



Lisa Yuskavage

Taste

En el mundo del arte, el gusto es un concepto que ha evolucionado a lo largo de la historia. Desde las pinturas clásicas hasta las obras más modernas, el espectador ha ido descubriendo nuevas formas de expresión y belleza. Este artículo explorará cómo el gusto se ha moldeado por factores culturales, sociales y personales, y cómo sigue cambiando en la era de la globalización y la tecnología.

Tobias Ostrander

El gusto es un fenómeno complejo que surge de la interacción entre factores biológicos, culturales y personales. Desde la perspectiva biológica, el cerebro humano está diseñado para detectar patrones de simetría y armonía, lo que nos hace sentir atraídos por ciertos tipos de arte y diseño. Sin embargo, el gusto también está profundamente influenciado por el contexto cultural. Lo que se considera bello o interesante puede variar enormemente entre diferentes sociedades y épocas. Por ejemplo, el arte abstracto que hoy en día es muy valorado, fue considerado una aberración en el siglo XIX. Además, el gusto individual se forma a lo largo de la vida a través de experiencias, educación y exposición a diferentes tipos de arte. En la era digital, el acceso a una gran variedad de obras de arte ha permitido a los espectadores descubrir estilos y técnicas que antes eran desconocidos. Esto ha llevado a una mayor diversidad de gustos y a un cuestionamiento de las normas establecidas. El futuro del gusto probablemente continuará evolucionando a medida que nuevas tecnologías y estilos de arte emerjan.

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In addressing questions of taste, Yuskavage's paintings initially evidence a distinct pleasure in constructing assaults on middle-class taste, particularly as it relates to propriety and established mores. Her most explicit confrontations are often expressed through the use of objects traditionally associated with domestic stability, elegance or manners, which she juxtaposes with naked female bodies. In an early work, *The Ones that Don't Want to: Kelly Marie* (1992) she portrays a pale female figure, partially emerging from the green haze of a monochromatic background. The woman holds a delicate teacup at breast-height, with an apprehensive facial expression directed at the viewer. While she wears a sober turtle-neck sweater, her lower body is bare, with her brushy pubic hair visible, though veiled within emerald shadow. Similarly odd pairings occur within other works included in this exhibition, such as with the kitchen utensil in *Blonde with Oven Mitt* (1994), the fruit and flower arrangement in *Still Life* (2003), or the tasseled drapes and bookcases of the parlor depicted in two paintings from the *Northview* (2000) series.

It is of course Yuskavage's specific renderings of the female form that is often viewed as distasteful, the overly-voluptuous curves of their breasts, hips, noses or buttocks; exaggerated in ways that at times appear to reference erotic cartoons. Similarly unnerving to middle-class tastes are the works that contain compositions and poses that recall those used in the magazines *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. The painting *Surrender* (1998) reveals these influences, in which a figure with ponytails and eye shadow is shown gazing down at the tan-lines visible across her naked body. Similarly, the blond in the watercolor, *KK Thinking* (2001), dressed in a *négligé*, bathed in saccharin pink light, evokes the soft-focus images of 1970s erotic photography. *Heart* (1995) is the most overtly sexualized painting included in the exhibition, with its kneeling figure's hand deep between her open legs.

It is these aspects of Yuskavage's work that established her reputation during the 1990s as a "bad-girl" artist, as an artist particularly interested in making the viewer uncomfortable by confronting him or her with overtly sexualized works, composed of odd elements and exaggerated forms. In retrospect, for this author, these early readings appear to mask, or attempt to diminish, an underlying discomfort one felt about not being able to fix a clear reading on the significance of these figures, for the artist herself or for the politicized cultural environment at the time. Their audacity or offensiveness ultimately seemed to emerge from an inability to establish Yuskavage's position, politically or emotionally in relation to

these works, which made it in turn difficult to articulate one's own reading as a viewer.

This exhibition at the Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo provides a look at the continued trajectory of the artist's production, which has developed in an increasingly nuanced manner. Examining her recent paintings, such as *Garden* (2002) or *Angel* (2004), we are presented with figures projecting a more regal or iconic air. *Angel* shows a large, fleshy woman, dressed in a cream, silk slip with a brightly colored jacket. She faces directly forward, with her arms raised behind her; a posture that exposes her corpulent body, while concurrently giving her a majestic quality, as her raised arms subtly evoke colored wings. The figure projects a distinct self-awareness, a particular form of presence, which is a characteristic of much of the artist's current production. Through the specific group of works selected, this presentation seeks to trace this contemplative mood back through the artist's older work, presenting paintings that at times approach a feeling of portraiture. They confront the viewer with glimmers of the real, recording touches of humble, human emotion; while continually making their position as aesthetic constructions clearly evident. Looking at this group of paintings one recognizes that while the figures are consistently confrontational, much of their complexity lies not only within the cultural play of their overt sexuality, but additionally in how their character draws us toward addressing older questions regarding the representation of the female figure in art, its ties to definitions of the beautiful and to aesthetic pleasure.

