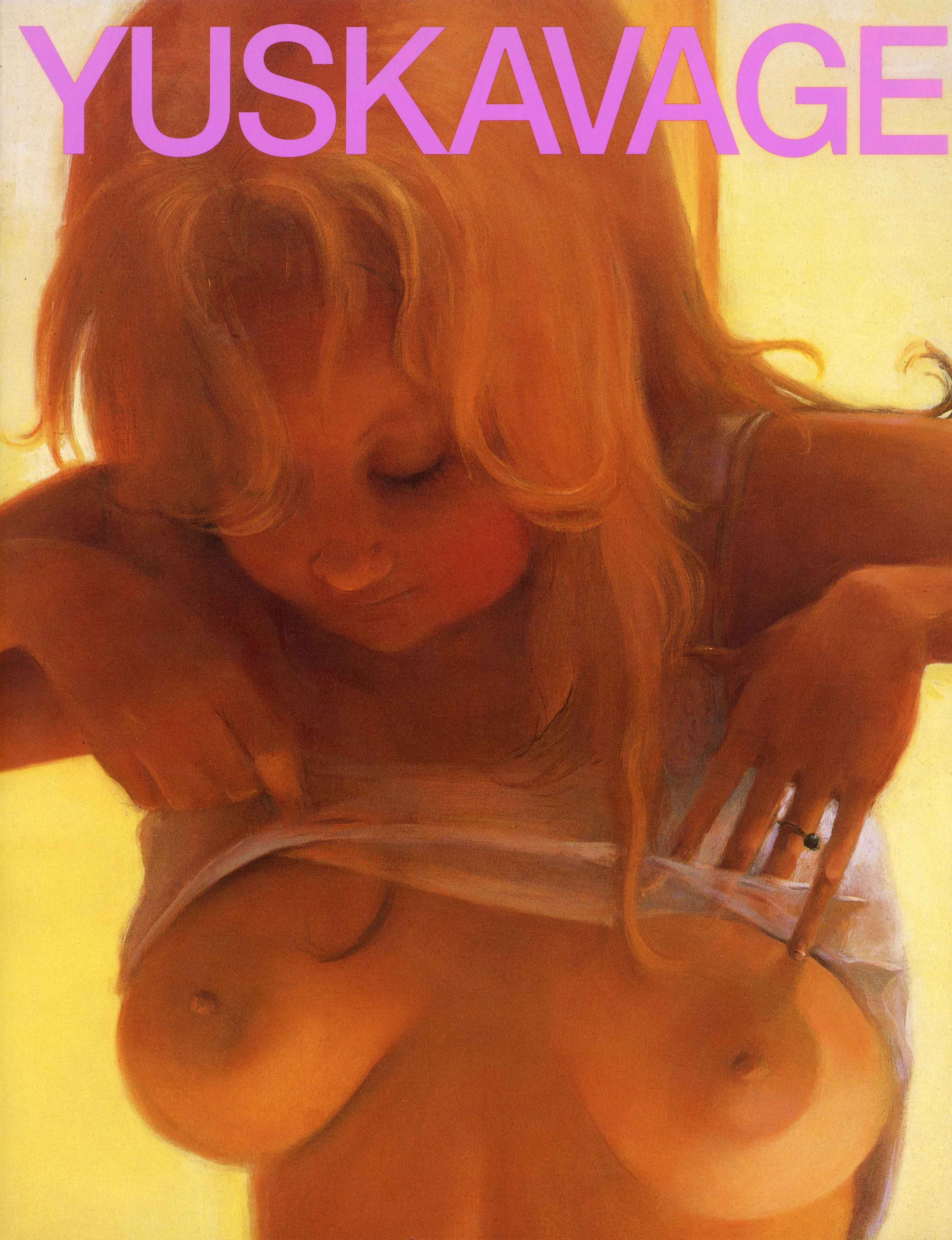


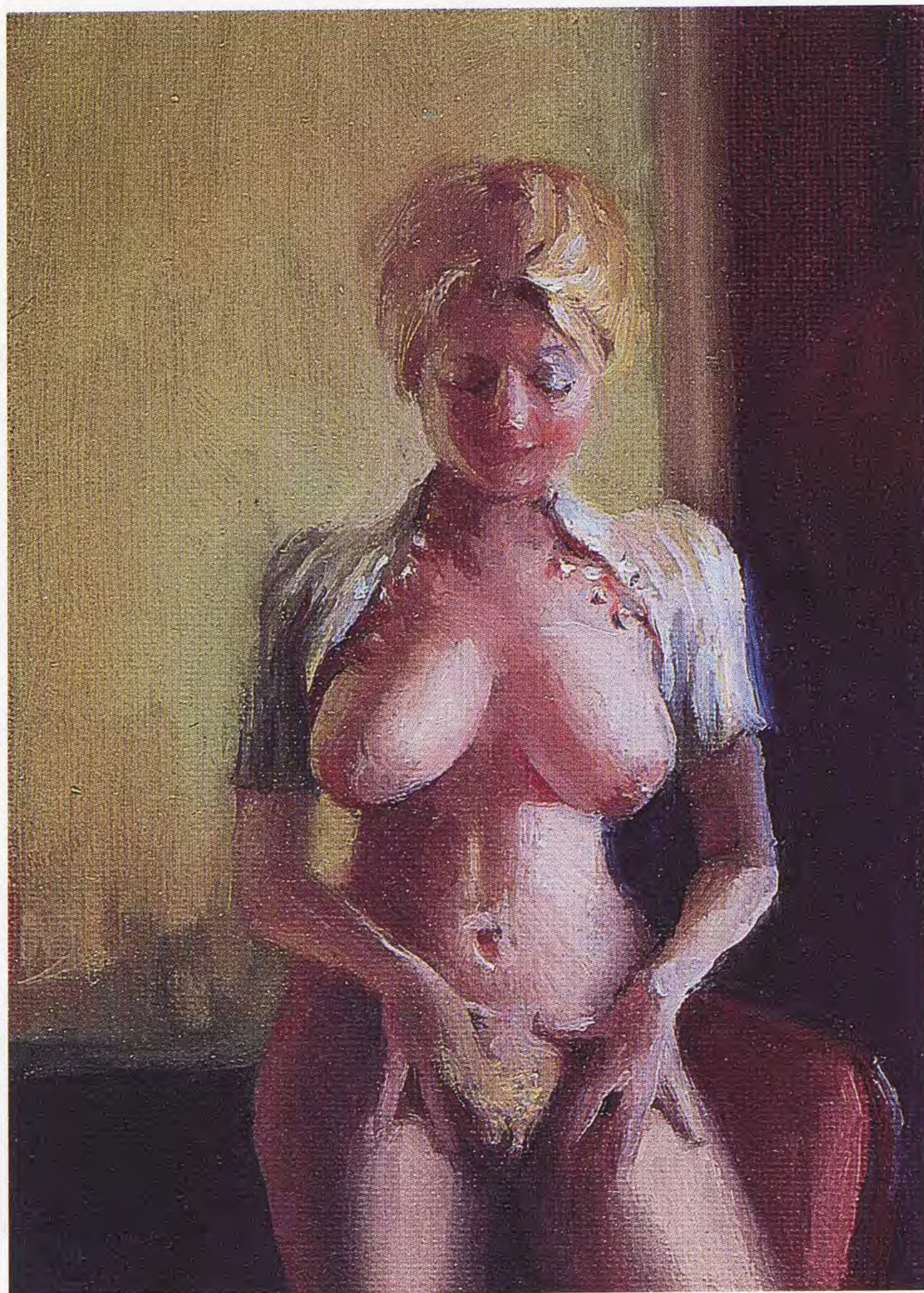


YUSKAVAGE

LISA YUSKAVAGE

Institute of Contemporary Art
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, PHILADELPHIA

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Screwing Her Pussy on Straight, 1997

OIL ON CANVASBOARD, 7 X 5

COLLECTION OF PHILIP GOLDENTYER, WASHINGTON DC

SCREWING IT ON STRAIGHT

Claudia Gould

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WORKING ACROSS THE STREET from the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York allowed me to frequent Lisa Yuskavage's solo shows in 1996 and 1998. The first time I saw a large body of Lisa's work in one place, at the 1996 show, I was taken aback—not quite horrified, but completely puzzled. I wondered: Why was a woman painting these types of paintings about women? When I returned two years later, in 1998, I was no closer to understanding what she was up to, except that I was much more *comfortable* with her work. I was certainly getting older and more comfortable with myself; was it a sign I was growing up? I was also beginning to understand that contradictions and change (in general, and as specifically reflected in Lisa's growing body of work) are not inherently vexing; they can be liberating as well. Two years later, and another two years older, I find myself not only enthralled by Lisa's images but curating her first one-person museum show.

Anyone who knows me knows better than to call me on Sundays at 9pm. I rarely miss an episode of *Sex and the City*, HBO's weekly program about four women in their thirties living and working in Manhattan. The dialogue is smart, provocative, and startlingly true to life. (You can hardly believe it airs on prime time American television.) The characters talk about the kind of stuff you dare only say to yourself and maybe—just maybe—to your closest friends. For instance: In one recent show, Samantha (the most sexually adventurous character) reveals over lunch that her newest partner has “funky spunk” and, alluding to the popular slang for oral sex, says “Well, girls, they don't call it a job for nothing.” Charlotte (the prim one) promptly walks out, and Carrie (the narrator) cancels her order of rice pudding.

