

# Disturbing Beauty

Lisa Yuskavage has courted controversy by transforming the classic pinup girl into something even less realistic—and more audacious

BY ANN LANDI

CONFRONTED WITH LISA YUSKAVAGE'S subjects, one is never certain whether to squirm or blush or turn away. For certain, they can't be ignored. Until recently the artist's canvases have featured women with outlandish attributes—a jutting shelflike derriere, ballooning breasts that veer off in strange directions, impossibly ripe lips, and ski-jump noses. The girls examine themselves pensively or gaze into space vacantly; they seldom engage the viewer, or one another, when more than one is present in a painting. It would be possible simply to dismiss these creatures as distorted caricatures, parodies of standard-issue male fantasies, but for a few factors. For one, the figures are painted with gorgeous authority. After the initial shock of Yuskavage's imagery, as critic Peter Schjeldahl noted in the *New Yorker*, "the viewer soon notices her skill at modeling massy forms in depth and teasing out unlikely delicacies of expression." Savvy observers have also discerned the complexity of her sources, which range from old *Penthouse* magazines to Laura Ashley fabrics to a famous altarpiece by the Renaissance master Giovanni Bellini. Every kind of interpretive spin has been put on these subjects, the most common being that they are projections of her own fantasy life or sexual anxieties.

"There are a lot of things said about me that could be said about male painters," Yuskavage notes, without rancor. "I'm fine with it, but I think it would be interesting if the critics

talked about men's fantasies and anxieties as well." For the most part, she shrugs off issues of meaning, leaving the weightier interpretations to others. "I'm as curious about my work as anybody else, because I definitely am making paintings that are about aspects of myself."

Yuskavage's star has been steadily rising over the past decade, as the artist and her paintings have captured the attention of both the mainstream and art press. Two years ago, she was the subject of a full-scale midcareer retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia, and her works are in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. But still, a fair amount of controversy accompanies that success: some critics accuse her of perpetuating stereotypes; others celebrate her original way of tweaking them.

*Village Voice* writer Kim Levin commented, "In the race for the most obnoxious female figuration, Lisa Yuskavage's luscious paintings . . . run neck and neck with John Currin's equally brain-dead curvaceous cuties." Reviewing the ICA show, Roberta Smith wrote in the *New York Times* that Yuskavage depicted the female body in "ways that feel fresh and are funny, grotesque, pathetic and beautiful, sometimes all at once." Writing in *ARTnews*, Philadelphia correspondent Edith Newhall echoed many critics



**Tit Heaven #17, 1992,**  
from a series inspired by  
youthful explorations  
of anatomy.

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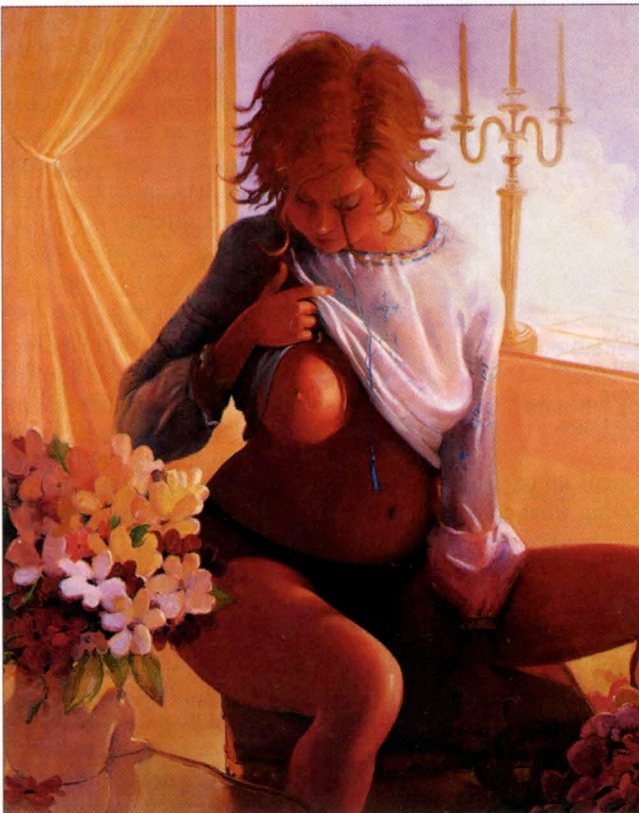
Ann Landi is a contributing editor of ARTnews.



