

Flesh for fantasy

After a three-year hiatus from New York galleries, Lisa Yuskavage is back with a two-venue show.

By **Andrea K. Scott**

If Caravaggio painted the babes on HBO's *CatHouse*, the results might resemble the outrageous beauty of a work by Lisa Yuskavage. Like the Baroque artist, Yuskavage marries the sacred and the profane in her exquisitely rendered images of young women—usually naked—which satirize the male gaze, while steeped in the history of painting. Her first show with David Zwirner is a two-gallery affair. Drawings and small paintings are installed uptown at Zwirner & Wirth, with large canvases on view in the dealer's gargantuan Chelsea gallery, where *TONY* met up with the 44-year-old artist to preview her show.

Your new work is, in part, inspired by the Baroque sculpture of Bernini.

His figures are always struggling; those sculptures are all about someone violating someone else. Another thing I was really interested in is the way things are weighted at the bottom. Bernini puts a helmet and rocks at the base to keep the things balanced. The difference is that, in a painting, you can take the weight out of the bottom and put it at the top. The "weight" of color is another way of talking about color value, so when you use close value, as I do in these paintings, you reduce the weight of color.

You were also looking at Giorgio de Chirico's gladiator paintings.

I find them such intense pictures of intimacy and struggle. What I also find interesting is that De Chirico is represented in almost all museums, but only with certain work. He has been boycotted curatorially as an artist of any depth. People think of his work in the later years as tasteless.

Do you feel an affinity because of the way you were pigeonholed as a "bad girl" painter early on?

Not at all. I've been very lucky. I've been able to keep growing, though people may sometimes say, "I really like the *Bad Baby* paintings [from the '90s]. I wish you'd never stopped doing those. You were so cute as a child, I wish you'd never changed."



De Chirico forged his own paintings. Does that market subversion interest you, after you sold a painting at Sotheby's last May for \$1 million?

Interesting word choice. I didn't sell the painting. [Laughs] People say, "You sold that painting, can I borrow some money?"

As if you had any agency in the process.

Exactly. But what do I think of the price? I think that it's a wonderful painting. I made it in 1998 and those works are such a record of who I was at that moment. I could never replicate them. It's the opposite of De Chirico. So for me that painting is priceless, and I think it's worth anything that anyone is willing to pay. I just hope the person who spent all that money really likes it.

In previous paintings, the figures seemed alienated. In your new work, the pairs are all intertwined.

It's still very open for me, but I would put out the possibility that there are not two figures. That there is one figure, one entity. It's the idea of caring for oneself or struggling with oneself.

That's interesting, because a few of the new paintings with lone figures look startlingly like self-portraits.

That's not me, it's a model. I was eating at that French chain Le Gamin, having breakfast with my husband, and I saw a girl who looked like my doppelgänger. I was flattering myself, of course, because she's, like, 20. So I made a pass at her, as it were. She was on a date, so it was a little bit tricky. I went up and

told her I was a painter, and I gave her the address of the David Zwirner website. A month went by, and then I received a very sweet e-mail.

Do you paint from life?

I can't paint with anybody around, so I've learned how to take pictures that are really good source material for myself. I used to work completely from my own imagination, but it started to create a sense of perseverance, which is a disease where you just repeat and repeat and repeat. But no matter what the source, I still have to work from my imagination.

"I'm not an artist who is involved with political issues."

Do you still work from other photographic sources?

Sometimes.

Is *Penthouse* still a source?

No, it isn't, and I only used it for about four paintings, just because no one else had done it. Then it became, "Oh, Lisa Yuskavage, the woman who paints skin magazines."

Your work is a hot button for feminists. What's your position?

I see feminism the way I think most people do now. It's a civil-rights issue and it needs to be addressed that way. But as for its place in my work, I'm not an artist who's involved in political issues. I'm involved in the fictional and the psychological. There's nothing more real than politics, and my work is not about what's real.

Why do you almost always paint women?

A few years ago I gave a lecture at the 92nd Street Y, and a little old woman in the front row said, "You seem like a very nice girl, but don't you think you're a little stuck?" Robert Storr, who was interviewing me, answered her by saying that if painting Mount Sainte-Victoire over and over was a problem, then maybe Cézanne was stuck, too.

"Lisa Yuskavage: New Work" is on view at David Zwirner and Zwirner & Wirth through November 18. See Chelsea and Uptown/Madison Ave.