A gay male friend of mine says he loves *Sex and the City* because it is as outrageous as the gay scene was in the seventies. But many people are uncomfortable with it, even threatened by it, except women of a certain age—from, say, sixteen to sixty.

If *Sex and the City* levels the playing field by giving voice to women and

their sexuality, so, too, does Lisa Yuskavage. Like HBO's hit sitcom, Lisa's paintings are audacious and provocative; almost all of her women look sexually ripe. If you disregard her subject matter and focus on the virtuosity of her gorgeous technique, Lisa hits you over the head with such titles as *Asspicking*, *foodeating*, *headshrinking*, *socialclimbing motherfucking bad habits*; *Good Evening, Hamass*; and *Screwing Her Pussy on Straight* (referring to a woman who, in Lisa's lexicon, knows who she is and what she is doing). I hear these titles and my jaw drops. But, however much Lisa's work prompts some people to walk out and others to cancel their rice pudding, it assuredly rewards those who, like me, keep coming back for more.

The women in *Sex and the City* are, of course, fictitious, and Lisa's women are, too. The fact that they are unreal (or, as Lisa insists, "only real as paint") is what stumped me. As a feminist, I did not like her women and did not understand how a thirty-something woman could paint these images. I am a product of a culture that wants to believe everything we see, has a need to define things and neatly package them, and ultimately seeks understanding and resolution. Yuskavage makes this impossible: She teases us, contradicts herself, and constantly changes. This is a reflection of her own intellectual growth; a provocateur, she fights tooth and nail to keep things open, unresolved, *complicated*.

We explored some of these issues, and more, in a recent interview.

CLAUDIA GOULD: *In preparing for this interview, I have been reading a lot about you. There seem to be little contradictions both on your part and in statements by writers that you admire who use words that I know make you cringe—"bimbos, nymphets," etc. Do you see these women as "bimbos" with low self-esteem?*

LISA YUSKAVAGE: I am quite conscious that I am creating a fiction. If I didn't, I wouldn't be able to construct and manipulate them aggressively as paintings. I have always thought of the image as a personification of the painting itself. It is the layering and intersecting of how it is painted and what the image is that creates the meaning for me. I do feel puzzled, perhaps naively, about some of the language used by others to talk about them. Words like "bimbo" are problematic for me, as they describe a lofty distance and a lack of empathy; I am a great deal more empathic than ironic toward the paintings. I think you can see that if you look at the light and how they are painted. I don't work from an elevated place looking down; if they are low, then I am in the ditch with them, and by painting them, I am trying to dig us out together.

CG: *The thing is, we do see them as people. Is this just my problem? Am I misunderstanding things?*

LY: No, that's not your problem alone. Most people are more equipped to interpret subject matter. I am asking or daring the viewer, I suppose, to just look at it as a painted thing, as a kind of layered spectacle.

CG: *You want to keep it dangerous?*

LY: I prefer to work from the point of view that what I am doing is wrong rather than right. And I also like to keep in mind that it isn't truly dangerous, it's just fiction. But I also know how powerful good fiction can be. I read *Anna Karenina* this summer, and I walked around traumatized about Anna's demise; I felt as if someone had actually died. What affected me was not so much the suicide but the way it was described. It is compelling because of how Tolstoy allowed his characters to be full of contradictions and ambivalence. I was very drawn in because of that.

CG: *Now that you are painting your friend Kathy, who is a real person, doesn't that change things for you?*

LY: Yes, it does. A lot. I was looking for a way to change the drawing in my paintings, to continue the exploration of "What is a model?," which I started with the little maquettes. As far as studying light, the maquettes were great, but in terms of linear drawing, they set me up in overly mannerist and cartoony territory that made the reading of the paintings quicker than I intended. I also wanted to up the ante by having not only a real person pose but someone that I cared so deeply about, and whose own narrative might inform some of my pictorial choices and possibly open up options. I wanted to see what it would be like to turn something real into a painted thing to see if I could sustain my ability to keep it fictional.

CG: *It's made up. It's still not real.*

LY: Yes. It's still just an object, and it's still a constructed pictorial object.

CG: *This brings up Peter Schjeldahl's quote in a review about your work: "Painting can square public with private existence like no other visual medium. Its main demands on an artist, in this pursuit, are only that he or she be, first, adequately skilled, and, second, a sufficiently interesting person." Isn't that what other people are talking about?*

LY: I don't think that there is an uninteresting person alive. It's just that not every-

one has access to themselves, to the full range of their emotional life. This is why my work often embarrasses me and why I need it to embarrass me. Being embarrassed allows me to access more surprising pictorial solutions. I don't know precisely how, but it seems to function as a clarifying agent.

CG: *This brings up your titles. You said that when you named some of these paintings, you never expected them to see the light of day. Some of these titles can be considered vulgar or taboo, but to me they're very funny. How do you feel about that?*

LY: I just didn't think it would matter, because no one was paying attention. I was also listening to a bit too much rap music. Now, I have to face up to how aggressive they seem. I feel a little bad about them.

CG: *You do?*

LY: Sure. But I do have a funny story for why I called that one painting *Screwing Her Pussy on Straight*. It is a direct quote from friend, painter, and grad-school classmate Jesse Murry. He came to my studio, one day back in 1991, and took a long look at some painting I was working on, and said, "Honey, you have got to have your pussy screwed on straight to make these paintings!"

CG: *In other words, you've got to know what you are doing.*

LY: Specifically as a woman. I now know exactly what he meant. It is so easy to let it get all out of whack.

CG: *Do you find it liberating?*

LY: Sure it's liberating, but then I feel bad about it. I guess that would be your typical Catholic reaction. I laugh, I feel guilty, and I waver.

CG: *We talked yesterday about what makes your mouth water?*

LY: What do you mean? What kind of art?

CG: *What gets you really excited? What art makes you passionate?*

LY: Dense, layered things: movies, books, paintings. I have been in love with Phillip Guston's late work for a long time now, and rely on a lot of what he said about his own practice: "There is an ongoing battle between the form and the subject matter." His work is boundless and generous; it's as multilayered and woven as a

Beethoven symphony. I hate stingy art.

CG: *What would you say are some of your most complex paintings?*

LY: I don't know how to answer that, but I can say that one painting that is still a puzzle to me is called *True Blonde Draped*. I like how it reflects classicism. I am very interested in art history, but I am not in love with the past. It was hard for me to work with that image, because there was so much about the person posing that I had to consider while painting it.

CG: *It's Kathy; right?*

LY: Yes. Dealing with her presence stripped me of all of my antics. I wanted to see if I could let the image lead, and trust that the paintingness of it would still take over. I guess that was the joy; it was a real dialogue between the image and me. I am fond of all of the paintings of Kathy because I am dealing with someone else's generosity in lending their life force, in trusting me.

