've created two diagrams that attempt to chart the evolution of two large paintings. This is, of course, an imperfect investigation—the intuitive process of an artist is not something that can be mapped out. Nonetheless, I went ahead and tried anyway. Diagram #1, "L'histoire de *Faucet*," explores the lineage of an unsettling portrait of an innocent blonde girl-woman with bangs and a turned-up bob who stands before a wall that is the same color as her flesh, wearing nothing more than a matching flesh-colored shrug with a beaded collar. She seems to be staring out at us from the bottom of a fleshy well where above her an out-of-reach faucet pokes from an otherwise empty wall. Diagram #2, "The History of *Hamass*," traces the genesis of *Hamass* and one of the largest of Lisa's paintings to date, *Good Evening Hamass* (1997)—a diptych in CinemaScope proportions that measures 42 × 96½ inches.

Throughout the book you'll discover instances when the same composition appears in different

paintings with different colors or different lighting. Occasionally there are tiny adjustments made to the subject's pose or the expression on her face. In these cases Lisa is trying out an idea in all its variations before launching into a large-scale production. Seeing all these explorations of the same image is like being given a chance to sit in on the painting equivalent of a rehearsal.

A small painting also creates a different physical experience for both the artist and the viewer. For someone like Lisa, who generally uses big canvases, working small allows her the opportunity to stay close to the image while painting. She doesn't have to continually step away from the canvas while working on it in order to see how her efforts are affecting the painting as a whole. The whole is right there in front of her. The constant proximity to the canvas creates an intimate working experience. Similarly, the viewer must get close to a small painting in order to engage with it. Unlike the massive canvases that dominate the walls of a Lisa Yuskavage show, these small paintings beckon the viewer with a whisper instead of a shout.

DIAGRAM #1 - L'HISTOIRE DE "FAUCET"

THE GENEALOGY OF A LARGE PAINTING

- NOTE HOW HAIR IS SPLIT ON EITHER SIDE OF EARS. THIS ODD HAIRSTYLE SHOWS UP LATER IN A MODIFIED FORM IN FAUCET
- NOTE SCHOOL UNIFORM



BLONDE SIDEBURNS - FIRST GENERATION:
1995
(10x10)

--- STUDY FOR BLONDE JERKING OFF
1995
(10 1/2 x 8 1/2) WHAT I WOULD CALL ONE OF YUSKAVAGE'S PUNK ROCK PAINTINGS

COW GIRL
1995
(8x6)



LITTLE FLESH POT
1994
(13x12 1/4)

- NOTE THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SHRUG AND THE RETURN TO BLONDE HAIR

- NOTE THE SIGNIFICANT APPEARANCE OF THE SPIGOT
- ALSO NOTE THE INTRODUCTION OF THE SHRUG WITH THE MARABOU COLLAR, AN ITEM THAT YOU MIGHT COME ACROSS IN A FREDERICKS OF HOLLYWOOD CATALOGUE ACCOMPANIED BY ONE OF THEIR AD LINES LIKE, "FOR THE GAL YOU LOVE TO SEE A LOT OF."
- LISA HAS TRANSFORMED HER BLONDE INTO A BRUNETTE
- AND OF COURSE NOW BREASTS HAVE BEEN EXPOSED AND PINK HAS BECOME THE DOMINANT COLOR & SCHOOL UNIFORM HAS BEEN REPLACED BY SHRUG.



- NOTE APPEARANCE OF DISH & SPOON

- ALSO, THE BREASTS HAVE BECOME SIGNIFICANTLY ASYMMETRICAL

FAUCET
1995
(12x60)

