

structions collide with their historical reality, but also as ideologically dialectical, where the stereotypical representations are understood both to mask and to create the conditions of poverty shown in the photograph.



Lisa Yuskavage

Blonde, Brunette, and Redhead, 1995. Oil on linen, triptych, 36" x 108". Photo courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery.

This examination of the connection between aesthetics

and racism is continuous with Wilson's previous projects. "Mining the Museum," Wilson's 1992 critique of a Maryland historical museum, exposed the ways in which a supposedly objective and neutral institution is both determined by and produces racist hierarchies. "Collectibles," however, shifts from the museum to the thrift store, where historical objects are returned to circulation as commodities, exchanged both as collector's items and as mass-produced signs of racial identity. Brought into the gallery for critical inspection, Wilson's readymade figures render visible this peculiar connection between aesthetic nostalgia and racism.

The ceramic figures' miniature forms, cartoon-like features, and shiny surfaces suggest fantasies of total manipulation and control, reproducing the child-like psychical arena in which the racial Other is defined and paternalistically controlled. In other pieces, Wilson juxtaposes these figures with comparable characterizations of white people, where the latter stress mythical values like innocence, purity, and delicacy, sharply contrasting with the ingratiating servility, docile self-contentment, and dutiful obedience of the black figures. In a second grouping, Wilson adds hose-like Plasticine "extensions" to the black faces. These sculptural objects construct a metaphorical link between racist sedimentation and the relative density of material, where the hardened characterizations flow into supple and abstract form. By allowing the malleable Plasticine, with finger-

prints still visible, to cover the reified hardness and finish of the faces of the ceramic stereotypes, Wilson both violently negates these forms and renders changeable these racist figurations. ~T.J. Demos

CALIFORNIA:

LISA YUSKAVAGE CHRISTOPHER GRIMES GALLERY

916 Colorado Ave.
Santa Monica, 90404, 310/587-3373

Lisa Yuskavage's paintings stubbornly maintain their right to offend just about anybody. This, it turns out, is not only an interesting position to contemplate, but also one from which the viewer is forced to ask awkward questions of her or his own response.

The six paintings at Christopher Grimes feature highly stylized representations of preternaturally pubescent nymphets, rendered in traditional chiaroscuro technique, emerging from fluorescent color fields. The aesthetic of Yuskavage's iconography indicates an exploration of messy margins of accepted taste, while the medium, oil on canvas, and its application appear to confirm a very classical interpretation of painting practice. Such an apparent contradiction generates a palpable tension in both the object and its audience. Because Yuskavage's facility for paint-handling is entrancing, it is tempting to over-

simplify the manner in which her images operate. The viewer is so obviously manipulated by the full-frontal assault of her sexually charged images, that the ambiguous territory they inhabit is easily overlooked. Unlike the blatant misogyny of Courbet's *Birth of the World*, the splayed legs and jutting pudenda of Yuskavage's *Flesh Pot* reveal little of the artist's attitude toward her subject. Without an identifiable philosophy, the work remains less shocking than the exploitation of the Madonna/Whore symbol might infer, leaving the viewer wanting for the authenticity of a truly loaded statement. While the paintings affect an arena for female desire and fantasy, they use the image vocabulary of the masculine "wet dream," without imbuing their rather bathetic actresses with enough self-irony to overcome their predicament. Such a bizarre mix of the heroic and the abject obfuscates the locus of the viewer's discomfort.

Where the work triumphantly runs amok is in its witty quoting of the established painting canon. In *Faucet*, a truncated torso is bathed in a cloak of acid-pink light, while the triptych *Blonde, Brunette, and Redhead* sits in anthropomorphic judgment of the primary colors. Funny and direct, this female formalism speaks of an irreverence for content missing in the oversimplified sexual politics of a pumped-up vision like *Flesh Pot*.

Formally, these are very beautiful paintings, yet the humor and intelligence displayed in Yuskavage's

refiguring of the masculine language of painting is often less clear when transferred to a narrative. This does not mean that the paintings fail to provoke; quite the contrary. It does, however, behoove the viewer to question whether ambiguity in place of culpability is a dangerous strategy for avoiding the truth.

~Jacqueline Cooper

**STAGING:
THE PREFABRICATED IMAGE**
UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

*San Diego State University
San Diego, 92182, 619/594-6511*

Borders, boundaries, and marginalization are trendy topics these days in the art world, which in the past ten years has finally acknowledged that its own boundaries have seldom included anyone other than white males of European descent. One of the borders that matters most in the art world is that between the United States and Mexico, an admittedly liminal space in which the third world bleeds into

the first. The U.S. has another border, however, and it was this border that was crossed and dissolved by "Staging," which was shown first in Southern California, then in Quebec. Curated by Peter Krausz, this exhibition was motivated by a series of exchanges between two Canadian artists included in the exhibition—Holly King and Serge Tousignant—and two Americans—Walter Cotten and Steven De Pinto. Cotten, who is a professor at San Diego State, was particularly instrumental in facilitating the exhibition here, a serendipitous connection that proved particularly fortunate, as "Staging" proved to be an interesting show of strong work.

The second premise behind "Staging" was the current conceptual issues with which photography is concerned today. In the past 20 years, the notion of the photograph as an unmediated depiction of reality has been challenged by Post-modern/structuralist theories, which suggest that reality cannot exist prior to representation but is always/already constructed in and by

reality. All of the artists included in "Staging" construct the "reality" they photograph, thereby challenging the viewer's notion of it. Cotten, De Pinto, and Canadian Denis Farley problematize the notion of landscape/nature as signifier of a given essence that precedes and exceeds (wo)man's ability to represent it. Farley's photographs of landscape images projected on the inside of a camera-obscura tent emphasize, rather than mystify, the process of representing the land. In the work of De Pinto and Cotten, the expansive landscape of the desert is reduced to a mere indexical trace—the former artist's image of a hanging military parachute is reminiscent of the arid places where military testing took place, and the latter's unrecognizable manipulated images suggest the long-abandoned concrete floors of nuclear test sites.

Other artists in the exhibition, such as Evergon and Mary Beth Heffernan, use constructed images to challenge the viewer's notions of the essential construction of gender and art. Evergon stages Caravaggio-like scenes of mythological and angelic beings that are colored by a *fin-de-siècle* decadence that has more than a hint of homoeroticism. Heffernan's coldly beautiful photographs of manipulated chicken parts that look like hermaphroditic genitalia are reminiscent of nineteenth-century taxonomic photographs of abnormalities and deformities. Printed on post-card-size paper, Heffernan's work looks as though it was taken from a medical textbook. Unlike those images from the last century, Heffernan's exceed meaning and classification, remaining firmly rooted in the realm of the uncanny and the unconscious.

When staging an international exhibition between two countries, it is sometimes difficult to avoid comparison between the work from different regions. Curator Krausz is to be commended for assembling a show in which work from both countries was equally strong.

~Jennie Klein



Steven De Pinto
Untitled, from the
"Test Service"
series, 1994,
from "Stages."
Photographic
constructions,
line film on
aluminum,
14" x 11".