CG: *Why do people think that your work is political?*

LY: Because they want to believe that it is. I am interested in art, not politics. I am interested in giving myself the freedom to paint.



kk, 1998

OIL ON CANVASBOARD, 9½ X 7
PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK

her Hair (1995) [p.35]. The same icon is a ghostly presence elsewhere: *Bad Habits* (1996) [p.37] for instance. As in a Byzantine icon, the figure is stylized: She is symmetrical and rigid in pose, the folds of her drapery regularized, the colors and modeling simplified, a celestial blue dominating. All accidents of light or nature are purged. The background is suppressed, removing the image from the material context. She may be seen from below, lit from above. What better icon for our times than the shrink?

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In some of her recent pictures, Yuskavage has moved away from innocence and pastels. *Interior: Big Blonde with Beaded Jacket* (1997) [p.45] is darker, in every sense, than her sisters. There is a calculation in her erotic self-presentation that is not mindless, and is, therefore, more sinister. The self-consciousness of *Honeymoon* (1998) [p.53] is of a different sort. The artist has created a setting of mysterious mountains, moonlight, transparent drapery, and voluptuous nymph—all rendered with the air-brushed perfection of a soft-porn magazine. As the artist steps back to get her accustomed distance, she exposes the clichés of the “romantic” image, removing the scene from the actual with anatomical exaggerations and distortions. *True Blonde* (1999) [p.63] poses erotically, but covers her crotch with her hands. Is she concealing her pudenda, or playing with herself? Her lowered eyes show us a sadder, more introspective, side to the woman who accepts her role as sex symbol, but yearns for something more real. *True Blonde Draped* (1999) [p.61] gives us a still more poignant and more unguarded view of her. She looks out at us with a self-awareness we have not seen before. Her face, particularly her eyes, are shadowed, giving her more age, more consciousness. Significantly, her lower body is draped, and this time, unmistakably, her hands are clasped protectively over her crotch. She is a woman endowed with the attributes of sexual allure—blond hair and huge breasts—but they seem to be, for her, more a heavy burden than a useful weapon. She is a poignant portrait of a woman who longs to be taken as a person and not as a sexual object, but the postcoital air suggests that she is trapped in a role she does not know how to escape.

Lisa Yuskavage wants seriously to paint. She believes in the transforming beauty of pigment suspended in oil on canvas, and the ability of that beauty to suggest transcendence. She paints the shallow, the vulgar, the heedless as if it were profound, elegant, meditative, thereby reminding us obliquely of the absence of these qualities and the enduring possibility of their renascence.

church late one autumn afternoon, when the sun, low on the horizon, had worked its way around so that it entered the window and struck the painting exactly as Bellini had painted his light. For a fleeting, magical moment—miraculously free of tourists popping five-hundred lire pieces into the spotlight machine—the presence of the supernatural, which the saints are silently contemplating, was palpable. Yuskavage creates that chaste silence with her studied light for her narcissistic figures, who contemplate nothing beyond themselves and their bodies.

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Humor helps soften her irony and avoid pretentiousness. The twentieth century is when humor and wit in art came into the mainstream. The locus of most of the humor in art before the twentieth century, in the form of parody or social criticism, was prints. In this small-scale, cheap, and accessible medium, the human condition, or selected segments of humanity, was held up to ridicule. Frequently, there was a moralizing message conveyed explicitly or implicitly. Humor on the large scale is an invention of the twentieth century. Freud and Bergson, Duchamp and Dada put wit at the center. Claes Oldenburg playfully enlarged the mundane to monumental scale, then rendered it in inappropriate modern materials.

Donald Kuspit has suggested that the prominence of wit and humor in the art of the twentieth century resulted from the attempts of media, government, religion—all the institutions of modern life—to make us take everything seriously. Yuskavage clearly believes we have taken sex too seriously. Feminism has tried to persuade us that it is degrading to the woman to acknowledge feminine allure. The threat of sexual harassment suits has cowed men into silencing any form of appreciation of “la difference” in the workplace. Meanwhile, the industry of commercializing sexuality has reached its greatest proportions ever. Yuskavage gives us *Penthouse* pinups in billboard scale, but painted with a tenderness that wars with this commodified idiom. Her *Lolitas* parody the trite archetype, but without bitterness. The modern-day feminists are irrelevant to Yuskavage’s purposes. She deflates their finger-wagging pretension with her good-humored appreciation of feminine sensuality. She treats the male fantasy equally playfully. Distortions and exaggerations distance her nymphets just enough to verge on caricature, but not so much as to deprive them of presence. She celebrates the sexuality of her babes at the same time that she lampoons their ubiquity in American visual culture, as if to say it is not their physicality that is vulgar but the use made of them by male and female alike.

At times, Yuskavage iconocizes her child-women, turning them into contemporary versions of the divinized image—particularly in *Manifest Destiny* (1998) [p. 55] and *Transference Portrait of my Shrink in Her Starched Nightgown with my Face and*

Looking at Yuskavage's paintings, I am reminded of the way I feel about America when I return home after living abroad. I am overwhelmed by the lush fecundity, the license, the writ too largeness, the abrasive vulgarity. The finesse of Yuskavage's paintings is her rejoinder to these qualities in our culture. Her corrective to *too much too fast too big* is to make pictures at a rate of five or six a year that aspire to rival the great masters. Thoughtful, scrupulously prepared, exquisitely painted, they ask to be regarded with the same kind of attention as the masterpieces of the grand tradition from which she has learned.

