

NEW YORK

Andy Warhol

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Late work is not always great work—a truism that scholarly opinion and auction prices generally bear out. Andy Warhol, who died in 1987 at the age of 58, never really got to his own late period, although we now regard his paintings of the '80s as such by default. By that time his reputation was already tarnished by his production of art for schlocky galleries, and by a stream of arguably indiscriminating society portraits. Yet while the art establishment may have raised an eye-

brow over Warhol's "slumming" (don't forget his appearance on *The Love Boat*), his genius was never really in doubt. His brilliance was particularly apparent in the paintings that set out to startle, offend, or even mystify the viewer. His interrogations of mass culture were spectacularly lurid and practically clairvoyant, but the undertow of death that tugged at so many of his subjects—from glamour girls to car wrecks to skulls—was the most personal aspect of his work.

Whereas Martin Kippenberger anticipated the time of his death and mined its approach as material for a dramatic series of self-portraits based on Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, 1819, death snuck up on Warhol and took us all by surprise. It was entirely coincidental that when he died he had recently completed a major body of work on the

theme of the Last Supper, based on Leonardo's masterpiece of 1498. Serendipitously, however, the paintings take on exponentially more power given that they are not only late works but also *last* works—and they are well up to the task of constituting a grand summation of Warhol's art that remains open-ended and enigmatic, and mesmerizing, too.

"Cast a Cold Eye: The Late Work of Andy Warhol" consisted of ninety paintings from the '70s and '80s, including four monumental canvases from the "Last Supper" series, the most spectacular of which is *The Last Supper (Camouflage)*, 1986. Measuring more than twenty-five feet long, it presents a doubled reproduction of Leonardo's painting of Christ and his disciples. Warhol veils the twin images with a deep jade green camouflage print. Think of Francis Picabia's transparency paintings—the effect of Warhol's cluttered palimpsest is much the same. So much fuss to distract the viewer; so much effort to expose a genuine obsession only to disguise it as blasphemy.

The camouflage filter was a favorite device of Warhol's in 1986. In the Gagosian show, it was splashed across a large self-portrait and two portraits of Joseph Beuys, who, in many respects, emerges as Warhol's doppelgänger in the years after their deaths—the former as so-called shaman, the latter as perpetual prankster. They share space with a carefully selected rogue's gallery that includes a lovely transvestite, from the series "Ladies and Gentlemen," 1975, and portraits of Mao and Lenin, the political dimensions of which correspond to the Cold War thematics that inform many of the paintings in the exhibition—most obviously one depicting a map of a Russian missile base.



Andy Warhol, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 1975, synthetic polymer paint and silk screen on canvas, 50 x 40".

In works such as *The Statue of Liberty*, 1986, politics functions at the level of camp. In Warhol's cosmology, Mao and Lenin are celebrities like any others. The more enigmatic "Last Supper" paintings join forces with his decorously colored "Skull" series and the mysterious "Shadow" canvases, and move well beyond camp to take up the Big Subjects. There's no sense of pastiche and not even the hint of a possibility that the questions of mortality that loom large in these works are contrived or couched in irony. The more we look at Warhol, the more we feel his gravitas.

—Jan Avgikos

Lisa Yuskavage

DAVID ZWIRNER GALLERY/ZWIRNER & WIRTH

If Jan Vermeer shopped at Kmart, or if Pierre Bonnard were interested in what it might feel like to be pregnant, then their paintings might resemble Lisa Yuskavage's new work. As it is, no one makes pictures like hers. Showing in New York for the first time since 2003, Yuskavage proved several things. First, that she is her generation's best colorist, and that her toxic-sunset palette serves to highlight rather than obscure her expertise with heaving, tendril-like line. Second, that the narcissistic nymphets and tit-goddesses for which she has been both celebrated and reviled have matured into complex emotional dyads. In these canvases, even when a figure appears alone, she shares a dream space with iconic props that are her avatars.

A third achievement of these meditative, gorgeously weird paintings is that—dependent as they are on the old equation of luscious paint with female nudity—the metaphor of one kind of pretty matter standing in for another has been sublimed; that is, rendered both beautiful and frightening. These are portraits of thoughts if ever there were any. But the psyche, for Yuskavage, is a pulse in the flesh, and fleshliness is a continuum where human versus inanimate is not an important distinction. She blurs a ninth-month belly or grotesque breast into a nobby pear, a fake pearl, or a hot sfumato that describes no tangible thing at all. All are envisioned as temporary clumps of the same shimmering, morphing stuff, in which even aggressive physicality evanesces.

The show was organized in two parts. Downtown at David Zwirner Gallery were ten full-scale paintings; uptown, Zwirner & Wirth presented twenty-eight smaller works on canvas, linen, panel, and paper. With a few exceptions, Yuskavage's *belle-laide* ladies appear in repeating roles. There's the gravid contemplative standing beside—almost within—a not-quite-solid table strewn with plums or



Lisa Yuskavage, *Persimmons*, 2006, oil on linen, 48 x 72".

pomegranates. In some versions, a tasseled curtain overhangs her; in others, she sucks an indeterminate red berry while butterflies flit about. Another trope suggests Demeter and Persephone, or what Yeats would call the “dialogue of self and soul.” A doughy, currant-eyed, rather haggard nude is comforted by a spring maiden with ribbons in her hair. A variation on this theme presents the half-merged couple as lover-twins, joined by matching necklaces, panties, or opera gloves. Clinging to a hillside or hidden amidst branches, the figures grow together like two blooms on a stalk. The pregnant women, similarly, commune with their ripe drupes as sisters.