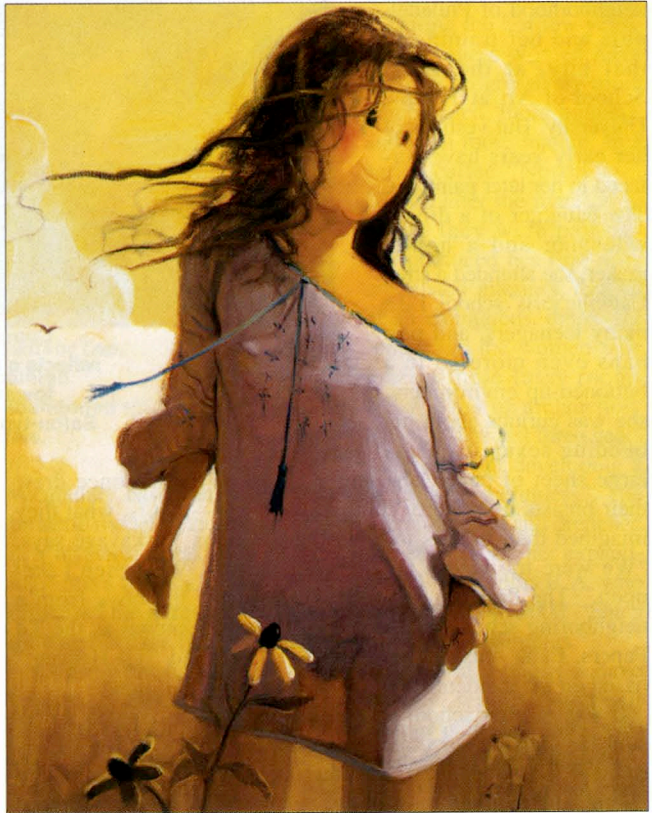
**"I definitely am making paintings that are about aspects of myself," the artist says.**



***Transference Portrait of My Shrink in her Starched Nightgown with My Face and her Hair, 1995.***



***Northview, 2000,* features a more humane and mature protagonist than earlier works.**



***Smiley, 2003,* twists ideals of feminine beauty into something bizarre to behold.**

when she observed, “Yuskavage’s work continued to raise more questions than it answered, a condition she apparently encourages. . . .”

**R**ECENTLY, ON THE EVE OF LEAVING FOR A year in Rome—where she had spent her junior year of college in 1982—Yuskavage was excited about being in the place “that got all this stuff brewing in me.” As she points out, “There aren’t too many people of my generation who studied art in Italy.” (Her husband, the painter Matvey Levenstein, is the recipient of the American Academy in Rome Award; the move involved dismantling their two studios as well as their East Village apartment and transporting their two dogs.)

She is also more than a little wary of being pilloried in print, even after years of enduring all manner of criticism about her work. “Please don’t do one of those stories where you talk about my boobs or my butt,” she requests before even consenting to an interview. Let it be said that Yuskavage is an ample woman of medium height with an open, generous face that looks a decade younger than her 40 years.

On the surface it would seem that she has traveled a long way from her childhood in a working-class neighborhood of Philadelphia and her training in that city, at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University. But vestiges of her early years have surfaced in her later paintings. The daughter of a driver-salesman and a homemaker, she attended a strict Catholic girls’ school. Like many teenagers, and perhaps even more so in a buttoned-up environment, she was curious about her budding sexuality. On a large sheet of paper, she and a group of friends once drew their breasts from every conceivable angle—that is, what they imagined their breasts to look like, since, as Yuskavage says, “We were too shy to take off our clothes. We weren’t *that* open.” The drawing fell into the hands of the boys from a neighboring school and became infamously known as the Tit Papers. Later Yuskavage made a series called “Tit Heaven,” based on the incident.

