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Lisa Yuskavage's Art Continues to Defy Characterization

Yuskavage was grappling with sexuality, power, and womanhood long before #MeToo. Now, her work is more relevant than ever

By *Thomas Gebremedhin*

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Lisa Yuskavage PHOTO: AMANDA WEBSTER FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

David Zwirner

IN 1990, Lisa Yuskavage was a painter who was not painting. She had not been painting for a year, in fact, since the opening of her debut solo show at Pamela Auchincloss Gallery in New York. The exhibition, a series of small, gloomy canvases depicting female backs—long sloping forms shrouded in shadow—had left her shaken. The works “didn’t feel like me,” Yuskavage, 56, says. “The attitude of the paintings was shame: ‘I’m not going to be big or loud.’ They made me so unhappy.” When the show ended, she left feeling defeated and confused, unsure about her future as an artist. “It was pretty dramatic, crisis-forming. I just stopped painting and sat in a spot and watched the bugs walking around in my Ludlow Street apartment.”



Lisa Yuskavage, *The Ones That Shouldn't: The Gifts*, 1991 PHOTO: © LISA YUSKAVAGE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER

That same year, on a late fall evening, Yuskavage returned home from work, to the apartment she shared with her husband, the painter Matvey Levenstein, and pressed play on their answering machine. They first listened to a message from a graduate school friend inviting them to a party; then in a subsequent message, that same friend disinvited Yuskavage. “Everyone discussed it, and Lisa’s just too much,” Yuskavage recalls the friend saying. “We thought it was crazy, but we were also enjoying the thought. What does that mean, *too much*?” It was a moment that proved a turning point for the artist. Her principal complaint about her earlier work was that it had been too timid, demure—faceless women with their backs to the viewer—so, her husband suggested, why not switch personalities with

the paintings? What would happen if she made paintings that got her disinvited to the party? Yuskavage headed straight to her studio and painted *The Ones That Shouldn't: The Gifts*, which shows a young woman bound, breasts exposed, with frosted flowers stuffed in her mouth.

David Zwirner

The move was a success for Yuskavage, setting the tone for the rest of her career; she began to circle thematic preoccupations that would haunt her work for decades: sexuality, power and womanhood. Since then, Yuskavage has built a body of similarly provocative work, drawing on classical European painterly techniques of portraiture to subvert and recast ideas about the female form. The intimacy and vividness of her work, the delicate, fine brushstrokes, recall Delacroix, but the cheeky, unapologetic, and at times challenging attitude of her heroines evokes a model in a pinup magazine.

In those early years, Yuskavage continued to toy with the “what” of her paintings—“What is the energy of the work? I’m not here making shortbread in my studio, to make you feel warm and cozy.” Once she had landed that, she started to explore the actual look, roles and desires of the figures that populated her canvases and, by extension, herself.

This month, nearly 100 works from Yuskavage’s oeuvre that together chart her artistic evolution will be presented in concurrent exhibitions at David Zwirner in New York City. The gallery’s downtown space will present *Babie Brood: Small Paintings 1985–2018*, the first survey of her small-scale work, while uptown eight new large-scale pieces make their debut in a show dubbed *New Paintings*. One afternoon in October, in a private room at David Zwirner, Yuskavage assesses a selection of the loans that will go on view—the first time she’s seen some of the paintings since they were sold years before. “It’s such a privilege to have made art for decades,” she says. “Maybe it’s because I don’t have kids, but I feel like we’re having a family reunion. I feel like I’m bringing them home.”

YUSKAVAGE WAS born and raised in Philadelphia. Her father was a salesman and truck driver for Mrs. Smith's Pies, and her mother was a homemaker (later she became a medical records technician). "I didn't know we were poor, because I got everything I wanted. We had a clean house. All the bills were paid," Yuskavage says. The surrounding neighborhood was strictly blue-collar and, at times, rough. She references a recent article about the heroin market in a Philadelphia neighborhood: "I grew up blocks from there and it was scary then."

She received her BFA from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University. Her parents were supportive but also reliably realistic—her father taught her how to operate a stick shift in case she needed to drive a truck for money. She went on to earn her MFA at Yale University, where she met Levenstein. But the university's tony atmosphere intimidated Yuskavage and she slowly felt the particularities of her personality, her blue-collar roots, being chased out; she was an outsider. "I guess it was a class thing," she says. "Yale costs a lot, so I better listen to them. I wasn't there to fight them, they're teachers." It was at Yale that she met the artist Jesse Murry, a gay black artist from the South, and the two outsiders formed an immediate, intense bond. Several years later, in 1993, when Murry was dying from AIDS, he left Yuskavage with these words: "You'll never flinch.... You will always be able to stand up to it." It was a sentiment that Yuskavage needed to hear as she continued to find her way as an artist, facing near-endless rejection and shedding the baggage she had picked up at Yale. ("Shame when harnessed is jet engine fuel," she says. "When harnessed.")

After Yale, and a stint in Provincetown, Massachusetts (at the Fine Arts Work Center), Yuskavage and Levenstein moved to Hoboken, New Jersey, where they lived in a loft above Donald Judd's office. They shared the apartment with Yale classmate and painter John Currin. To make ends meet, Yuskavage ran a swimming pool in Hoboken and bartended, while Levenstein and Currin took the PATH train to their construction jobs. ("People don't realize John was skim coating walls. He was very good at it!" she says, laughing.) When she was in a pinch, Yuskavage briefly considered egg donation but was ultimately too scared when faced with the reality of her child out in the world. "I was aware as a young person that I wasn't going to have a child," she recalls. "I knew how hard it was to be an artist, especially as a woman.... I didn't want to take the risk with my work.... It's unfair that women start to become infertile at 35, and that's when my career took off."