Naturally, there is trouble in paradise. Notwithstanding the flowers and fruit that surround her, the thoughtful character in *Persimmons*, 2006, exhibited at David Zwirner, has apparently undergone a mastectomy of sorts. A long necklace crosses her asymmetrical chest, its highlighted beads expressing the same uncanny vitality as the berries that seem to migrate, of their own accord, toward the dark beneath her skirt. In *Biting the Red Thing*, 2004–2005, also on show at David Zwirner, the fruit bowl filled with translucent orbs is not grounded on the table but levitates in rusty shadow, the same blood-rich passage into which the woman’s arm deflates in a handleless, trunklike appendage. The baby in *It’s a Boy*, 2006, seen at Zwirner & Wirth, looks genuinely happy. But where one eye should be there is only ominous smoothness.

The unit of measure for Yuskavage is the small sphere or dot—eye, nipple, berry, bud, bubble, bauble, melon, tumor, brushstroke. These compositional molecules show off her mutant old-master skill and speak about conception, fruition, rot, and dissolution as phases of a polymorphous, universal fact—“polymorphous and universal” meaning not only “painterly,” but “female.”

—Frances Richard

Nigel Cooke

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

Nigel Cooke holds a doctorate in Fine Art from Goldsmiths, London, where he wrote a thesis on the death of painting in the twentieth century. To begin by mentioning this fact might seem to be stacking the deck if a concern with the medium’s various historical demises did not figure so markedly in the British artist’s work—but it does, to the extent that he titled his second solo show at Andrea Rosen Gallery “Dead Painter.” The phrase encompasses art-historical corpses (skulls and bearded old men populated the six oils and two drawings on view) as well as Cooke himself, as one who paints what’s died. Indeed, the young English artist is not painting the end of painting so much as he is painting *about* the end of painting: His bile-colored canvases are phantasmagoric graveyards where the medium’s conventions and contraries have come to collide and expire and, in so doing, sustain his practice.

Cooke has said that his works “pretend at being *total* paintings, or painting extreme—overloaded, high octane, all the painting you’ll ever need.” *The Artist’s Garden* (all works 2006) displays such encyclopedic breadth in its welter of formal and stylistic oppositions. The spatial recession implied by a kaleidoscopic garden sprawling under a peaked-roof aerie is set against a gold backdrop, the monochromatic expanse of which, together with intermittent graffiti elsewhere on the surface, work to assert the flatness of the picture plane; abstract squiggles commingle with caricatures of human faces and animals; and color and line are used both as independent properties and as means of bounding form and object. In addition, the grand scale of the work (it’s over twelve feet wide) contends with the microscopic



Nigel Cooke, *Ghosts That Need Tending*, 2006, oil on canvas, 7' 2¾" x 12' 1¾".

detail of its contents, and the lacquerlike polish achieved by repeated coats of paint is regularly punctured by small pockmarks resembling spots of rust.

Cooke has raised his horizon line in this batch of work, ceding more and more of the stretches of infected sky in his earlier paintings to loopy, meandering doodles. It’s a trading of curdled Romantic landscapes for even sicker Surrealist mindscapes. There’s more to decipher and less room to breathe, but what materializes in the bargain is Cooke’s keen feel for structure: The edge-to-edge marking in *Ill Health*, for example, evokes the dense spatial irresolution of Willem de Kooning’s *Excavation*, 1950. In two pencil studies, delicate sub-layer traceries and surface figuration seem to repeatedly alternate places, confirming Cooke’s fluency with multiple pictorial strata. Comparing the study for *Night Thoughts* with the finished canvas is akin to looking at an X-ray side by side with the object it pictures. This painting is the surest on view; its surface seems to pulse between the gray-on-gray ciphers of the still-life objects (bulbous fruit and a bottle of wine) that lie beneath and the crosshatching and built-up patches of paint above. These are huge, packed works that perhaps try to do too much at once—but such overreaching is endemic to Cooke’s project, and in his prolixity he succeeds in limning several of the practical and theoretical dynamics that have steered the past of painting and that will, for better or worse, shape its future.

—Lisa Turvey

John Bock

ANTON KERN GALLERY

Gradually, the simplest things become exponentially more difficult for the protagonist of John Bock’s film installation *Zezziminnegesang* (Sissy Songs of Courtly Love) (all works 2006). After opening, with a chisel and mallet, a tin of ravioli, he must then contend with his eating implement: a spoon attached to the leg of an armchair. Eating requires that he turn the chair over, struggle to lower its bulk to the dish, then heft the spoon to his mouth. Small wonder that he takes only two bites before giving up.

Much has been written about the echoes, in Bock’s laborious procedures, of Joseph Beuys’s opaque rituals. Also invoked have been Paul McCarthy’s spirited excess and the Viennese Aktionists’ intense and antagonistic focus on the body. Less often mentioned is the Chaplinesque quality of the characters Bock creates—hapless but more or less oblivious to their haplessness, overwhelmed and confused by the world, often in distress but nonetheless given to sentiment. In Bock’s world, confusion is of the artist’s own making. The situations he devises are thus more psychological than mechanical, if absurd.