It was at after-school art classes that she discovered a passion for drawing, specifically the human figure. When she arrived at Tyler in 1980, the impulse toward figuration held strong, even though most of her teachers, like Stephen Greene and Margo Margolis, were seriously committed to abstract art. “I was lucky to be studying with abstract painters, even though I didn’t want to *be* an abstract painter,” she says. “It was stimulating to have conflicting points of view.” Yuskavage chose

Tyler over the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts in part because it offered the year in Rome and in part because her mother wanted her to graduate with an accredited four-year degree. “My mother told me, ‘You’re too lazy. You need to be forced to take courses.’” Her older sister was the “brain” in the family; she attended the University of Pennsylvania on scholarship and became a family doctor in Clovis, California. “It was a very typical sibling story,” Yuskavage recalls. “I had to find something that was mine. My mother always said to me, ‘Whatever you do, you will be successful because you are really very smart.’”

A few years later, while working toward her graduate degree at Yale, Yuskavage met her future husband and discovered the importance of psychotherapy in her life and work. “I was a bit young to be in graduate school,” she says, “and I was personalizing things too much.” If one of her teachers criticized her paintings, she took it as a larger rejection of herself. She sought out the crisis counseling offered by the university after experiencing “sort of a breakdown in my ego as a student.” Eventually, she says, “I learned to develop my instincts. That’s what I really got out of Yale, learning that there are opinions that are not going to ring true.”

When she and Levenstein landed in the East Village in the mid-1980s, Yuskavage entered psychotherapy again and has been with the same analyst for the past 13 years. (She has, in fact, painted works directly related to therapy, such as *Transference Portrait of My Shrink in her Starched Nightgown with My Face and her Hair*, 1995, and *Free Association*, 1997.)

“The more you trust the unconscious, the more it opens up to you,” she says. “The idea of not judging, not filtering what comes up, and just allowing myself to follow that has worked for me.”

Therapy may have allowed her to dispense with a certain amount of self-censorship, but it was Levenstein who first suggested a major change in the direction of her work. Yuskavage recalls that she was acting more than “a little nutty” at dinner parties among friends—“I can be blunt and I enjoy vulgarity more than is allowed in a cultured environment,” she explains. Certain guests were put off. “Once or twice I was disinvented to a party or something because there was somebody who wouldn’t come if I was there.” Levenstein suggested that she channel her personality into her paintings, allowing the more abrasive and unappealing aspects of her character to surface in the work. The result was the 1991 “Bad Babies” series, a group of doll-face nymphets whose cute little dresses stop just short



**Couch, 2003,**  
reflects a recent move  
toward more  
Salon-type paintings.

of an alarmingly mature bush of pubic hair, and the 1994 “Big Blondes” series, consisting of girls who smoked, squatted, and indulged in more unsavory activities. At that point, Yuskavage was painting straight out of her head, often without preliminary drawings, and if the subject matter didn’t offend, the titles themselves might, no matter what the content: *Motherfucker*, *Wee Asspicker*, *All’s I Got Are Big Boobs*. “This was before anyone was seriously looking at my work,” she recalls, “and I was being aggressive, having fun. It seems insincere to say that I did it because no one was looking, but I did have a long period when I had a very small audience.”

**A**ROUND THE MIDDLE OF THE 1990s, Yuskavage experienced a need to change tack dramatically. “I remember I had all these paintings in my studio in the East Village, and I just decided that I could not make another work like those.” She started questioning what it was she so disliked, a process that underlies virtually all her work. “What do you mean you’re sick of it? You hate the color? What? You seem like a psychotic; you have this process of asking yourself and answering, becoming gradually more specific.” She realized that one of the characters who repeatedly cropped up in the work, a rather saucy blonde, was an old friend from her school days named Kathy. The artist considered her “the perfect archetype of this beautiful, sexualized character.” She looked Kathy up, arranged a reunion, and asked her to pose, which Kathy readily agreed to do. “What was strange to me was that, after all these years, by my being an artist and her being the model, we could carry on where we left off, but in a much more evolved way,” Yuskavage recalls.

Eventually, though, the process proved “way too intense.” She had trouble working from the model, and for whatever reasons, Yuskavage was not ready to move from the fictive to the real. Around the same time, she recalled a lesson from the Old Masters, imparted during her first trip to Italy. An art historian who took students on tours led her charges to the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice, the site of Tintoretto’s great cycle of scenes from the life of Christ. Yuskavage remembered learning how Tintoretto made small wax maquettes of his figures, set them on miniature stages, and lit them from different angles. It was a suggestion the artist had given her own students—at Cooper Union, Columbia, and Princeton—over the years. “I decided to take my own advice,” she says, “and I picked up a hunk of Sculpee. I made this three-dimensional model of a figure in

the painting called *Faucet*, and then I made five more characters. And I just never looked back.”