For the paintings are aesthetically pleasing. They glow with diffused light, their colored *sfumatos*, and dramatic *chiaroscuros* are undeniably sumptuous. The artist's interest in light finds its perfect vehicle in the multiple rotund forms of these bodies. One is attracted to her diverse use of brushwork, from wet glazes to confident flourishes of dry-brushed paint. Examining these various effects, it is easy to get lost in the complexity and mastery of the artist's use of her medium. Yuskavage's paintings reinvigorate the age-old dynamism that oil paint has in rendering both light and flesh. Her particular rendering of these elements has historically been engaged in religious painting, such as those from the Baroque period, where light and flesh were tied to symbolic expressions of divinity and the transfiguration of flesh into spirit, a sensual tradition that she both acknowledges and subverts.¹ Our experience of her lush treatment of oil paint can easily become one of intense sensual excitement.

Cursed Beauty:

The Painting of Lisa Yuskavage and the Goosing of the Great Tradition

Christian Viveros-Fauné

The painting of Lisa Yuskavage, a young woman with long, dark hair, looking directly at the viewer with a slight smile, is a work of art that has caused a great deal of controversy. It is a painting that has been described as "pornographic" and "offensive" by some critics, while others have praised it as a masterpiece of contemporary art. The painting is a study of the female form, and it is a work that has challenged the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in the art world. The painting is a work of art that has caused a great deal of controversy. It is a painting that has been described as "pornographic" and "offensive" by some critics, while others have praised it as a masterpiece of contemporary art. The painting is a study of the female form, and it is a work that has challenged the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in the art world.

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Lisa Yuskavage has a mouth on her. A gift she picked up in her blue collar North Philadelphia neighborhood of Juniata Park, this characteristic feature of her outsize personality landed her in plenty of hot water as a child. As an adult, she has become the sort of woman who needs no invitation to speak plainly. Humor, much of it the self-deprecating kind, populates her speech and much of her thinking. Being with her can be like hearing the world's dirtiest joke told by a nun. Funny, not infrequently offensive and exceedingly poignant, the fact that such an immensely accomplished woman is doing the telling makes every iteration ring ever more powerful, absurd and delicious.

In the words of another, far more thin-skinned artist, Lisa Yuskavage has—largely by dint of her hard-won irreverence—developed the one instrument all real artists crave though most don't know enough to want: a built-in shit detector. She has it in spades. A sort of mental thresher that serves as a guarantor of critical thinking, her ability to apply a colder eye to her own practice as well as the successes and failures of others has consistently brought her back to her own relentlessly original vision. A path that windingly leads to her beautiful yet outrageous paintings, the tragicomic female universe she has developed expresses nothing less and of course, far more than George Orwell's definition of a dirty joke as a significant mental rebellion.

As a little girl, Lisa was drawn to art to differentiate herself from her older, smarter sister and also, one would guess, the low passions of the American middle-class experience. Drawing pictures of "naked people" was a favorite pastime; so was the thrill with which she tore up the offending pieces of paper before they found their way into the hands of the adults. At Tyler School of Art, the city's state school—where her parents encouraged her to go because they firmly believed in the need for a college degree—she naively declared her love of Degas nudes to a postmodern painting faculty terminally obsessed with the flatness of the picture plane. Later at Yale, which Lisa attended between 1986 and 1988, she confronted an august educational atmosphere charged with a prim, aggressive pedagogy that was, as one might well expect, not without its tweedy burr of class.

Stubbornly though inarticulately drawn to the work of certain deeply unfashionable painters and away from the "gourmet art" exemplified by the work of teachers like the ultra-academic William Bailey, Yuskavage worked hard at painting well but struggled to find a subject matter suitable for her extra large ambition and personality. She was miserable

during her tenure at Yale; she was certainly nobody's pet. Four years after leaving graduate school and crafting several modalities of what in one conversation she has called "buttermilk biscuit" paintings—read correct, well-behaved and ultimately anodyne pictures—she nearly gave up painting altogether. Only on the advice of her husband, the painter Matvey Levenstein, did she stop to reconsider what would have been, in terms of the history of contemporary painting, nothing less than a tremendous loss.

