

Upstaging Masculinity and Speaking With the Power of Pretty. Kristeva, Lacan and an Aside That Changes Everything.

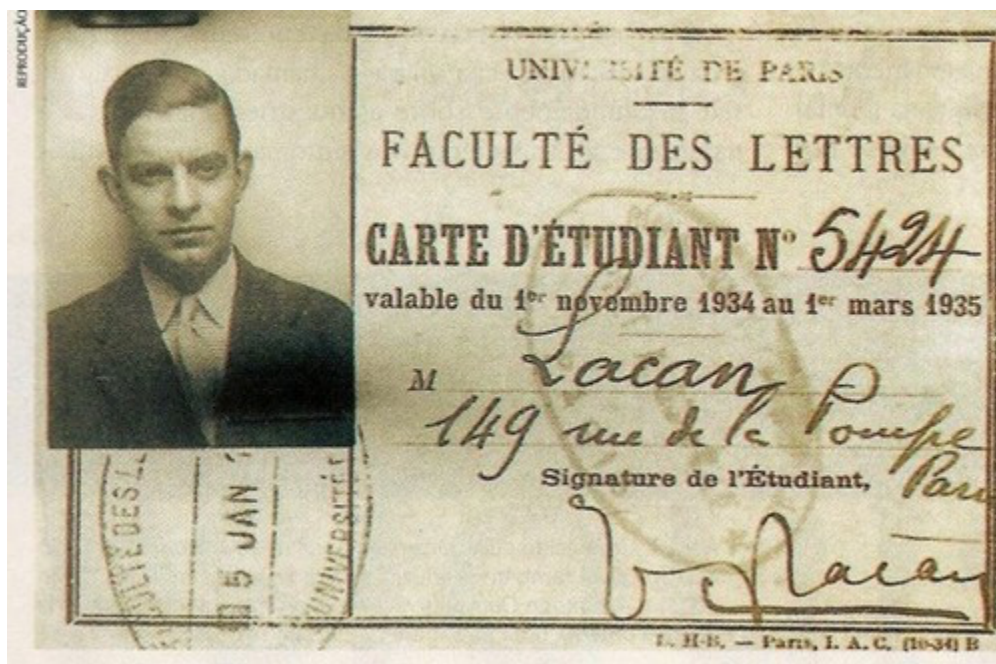
Originally posted on May 26, 2013 | By [xavier lopez jr.](#)

This article has been reposted and shared by the [International Psychoanalysis Blog \(Pretty nifty, eh!?!\)](#)

Lisa Yuskavage is one of my all-time most favorite artists—alongside only a handful of others, I believe that her work attains an almost perfect level of beauty, horror and grotesquery. Imagine my surprise when a couple of years ago, I walked into the Seattle Art Museum and saw that Lisa Yuskavage was actually part of the permanent collection. At the same time it appears that her painting, has only been shown for about six months (to my knowledge) in the entire time that I have known about it. Now, this isn't surprising, Seattle can be amazingly prudish for a supposedly, extremely liberal city. Yuskavage's work is amazingly challenging, not just because of the nudity—but because she takes on and attacks our sensibilities—her work lures us in with its prettiness and then takes us on an excursion that requires us to step away from our most cherished assumptions of gender, sexuality and beauty. As you read the rest of this article, I want you to think and then if you want to see more of this amazing artist—call or walk in and ask SAM to put up her painting—so you too can make a decision for yourself about whether Yuskavage is in fact an amazingly powerful artist who challenges us as she wields the power of pretty.



In the thirties, Jacques Lacan began to be interested in the work of the Surrealists, during this time much of his writing and theory was both influenced by and influential to young artists like Andre Breton and Salvador Dali. As a Surrealist, Lacan's own theories turned to the internal workings of the mind and to how desire and psychosis finds its way into imagery and the artistic object. Because of this, Lacan is the perfect analyst for modern artists, like Lisa Yuskavage, who, like the Surrealists of the past, make work that stems from their own internal makeup. When I began this project, my desire was to pit Jacques Lacan against a modern feminist who also uses Freud as the basis of her practice. To that end, I chose the theorist Julia Kristeva. I was unaware, however, that rather than arguing with Lacan, Kristeva chooses to expand on his basis, but to clarify it in terms of the female analysand. Ultimately, it was Yuskavage, herself, who through her own artwork would prove a fit counter to a Freudian analysis which always places the female as an object of lack.