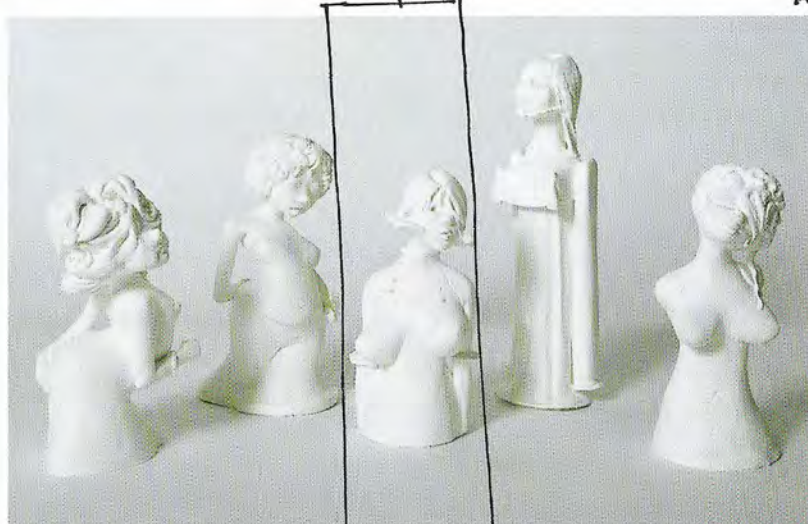
- SHRUG RE-APPEARS WITH BEADED COLLAR IN PLACE OF MARABOU. HAIRSTYLE VERY MUCH LIKE ORIGINAL DOO IN "BLONDE SIDEBURNS."

VERY GRIMMS FAIRYTALE THERE IS AN ALLEGORICAL QUALITY TO THIS IMAGE - IT COULD BE AN ILLUSTRATION FOR A WEIRD, TWISTED CHILDREN'S STORY - AS IS THE CASE WITH FAUCET

ASYMMETRICAL BREASTS REMAIN

MOTHERFUCKER
1996

NEW SPECIES MAQUETTES BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM HER PAINTINGS.



- ALSO NOTE OPEN MOUTH LIKE "LITTLE FLESH POT" BUT MORE NATURALISTIC.

DIAGRAM #2 - HISTORY OF "HAMASS"

AND THE FEMALE SUBJECT
BASKS IN THE BEATIFIC
LIGHT OF A BLOOD ORANGE SUNSET

"SUNSET" IS A
DESCENDANT OF
"WEE MOTHERFUCKER"
BUT INSTEAD OF
USING A MONOCHROME
BACKGROUND, LISA
PLACES SUBJECT IN
A GLOWING PASTEL
CLOUDSCAPE.
FLOWERS ADORN
THE BOTTOM CORNER
OF THE CANVAS



• BUTTON NOSE
TRAIT IN ALMOST
ALL OF YUSKAVAGE'S
FIGURES

FAUCET
1995
(12x60)

• FOR ORIGINS OF FAUCET
SEE DIAGRAM #1

"AN EARLY VERSION OF
A SWAYBACKED, BLOATED
BELLIED, POINTY
NIPPLED FOODEATER
CREATURE 1996

(8x6)

*NOTE
HAMASS "SHELF BUTT"
CHARACTERISTIC IS
SUGGESTED HERE

*BEGINNING OF
NIPPLE
EXAGGERATION



• THE MODELED APPEARANCE
OF THE BREASTS IS A RESULT
OF LISA'S ADOPTION OF THE
RENAISSANCE TECHNIQUE OF
WEE MOTHERFUCKER

1996 WORKING FROM
MAQUETTES—

(10x8)

• THIS IMAGE HAS EVOLVED
FROM A 3 STEP PROCESS

1. FAUCET

2. A MAQUETTE—A
LITTLE WHITE PLASTER
STATUE BASED ON
THE FIGURE IN "FAUCET"
CALLED
"MOTHER-
FUCKER"

SUNSET
1997
(5x7)

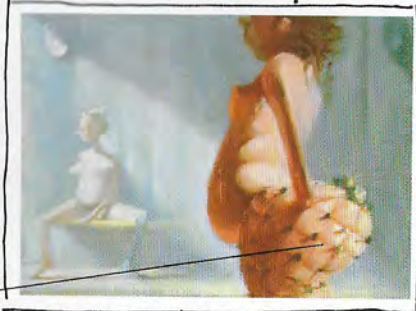
3. USING "MOTHER-
FUCKER" LISA
EXAMINES THE
EFFECTS OF
SHADOW & LIGHT
& CREATES
"WEE MOTHER-
FUCKER"

GOOD EVENING
HAMASS
1997

(42x96 1/2)

• NOTE THE BLUE
HAZY BACKGROUND
OF "HAMASS" COM-
BINED W/
GLOWING
SUNSET
OF
"SUNSET"

HAMASS
1996
(6x8)



*THE FULLY
FLESHED-OUT
"SHELF BUTT"
THAT WILL ULTIMATELY BE
EXPANDED UPON IN THE
SPECTACULARLY
IMMENSE
"GOOD EVENING
HAMASS"
BELOW.