"My personality was too much for people," she told one interviewer a few years back, "I was too provocative. I was very original, very take it or leave it. I felt I was more original than my work." Her husband's counsel was radically simple: that she exchange places with her work, toning down her personality to allow her paintings to become more abrasive instead. "I thought for a year," she said. "What would it take to make my work the opposite? And I realized I could do it. So I made those *Bad Babies* paintings of angry demons. I let them be dirty and lazy."

Dirty, lazy and maddeningly sexualized, the *Bad Babies* paintings—with their frustrated narratives of prepubescent shame and voluptuousness in a palette of bright, artificial colors—grasped the twin battery wires of an art world obsessed with political correctness and a lingering, decades-old anti-aestheticism. Yuskavage's next act, the *Big Blonde* series, upped the ante on her bad girls, rendering them at once more docile and more extroverted; more painterly, yet less acceptable to artistic convention. These and subsequent works were titled with an arsonist's sense of provocation: *Motherfucker*, *Wee Asspicker*, *All's I Got Are Big Boobs*. People were aghast; others were only too pleased to be compelled to be aghast. The electrical charge her work set off is still being felt in its myriad aftershocks today.

The truth is, simply, that Lisa Yuskavage's earliest works pried open a previously corseted, straight-laced space largely reserved for well-behaved painting and literally rearticulated the medium's possibilities by placing high style (a Pontorno-like use of light, for example) at the service of a particularly low subject matter (think *Penthouse Magazine*). Strategically yet intuitively selecting the *démodé* genre of the female nude, Yuskavage characteristically met painting's and representation's critics head on. For those who insisted on the medium's inherent oppressiveness, she gave them, as one art card famously put it, "stroke material for the patriarchy." For those who preferred their art packed in the dry ice of straight ruler conceptualism, Yuskavage provided finely

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tuned, exquisitely colored, light dappled paintings that cast their popular and personal sources into conflicted, ambiguous, previously unimagined narratives. Dirty, lazy, sexy and guilty, Yuskavage's continuing roster of gorgeously painted girls has managed the one thing all serious painting strives for: to problematize the issue of painting itself. Today her seductive, unsettling works constitute some of the most limpid, convincing painted fictions made in the last half century.

Seen from the vantage point of her newest museum exhibition, Lisa Yuskavage's more recent canvases continue the outrages of her earlier work, while seriously expanding the breath of her painterly possibilities. From works like the roseate, masturbating female cipher of *Heart* (1995) and the sunset-colored *Blonde with Oven Mitt* (1994), Yuskavage has migrated to subtler, moodier, more complex paintings like *K.K. Thinking* (2001) and *Biting the Red Thing* (2005) pictures that inhabit a space where naked psychological narratives hold greater sway than naked provocations. Ever sexual extensions of her earliest incitements, these paintings and others from the last ten years—provide as is typical with this restless, innovative artist—repeated advances on an initial, cardinal breakthrough.

Take the paintings from the *Northview* series, three of which are on view in this exhibition. Works from a suite that Yuskavage exhibited in New York in 2000, they describe a group of fancy femmes padding around the rooms of a Dame Barbara Cartland mansion in various states of undress and rumination. More the cast of *Desperate Housewives* than the jailbait of *The O.C.*, Yuskavage's girls are posed in groups rather than individually and rendered sadder, less doe-eyed and more realistic than their underage predecessors (note a painting like *Big Blonde with Hairdo*, 1994). Expensively draped, bejeweled and wearing what appear to be wedding rings, Yuskavage's women inhabit complex psychologies as well as a more expansive painterly space. Outfitted with foggy windows, flattering mirrors and lazy drapery, these pictures describe fully articulated interiors rather than Yuskavage's previously glowing neutral spaces, while at the same time dredging up a particular kind of modern ennui whose artistic bedrock echoes the best examples of painting from a rich past.

A *sine qua non* of Yuskavage's works has always been an overt, declarative acknowledgement of the tradition of painting. Her own relation to the past is deep, specific and reverent, despite the apparent contradiction inherent in her approach to her triple D-cup subject matter. Profoundly committed to a painterly heritage few contemporaries invoked openly before she burst onto the scene, Yuskavage has

taken pains to actively own the legacy, as well as to make increasingly relevant works in the guise of 21st century objects. But if an immersion in the past is a precondition for fully understanding Lisa Yuskavage's work, her use of art history evinces none of the weightless, appropriationistic, yard-sale character of textbook postmodernism. Deeply satirical instead of being simply ironic, perversely pledged to vulgarity rather than any semblance of good taste, Yuskavage's paintings stand in dead earnest about something rare and basic (and so old it's novel): what the critic Barry Schwabsky once called: "The power inherent in painting's mobilization of vision."