Working with the maquettes freed Yuskavage to return to the “Kathy” series. The problem with the earlier pictures, she decided, was that they were too much about the model and not enough about her own fictional world. The paintings that resulted—including *Big Blonde with Beaded Jacket* (1997) and the 1999 “True Blonde” series—were more an amalgam of the real and the made-up, and therefore more on target with her ambitions. “It’s fiction, it’s a sculpture, it’s a person. The image simply became more and more loaded.”

“Loaded” is one of the qualities the artist values most in her work. A brief foray into paintings based on *Penthouse* photographs from the 1970s is, at first blush, coyly pornographic: the women are caught in the act of examining their nipples or buttocks. But then the sumptuous quality of the paint and the careful manipulation of light kick in. References to earlier

artists can also be detected. *Day* (1999–2000), which took Yuskavage a year and a half to paint, is backlit against a window in the sunny manner of a Bonnard nude. The artist says that she had a vague recollection of a Degas monotype, *Nude woman standing in a bathtub*, tucked away in memory while working on the canvas.

During the last few years, Yuskavage’s women have become progressively more complicated, more humane, and even more mature. In a series called “Northview” (2000), after the mansion in which they were painted, she produced her first fully articulated interiors, instead of an ambiguous, dreamlike space, and the women who inhabit these fussy rooms show signs of melancholy and age. The last three years have seen her developing a

vocabulary based on what Yuskavage calls “gracefulness.” The brunette model in these paintings is often fully clad and drenched in a mysterious, raking light. “It’s interesting to see her expanding,” notes Claudia Gould, director of the Philadelphia ICA, who organized the retrospective of Yuskavage’s work in 2000. “She’s moving from the outrageous to more Salon-type paintings.”

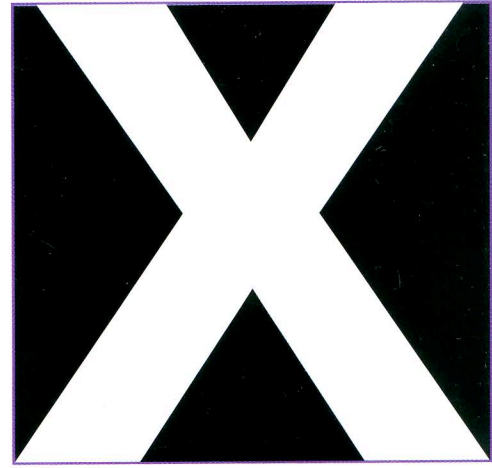
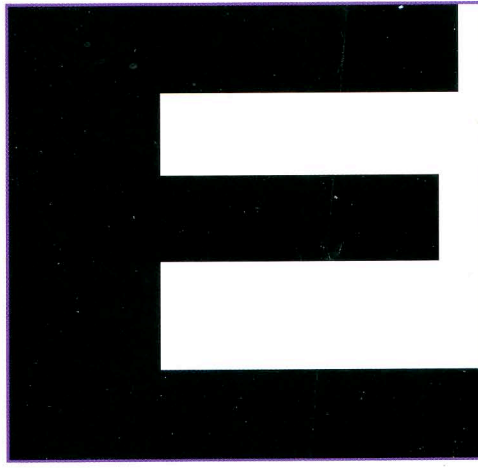
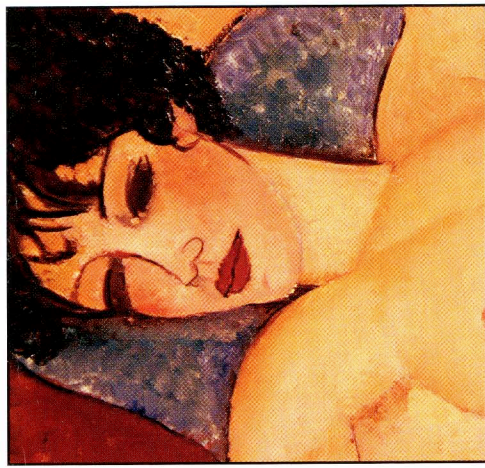
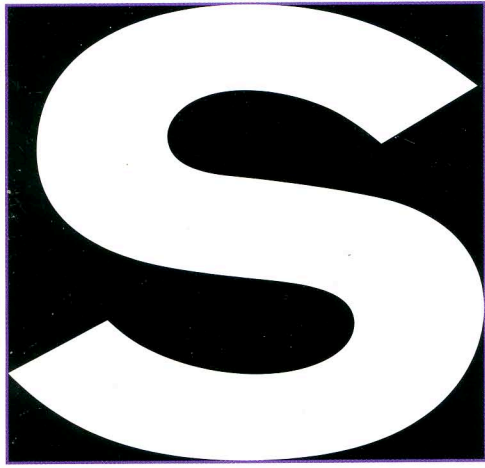
As her work has gained greater recognition, her prices have kept pace. Her dealer, Marianne Boesky, reports that small canvases sell for \$12,000, while the larger paintings have been fetching as much as \$150,000 on the secondary market. A show of her works on paper, a lesser-known side of her output, will be on view at the St. Louis Contemporary Art Museum in the fall of 2006.

