

Lisa Yuskavage

Boesky & Gallery
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With Linda Yuskavage's paintings, you don't know whether to recoil in horror, snicker with derision, or surrender to the aesthetic pleasure of it all. She creates beautiful paintings of deformed bimbos, an oddly compelling combination. Against a field of sumptuous color passively stands an anomalous figure—part Venus of Willendorf, part blow doll, a sexual fantasy or corporeal nightmare, depending on your point of view. Her fleshy body sprouts dangling breasts, enormous thighs, and an alien spaceship for buttocks. Her head wears a doll's face complete with round cheeks, upturned nose, and a pouty little mouth. Although you can't quite make out the button eyes peeking through the bouncy blonde curls, you sense that they stare blankly, engaged in nothing.

The creature stands. We look. But what are we supposed to see? The pernicious gaze of heterosexual male desire? The pitiable predicament of self-loathing women in a body-obsessed culture? Are Yuskavage's works feminist critiques or misogynist slurs? Like Goya painting the roval Spanish family as glittering dummies (unbeknownst to them), does Yuskavage mock feminism in the guise of serving it? The comic send up and biting satire are there, but it's difficult to discern what exactly is being held up for ridicule. Yuskavage plays an evasive game of withholding information. The painting as (eye) candy is dangled before us, but its significance is kept maddeningly from our cerebral grasps.

While poking fun at her audience, Yuskavage pokes holes through the once exulted, now exhausted, institution of painting and, to another degree, that of feminism. In *Hamass*, she recreates the eighteenth century French genre painting of a woman at her toilette. We peek into the intimate interior of this small scale (6" x 8") work to see one of her naked creatures walk across a room, her bare backside an enormous dressed ham studded with cloves. In one fell swoop, Yuskavage turns a sanctuary of private ritual into a public humiliation, an elegant woman into a porcine feast, and traditional painting into a burlesque.

Asspicking, foodeating, headshrinking, socialclimbing, motherfucking bad habits is the collective title of 10 little Hydrocal sculptures, the doll-creatures that Yuskavage uses in her paintings. Without the trappings of large-scale oil painting, the figures appear as tawdry kitsch figurines one might find in a novelty gift shop. Footless, each creature is trapped in the position of her unfortunate namesake—one's hand is still caught in her derriere. Although utterly puerile, three of these figures assume a mock grandeur in the painting *Bad Habits*. Looming large on a seven-



Lisa Yuskavage, *Wrist Corsage*, 1996, oil on linen, 72" x 84" (photo courtesy Boesky & Gallery).

foot canvas, two nude creatures flank a figure in a white full-length robe. Bathed in a bright, red-yellow dawning light, this trinity of dunces almost takes on religious import.

Yuskavage's sugar-coated causticity is wearing at times. Yet, in that she has gone so far to one extreme, with any attempt to soften the blow she runs the risk of losing all credibility as cunning satirist. In *Still Life*, the only non-figurative painting in the exhibition, a hint of untainted sentiment faintly glimmers. It's a massive (7' x 9') painting, depicting otherwise diminutive accessories—the solitary pearls and flowers from the corsages Yuskavage sometimes uses to adorn her creatures. Taken in context with her other paintings, it's the discarded flowers left over from this pageant of deformity; by itself, it's a nostalgic longing for romanticism and beauty—traits Yuskavage herself seems hell-bent on destroying.

Other artists, such as Nicole Eisenmann, have used humor and satire in their cartoon-like renderings of women, but with a great deal more empathy and soul. Yuskavage is unforgiving, and her paintings, unrewarding. However, with their seductively lush surfaces and irreverent sense of humor, they do afford a prickly kind of pleasure for the thick-skinned misanthropes of the world.

Katie Clifford, *Brooklyn, New York*