

LISA YUSKAVAGE

DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK
18 OCTOBER - 18 NOVEMBER

Lisa Yuskavage has traded in sex for sentimentality. After nearly a decade of painting balloon-headed and button-nosed girls with more tits and ass than the *Penthouse* pages that inspired them, her new (and first) show at David Zwirner suggests that a kinder, gentler, more conservatively feminine, more maternal Yuskavage is at work in front of the canvas – which would be sweet were it not so clichéd.

'Mellowing with age' is what the rest of us are condemned to, but we rely upon our artists, particularly our successful ones, to rake the business of getting older over the coals. Yuskavage seemed to do this throughout the 1990s, when critics hailed her work as shedding the stale, self-righteous feminism of her predecessors in favour of the self-indulgent 'fuck you' (or 'fuck me') of a new generation which looked at pleasure, defined via consumption – of goods, of images, of men, of women – as an ever more equal right. Now, with pictures of motherly, daughterly and sisterly care, Yuskavage has left behind her earlier provocations for a saccharine pathos that undercuts those achievements.

Perhaps it was only a matter of time before the tumescent bellies and breasts of the artist's earlier work led to canvases such as *Still Life II* (2005) and *Brood* (2005–6), where the images of expectant mothers immediately head off any sense of sexual desire by invoking a hackneyed reverence in the form of that platitudinous 'glow' so mindlessly offered up in descriptions of pregnant women. In this context, even the peasant blouse on the protagonist in *Biting the Red Thing* (2004–5) appears more utilitarian than inviting, just as the act of eating is evacuated of sexual overtones. Only one canvas, *Imprint* (2006), carries a familiar charge, but it is no match for the general tenor of the show. The twenty-first-century pietàs Yuskavage gives us in *Ledge* (2005) and *Painted Things* (2006) are certainly authentic, but they lack the ambivalence of desire that is so central, and so necessary, to her best work.

Yuskavage's work is often thrown in with John Currin's for its resuscitation of what people like to call figuration, an assessment which points less to her historical importance than to a shift in fashion; the simple trend where bodies, long exposed to the torsions of digital, graphic and surgical cosmetics, have finally found their way, via the artist's imagination, back into painting. And both Yuskavage and her critics have positioned her paintings as revisiting the compositions, or at least the sensibilities, of everything from the High Renaissance (Giorgione, Bellini) to eighteenth-century neoclassicism (Fragonard, Boucher) to the crises of nineteenth-century representation (Degas, Manet). Such observations flirt with the artworld's supposedly most biting, but in the end rather toothless, denouncement: that the work may be 'derivative'. (Isn't all art, to some extent, derivative? – let's keep to those negative assessments, 'unoriginal' or 'inauthentic'.) Yuskavage's work remains as authentic as ever; it just no longer feels new, no matter how much care was put into each canvas. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*



Still Life II, 2005,
oil on linen, 51 x 42 cm.
Courtesy David Zwirner,
New York