A painting like *Surrender* (1998), for example, easily recalls certain works of Bellini—among others, say, *Young Woman at her Toilet*—in its dark, romantic self-appraisal. Like her fifteenth century precursor, Yuskavage's melon-breasted pin-up in stockings exists as an idealized creature, imagined and created chiefly for the purposes of arriving at a kind of carefully calibrated, painted performance. Other paintings, like the prosaically titled *Still Life* (2003), also easily evoke a slew of influences Yuskavage marshals to push her own artistic conceits along the grand continuum: from the Botticelliesque streamers for curls to the Rubenesque belly and breasts that ripely interject themselves between the lemons and the pears. But we needn't bother thinking that Yuskavage intends to present a straight ideal of female beauty here, since we know perfectly well that she prefers the funhouse mirror approach. Still the age-old prescriptions of Leon Battista Alberti's *Della Pittura* very much apply. In the "grace and beauty" department Yuskavage's paintings—however much they satirize the "male gaze" and liberally cite kitsch from the *Keane Kids* to *Emmanuelle*—achieve "a harmony of all parts in relation to one another" with as much genuine feeling as the works of her storied predecessors.

Of course, Lisa Yuskavage doesn't just make still-life paintings, especially when she says she is. Even if one allows for the idea that no one loves the thing satirized more than the satirist herself, Yuskavage has fashioned a highly influential career from painting a species of female freak whose photographic analogue is most appropriately the work of Diane Arbus. Beautiful and horrifying at once, comically exaggerated yet realistic, Lisa Yuskavage's pert-nosed, big bosomed chicks watch over a well-guarded secret in which we are all extremely complicit. This secret contains multitudes, loaded as it is with mixed messages that include, among other formulations, voyeurism and exhibitionism, feminism and misogyny, the personal and the psychosocial. Ultimately, Yuskavage's

oeuvre adds up to one large, profoundly weird and perversely powerful enigma that succeeds exactly to the degree that it refuses to be pinned down to any one of its many conflicted meanings. "I only load the gun," she has been known to say to those who insist on viewing a painting as an explanation. Or to paraphrase Arbus on her own work: "Lisa Yuskavage's paintings are a secret about a secret. The more they tell you, the less you know."

Yet Lisa Yuskavage is at least as genuinely committed to the characters she paints as she is to the manner in which they are painted. Having long imbued her figures with aspects of human psychology, chiefly her own, Yuskavage continues to mine art history and the gap between self-love and self-loathing that is at once uniquely female and profoundly, disturbingly universal. From a starting point of psychic abjection that not at all fortuitously recalls the guilty, involuted psychic landscapes of Philip Guston, Yuskavage paints highly complicated women figures who, alternately, resemble impossible fantasies, her own psychiatrist or, at times, even herself (see the weirdly hieratic *Angel*, 2004). Simultaneously plump and slender, shameful and erotic, narcissistic and anxiously observed, her female figures let fly with multiple revelations that point fingers

at everyone's unconscious, most prominently their creator's. In a Gustonian phrase, Lisa Yuskavage has identified the enemy, and the enemy is herself.

Of the women in her paintings, Yuskavage has eloquently said: "If they are low, then I am in the ditch with them, and by painting them, I am trying to dig us out together." A revelation that leads towards the particularly juicy connection between this female artist's examination of herself and the history of women as an object of art, the statement also pinpoints the deep vulnerability inherent in such pictures. Generous and vulgar, graceful and embarrassingly empathetic, Lisa Yuskavage's paintings sport potty mouths that, like the artist herself, are capable of clearing a room of our most politic, best-intentioned, right-thinking impulses. In the words of the inimitable Marty Feldman: "Comedy, like sodomy, is an unnatural act." But, one should add, also a necessary one, that in the case of this painter squares uncomfortable truths with some of the most important, courageous and frankly beautiful paintings of the last half-decade. Shocking, scandalous and liberating, Lisa Yuskavage's marvelously refined paintings of failed, foul and even unredeemable women raise a middle finger at good taste while rewriting the latest, most contemporary chapter of an age-old tradition.