THE ART WORLD

GIRLS, GIRLS, GIRLS

Lisa Yuskavage raises trashiness to high art.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Lisa Yuskavage says that her favorite painters include Giovanni Bellini and Rembrandt. I believe her, even though the thirty-eight-year-old New York artist's pneumatic-looking, morose, and gamy nudes in flamingo colors hardly radiate Venetian sublimity or Dutch discretion. Encountering one of them is like clicking on a radio whose volume control has been set way up: you fear for your visual equivalent of eardrums. I was inclined to ignore Yuskavage's work a few years ago, when she emerged in a wave of new, resolutely strident figurative painters, among them Elizabeth Peyton and Yuskavage's friend and former Yale classmate John Currin. (Currin's virtuosity, which veers between sex cartoons and German Renaissance masters, has overshadowed Yuskavage's achievement and that of everybody else in the field.) But Yuskavage didn't go away, and I came around. Walking through a five-year retrospective of her work, which is currently at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (it will remain there until February 9th), I felt like a rock fan parsing nuances in a guitar strum. I confirmed for myself that she paints wonderfully, and that wonderful painting is what concerns her. A show of new work, which has just opened at the Marianne Boesky gallery, on West Twenty-second Street, refines her rough magic with no loss of effrontery. This painter squares simpering, vulgar imagery with a reverence for art.

Yuskavage's work paraphrases images of girlie pulchritude from old skin magazines and from photographs that she takes of models, but her essential source is her own obsessive fantasy life. Elements of her plump figure appear in some paintings, she has said. So do various features of her longtime psychotherapist, a woman whose pert, ski-jump nose is a leitmotiv. (How gnarled can therapy get? Consider a 1995 painting entitled "Transference Portrait of My Shrink in Her Starched Nightgown with My Face and Her Hair.") Yuskavage has often painted from little plaster statues, ten of which are in the Philadelphia show as art objects in their own right—sugar-white, grossly curvy figurines of pubescent girls adorned with fake pearls or tiny cloth-flower bouquets. (Fragments of bridal wear are recurring symbols in Yuskavage's iconography.) Studying these maquettes helps her puzzle out the intricacies of light and shadow which, along with high-combustion color harmonies, define her technique.

At first glance, Yuskavage's pictures suggest sophisticated cartooning, on a level with Disney animation cels. But the viewer soon notices her skill at modelling massy forms in depth and teasing out unlikely delicacies of expression. Finally, one succumbs to the surreal plausibility of a painting such as "Honeymoon" (1998): in twilight, a wistful, long-haired girl in an open robe kneels on a bed by a window that looks on a misty gray mountain range. A highlight gleams on the enlarged purple nipple of her left breast. Lurid? Yes, but perfectly in key. In these pictures, body parts routinely transmogrify, as if in involuntary response to a character's discomfiture. In "Honeymoon," the purple nipple insinuates a hyperbolic variation on the maidenly blush.

Yuskavage is one of a number of younger female artists who have taken up the vexed tradition of the female nude. Among her colleagues are the painters Jenny Saville and Cecily Brown and any number of photographers who work in the tell-all mode of Nan Goldin. The theme—though it is rife in our commercial culture—is an uncommon one in American painting. (Saville and Brown are English, come to think of it.) American painters since Thomas Eakins have been at least as partial to the unclothed male. Something in our history makes prolonged scrutiny of naked women in artists' studios more troubling than it's worth for our delectation. In recent years, feminist criticism's shaming attacks on the "male gaze" have amplified these national qualms to a point where any man's painting of a female nude is likely to be deemed roguishly defiant, at best. And so the tradition, such as it is, has fallen, as a guilt-free novelty, into the hands of women. Why shouldn't they reinvent it, as they presumably can, from the outside and the inside simultaneously? Yuskavage shows how. Her seriousness of purpose transforms generic-looking images into figures of individuality.

Yuskavage's personae come across as tender souls who are burdened by surplus flesh and inchoate longings. The young ones are confused. Older characters are confused and tired. All of them appear fated for sex. They are decked out, if at all, in such raffish accoutrements as little jackets that cover only their arms and their shoulders. Some examine their breasts, buttocks, or crotches with suggestive absorption. But in none of the images is the effect pornographic. Lust can't gain traction in these dream landscapes and interiors. Abstracted realms of feverish light, they are hermetic and, once you adjust to their kicked-up color, meltingly beautiful. Defenseless innocence prohibits desire. To me, even the most flagrant of Yuskavage's females seem more daughterly or sisterly than anything else—shielded by taboo. They hover between sweetness and dread.