With her technique, she makes it clear that craftsmanship is as important to her as to any painter of the Renaissance. She prepares a composition with numerous drawings, in the same way as the masters in the academic tradition. There is nothing of the accidental or spontaneous in her final product, and, with this evident premeditation, she opens the ironic gap between her ignoble actors and her noble treatment of them. As part of her laborious preparation, in imitation of sixteenth-century painters like Jacopo Tintoretto, Yuskavage makes three-dimensional models of her figures. We are told that Tintoretto made clay figures and then placed them on a little stage, where he could adjust the lighting and study them from various angles and in relation to the other figures in a composition. In fact, the Venetian probably learned this technique in central Italy from his hero, Michelangelo. When he needed to design some four hundred poses for the Sistine *Last Judgment*, Michelangelo created small wax figures that he could warm in hot water and mold into the desired poses. He could then study them in various lights. This technique obviated the need for studies of the live model, and when those figures were painted, he could reshape and reuse the figurines. Yuskavage makes her maquettes of cast hydrocal, and they are larger than I imagine Tintoretto's or Michelangelo's to have been (but who knows? None has survived). She, too, uses them to study light: "to get 'real' light," she says. She discovered that when Thomas Hart Benton used maquettes, he had his model take the pose of the sculpture, so she has included this step in her process. She photographs the models; then, she may draw from the photo in ink, or pencil, or pastel. The use of photographs seems to me to help her get the right distance. She does not want immediacy, only the illusion of immediacy. Sometimes, she is inspired by Degas to make monoprints (figs. i, ii). There are examples in the exhibition of all these paths to the finished work. And we can see that there are even times when the study becomes the finished work.

Light for Yuskavage is alchemical. Like her great Venetian forebears, she finds in light the power to transform the visual image, to imbue it with mood. Like Lisa, who wanted to reproduce here Giovanni Bellini's San Zaccaria altarpiece (fig. iii), I, too, find it a very moving piece, because of its light. I remember visiting the



fig. v Bellini (Giovanni, 1430–1516). *Madonna and Child between Saint Catherine and Mary Magdalen*, 1490. Oil on wood, 58 x 107 cm. Accademia, Venice, Italy.

reality. Yuskavage intends for us to be repelled and attracted simultaneously. She wants for us to bring to consciousness the gulf between the realms of *Penthouse* and the traditional odalisque of Velázquez or Ingres. The sheer sensuous bounty she creates with her color and brushwork mocks the gaudy glitter of her models. In our mind's eye, we are meant to set the vacuity of her self-absorbed little vamps against the inhabited grace of a Rubens Venus.

In our cynical age, finding a subject worthy of celebrating without giving it an ironic twist is next to impossible. In this respect, our times resemble those of the sixteenth-century mannerists, the successors of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo. Il Bronzino strikes me as exemplary of this sophisticated generation (fig. iv). The contemporary historian Giorgio Vasari described Bronzino's predecessor Andrea del Sarto as "the perfect painter"—indeed a hard act to follow. Bronzino portrayed the new rich of his day as they wished to be seen: elegant, poised, aloof from the fray of ordinary life. With his exquisite technique, he could give them life even in the unrelieved black costumes dictated by fashion in midcentury Florence. But the painter tells more about his sitters than they were able to perceive, apparently. Their ramrod uprightness and vacant smile and wandering eye gainsay their show of intrepidity and suggest a hollow center, like that of Yuskavage's dolls. And the sheer opulence of Bronzino's technique, like Yuskavage's, makes more lamentable the abyss between the worth of their subjects and the treatment. Sydney Freedberg summed up the mannerist dilemma, saying that for these artists, the simple statement was no longer possible. This describes equally the dilemma of the painter today.



fig. iv Bronzino (Agnolo di Cosimo di Mariano, 1503–1572).
Portrait of a Young Man. Oil on wood. (95.5 x 74.9 cm).
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection,
 Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929. (29.100.16)
 © 1990 The Metropolitan Museum of Art

chosen the grand format for her banal subjects but her attitude toward her subject cannot be explicit. It is forced beneath the opulent surface, cloaked in ambiguity, and expressed in irony.

The criticism of Yuskavage's paintings exhausts Roget's entries under "ambiguous" and "paradoxical." Critics have vied with one another to produce a yet more ringing phrase describing the contradictions they see in her imagery: "exploitation and arousal," "alienation and affection," "self-love and self-loathing," "desire and desolation," "disgust and desire," "vulgarity and earnestness," "kitsch and the great tradition." Part of Yuskavage's irony is that while her subjects are "ignoble," at the same time they connect to the tradition of the female nude in western art. And the connection, in a double irony, is not the expected one of parody but of sincere emulation.

Her girls present themselves—that is, their bodies—to the male user. There is no hint of anything but darling voluptuousness about them. They pucker their lips, ready to be kissed; they thrust their oversize breasts and erect nipples with mouths open, eyes closed. They examine their bodies, reclining in the traditional pose of the seductress. They look like dolls, and, indeed, they offer themselves as though their function and purpose is to be played with. But beauty is not among their attributes. The ubiquitous turned-up nose is Lisa Yuskavage's sign of where they stand on the scale of classical aesthetic values: They are cute.

One may wonder at their sometimes bizarre distortions. A purple plastic nipple, distasteful as a substitute in real life, is peculiarly attractive in this painted

LISA YUSKAVAGE'S PAINTERLY PARADOXES

Marcia B. Hall

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LISA YUSKAVAGE TREATS LOW SUBJECTS in an ennobling format, as if they deserved to be elevated art. Her themes are ignoble, but her art comments more upon the culture that surrounds us with such images than upon the babelicious damsels themselves. Yes, it is about the gaze, but, more, it comments upon the culture that consumes such images. She critiques the girls, but, at the same time, she is deeply responsive to the women burdened with sexual attributes that may be all that the world chooses to see about her. And, above all, these paintings are about painting. Revisiting the classic techniques of handling perspective, coloring, light, texture, is what really interests Lisa Yuskavage. It is with a splendid display of painterliness that she creates her paradox: banal subjects painted in a manner worthy of a Vermeer, a Raphael, a Bellini, a Bronzino.