“Many people think that I’m fearless,” notes Yuskavage of her supporters and her detractors. “But I really have to work on it. I don’t try to make art that’s easy for me to like.” ■



**True Blonde Mountain Top,  
1998–99, painted  
after the artist abandoned  
live models.**

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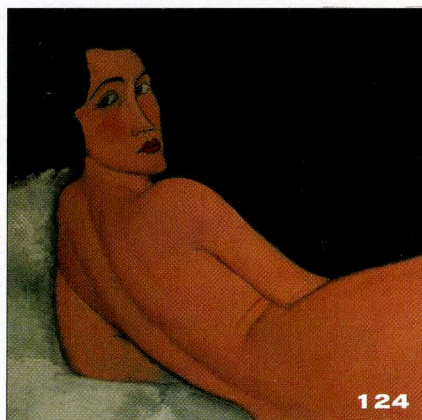
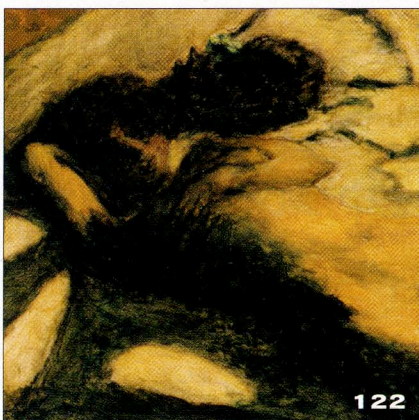
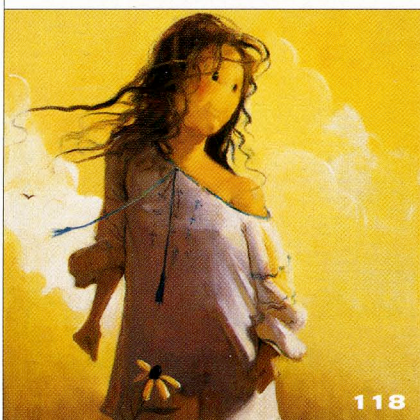
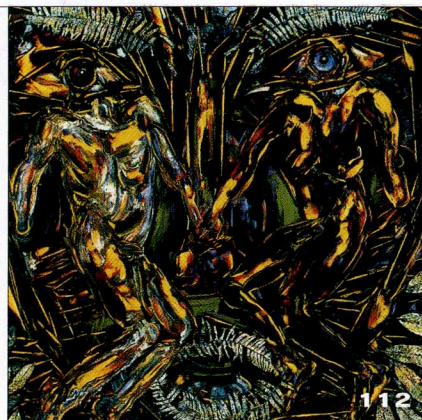
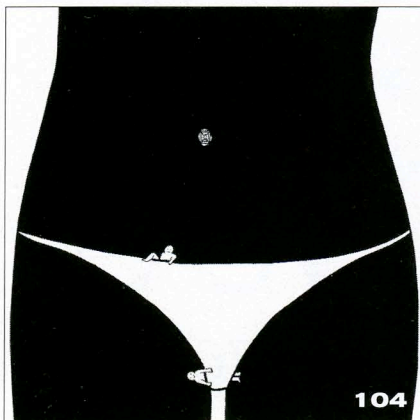
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