COURTESY MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

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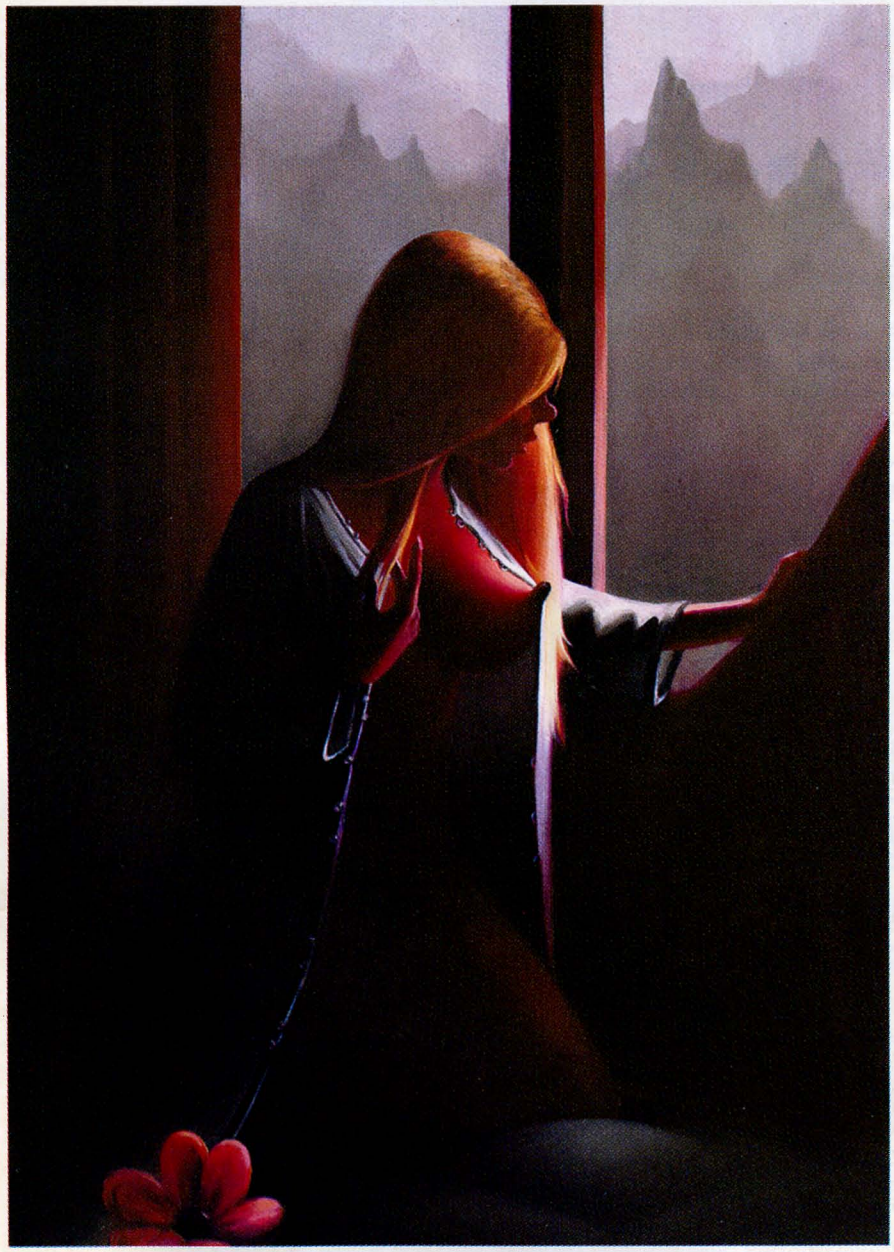
Yuskavage makes weird, darling dolls of "sexy" archetypes in the vein of a worried child playing with Barbie. But there is nothing puerile about her work's rhetorical intensity. Reproduction does not do justice to these paintings. You must view them in person to perceive the refined intimations in their ostensibly clownish style. The subtleties register slowly, building recognitions that, among other things, open royal roads to antecedents in the Old Masters.

Along the way, Yuskavage illuminates present feminine discontents. How can a girl develop a satisfactory body image in a world of industrialized sex and glamour? She can't, Yuskavage implies. Whenever she contemplates herself, it is inevitably through batteries of alien eyes. Two recent paintings—"Day" and "Night"—add up to an allegory. In the first, a blonde in effulgent light daintily lifts her flimsy shirt to behold her sumptuous breasts. In the second, a highlighted brunette in inky darkness grabs at one bare hip with a bejewelled, long-nailed hand. Her eyes are closed. A good-girl/bad-girl duality seems involved. But in both paintings the attitudes of the characters bespeak vulnerability. Their various autoerotic reveries might as well be aspects of one bewildered girl's kaleidoscopic self-consciousness—and, of course, they are. The engine of Yuskavage's art is plainly her own sexual anxiety, which provides a surprisingly rich source of inspiration. When you get past the initially overwhelming family resemblance of her works, you see that she does not repeat herself. Each image has the authority of a continuing quandary, freshly recast. During my last circuit of the Philadelphia show, each picture was singing a particular song—always in praise of the act of painting. In the show at the Boesky gallery, which runs until February 3rd, the same effect becomes a chorale. The new paintings, which show a series of amiably louche nudes in decorous mansion interiors, are less cartoonish than her past work, although they are at least as incendiary in color. Their consistency signals a mature assurance.



In "Honeymoon" (1998), Yuskavage creates an abstracted realm of feverish light.

In Philadelphia, the show's catalogue includes a reproduction of Bellini's "Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints," an altarpiece in the church of San Zaccaria, in Venice. This pellucid masterpiece depicts an angelic young musician drawing a bow across a viola, while six other characters share a mood of strangely tense calm. They are listening. Mary listens with a difference. As usual in Renaissance Madonnas, we understand that she contemplates the terrible end of her child's mortal life. Here her incomprehensible acceptance fuses with the held-breath span of a musical note—a vibration of eternity, suspended in paint. Some such transfixion grips the characters in Yuskavage's art. Sad and silly as they are, they, too, harken to something outside time. The art historian Marcia B. Hall, writing in the catalogue, cites Bellini as an influence on the artist and uses an almost obsolete word for Yuskavage's females—"ignoble." That's just right. These abject beings yearn toward nobility's vested grace, its immunity from ordinary judgment; and their yearning is dignified by the powers of masterly painting. The effect is both funny and painful. It is also piercingly true to the plight of the aesthetically aroused soul in a mass culture of warped ideals. Yuskavage hints that, even here, beauty and truth are as accessible as they ever were. We need only reach low enough to touch them. ♦