

Art By Edward J. Sozanski

A provocative take on female sexuality

Philadelphia-born Lisa Yuskavage has achieved an artist's dream. The Tyler School of Art graduate makes paintings that people talk about because they're impossible to ignore. One either likes or loathes them, but it's difficult to imagine indifference.

The 38-year-old Yuskavage paints sexually provocative women. That's the bottom line, but not the whole story, because she paints women whose sexual attributes and attitudes often are grotesquely distorted to the point of caricature.

Thus, the question is not so much what Yuskavage is portraying as what she's thinking.

Are her sultry, top-heavy temptresses supposed to be erotic? Are they send-ups of the male gaze or meditations on the inner life of women? Are we supposed to smile at these perky little creatures, or feel patronizing because they're victims of their own anatomical excess?

Or perhaps Yuskavage's paintings are intended as a kind of Rorschach test that reveals subconscious attitudes about female sexuality.

When I saw several of them in last spring's Whitney Biennial, I wasn't sure what to make of them, although it was clear that they were among the strongest works in the show. Their mood, if not their style, reminded me of British artist Francis Bacon's ugly, agonized figures.

I know now that the Whitney sample was too small to reveal the complexity and the enigma of her art.

Yuskavage's exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, her first solo show in a museum, makes possible a more analytical reading of her work. It contains 19 large paintings and 37 smaller paintings and drawings made since 1995.

There's enough variety and progression here to confirm at the very least that Yuskavage isn't kidding around, nor is she peddling "bimbo art" or soft-core pornography disguised as high art.

Some people would say that's exactly what she's doing, because her sources, especially for the more recent paintings, seem obvious — men's magazines such as *Penthouse*. The companion paintings *Day and Night*, which were in the Biennial, re-create poses from typical nude layouts.

In *Day*, a blonde lifts her nightie top and examines her more-than-ample breasts. In *Night*, an equally bosomy, dark-haired model raises her slip to expose her buttocks.

Despite the stock poses, no one can mistake these women for sultry pinups. As she does with almost all her female figures, Yuskavage has de-glamorized them by distorting their faces and bodies.

This is more evident in *Night*. The model has been given extravagant breasts, pipe-stem Olive Oyl arms, and a bulbous Peggy Guggenheim nose. The slightly upturned nose is a standard feature of Yuskavage women. It makes them look comic and doll-like, and sometimes even slightly pathetic. The ridiculous breasts add to this impression, as if the artist were saying, "You like breasts? Try these on for size."

By comparison, the blonde in *Day* seems almost normally realist. But whether she was painted from life or from a photograph, Yuskavage has transformed her into a fictional creature. But whose fantasy is she, ours or hers?

The deeper one penetrates into this exhibition, the more one realizes that Yuskavage has blended a lot



"Manifest Destiny," from 1998, is one of the paintings by Philadelphia-born Lisa Yuskavage in a show of her works at the Institute of Contemporary Art. It's the first solo museum show for the 38-year-old artist.

of often contradictory ingredients. The paintings involve caricature, parody, a dash of surrealism, and a spicy mix of high and low culture.

The subjects come from popular art, but Yuskavage renders them in high-art technique. The pictures are beautifully painted in a way that communicates respect for traditional process.

For instance, one is struck by the handling of light. In *Day*, enveloping

light in a yellow room, so palpable that it feels material, makes a stronger impression than the ostensible subject, the exhibitionist blonde. The illumination in *Night* is more typical of work in this show; it's a raking baroque light that produces deep shadows and dramatic ambience.

Theatrical lighting also establishes the tone of *Honeymoon*, a woman in a darkened room overlooking a mountainous landscape, and *True*

See YUSKAVAGE on 15



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A female artist on female form

YUSKAVAGE from 14

Blonde, a nude on a couch in a sexually tantalizing pose.

Yet in both these paintings, as in others, the picture is less than perfect, and less intensely serious in a baroque sense. The imperfections give each painting an edgy ambiguity that precludes a superficial reading.

In *Honeymoon*, the anomaly is a prominent breast with a distended, upturned nipple silhouetted against a luminous hank of hair. The painting owes its visual power to Georges de La Tour, although its exotic setting and distorted glamour are closer in spirit to the 19th-century romantic Arnold Böcklin.

True Blonde is a more straightforward picture, reflective of a progression in the artist's work over the last five years from more imagined to more realist. She has painted a slightly tawdry subject — a naked woman coyly covering her genitals — with old-masterish so-

If You Go

The Lisa Yuskavage exhibition continues at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 36th and Sansom Streets, through Feb. 9, along with two other new exhibitions — objects by Dutch designers Hella Jongerius and Jurgen Bey and an installation by Philadelphian Mei-ling Hom. The ICA is open from noon to 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays and from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Admission is \$3 general and \$2 for artists, senior citizens, and students over 12. Free Sundays from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Information: 215-898-5911 or www.icaphila.edu

lemnity. The woman appears pensive, and yet her pose is pure calendar art, albeit with a high-art gloss.

Such a collision of attitudes and influences gives Yuskavage's work its bite, and also its elusiveness. One is never quite sure what she's saying, and so is forced to speculate.

The bite becomes sharper and more unsettling the more she invents and manipulates. The earliest images in the show, such as the puzzling *Faucet* of 1995, come out of her head. Painted entirely in peach tones, *Faucet* juxtaposes a blond, waist-length nude in one corner against a faucet in the corner opposite. A puzzle wrapped in an enigma.

Also in 1995, Yuskavage painted a woman standing in a high-necked nightgown so starched it seems to be carved from stone. Supposedly, it's her analyst, with the artist's face. It's painted entirely in mint green. So is *Wrist Corsage*, a nude with an enor-

mous, shelflike derriere who is gazing at a photograph of a young girl, as if recalling her first prom.

The imagined images could be symbolic, or perhaps fragments of memory. Either way, they read as recovered truth.

Even when they look bizarre, Yuskavage's pictures are oddly reflective. For instance, *Shrugs* presents a woman with a second, more ghostly figure that might be an alter ego, or an alternative self, or even a flashback.

One is struck in Yuskavage's work, even in her more grotesque visions, by the consistent undercurrent of femininity. Her palette is warm and lush, rich in reds, blues and purples; she cites a Laura Ashley influence.

A few paintings include greeting-card still lifes of flowers, and one has a roseate sunset. And her women, for all their comic aspects, are never coarse, although Yuskavage's picture titles sometimes are.

The more I considered this work, the more it seemed that it might express an interior monologue, not necessarily autobiographical but generally about female fantasies, fears and obsessions.

I concluded that it must look quite different to a woman; in fact, it might be very difficult, if not impossible, for men to fully apprehend it.

Is Yuskavage's art exploitative? It might be if it were painted by a man, but the fact that it wasn't gives it gravity and a right to be taken seriously.

One thing is certain: It's work that affirms the continued vitality of painting, especially its ability to pose questions — in this case about the nature of femaleness — with a pungency that isn't possible in any other medium.

Edward J. Sozanski's e-mail address is esozanski@phillynews.com