To begin with, both Lacan and Kristeva, like proper analysts would be intensely interested in Yuskavage's biographical history. They would, however, be less interested in what she herself thinks her own work is about. Yuskavage however, is very cagey about her own personal data. From the various articles I have read, I have been able to piece together that she was born on May 16th, 1962 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.^[1] She graduated with an MFA from Yale University and had her first show in 1989. This is the extent of her biographical information that I have been able to accumulate, and even in long form interviews she is notoriously silent about her past. We do know that she was not pregnant as a teen, nor was she abused while growing up, two issues which a spectator might assume upon viewing her work.^[2] Ultimately, Yuskavage is much more interested in being thought

of as an average American woman—she never delves into her own ethnicity. Instead, she prefers that her troubling artwork do the speaking for her.



The artwork itself has been described as “knowingly dreadful.” [\[3\]](#) It is at once beautifully ugly. Her horrible, alluring, misshapen, sexualized, fertilized figures are the types of images that strike anger and fear into anyone who has fought so that women would not be portrayed as seemingly helpless objects for the unrestrained, wanton, libidinous, male gaze. Her work is not easily categorizeable; on the surface she is a woman who paints women. But, Lisa Yuskavage does so in a quiet, violently erotic way that seems to taunt the viewer’s sensibilities with images of rubberized females who flaunt their hypersexual organs. Yuskavage does not, however mean for us to desire these figures, instead, she paints images that are meant specifically not to be “easy on the eye.” [\[4\]](#) Ridiculously large asses and upwardly thrust nipples, cartoonish, round, nose-less faces with slit-like eyes and mouths are as frightening as they are compelling. Yuskavage’s females dance in the minefield between the id and the ego; they seemingly celebrate what she has comically referred to as the “power of pretty.” [\[5\]](#) She seemingly does not make work that obviously attempts to correct the differential power scheme between men and women. Yuskavage does not rest easily in any of a number of feminisms.



One series in particular, an ongoing set of paintings begun in 1994 and entitled “Teen Mom” best describes this problematic. This surrealist, abject series of oil paintings of seemingly underage, proudly, pregnant ladies, “Single, isolated figures—always female,” stand against hot pink, nightmare black or lemon yellow, “essentially abstract, spatially indefinite grounds” of atmospheric, nebulous color. Yuskavage has branched out within this self-determined definition to include “multifigure compositions (but) without overt interaction among the figures.” It is not her intention to create any overt narrativity.[\[6\]](#)

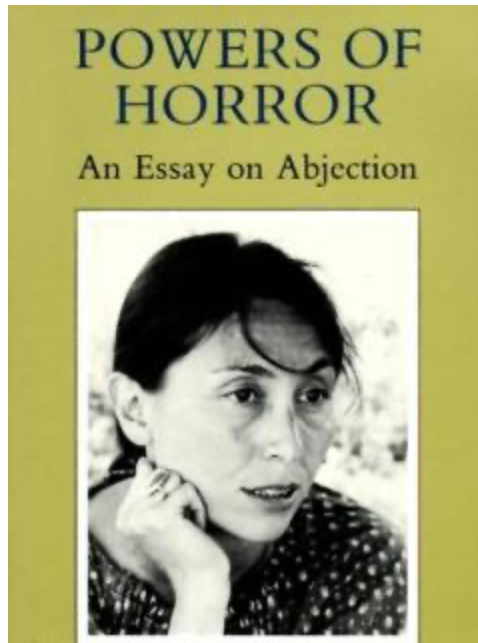
As Barry Schwabsky noted in his December 1997 article for *Art in America*, Yuskavage’s focus is indeed simply on the picture (the image of the object, *Das Ding*.) He adds that, “Reduced to an ideological minimum, a picture must be a picture *of* something, and most saliently of *someone*; [\[7\]](#) but I wish to add, perhaps no more importantly, but for me, at least, more interestingly, the picture must be made *by someone*—And ultimately *for someone* as well.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Terea and Lauren*, oil on linen, 2008.

