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# Lady Painters? Smile When You Say That.

## Surrealism's the name, postfeminism is the game

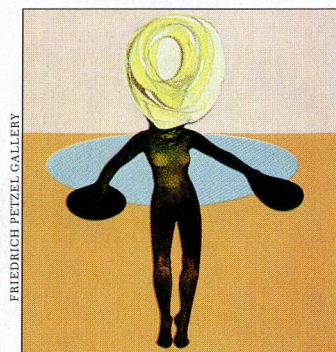
BY PETER PLAGENS

**T**HIS IS THE FIRST GENERATION TO DO what-the-hell, without having to wag a finger at somebody or make art about why one can't make art," says London-born painter Nicola Tyson, 36, in her austere New York studio. She means the first generation since didactic political art started taking over the scene about 20 years ago. Now some of the best—the craftiest, funniest and, in a dark way, sexiest—art around is being made by three women painters who've resurrected surrealism and given it a postfeminist twist.

Tyson prefers to call it a "complex female subjectivity." OK, she's earned the right. She started out as a commercial-art student in London, then dropped out to dive into the rock-band/club scene. "I had some adventures," she

says with English understatement. By the time she re-entered art college five years later, in 1986, political activists had taken over the academy, and the most inspirational pictures ("for their attitude") she could find were photographer Cindy Sherman's mock movie stills. Fresh out of school, she moved to New York. When she started painting again, Tyson decided "not to censor myself. Whatever comes up comes up." What came up were deftly distorted female figures—looking like paperdoll refugees from a Calvin Klein ad, in acid decorator colors reminiscent of Francis Bacon. They're deeper than mere complaints

**Alien notion:** Olbert (below), and a work in progress. 'People say my paintings are both seductive and repulsive, so they must not be exploitative.'



### Say no to self-censorship:

Tyson in her loft, with SoHo outside and some strange pictures inside. 'I was naive when I first went to school. I needed to see the world a bit. Images don't come just out of your head, without experience.' Below, her recent oil painting 'Figure and Lake.'

about women's negative body images. Let's say, existentialism from the distaff side. It got her shows at both the edgy Friedrich Petzel gallery downtown (the next one is next spring) and London's blue-chip Anthony d'Offay gallery.

Like Tyson, Elizabeth Olbert, 39, is engagingly articulate: "Teenage boys love surrealism; it's science fiction and it's gross, too." But unlike Tyson, Olbert developed her style rather naturally. "I did floating eyeballs when I was a kid. I have a sort of Rolodex of ways to make volume, and at some point the figure becomes an excuse to use it." What a use! Olbert has produced great big images of weird, multi-breasted creatures that she says are portraits of saints, and a new series of quasi-cuddly space aliens. (The E.T.s are on view at New York's Caren Golden Fine Art through Oct. 12.) Olbert is metaphysically inclined. "I'm a serious, practicing Catholic," she says, "although somewhat unconventional in my politics." We'll take her word on that.

In her studio, surrounded by auto-body shops near the Hudson River, Olbert paints with a quick-drying synthetic medi-

um that allows her to apply as many as 10 glaze coats a day. The technique lends her paintings a caricature chiaroscuro and old-master mottling that reinforce their strangeness. But they're not ironic. "The cartoon is our landscape," Olbert says. "It would be anachronistic and false for me to paint as people did when society believed that the world is grand and the soul perfectible."

That was back in the Renaissance, an era that Lisa Yuskavage, 34, admires in her own way. "From a certain point of view," she says, "all Italian religious painting is surrealist." Yuskavage, who paints in the funky East Village, is an overtly sexual artist. Her ghostly, grotesque bimbos seem to rise out of, and recede back into, pastel fogs. She calls them "invaginated" figures ("That is a word; I found it in the dictionary"). Yuskavage says that after her first gallery show (of abstracted female backs)



**Desire:** Yuskavage and a new work

she asked herself, "What are you hiding, Lisa?" "So I decided to make paintings that would be the dumbest, most far-out extension of what I was trying to say." And what would that be? "Male desire."

Of course, Yuskavage has heard that "there are women who don't understand why I do this kind of work." But she's not particularly sympathetic to programmatic ideas of correctness. "I don't believe in utopias," she says. "I married a guy from the U.S.S.R., and I know that enforced idealism always leads to something worse than before. Communism was worse than the czars." Neither Tyson nor Olbert feels quite so embattled. But Tyson's torqued and flattened figures hint at bondage. And Olbert's saints and outer-spaceys seem compiled of glistening naughty bits not commonly depicted in public. Etiquette, however, is beside the point. With a little shock value, lots of intelligence and an abundance of old-fashioned talent, these artists have given the art world something arresting to look at again. Which is—first things first—what painting is all about. ■

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