



Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times

Lisa Yuskavage experiments with sculptures, photographs and drawings in preparation for her paintings of women.

## A Painter and Her Art Trade Places

### A Change in Style, and Provocative Works Find Success

By JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI

After more than an hour of art talk one recent day, Lisa Yuskavage, 36, a painter whose often shocking work deals with sex, misogyny and self-loathing, got up from the couch in her studio above a used-furniture warehouse in TriBeCa and fetched the secret of her latest success.

She held up two plaster sculptures of oddly misshapen, fleshy female nudes, each about 10 inches high. She described how she had made them and three similar statuettes and used them to experiment with composition and lighting. She would find poses she liked, take photographs, make drawings from the photographs and paint small studies from the drawings. Only then did Ms. Yuskavage put pigment on canvas.

And what paintings they are: provocative depictions of loose, blasé women in colors that glow or sometimes scream. Many have salacious titles. Critics have described the works, usually in praise, as "anatomically impossible bimbos, nymphets and other female travesties" and "demonically distorted Kewpie-doll

women" that are "perversely entertaining" and "visual spectacles." Ms. Yuskavage once said she captured the "far-out extension" of male sex fantasies. To question prevailing views about women and sex is not enough; she wants a reaction, as so many artists of her generation do.

Still, one wonders why Ms. Yuskavage (pronounced you-SKA-vidge) went

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*An Inside Look*

through the drawn-out artistic process. Her recent works, which sold out at prices of up to \$30,000 at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in SoHo last fall, are directly descended from two series she made a few years ago called "Bad Babies" and "Big Blondes."

Back then she simply painted, conjuring up her "sinister and precocious" (another critic's label) creations the way a child might invent imaginary friends. Those paintings made her reputation and created a following among top curators like Robert Storr of the

Museum of Modern Art and influential collectors like Charles Saatchi, the British advertising magnate.

But as Ms. Yuskavage, a voluble woman who seems to be making up for the long hours she spends alone in her studio without even a phone, spoke about the often studied but still elusive creative process, she was clear about the reasons for her new method.

"It's a way of making sure that painting is not dead," she said. "Paintings of nudes have been done, so I asked, How can it be done differently?"

She quotes Jasper Johns's famous self-instructional sketchbook note: "Take an object. Do something with it. Do something else with it."

In her earlier works, Ms. Yuskavage's figures often floated, apparition-like, in color fields. Her newer creations set the same sort of woman in more complex backgrounds, sometimes with references to art history or psychiatry.

Whatever her theory or process, things do seem to be working right now for Ms. Yuskavage. No less an artist than Chuck Close has called her work "beautifully painted." Gary Garrels, the

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chief curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, explains the appeal this way: "The images are extremely seductive in terms of color and her use of light, yet I find her paintings extremely unsettling and uncomfortable. And it's the combination of the seductive and the unsettling that makes them so interesting. They are very haunting and very poignant paintings, and they are brave paintings."

Her work was not always so well received, as Ms. Yuskavage tells it. Born into a working-class family in Philadelphia, she "found art" when she was about 12, partly to be different than her older, "smarter" sister, who became a doctor.

"Even before I wanted to be an artist, I remember sitting at my grandmother's table with a tablet — that's what we always called a pad of paper — and drawing," she recalled. "I always drew naked people, and then I tore them up. I was always only ever interested in people."

After earning a bachelor's degree at Temple University and a master's at Yale University, she started showing her paintings in group exhibitions. But she was not happy with her mild depictions of large-eyed girls looking away from the viewer.

Then two things happened. Ms. Yuskavage visited the Sonnabend Gallery in SoHo to see a Jeff Koons show: 18 kitschy objects inspired by soft porn, rock music, movies and television and made according to Mr. Koons's instructions, but not by him.

"It wasn't that I liked it," she said. "It was an affront. But it was like getting smacked in the face. It was nasty work, but it was better than what I did because it was affecting me."

## A Suggestion And a Breakthrough

Some time after that, another breakthrough occurred during a conversation with her husband, Matvey Levenstein, who is also a Yale-educated painter. At the time, "my personality was too much for people — I was too provocative," she said. "I felt no one liked me because I was too wild."

She leaped to an odd conclusion: "I told my husband I think I should not paint anymore; painting is the problem," she said. "I was very original, very take it or leave it. I felt I was more original than my work."

Mr. Levenstein, she said, suggested that she exchange places with her work, toning down her ribald personality while allowing her paintings to become more abrasive.

