

ART REVIEW

A Painter Who Loads the Gun and Lets the Viewer Fire It

By ROBERTA SMITH

Leave it to Lisa Yuskavage, premier bad-girl painter of the naughty late 1990's, to remind us that an exhibition catalog can be a place for gleeful subversion. The cover of the publication that accompanies her bracing exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia features one word, writ large in lavender: SKAY-Y. (It's pronounced you-SKAY-Y, as if to signal last-name-only art-historical fame, on the order of, say, Rembrandt, Picasso and Rauschenberg.)

And it can't be a coincidence that the big plain capital letters, as well as the cover's layout and proportion, are identical to those found on the cover of Penthouse magazine. (It helps that the names of both the magazine and the artist have nine letters.)

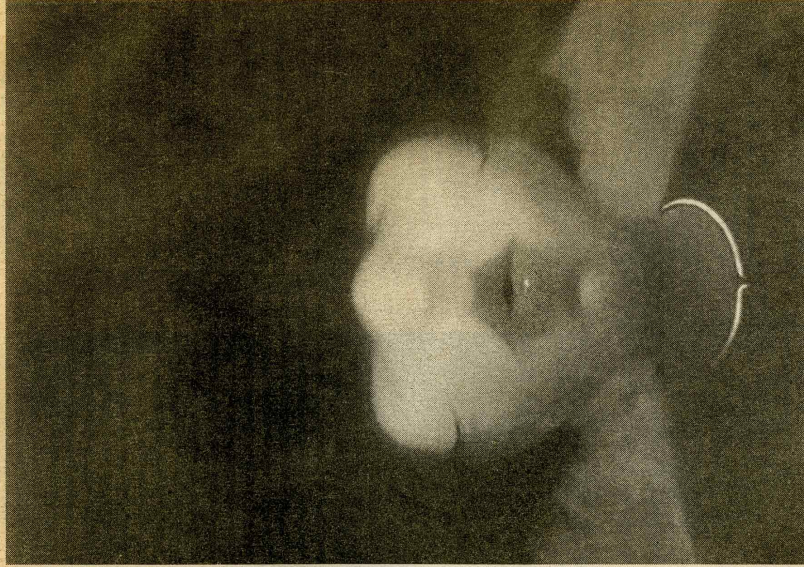
The main difference is that on the Yuskavage catalog, the requisite cheesecake is provided not by an air-brushed photograph but by a lushly painted Yuskavage. It depicts a honey blonde so tawny she's almost orange, lifting her camisole to gaze at her voluptuous breasts as if, it seems, for the first time.

The combination of mixed subliminal messages, deliciously artificial color and forthright sexuality is characteristic of Ms. Yuskavage's work, as is the journey from high to low to lower culture within a relatively seamless whole. If asked about the catalog cover, she would probably say, as she has in interviews, that men's magazines are one of her sources, along with old master paintings, Keane's big-eyed waifs and modernist abstraction, and leave it at that.

"I only load the gun," she has been known to say, implying that it is up to the viewer to figure out how it works or perhaps to understand that it can be fired with equal effectiveness in several directions.

Do her figures exaggerate or ridicule and deflect the male gaze? Do they perpetuate the stereotypes that assault women every day or illuminate some of the more private and at times darker corners of the female psyche, including those moments of searing self-reproach when a woman

"Lisa Yuskavage" is at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, 118 South 36th Street, Philadelphia, (215) 898-5911, through Feb. 9. Ms. Yuskavage's new paintings are at the Marianne Boesky Gallery, 555 West 22nd

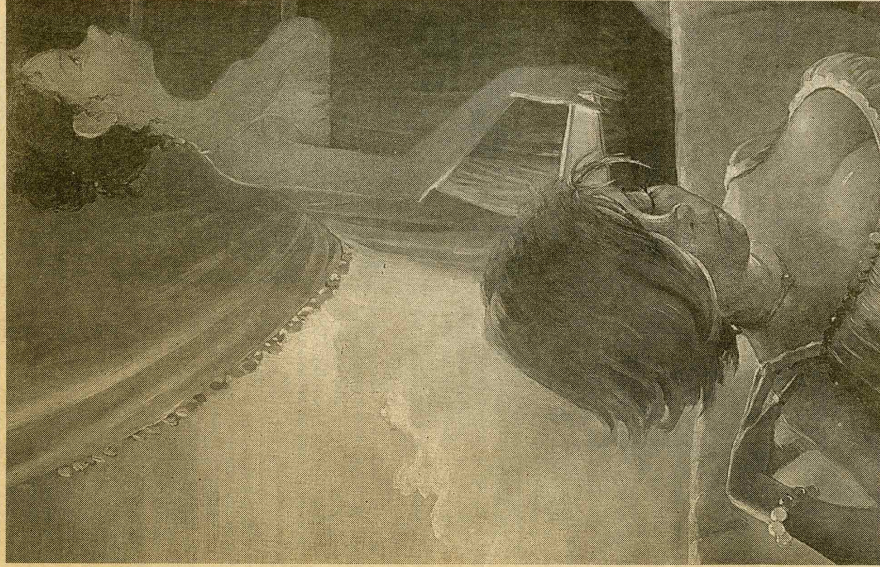


Two by Lisa Yuskavage: Large details from "The Bad Laura" (1997), above, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, and from "Northview" (2000) at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea.

appraises her appearance and finds it wanting.

Ms. Yuskavage's Philadelphia exhibition underscores her refusal to provide easy answers or simple resolutions on matters of meaning, style or feeling. It covers the last five years of her development and has nearly 20 large paintings, more than 35 small paintings, oil studies and works on paper, and 10 small sculptures that may put you in mind of Daumier.

This show would be stronger if it covered her whole 10-year development, including her more awkward and confrontational early figurative works and her luscious still lifes of fruits, flowers and gleaming berries with their odd intimations of female



Marianne Boesky Gallery

nism. During this period, she has managed to manifest the female body — arguably the most pervasive motif in Western visual culture — in ways that feel fresh and are funny, grotesque, pathetic and beautiful, sometimes all at once. Her figures can have enormous breasts, nipples or buttocks; they can be shaped like columns, have distended bellies or startlingly abbreviated features or limbs. When they are prim and proper, they wear high-necked nightgowns that suggest little gothic fortresses.

Ms. Yuskavage has approached this form from both the outside and the inside: her distortions exaggerate the way women are objectified both by society and by themselves. But her real subject is, I think, the inside, the female soul and psyche,

which has been much less thoroughly depicted.

The female freaks in her paintings from the mid-1990's can make you think of Goya, and Diane Arbus (as well as Daumier) and the stories of Flannery O'Connor in their combination of muttering intensity and blank victimhood, their ability to be both vulnerable and off-putting.

They practically sum up a period when political correctness gave way to something polymorphous, unsettling and psychologically real, and when realism resurged along with painting. Like other artists of her generation, notably John Currin and Kara Walker, Ms. Yuskavage doesn't moralize or assign blame in her images. Like their work, hers also eschews the jarring juxtapositions of 1980's painters like David Salle and

Jean-Michel Basquiat.

But beneath the veneer of unity, it is equally polyglot and pieced together, and it is full of fissures and contradictions. Is the blonde in "Day" undressing for the viewer's delectation or actually getting dressed, quietly observing the familiar terrain of her body?

This work's companion painting, "Night," shows a similar moment of intimate observation: a drowsy pug-nosed brunette groggily investigating an exposed buttock, perhaps asking, "Do I feel thinner than when I went to bed, or not?" The image can bring to mind Poussin's paintings of the drunken Silenus, and indeed appetite seems to be its point, in the darkened background, a silhouette of the woman speeds past, a cigarette dangling from her lip, a plate of food in her hand.

Another outstanding work is a big 1997 diptych of a dark-haired child with a derrière of candied ham, tufted with cherries so that it also seems upholstered. Wearing a white undershirt and a pout, this creature looks like an under-age colossus over a rosy, feather-clouded sunrise worthy of Tiepolo, a severely reduced landscape that brings to mind Brice Mar-den and Ed Ruscha, and a perky vase of flowers that she may be thinking of eating.

Moving between the triad of the female body, the gaze and the female soul, Ms. Yuskavage has cultivated a terrain of rich and disturbing ambiguities, making works that can be both tender and astoundingly harsh. She has been aided in this endeavor by her devotion to a second triad, that of light, color and flesh as they can be conveyed by the plasticity of oil paint.

This devotion is especially clear at Boesky, where light, color and flesh constantly seem to change places; in these often pink- and red-toned paintings, in which suggestive flowers are once again present, one sees surface as skin, skin as light, color as both, and everything as paint.

With their elaborate country-house interiors, these paintings suggest a more real, more sophisticated world. Their occupants seem almost normal, possibly career women, and are in charge of their lives and their pleasures. Some exude a postorgasmic glow, others just seem grateful to be sitting down after a long day.

Still, it is strange to see Ms. Yuskavage, who often expresses her admiration of Philip Guston's work, move toward an accomplished, almost academic realism, sacrificing much of her work's psychological and forthright bluntness as she goes.