*A PRE-
ADOLESCENT
GIRL WITH A
PETULANT POUT
WEARS AN
UNDERSHIRT
COVERING A

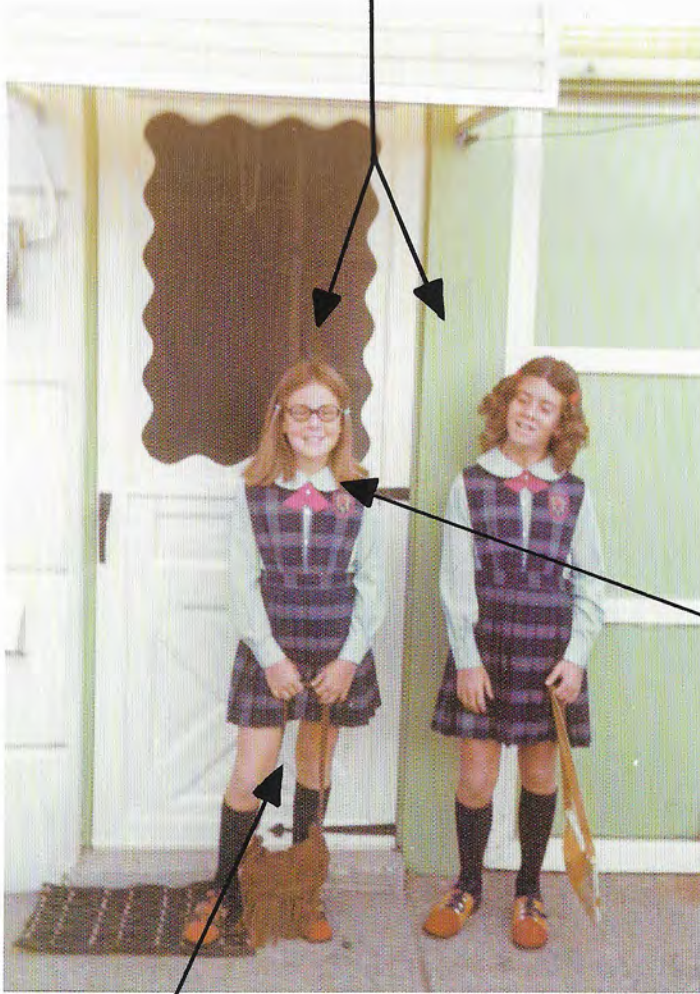


SET OF IMPOSSIBLY ERECT NIPPLES. THE BLONDE HAIR HAS BEEN REPLACED BY A WILD MANE OF DARK CURLY HAIR. LIKE AN ANIMAL REARING BACK BEFORE IT POUNCES, THE CREATURE CONTEMPLATES A VASE OF FLOWERS.

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG WOMAN IN PICTURES:

AN INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGINS OF MY FRIEND'S ARTISTIC
PREOCCUPATIONS

MIGHT EXPLAIN LATER
ADMIRATION FOR THE WORK
OF DIANE ARBUS



LISA YUSKAYAGE IN 1967
AT AGE 7
HOLY INNOCENTS
FIRST GRADE PICTURE



LISA(L) AND SISTER, MARYBETH(R), ON FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL
IN THEIR HOLY INNOCENTS UNIFORMS
•NOTE THE KNEE SOCKS THAT APPEAR MANY YEARS LATER
IN THE FORM OF BOOTS IN "THE BAD."

YUSKAVAGE AFTER HER FIRST DAY
OF PHILADELPHIA HIGH SCHOOL
FOR GIRLS.

*NOTE REBELLIOUS POSTURE
ALSO EVIDENCED IN "THE BAD"
AND MANY OTHER PAINT-
INGS

THE BAD, 1995
(OIL ON LINEN)
8X6



CATHOLIC SCHOOL UNIFORMS
WITH PETER PAN COLLARS

EARLY APPRECIATION OF EXOTIC
UNDERWEAR, A RECURRING MOTIF
IN YUSKAVAGE'S WORK

*NOTE THE POSSIBLE LACK OF UNDER-
WEAR IN "THE BAD." FOR OTHER EXAMPLES
OF UNUSUAL PANTIES, SEE "SWEETPUS."