There is a history, going back to antiquity, of paintings that run counter to the convention of the noble subject, grandly treated. Pliny tells us about the ancient Greek artist Peiraikos, who painted nothing but pictures of barbers' stalls, barnyard animals, and other ignoble themes. Seventeenth-century painters who wished to depict scenes from daily life took Peiraikos's celebrated success as refutation of the dictum that only elevated subjects were appropriate for art. The "Little Dutchmen" and their Roman counterparts, the Bamboccianti, were called upon to provide pictures suitable for bourgeois households. For these clients, painters like Jan Steen represented taverns and little scenes of peasant life, often with satiric or moralizing overtones, or Vermeer meditated upon light in a silent, domestic interior. In certain respects, the contemporary art market resembles this clientele. Today, as in seventeenth-century Holland, learned or literary subjects are regarded as pretentious and irrelevant. But, unlike the seventeenth-century Puritans, today's audience will tolerate no overt moralizing.

Yuskavage's paintings differ from these models of the past. She has not only



fig. iii Bellini (Giovanni, 1430–1516). *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints*, 1505. S. Zaccaria, Venice, Italy.

It is the awareness of this special space of painting that ultimately rules Yuskavage's work. Despite the high volume of her imagery, the paintings have a stillness, a quietness. They all convey a basic sense of a woman alone; even when they depict a group of figures, as does *XLP* (1999) [p.65], there is no interaction in a narrative sense, because paintings do not talk, and sound is not a property of the medium. As in the Italian Renaissance painter Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna and Child between Saint Catherine and Mary Magdalen*, (1490) [fig. v], the "conversation," the relationship between things inside Yuskavage's paintings, is psychic and formal.

In her early work, Yuskavage used a female figure to embody the painting as object of our gaze. But over the past five years, the women alone in interior spaces could also be seen to depict an act of aesthetic attention, even meditation. Perhaps because Yuskavage is a female artist, the solitary figures also represent her experience alone in the studio, an experience that is both contemplative and physical. As she puts it:

Making a painting is being alone in a room with a very sensuous object, and making a painting is a very sensuous experience, in terms of putting the paint down...Everybody who has moved paint around knows that. The whole experience of it can be very uplifting or it can be grueling, but I think that experience is reflected in the subject of reverie.

The women alone, in paintings as different as *Big Little Laura* (1997–98) [p.47] and *True Blonde on a Mountaintop* (1998), reveal their sensuality, reflect on themselves, occupy a world that seems to emanate directly from their beings. In doing so, the women become allegories for painting itself, for its possibilities and process, for its meaning and its material. One painting, *Shrugs* (1998) [p.57], makes this explicit, summing up Yuskavage's practice. Painted from a photograph she shot in her studio, *Shrugs* contains many of the props that appear in her paintings from 1990 on—stockings, little jackets, pearls. Like modernist paintings of the studio from Courbet to Guston—part tradition, part provocation—the various characters and objects and paintings of a painter's life and art meet.

As much as these individual works hint at the larger issues, the most important ideas get worked out over the course of years, across many paintings (this is why we need museum exhibitions). Seen as a whole, Yuskavage's oeuvre relates the rough narrative of coming to consciousness about what she is doing as a painter. Her rendering has become more definite and more refined, and so have her subjects; they have become both clearer and richer. As the artist herself states, "I am a viewer of my own work, too. Afterwards, I look at it and I ask, 'What have you done?'"



fig. i Edgar Degas (1834–1917). *Nude woman standing in a bathtub*. Monotype and black ink on paper. Louvre, Paris, France.



fig. ii Edgar Degas (1834–1917). *La couvette (The wash-basin)*. Monotype on paper. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA.

bathtub (ca. 1880–85), in which the figure stands in front of a window, silhouetted, but in shades of gray rather than flat black. *Day* repeats Degas's use of light, back-lighting a figure, which itself glows. Instead of gray, she uses yellow (a color even less associated with the silhouette device), imbuing the entire painting with a soft light that unites figure and ground. The conscious reference was a *Penthouse* photo depicting a woman in an act of self-regard, an image that rhymes perfectly with Degas's intimate interiors.

Like many artists and art historians of a preceding generation, Yuskavage has noticed that pornographic photos often borrow conventions from the nude as a painting genre, and vice versa. Her references occur not only on the level of subject matter but formally, complicating the simplistic look of many feminist critiques of the representation of women. Yuskavage's paintings are more intricate as well than those of David Salle and other postmodern painters, who juxtapose a wide cultural range of images, laying them side by side or rendering them in several discrete styles. Rather than patching together pictures, emphasizing a facile (if evocative) separateness, she allows the layers of real-world and image-world references to settle into each other, to reconcile, fusing in the new space that is a painting.