"I thought for a year: What would it take to make my work the opposite?" she said. "And I realized I could do it. So I made those 'Bad

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This is the first in a series of articles examining the creative process.

Babies' paintings of angry demons. I let them be dirty and lazy." Her series of "Big Blondes," who smoked, squatted and did things unprintable in a family newspaper, followed.

Most days, Ms. Yuskavage went to her studio and simply painted, with few preliminaries. "I knew how to draw bodies out of my head," she said, "and I understand how light works." She has always, she added, loved paintings "where light became the theater of the painting, almost the subject of the painting." And her best work, she said, incorporated the female body and dramatic lighting.

It was in the art classes she sometimes teaches at Princeton University and Cooper Union, as she told her students how Tintoretto placed wax sculptures in a box and used candles to play with the light, that Ms. Yuskavage was inspired to embark on her new way of working.

## Creative Process Becomes Elaborate

Initially she fashioned sculptures from Hydrocal (an artist's clay that hardens into a lightweight plaster), made a box for them and used lights to simulate daylight, candlelight, theatrical light and so on. "I felt I was giving myself fluidity," she said. "I felt my earlier work was one-dimensional."

Since those sculptures were exhibited and sold, Ms. Yuskavage has made the process more elaborate. She asked friends to model, rented a photography studio and hired makeup artists and equipment assistants. Voilà: a photo shoot.

"I had to get it done in eight hours, and it was the hardest thing I ever did," she said, getting excited all over again about the experience. "Everyone was asking me what to do." Which was a 180-degree turn from her usual solitude. From those photographs, Ms. Yuskavage made sculptures and drawings and oil studies before painting.

"One reason she does all this is that she always wants to move forward," said Marianne Boesky, her dealer, "and when she gets too good at something, she feels like she's cheating and she has to start again."

Ms. Yuskavage will sometimes ruminate for weeks before starting a new body of work, and her ideas can come from anywhere. "I have a lot of ideas backed up," she said. "I keep a lot of them in my head. I'm a list maker, too, but if it's important, you never forget it."

In her studio, a no-frills white rectangle messy with paint, brushes, containers and canvases in various stages of completion, Ms. Yuskavage tends to listen to the radio, generally a public station that has some talk so

she feels "connected to the world," though she does not really hear much of what is said.

She rarely starts painting right away. Instead, "I look at what I have done, I make a list of what needs to be fixed on a painting, then I may work on something else," like a watercolor. "It's like a warm-up for an athlete," she said. "I enter a different level of thinking after a few hours of working."

Once at this level of "alertness," as she terms it, "I'm not confused; I'm the master of my domain," she said. "It's not mystical. But you don't paint with your hands, you paint with your head."

Ms. Yuskavage once said in an interview with Mr. Close that when she paints, "I allow all sorts of things to run through my head." She mentioned dirty songs, a passage about urinating from James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist," Shirley Temple movies and the light in a Giovanni Bellini painting.

"Some of it's base; some of it's elegant," she said. "It's a Frankenstein way of putting a painting together. The parts of the corpse come from different bodies."

## 'That's the Fun': Shifting Boundaries

Like almost all artists, Ms. Yuskavage is reluctant to put specific meanings on her paintings. "Viewers are always trying to get it one way, and it's not like that," she said. "It changes. Within one painting, it can change from top to bottom. It's like dreams, the way dreams work, starting out one way and ending up another way. Artists play with shifting boundaries, and that's the fun."

A self-described "ornery" person, Ms. Yuskavage deflects more detailed probing about her thought processes. Still, she acknowledges an element of self-portraiture in her work. She has also said that her works are about misogyny and bad habits like social climbing and self-deprecation. Critics have commented on those things as well as on the anger in her creations and the conflict between self-love and self-loathing.

Ms. Yuskavage agreed that in a cultural climate where anything not only goes but might even seem necessary to gain attention, the temptation is to grow ever more provocative. But she said she would not take that road. Citing a 1995 work called "Rorschach Blot," which depicted a nude woman, standing, with her legs spread apart, she said, "That was the painting in which I answered how low will I go, how vulgar."

Her newer work, a bit more subtle but ever sexual, has a little more context, though narrative remains minimal. One painting, "Honey-moon," poses a long-haired blond woman, clad in a peignoir, at a window overlooking a mountainous landscape. Another, "Loved," is a seductive nude with strategically placed flowers.

"One way to enlarge a small idea," Ms. Yuskavage said, "is to really jump into it. You inhabit it, turn over every rock."