That someone, in both cases has, of course, historically, ostensibly been male. From the cave paintings of Lascaux and the Venus of Willendorf, Leonardo's Mona Lisa to the colonizing images of Gauguin's Pacific Islander girlfriend(s), women have been depicted (or in the case of Lascaux,[\[8\]](#) excluded from depiction) by men—for men. Women have and continue to be effectively, cut out of this schema, in part described by Lacan and ultimately reified by Julia Kristeva.

This "second sex," as Kristeva calls women, (recalling the idea of the second class citizen,) are a mute class, alienated from the means of production, in this case—re-production and re-presentation. Women, under this type of a schema are all abject, united by the fact that they do not have access to the phallus. Essentially, and ironically, they do not have access to the means of producing and of reproducing power.[\[9\]](#)



Whether we deal with Yuskavage's figures in paintings or the sculptures that she uses as models, these are attempts to breathe new life into the fiercely masculinist surrealist tradition. Originally, the surrealists were a modernist boys' club, in which dream imagery was used as an excuse to envision all sorts of masculine misogyny. Strangely, perhaps, Yuskavage does not even attempt to fight this type of misogynist imagery; instead she chooses to play within this tradition. Her expectant baby-doll bodies call to mind, easily, Hans Belmer's wooden, manipulated poupee. Her arcing, outstretched, overstretched girls recall a more figural Arp, or even Dali's better, earlier work.



Her figures are often wildly distorted. At times, their small frames become overpowered by large, obtrusive breasts, usually sporting dagger/phallus-like, upright nipples. Often nude, these figures fall in and out of gaseous fields of mauve or orange sherbet fifty-fifty bar dreamscapes, devoid of any masculine architecture (though strewn marbles and flowers appear with many of them.) That these figures are meant to be considered in terms of dream imagery and the unconscious is mirrored in Yuskavage's own words. "I...think of the whole business of looking at art as Rorschachian..." she admits, "The paintings (are often) acting as a shrink for the viewer to have as much transference as is possible."[\[10\]](#)



Yuskavage lovingly paints these “babes” as she calls them, as realistically abstracted torsos. They are often presented to us as armless (*Transference Portrait of my Shrink*, 1995), leg-less (*Motherfucking Foodeating*, 1997), blind (*Blonde*, 1995) or otherwise unwholesomely un-whole. From a Lacan point of view, Yuskavage’s imagery is obviously, attempting to deal with the universal alienation of the self from the body. The fact that her figures break apart and into the soft-tissue surrounding them is evidence of her own fear and a sense of falling into the void of fragmentation.[\[11\]](#)

For Julia Kristeva, however this fragmentation is evidence of comedic horror. Yuskavage’s images are borne out of the gore and violence of the first moments of life. That is the separation of the self from the wholesome primary state of the womb, into the alienating environment of the world.[\[12\]](#) The fact that Yuskavage’s “Babes” are often pregnant or otherwise filled and brimming over with life, is no accident to Kristeva. These surrealist, cinematic images of fragilized females tie neatly into Kristeva’s ideas of horror—as a reference to the beginning of life and to the recurring menstrual cycle, that reminds us both of life and ultimately ties the female to the fear of death.[\[13\]](#)



It is no coincidence, then, that when Yuskavage speaks of these images, her primary reference is to cinematic horror:

