

Lisa Yuskavage is hardly ever laid back. And neither are her paintings of "big, fleshy, naked women."



Lisa Yuskavage, on the roof of her N.Y. studio, attended the Tyler School.

The Philadelphia Inquirer / AKIRA SUWA

A Juniata Park native hits big on the art scene

By Kathy Boccella
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Ever since she saw Titian's voluptuous Venuses as an art student in Rome, Lisa Yuskavage knew she wanted to paint pictures of women.

"Big, fleshy, naked women," said Yuskavage, 34, a big, fleshy woman who grew up in Juniata Park and attended Temple University's Tyler School of Art.

While her nudes might make Titian blush — they are mutilated, perverse, inflated Barbie doll-like figures — she is capturing the attention of the art world with a combination of intelligence, talent and good old-fashioned shock value.

Her current show of zaftig women with enlarged busts or buttocks at Boesky & Callery Fine Arts in New York

sold out in the first week, and her works are finding their way into some of the nation's most prestigious art collections.

In a recent article on three up-and-coming women painters, Newsweek called Yuskavage's color-saturated canvases among "the best — the craftiest, funniest and, in a dark way, sexiest — art around."

Another critic, Bill Arning, said the show is "wildly successful." Yuskavage has two more lined up, in Milan in May and in Los Angeles in January 1998, as well as an alumni show at Tyler Dec. 6 through Jan. 7.

That a nice Catholic girl from a working-class neighborhood in Northeast Philadelphia is emerging as one of the most overtly sexual painters on the con-

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She hit it big with paintings of zaftig women

ARTIST from E1 temporary art scene doesn't strike Yuskavage as a bit odd.

Juniata Park "is a very earthy place. People are bawdy," she said with a laugh, showing her good-girl upbringing by wearing a string of pearls, diamond stud earrings and Timex to lunch at a SoHo bistro. Though she is uninhibited enough to paint female genitalia, she is as inhibited as everybody else when she dribbles pasta sauce on her blouse and quickly buttons up her jacket so no one will see the stain.

Such seeming contradictions, which show up in her paintings, often catch people by surprise. Though she looks like the girl next door, she can be loud and brassy with a low-brow sense of humor.

"People look at my paintings and say, 'Wow, this is so strange.' Then they meet me and say, 'She's not so strange.' Then they get to know me better and they say, 'Maybe she is strange,'" she said.

"My paintings are very schooled. I'm speaking very eloquently but I'm using four-letter words," she added, the words, many of them four-lettered, tumbling out.

After a dozen years of being just another starving artist in New York, Yuskavage has achieved a kind of breakout stardom. She says it is a good time for women painters like herself, who are giving feminist art a new twist.

"It's not like my sister who got out of medical school and was a doctor. When you're a doctor you have money and a big house," the 1980 Girls High graduate said of her achievement. "It seemed to everybody like nothing was happening to me, but I knew I was succeeding."

Parents' views

And what do her parents, a homemaker who grew up in a large Irish Catholic family in Narberth and a retired driver for Mrs. Smith's Pies, think of their daughter's sexually charged work?

"It doesn't shock me," Marie Yuskavage said of the paintings, which adorn every room in her house. "I know what she's trying to express and some people are a little bit taken back by that."

Even Yuskavage's 87-year-old Irish grandmother went to the New York show, although "it's not her taste in art and of course they didn't let her see the titles," the artist's mother said.

Not everyone is such a big fan. One critic wrote that Yuskavage's paintings "stubbornly maintain their right to offend just about anybody," while another said they were "hamfisted."

Said Marianne Boesky, co-owner of the gallery: "People don't like [them] because they are challenging and touching a nerve."

Yuskavage's paintings were not always so sexually raw. When nobody paid attention to her first gallery show of women's backs in 1990, she asked herself what she was hiding. So she turned the characters around and, instead of shy, poetic creatures, they were hyper-sexual baby dolls.

"Everything was very played down," she said of the earlier works. "Not only was this not me, nobody was interested in it. It was my husband, actually, who said, 'Your paintings are so shy and demure and you've got such a big personality. Why not make paintings with big personality and you get shy and demure?'"

Sexy and tough

The cutie-pie figures she now paints are both sexy and tough, funny and sad, high-brow and tasteless. They are concerned with the anxieties of being a woman — or more to the point, of being the artist.

"I tell my shrink I'm getting paid for my own neurosis," she quipped.

While women painters have explored this psychological terrain before, what distinguishes Yuskavage "is that she is such a gifted painter," said Faye Hirsch, an art critic and editor of the art magazine, *On Paper*. "They almost have an old master quality to them because they are so incredibly crafted."

It was at Tyler that Yuskavage had a feminist epiphany of sorts when she saw the Latin phrase, "She conquers who conquers herself" — a line in the Girls High alma mater — in a dream. She realized she had to "chill out from boys" and knuckle down to work, she said.

"As soon as a boy paid attention to me, my work flew out the window. I noticed nothing came between them and their work. I thought 'Wow, that's it, feminism in a nutshell,'" she recalled.

At Yale University she found a man as interested in her work as she was, a Russian emigre named Matvey Levenstein. They married four years ago.

"He thinks I'm the greatest artist and I think he is," she said.

After graduating they moved into — what else? — a vermin-infested apartment in the East Village.



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Lisa Yuskavage *beside an untitled work in her studio. She has a successful show in New York, and shows set for Milan and Los Angeles. Next month her work will be in an alumni show at Tyler.*

"I couldn't stand it," she said. "I wanted to be middle-class."

She is well on her way, with paintings selling for \$12,000 and more and collectors such as Lawrence Rockefeller and Charles Satchi adding them to their collections. And

this year she is teaching an introductory painting course at Princeton University.

"Joyce Carol Oates' office is next to mine. I see her around all the time," Yuskavage said in amazement, though not amazed enough to

behave. One day she was out with some teachers and stuck her tongue out while chewing on food.

"Someone said, 'Oh she's just trying to get our attention,'" Yuskavage said. "That was part of it. But I'm secure enough just to be silly."