Lisa Yuskavage, *Asspicking, foodeating, headshrinking, socialclimbing, motherfucking bad habits*, 1996 PHOTO: © LISA YUSKAVAGE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER

After the crisis that followed her debut at Pamela Auchincloss, and the yearlong break from painting it caused, Yuskavage returned to her studio, constantly reinventing and shifting aspects of her technique. For the figures that appear in her early group of paintings *Bad Habits*, Yuskavage worked from Tintoretto-inspired clay sculptures she molded. Later, she searched vintage issues of *Penthouse* for muses, fixating on the bodies that appeared in those pages. “It was considered pretty incorrect of me to be using these images, but I was intrigued,” she says. “If that’s a woman, what am I? I don’t look anything like that.” It was Yuskavage’s radical move, an effort to elevate a form deemed tasteless to high art. For her *Northview* series, she hired a friend to sit for her at an acquaintance’s home in Westchester, New York, a space that she remembers as being “intensely feminine,” as feminine as the figures depicted in the work. It was the first time Yuskavage had used a richly detailed environment in her work, and the possibilities of that interaction between the subject and the space she inhabits, fascinated her. Then Yuskavage pulled back and placed her women in fantastical, post-apocalyptic scenes, fields of trees and flowers dotted with piles of dead fish. Despite the change in background, the trademark Yuskavage bombshell—buxom, beguiling, inscrutable—was still there.

David Zwirner



Lisa Yuskavage, *Northview Afternoon*, 2000
PHOTO: © LISA YUSKAVAGE, COURTESY OF
THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER



Lisa Yuskavage, *Self Portrait*, 2017 PHOTO: ©
LISA YUSKAVAGE, COLLECTION OF SUSAN
AND LEONARD FEINSTEIN, COURTESY OF THE
ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER

More recently Yuskavage has ventured into the male form, first with individual portraits of strapping, longhaired hippies to paintings of heterosexual couples. “The couple is an entity,” she says. “It’s not about one or the other, it’s about how they are together.... When I got into couples, I began to play with all of it.” In *Self Portrait*, a bug-eyed man, inspired by former Penthouse publisher Bob Guccione, looms behind a doll-like nude woman in an eerie, blood-red room. In *The Tongue Tondo*, young lovers tease one another while surrounded by lush foliage.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, Yuskavage was labeled one of the bad girls of painting, alongside Cecily Brown and Sue Williams, female artists whose work was considered unapologetic and transgressive in one way or another. Despite this comparison, she was left out of group shows featuring other transgressors, most noticeably from the seminal exhibit at the New Museum in 1994. She took the omissions hard. “I was like, ‘I was made for this,’” she says. “But Matvey said, ‘You don’t want to get stuck here.... If you become the poster child for this, you won’t get to develop the other edges you have in you.’ It was a nice way of comforting me—that and a margarita and a basket of chips.”

In more recent years, the effort to characterize Yuskavage's work has only increased, especially as the conversation surrounding gender politics and the female body has come to the foreground. In *Golden God*, a large canvas that shows a broad-shouldered man with a female draped over his back, one searches for meaning in the expressions of its subjects. Is she in the throes of ecstasy or grimacing in pain? What does a painting like this mean in the #MeToo era? Yuskavage says that people have been stopping her on the street lately. "They say, 'You've *been* out there speaking the truth,' and I say, 'Tell me what truth, because then I'll do it some more!' I only speak my truth.... Part of my journey has been that I was put on this earth as a female. Our stories...have not been heard." And what of the critics who argue that her work is reflective of a kind of brutality? "I think America has become the Wild West again—



Lisa Yuskavage, *Golden God*, 2018 PHOTO: © LISA YUSKAVAGE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER

raping, pillaging. But I feel that maybe we were always a rough country.... I find it upsetting from every possible angle." Hanna Schouwink, a senior partner at David Zwirner, who works closely with Yuskavage, was struck by the consistency of the issues and themes in Yuskavage's art. "You look at works from 20 years ago and they look extremely present and of the moment," Schouwink says. "Her work has evolved so much—it's become increasingly complex and demanding of her as a painter—but at the same time there are specific themes that she stays very true to. She hasn't abandoned fundamental principles."

David Zwirner

SIX YEARS ago, Yuskavage injured her painting hand while getting a routine massage. It took three days to get a diagnosis, and she couldn't move her wrist for another three months. She learned that the masseuse had pressed into her hand too hard, crushing her radial nerve. She thought she would never paint again. It was the same year that Hurricane Sandy hit New York. Several of Yuskavage's artworks were lost in the flood at David Zwirner. As after many dramatic moments from her career and life—the disastrous first show, the death of her friend—she tried to understand that year, to learn from it. “I don't take anything for granted [when it comes to] my ability to work, to keep doing anything,” she says. “We're fragile; I guess that's the lesson.” Her hand now long recovered—except for the occasional tingle in her wrist—Yuskavage considers her forthcoming shows, which includes a large traveling exhibition that will open at the Aspen Art Museum in 2020 before heading to the Baltimore Museum of Art later that year. She thinks back to that phone message, when she was disinvited from a party. [After hearing that,] “I never intended to put paintings into the world that were not troublemakers, that were not getting disinvited to parties.”