Art Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

The big boys of the art world have long relished painting raunchy pictures. But now, it's female artists who are becoming famous by being naughty. By Deborah Solomon

This isn't exactly what Betty Friedan had in mind. This isn't the reason a generation of housewives untied their aprons, picked up a briefcase and headed to the office. No, they weren't struggling to create a future in which women artists were free to celebrate . . . smut.

Introducing the so-called Bad Girls, the latest cool school in the art world. Defying the rules of sisterhood, they elevate high-school stereotypes — the slut, the bimbo, the messed-up chick — into the realm of art. Their work weds high aesthetic quality with debased ideals, suggesting it is O.K. to chase guys, tell dirty jokes, read Cosmo instead of Virginia Woolf and wonder why your self-esteem is scraping the pavement.

The Bad Girls stand in sharp contrast to such long-ago legends as Georgia O'Keeffe, art's leading good girl. When she felt like painting lusty pictures, she painted flowers, red poppies with swelling petals and dark fissures. Famously self-reliant, she ended up in the New Mexico desert with her collection of skulls and bones for company. O'Keeffe was granted saintly status by the women's movement, which itself often felt like a religious order. All those beliefs, all that dignity, all that scrupulous communal striving required a lot of compliance — and the new generation wants out.

Cecily Brown, Lisa Yuskavage and Sue Williams are painters with sex on the brain, while Sam Taylor-Wood thrashes out her fantasies in photographs and films. They don't belong to an official movement (but then artists seldom do, except in retrospect). Their critics accuse them of reducing women to ciphers of desire and hence reversing hard-won gains. Yet the charge is unfair. For true equality includes the right to enjoy misbehaving — as Picasso and legions of male artists have always known. In an age when contemporary art is bloated with academic theory, it is good to see women cutting class and reinvesting art with the virtue of the nervy gesture. What follows on the next page is a gallery (partly censored, naturally) of Bad Girl art.

Deborah Solomon, an art critic and regular contributor to the magazine, is writing a biography of Norman Rockwell.

The Bad Girls *From left: Sue Williams, Sam Taylor-Wood, Cecily Brown and Lisa Yuskavage.*

Photograph by Andrew Eccles

True Blonde Mountain Top, 1998-1999

Lisa Yuskavage

Yuskavage is a central figure in the we-love-bimbos school of painting. She specializes in clueless nymphets rising out of pastel fogs. These are women who aim to please. You can be sure they don't work on Wall Street. They'll take any job (or guy) they can get. But they seem to have neither. More often than not, they are just standing around in the middle of the day, with their kittenish expressions and size Double-D breasts, begging for our attention. When you look at a Yuskavage painting, you aren't sure if you're supposed to feel titillated or offended, or if the proper response is to rush to your desk and write an essay on the eroticizing tendencies of "the male gaze." Unable to decide, you shrug your shoulders and conclude that the paintings are gorgeous to look at. And that is always enough.

One afternoon in her studio in lower Manhattan, Yuskavage — a truck driver's daughter from Philadelphia who studied at Yale and is now 37 — was perusing a book on Fragonard as well as some back issues of Penthouse. "I prefer Penthouses from the 70's," she said of her artistic sources, "because the photographs are less explicit. The lighting is so diffuse, like in a Vermeer painting."

Dripping With Love, 1999

Sue Williams

Williams takes the tradition of abstract painting and turns it on its elegant head. At first, her pictures look like odes to good taste — curvy lines on white fields, late de Kooning lite. Yet viewed up close, they yield naughty surprises, a secret underground of penile heads and buttock clefts and full-frontal noses. Art, she seems to be saying, can't make us pure, can't erase the gunk of real life — as we noticed in 1993, when the artist placed a now-famous puddle of (rubber) vomit on the floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art. "The vomit was so misunderstood," she says. "People saw it as this hideous gesture about bulimia, but I saw it as humorous."

Williams, a 45-year-old Brooklynite, describes the subject of her art as "intimacy angst." As a former battered woman, she has no shortage of material to draw on. "I've lived with some very scary men," she says. "I've been hit in the head with a hammer and pushed through glass windows. Once, I was shot and left for dead." These are experiences that induce rage, and they may not sound like an obvious source for Williams's recent pictures, with their graceful calligraphy and coolly ravishing surfaces and seeming absence of irate emotion. Then again, as the artist says: "There are sliced-up penises in some of my paintings. It's kind of a Bobbitt thing."

Soliloquy III, 1998

Sam Taylor-Wood

Is every good girl just a closet bad girl? It often seems so in Sam Taylor-Wood's photographs, which feature a cast of stylish urbanites consumed by desire — be it the desire to live in a deluxe loft, or to own a pair of Barcelona chairs, or to have good sex, or to understand why having sex near Barcelona chairs in a perfectly appointed loft is not what they thought it would be and invariably leaves them disappointed.

"I think we desire the things we're afraid of," says the artist, a 32-year-old Londoner. "We court our fears." Her first solo show in New York now occupies Matthew Marks's two galleries in Chelsea, and it includes a series of big color photographs that swipe from the high form of painting and the low form of B-movies to achieve a surprising emotional subtlety.

Consider "Soliloquy III," in which a 90's version of Velázquez's "Rokeby Venus" spends a sunny day stretched out in bed, regarding herself in a grimy mirror. Below her, an orgy unfolds like a decadent dream, a porn flick glimpsed behind the tender skin of her eyelids. Despite the pink hues and luxuriant haze, the photograph mocks romantic ideals. Now we know what all those man-pleasing Venuses in art history were really thinking about: pleasing themselves. Closet bad girls, let yourselves out. ■

GOSIAN GALLERY, MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY, 303 GALLERY AND MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY.

ARTISTS: ANDREW ECCLES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES.