ART REVIEW

Porn-inspired art that pulses with intelligence

By **Sebastian Smee** Globe Staff, September 17, 2015, 6:00 p.m.

Lisa Yuskavage's "Blonde, Brunette, Redhead." PHOTOS/ LISA YUSKAVAGE AND DAVID ZWIRNER

WALTHAM — Lisa Yuskavage makes paintings of psychosexual gunk — her own and maybe yours and mine — in unctuous pastiches of Old Master idioms, made freaky by artificial color, extravagantly contrived lighting, and elastic anatomy.

Her images offend both conventional taste and bien pensant ideology, which predisposes me to want to like them. In the end, I don't. Although part of me delights in Yuskavage's audacity, and in the fragrant, salty-caramel-chewiness of her richly considered provocations, I find most of her pictures get stuck in my teeth, where the flavor quickly drains out of them.

"The Ones That Don't Want To: Buttons" LISA YUSKAVAGE AND DAVID ZWIRNER

In this era of trigger warnings and anti-art petitions on campus, perhaps the most shocking aspect of the survey of Yuskavage's career at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University is that it is on a college campus at all. "Rorschach Blot," a painting from 1995, shows a standing woman with no nose and an open O-shaped mouth designed for one purpose only. Her legs are spread, her pubic area shaved. She is a sex doll painted as if by Fragonard or Boucher.

Or by the guy down the road who spray-paints lusty murals onto the sides of his van. Do such distinctions matter? They do and they don't. It might be as well to ask whether we're all clear yet on the distinction between eroticism and pornography.

Yuskavage, 53, was born in Philadelphia. She received an MFA from the Yale School of Art in 1986, and has been painting her comics- and porn-inspired female nudes since the early 1990s. Along with Yale classmate John Currin, she has been both critically acclaimed and commercially successful for two decades. If neither Currin nor Yuskavage have been accorded the number of museum exhibitions their reputations warrant, it may be because of an expectation (one that has frankly been getting out of hand lately) that museums embody civic-mindedness and welcome children.

Yuskavage's work does neither. It is, if not pornographic, then certainly in open and heady dialog with pornography. That makes it interesting to me — more interesting, certainly, than paintings by male artists such as Gerhard Richter, Thomas Ruff, and Currin, who have all discovered an allure in the ubiquity and all-round zeitgeistiness of porn, and made paintings accordingly.

Yuskavage gives us a take on porn that is captivatingly ambivalent — not only because she is female, but also because she is so honest and forthright. She has spoken in the past about how her first exposure to sex involved looking at the eroticized bodies of women. One imagines this to be a near-universal experience in a society obsessed with using female bodies to advertise commercial products aimed at women (most of whom are presumably assumed to be heterosexual). But it is no less strange because of that.

"I intentionally embarrass myself," Yuskavage once said. "My work really embarrasses me." And at the same time (this was early in her career): "I think my art makes something which is very, very private public. . . . It's like saying, this is exactly the smell of my [expletive]."

Spread legs, shaved pudenda, tan lines, and improbably swollen or preposterously perky breasts recur throughout the exhibition, which was organized by Rose director Christopher Bedford. A plinth holding five of Yuskavage's small white plaster sculptures is displayed in a second gallery.

The settings of the figures in the paintings are sometimes vacant (airless vacuums of pure or mottled color), sometimes like Vaseline-smudged daytime soap-opera interiors. Lately, however, in a body of large-scale paintings which look weirdly great to me (or at least bracingly immune to anything I might have to say about them) Yuskavage has been painting figures in tawny landscapes under florid, toxic fantasy skies.

Yuskavage is interested in the connection between her own psychosexual preoccupations and the practice of painting itself. And it is possible, you feel she would like to encourage us, to see her work as an allegory for, or at least a kind of reflection on, painting as a pursuit: indulgent, manipulative, perverse, onanistic — and weirdly gratifying.

Good painting, one feels reasonably safe in asserting, requires the painter to bend her subjects to the will of the pictures. Acutely conscious of this, Yuskavage is fascinated by the "chain of command" such an endeavor implies: Degas, for instance (her own example), manipulated images which happened to be of women — and was therefore, one could say, manipulating women.

What does that imply? And what happens — psychologically, aesthetically — when Yuskavage embarks on a comparable endeavor more than a century later? What is the new dynamic? How much is the life of the work in its loaded subject, and how much is exclusively in the image, and in the means of its execution?

All this is interesting, but it is also where I rebel.

Reflect on these paintings and you quickly register that they are trying to do a lot, and maybe too much, at once. The content, certainly, feels fresh, deriving from under-examined and mysterious crannies of the psyche.

"The Feminist's Husband."

But Yuskavage's works, like Currin's, are executed in a style that is essentially parodic — which is to say secondhand, resuscitated only by critical and comedic somersaults, by punch lines and twists. The more virtuosic the painting becomes, and the more egregious the twists — the curling toes that become upturned nipples or phalluses; the sad and sickly, half-occluded eyes; the provocative titles (e.g., "The Feminist's Husband," a forlorn-looking fellow, or "Surrender" and "Submit") — the more hardworking and desperate it starts to feel, and the more you are made to feel like you are chewing on someone else's gum.

Of course, it is this secondhandedness, or belatedness, that has invited many astute critics to see affinities between Yuskavage (and Currin) and the mid-16th century style known as Mannerism. Bewitched by the strenuous perfections attained by Michelangelo, the weaker Mannerist artists fell into the trap of believing, as E.H. Gombrich put it, that "all that was asked of art was a collection of nudes in difficult postures."

Mannerists, that is to say, possessed an excessive technical facility that overrode their ability to express — or compensated for their inability to find — a clear spiritual purpose. Of course it was all more complicated than this. But in our own period (speaking of society at large) of monstrously overdeveloped prowess failing to cloak abject spiritual confusion, the Mannerists' predicament feels uncomfortably familiar.

Also worth registering is the appeal for Yuskavage's generation of the early 20th-century painter, clown-philosopher, and contrarian Francis Picabia. Briefly associated with Dada, Picabia spent the Second World War painting conventional pin-up-style nudes, smiling stiffly under theatrical lighting. For Picabia, who once said that "work is vulgar if it does not give us pleasure for its own sake," painting in the 20th century was an inherently ironical practice.

It is essentially the same, I feel, for Yuskavage. I feel giggles bubbling up in front of most of her works. And I'm simply floored in front of paintings like "Brood," which shows a pregnant, heavy-breasted blonde woman behind a table laden with flowers and fruit. She sucks a lollipop; her eyes are obscured by the shadow of her blonde bangs.

The whole, superbly painted thing, with its bravura modeling and captivating control of the relations between rounded objects in space, is in a key of kitschiest mauve. Even the creases in the tied-back curtain, which conceals the source of light, pucker suggestively.

But "Brood" feels tame beside the astonishing "Triptych." A landscape of dry plains and a mountain range sets turquoise skies against green grass (a truly electrifying combination). Of the two main female figures in the composition, one is in the middle distance, lying prone on her stomach. She is an outlandishly sexed-up cipher for art-class exercises like foreshortening, contre-jour lighting effects, and color relations (her rainbow socks, joined at the toes, are beyond brilliant).

The other is in the foreground of the central panel, her jackknifed legs and naked rear end framed by the spilling hot pink of her hitched up dress. She is splayed (her face entirely out of sight) on a table above an elaborate still life that made me think both of Cezanne and of the broken objects and attributes in Albrecht Durer's "Melencolia I."

"Good art is dangerous," Yuskavage has said, "and I fully intend the danger I put out there. But you know, it's dangerous for me to just keep it locked up inside me."

Yuskavage's work pulses with intelligence and capability. But her provocative and hyper-knowing style may be less dangerous than she thinks. When compared with more original idioms carved out recently by artists such as Dana Schutz and Nicole Eisenman, or with the painterly videos of Mika Rottenberg, Yuskavage's work looks overplayed. It exhausts your patience, like a dreadfully affected dandy spewing rehearsed witticisms.

Picabia once said that the painter chews on his past paintings as the cow chews the cud. Painters working in a traditional vein, he said, should realize that "they are holding in their arms a legitimate old woman whom it is beyond the capacity of exotic makeup to rejuvenate."

The chauvinism of the remark matches its bitter cynicism. Yuskavage's paintings, too, suggest to me a level of cynicism, impressive in its way, and not inappropriate, but borne, perhaps, of a surplus of self-analysis.

Sebastian Smee can be reached at ssmee@globe.com.