I like to think of my characters as “The Brood”... have you seen that movie? It is by Cronenberg. It is about a woman who is the main suspect in a series of brutal murders, but her perfect alibi is that she is locked up in a mental hospital, so (she) couldn’t have done the deeds... Her mother is the first one to get hacked to pieces and then her husband’s girlfriend, I think, and so on... Then you find out that her special therapy is producing these creatures, which are manifestations or personifications of her different neurosis... They then go out and “heal” her by killing the responsible parties. Cool, huh?[\[14\]](#)

Again Yuskavage speaks in clinical terms about her artworks. This is significant because she touches on some important points that both Lacan and Kristeva would see evident in her work. By Yuskavage’s own admittance and according to Lacan, her figures must be seen to act as a kind of therapy, in which she safely works out her own psychoses. However, in other interviews she claims

that the fragmentation and dissolution of the figures is more specific, more an attempt at poetic symbology. Yuskavage's own claims that these "obscured edges" express "fucked up boundary issues," would be seen by both analysts as mere sublimation of the terror of the fragmented self.[\[15\]](#) At its worst, this terror can lead to and is evidenced by—paranoiac schizophrenia.



It is important to remember, that, for Lacan, paranoiac schizophrenia is an almost natural part of the human experience.[\[16\]](#) In essence, in madness we find a way for the mind to deal with the passions of being human, it is a time of recuperation and a mirror into the real nature of reality.[\[17\]](#) Here, the differences between the self and other dissolve and our relationship to the other, to reality and to ourselves is radically called into question. It is possible to see evidence of this breakdown,

throughout her paintings. In the “Teen Mom” series, the differences between subject and background is never certain, but breaks down often and with little warning.

In Yuskavage’s case this psychosis, according to Lacan, would of course, have to be fundamentally feminine in nature. She would be considered a hysteric. By creating objectifying images in her paintings of women, often engaged in fetishistic activity in isolation or alienation, she is attempting to gain information about differing aspects of the same question. Yuskavage asks over and over again, “what is it to be a woman?” Each painting then, seen in this way is a record. Each is the remains of a frustrated, failed effort at reaching the “mystery of femininity.”

The only way, in which she can acquire this information, however, is for her to take a stance in which she must identify with the male. She must take on an unconscious masculine position and view the female images from this site. To do this, like Freud’s patient–Dora, Yuskavage must identify at the level of the ego with the male viewer so that she may study the desire of the male—in essence to find what it is that men desire in women. Kristeva points out that, ironically, this activity is dubbed as narcissistic by both Freud and Lacan.^[18] It is only here, in this schema of desire, and by alienating herself into the masculine position (an imaginary, phantasmatic act) that according to the Ecole Freudienne, she can hope to gain an understanding of herself. In fact it is only from this position that she is capable of representing herself.



According to Lacan it is a fundamental aspect of the female to imagine herself being imagined by others. Female desire is a system in which, the woman can only desire herself when she in turn is desired, her worth is then external, completely dependent on the desire of the male. Nor is she empowered in any way, lacking the phallus. Representation, itself is an act of alienation for the woman, she is represented not for herself or as herself, but as an erotic representation for the male viewer—always.

According to Lacan, however this desire for representation is natural, it is inherent in the female and is made visible through language. However, its enacting evidence is not natural and is evidence of a neurosis.

Lacan thus, serves to separate the woman from her own body, through the alienating effects of linguistic desire and through a fundamental lack in the feminine. She is never the spectator, except in an imaginary situation in which she imagines herself being gazed upon by the other, a situation of judgement, objectification and essentializing abjection.

For Kristeva, on the other hand, this placement need not be considered neurotic, but is evidence of Kristeva's post-liberal feminist understanding of some fundamental differences between the perceptions and realities of men and women. Here, Yuskavage's images of "female" though would still be considered evidence of narcissism. It is interesting that Yuskavage speaks of "ultimate transference" Kristeva expands on this idea, which Lacan dubbed 'lovehate.' Traditionally, love, for Freud is bound to the state of narcissism. For men, *narcissus* is found in the form of the other. [\[19\]](#)



The importance of narcissism for Kristeva, however, is that it is an important aspect of the subject's attempting to develop identity and significance, which "reveals itself as a screen over *emptiness*." Narcissism acts to protect this emptiness, this "gaping hole" from chaos and the ultimate void of the dissolution of personality and the reality of symbolization. Yuskavage's narcissistic images then, act as a membrane of protection from her own dissolution. As in the Lacanian reading, they are again, a defense against madness and a kind of therapy for the artist.