I ONLY LET THINGS HAPPEN IN PAINTINGS THAT CAN ONLY REALLY HAPPEN
IN PAINTING. THEY TOUCH ON THE REAL WORLD, BUT THEY ARE NOT THE
SAME AS THE REAL WORLD.—*Lisa Yuskavage*

after she gave birth. In the photo, Kathy looks a little like one of Yuskavage's earlier girls; even when Yuskavage works from life or a preexistent image, she tends to choose slightly eccentric-looking women that already resemble something she dreamed up. In imitation of *Motherfucker*, one of Kathy's breasts is larger than the other; conversely, the *Motherfucker* figure was, in some ways, already Kathy. And, in the context of more realistic rendering, this imbalance also acts as a reality effect: No pair of breasts is ever perfectly matched, equal in size. Last, the image is still further overdetermined by the rendering, which pushes the distortion to create the illusion of spatial recession. As in *Transference Portrait of my Shrink in her Starched Nightgown with my Face and her Hair*, 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 work.

The third type of painting in Yuskavage's oeuvre relies on the found photograph, most often from seventies issues of *Penthouse* magazine. Like many people of her generation (both male and female), Yuskavage's initial adolescent encounters with erotic imagery were with *Penthouse* and *Playboy* magazines, furtively passed around among friends, and this experience obviously informed her early work in a general way. Now, she turned back to find particular images to use as source material. Just as working with her own photographs encouraged specificity in her work, using these conventionally attractive women drew her work further away from the grotesque. These paintings stage a different kind of relationship with the viewer, a more seductive one that is, ironically, both less confrontational and more problematic. Paintings such as *Submit* (1998), *Surrender* (1998), and *Cookie* (1998) unmistakably use the clichéd props and conventions of seventies soft-core pornography: tiny bits of clothing, open bodies, submissive attitudes. By this time, years after feminism's lessons, we know that we are not supposed to respond erotically to such imagery, that it is degrading or, at the very least, banal. Still, the women are seductively beautiful, and so is the painting style; they are hard to resist.

Initially, these paintings may look less complex than early work; examined closely, this impression fades. *Day*, (1999–2000) [p. 58], is not simple to look at, nor was it simple to make. It took Yuskavage a year and a half to paint, partly because of technical considerations, but partly to allow the artist to understand its complex sources. She says, "As I was working on *Day*, it started to bother me that it was reminding me of something. I couldn't figure out what it was and then I realized it was a Degas monotype." Yuskavage is thinking of *Nude woman standing in a*

lifesize figures, intended not as final works but as a tool to make paintings. Yuskavage's maquettes materialize a real model for an image that existed previously only in the artist's mind. Whereas the proportions of the invented figures seemed subjectively distorted (*Hamass* [1996] {p.66} seems to represent how a woman might imagine her own buttocks, as hugely bulbous and dimpled), the maquettes provide an objective model. Sometimes, they are mediated by another representation: The *Motherfucker* figure borrows the flip hairdo and strange little jacket of the (invented) oil painting titled *Faucet* (1995) [p.33]. The cartoony features of *Faucet* carry over into the broad features of *Motherfucker*; conversely, as subject matter the sculptures would seem ready-made to suit Yuskavage's painting style.

But, perversely, she uses the maquettes to draw from life, to gather specific information about light and shadow, to make her images more realistic and less cartoony. Where Yuskavage's early drawing style tended to generalize—despite a level of academic skill, she simply did not have a personal way to draw close to nature—working from a physical object made it much more varied and explicit. Life is more surprising than the imagination. The oil paintings *Foodeating Hardplace* (1996), *Motherfucking Rock* (1996), and *Motherfucking Foodeating Still Life* (1997), as well as myriad related watercolors, pastels, prints, and drawings, handle the figures with a beautifully refined touch, despite their grotesqueness. The device of the maquettes also allowed Yuskavage to photograph them under different conditions, playing with various genre conventions of composition, illumination, and atmosphere. In the aforementioned three paintings, she treats the figures as if they belong to a still life. Similar genre-bending renders *Still Life* (1996) [p.39], an image of pearls and flowers, with the light and space of a landscape.

During this time, as Yuskavage was thinking through the specificity of her forms, she was also working to make her subject matter increasingly specific. Having painted so many blondes, Yuskavage began to ask herself, *Which* blond? Who is the blond? Looking back through her blondes, seeing through the cultural generality of the images, she realized that an old high school friend, Kathy, was recognizably the model for the archetypal blond in the 1995 triptych, the blond in *Faucet*, and the *Motherfucker* figure. Yuskavage got back in touch with her, and photographed Kathy a number of times over several years. *True Blonde at Home* (1999), is based on a photograph in which Kathy's cropped head fills the frame, evoking the space of landscape more than portraiture, as if the woman herself were a mountainous terrain.

The painting that seems to depict Kathy most directly, *True Blonde Draped* (1999) [p.61], belongs to the same "True Blonde" series. She sits, turned toward us in a three-quarter pose, draped in a classical-looking sheet, an image taken shortly

There is another type of reflexivity in these invented works, of testing and understanding. In *Transference Portrait of my Shrink in her Starched Nightgown with my Face and her Hair* (1995) [p.35], a black-haired woman with an upturned nose stands in a corner, bathed in blue. This figure represents Yuskavage's therapist, wearing an imagined Laura Ashley nightgown, her features (the black hair) strangely combined with Yuskavage's own (the nose). The figure reappears in *Free Association* (1997) and *Manifest Destiny* (1998) [p.55], in the latter as a monumental sculpture towering above a small female figure. What is the therapist doing here? Obviously, she looms large in Yuskavage's psyche; more broadly, globally, she represents Yuskavage's investment in the subconscious. Not only in the strict Freudian sense of hidden desires, but in terms of the subconscious references that work their way into her art: the art historical, other people's personal stories, something she read or saw. Even Yuskavage herself, as she puts it, "doesn't know all the answers to a painting." Part of her painting process is understanding these references and connections, and allowing them to develop.