It is interesting to note that Kristeva, like Yuskavage is not interested in undoing Lacan. Hers is a feminism that has no trouble embracing the image of the woman as mother, as other, and attempts

to come to terms with the idea of lack. Instead of a site of abjection, the fertile female womb for Kristeva and others is a place of strength and ultimate jouissance and difference. This is where Yuskavage must break with Kristeva, as through her work, she has no intention of fitting in.



This may be so, but ultimately, Kristeva points out, for Lacan, woman is unsymbolizable. His famous statement that “There is no such thing as Woman,” is something that both Kristeva and Yuskavage cannot neglect. For Kristeva this is a call to find the ways in which “Woman” can be separated from the idea of a mythic unity. She sees woman as the base of “the terror of power and

terrorism as the desire for power,” a force for the subversion of the modernist, masculinist systems of power.[\[20\]](#) She seeks to undo Lacan, Freud and masculinist language and power from within!

However, this is a program that is bound to failure. The ultimate breakdown for Kristeva is that she is ultimately doomed to reify the system of masculinity that she attempts to subvert. By seeking to find a place of existence she does so in a system in which she has no voice and that is ultimately antagonistic to her story. Her breakdown is ultimately tied to that of Lacan and Freud, as well, because she makes no real break with them. Instead, she is content to find the areas within their system, in which women can be made to fit—however uncomfortably. She must ultimately, like Lacan, make excuses explaining how women like Yuskavage can so seemingly represent, not only themselves but also the world as they see it!

This seems to be an unfortunate aspect, perhaps, not just of any *Freudian Feminism*, but perhaps any feminism that seeks to make changes from within. It is the nature of hegemony to allow for its own criticisms, in fact ultimately opposition strengthens the hegemony, exhausting itself, while continuing the main power schemas through its need to have something to rail against. If this is so, then what can be done? How can any oppositional group hope to make any sort of actual change?

Part of the answer to this, may in fact lie in the work of the Teen Mom series. It is seemingly obvious that Yuskavage can and does represent the female, but I do not wish to come at Freud with an attack so common as sense. Since, ultimately we are speaking of language, I will deal with both in those terms. What Yuskavage does in these paintings is similar to what a Shakespearean character does when addressing the audience—as an aside. In this particular performative stance, the character is speaking aloud to a specific audience, while other characters sharing the same stage do not hear the actor’s words. Yuskavage delivers her words/works as an aside. They are spoken aloud, to the specific audience of women, and though men witness this action it is not delivered to them, nor can they hear it.



What Lisa Yuskavage does is important as it serves to rewrite this playing field. In performing her artwork as an aside, she takes an active position and makes art for the specific audience of herself and her other women. She actively ignores the traditional male audience, forcing them to stand upstaged or even await their cue behind the curtains. This, however, is not only evidenced in the artwork, even when she speaks, in terms that are universal, in interviews, her words seek to alienate the male viewer—

“The original reason I made the images look pubescent is that I always equated the experience of puberty as everyone’s collective memory of heightened vulnerability... at least it was for me... and I was hoping to equate that collective memory of fragility with my own and the painting’s feelings of being vulnerable to the viewer.”

Ultimately, by taking the male off center stage, she attempts to change the power relationship—by *actively* ignoring it. She *actively* ignores the male viewer, speaking past him; the artwork is not made for him, nor is it about him. She makes the male a voyeur in a system of his own creation. She

simply writes male spectatorship out of the equation. She effectively castrates the masculine point of view, dealing a blow, which according to Lacan and Freud, is the primary male fear. If the male attempts (as he will) to reintegrate himself into this equation, he can only do so from this castrated point of view. He takes on the role of the peeping tom, the unwelcomed guest in a trench coat sporting an impotent erectionless penis.