The problem with working purely from the imagination—even one richly infused with diverse images—is that it limits you to what you can think of. Yuskavage refers to this dilemma as one of "perseveration," of becoming stuck in a repetitive cycle. In order to up the ante of specificity, both in the image and its rendering, she began to work from life, albeit in a secondhand way, from photographs she took of real models as well as small sculptures she modeled herself.

Late in 1995, Yuskavage made a group of small maquettes, female figures rendered in Sculpeé. The five figurines echo the mannerist distortions of her earlier work—the bloated bellies, elongated necks, and giant butts; in fact, some of the figures are lifted directly from certain paintings. After she had finished with each figure, Yuskavage (who talks to her art, although she is quick to point out that it does not talk back) wagged her finger, chastising the little sculptures as, variously, "asspicker, foodeater, headshrinker, socialclimber, motherfucker." The names are funny and angry, lifted from a scene in the film *River's Edge*, where a frustrated teenager inarticulately accuses his mother's refrigerator-raiding boyfriend of being a "foodeating motherfucker." The title of the group is *Bad Habits* (1996) [p.37], borrowed from the title of a 1970 painting by Philip Guston, a hero to many artists for the scathingly witty, unsparing self-criticism of his later work (Guston counted painting among his bad habits, along with drinking, smoking, and eating). The figures' sources come from high and low.

The whole affair might seem terribly precious, like playing with dolls, but Yuskavage was resorting to traditional art making strategies employed by Poussin and Tintoretto, among others. Earlier artists frequently used maquettes, or even

the great art of the past with authentically déclassé contemporary taste and the vulgar sexuality and color of popular culture.

Over the past five years, Yuskavage has produced three bodies of work. First came the invented paintings (which she made exclusively until 1996); these emerged entirely from her imagination. The second type of work is paintings done from life, from photographs that the artist has taken of models posed according to her specifications or from small sculptures. The third category springs from the source of found photographs, any image from popular culture that resonates with Yuskavage. In a way, they all ask some version of the question, "What is a model?" A model is a standard or a template in some sense—the nude female figure, with certain general conventions. But ask a roomful of people to draw a nude and they will all come up with different versions. We draw on the model of all the representations of the subject we have seen before: Titian, Rubens, Manet, Picasso, *Playboy*. We may also add touches of real women we have seen nude: ourselves, lovers, friends, women in the locker room. Last, there is the model we see in our heads, a combination of all of the above, plus the strange things that we do to visual images in our minds.

Blonde Brunette and Redhead (1995) [p.31] is typical of the invented paintings, in that it relates to both the artist's experience and the formal properties of painting. Yuskavage has always had a very specific sense of color—specific to her, and to our cultural moment. In the triptych, the types correspond to primary colors: yellow, blue, and red, respectively. Each painting is composed of seventy percent one color, twenty percent of a second, and ten percent of a third color; for instance, the "Blonde" panel is seventy percent yellow, twenty percent blue and ten percent red. Still more eccentrically, she borrowed this particular palette from Laura Ashley's color charts, because, at the time, she fantasized that her therapist wore Laura Ashley clothing. These color formulas are a game Yuskavage engages in to stay challenged and interested, not unlike those for which Jasper Johns and Chuck Close are known. But it is not only paint that inspires this play. *Blonde Brunette and Redhead* also, and more obviously, invokes cultural archetypes that we commonly assign various characteristics—the smart one, the sexy one, the funny one, etc. The painting is not narrative, but, nonetheless, as you learn about it, its plot thickens.

Like many of her invented paintings, this triptych highlights the reflexivity of the painting process. Abstract painting clearly has been seen in the modern-art tradition of art for art's sake; abstraction describes the means of painting itself, not the outside world. Yuskavage demonstrates that even more traditional figurative work can be self-referential as well, that it can address color, light, and space, the elements of painting. All painting is, by definition, interested in painting.

LOCAL COLOR

Katy Siegel

□ □ □

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NONCOLLAGED WAY.—*Lisa Yuskavage*

WHY LOOK AT PAINTINGS? For visual excitement or beauty. For intellectual excitement, to learn something. Art can decorate your world, and it can make you think about it. But, for the chronically curious among us, what encompasses these various thrills is the excitement of seeing someone else's world, or version of the world, which may or may not overlap with our own. All artists have a world, and, to some extent, our interest in their work depends on whether that vision compels us. We do not necessarily have to understand it, but that world must interest us, make us want to look. Lisa Yuskavage does this emphatically, and, seemingly without effort. At first glance, her art appears to be wildly extroverted, extra-visible, full of comment on our common culture. But her high-impact images are each just a piece of a larger puzzle. Art, good and bad, just like a person, is inevitably complicated, if you choose to spend any time with it.

For an artist whose work has frequently been called shocking, Yuskavage's beginnings are surprisingly conventional. In her Philadelphia high school, as a student at the Tyler School of Art, and in the graduate painting program at Yale, Yuskavage drew avidly from life, looking admiringly to the history of representational painting. In the art-school milieu, her love of Degas's images of women seemed suspect, even somewhat kitschy. For this rebellious student, their questionable taste (in terms of modernist, art-school fashion) just reinforced their desirability; the pastels and monotypes and drawings of bathing women were beautiful and skillful, and now they were naughty, too. Still, it is difficult to draw and paint the nude today and remain a truly contemporary painter. Yuskavage has married her commitment to