Finally, Yuskavage seeks to reintroduce the female to her own body, by making artwork that denies the male viewer and creates a new surrealistic movement for women—one that is about the body, her

body, your body, and which comes out of her very personal experiences; erotic, filthy, sexual, fetishistic but ultimately female.

Because she *actively* ignores the male (as a performative act) she is capable of freely using his imagery, style and media. She simply co-opts it, to her own ends. As I have noted previously, she casually, even viciously, uses the language of masculinist surrealism, but she uses it personally, in her own pink, fluffy way. She shifts the power position and through her, we see a female dreaming not of being dreamed about, but actively reinvisioning the female by taking control of the dream.





FATCAPS

-

Xavier's Football Fantasy



*Disclaimer: Xavier Lopez is a writer, muralist and performance artist who is very active in the Seattle Alternative Art Scene where he may have artistic interactions with (may know, collaborate with, may show at or with) many of the people and institutions interviewed in this blog.

He/I will never trade an interview for anything. Xavier is not paid for, nor does he receive any type of remuneration for the articles he writes.



Works Cited

Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood. Art in Theory 1900-1990. Oxford: Blackwell Pub.

1992.

Lacan, Jacques, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds. Feminine Sexuality. New

York: WW Norton & Co. 1982.

Leader, Darian and Judy Groves. Introducing Lacan. New York: Totem Books. 1995.

Marcoci, Roxana, Diana Murphy and Eve Sinaiko, eds. *New Art*. New York: Abrams, 1997.

Moi, Toril. *The Kristeva Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Schwabsky, Barry. "Picturehood is Powerful." *Art in America*. December 1997: 80-85.

Siegel, Katy. "Lisa Yuskavage, Marianne Boesky." *Art in America*. November 1998: 115-116.

Yuskavage, Lisa. Interview. *Truth*. Undated. Internet.

http://www.platform.net/substance/teenmom/truth/05_97/30lisa/lisazero.html

[1] Roxana Marcoci, Diana Murphy and Eve Sinaiko, eds. *New Art*. (New York: Abrams, 1997) 155.

[2] Lisa Yuskavage. Interview. *Truth*. (Undated. Internet.)

http://www.platform.net/substance/teenmom/truth/05_97/30lisa/lisazero.html

[3] Barry Schwabsky. "Picturehood is Powerful," *Art in America*. December 1997: 81

[4] Internet

[5] Internet

[6] *Art in America*. 81.

[7] Art in America. 81-82

[8] I add Lascaux, because it seems interesting and indeed important to me that the earliest incident we know of in which men took to representing themselves and the world they lived in is also the first account we have of the exclusion of the female from any sort of representation. Of course, some historians claim that it seems difficult enough for the earliest men to represent themselves and must fall back on the images of animals to do so, but this does not negate the fact that in these caves, woman is not seen.

[9] Toril Moi. The Kristeva Reader. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 241-42.

[10] Internet

[11] Charles Harrison, and Paul Wood. "Powers of Horror." Art in Theory 1900-1990. (Oxford: Blackwell

Pub,1992) 1017.

[12] Charles Harrison, and Paul Wood. "Powers of Horror." Art in Theory 1900-1990. (Oxford: Blackwell

Pub,1992) 1015-7.

[13] Kristeva Reader. 252.

[14] Internet

[15] internet

[16] Charles Harrison, and Paul Wood. "The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I." Art in

Theory 1900-1990. (Oxford: Blackwell Pub,1992) 609-13.

[17] Here, I am using the common notion of the meaning of the word reality, with only the vaguest connections to Lacan's own theories of *the real*, *reality* or *the void*.

[\[18\]](#) Kristeva Reader. 249-55.

[\[19\]](#) Kristeva Reader, 240.

[\[20\]](#) Kristeva Reader, 205.