

Lisa Yuskavage, FAWC 1986-87, is a painter whose show last winter at Elizabeth Koury in New York was reviewed in *Artforum* and *Art in America*. She showed recently in Milan, and lives in New York.

AWL: Did you come right out of grad school and were you familiar with Provincetown?

Lisa Yuskavage: Yes, from Yale, and no, not at all.

AWL: What struck you first about Provincetown?

LY: I sent my work for the judging, I didn't bring my work up for the interview, so the day I got there was the day I got there. I remember getting excited driving along Route 6, but the thing that was really devastating in a visual way—even though it never entered my paintings and it never again had the drama of the first time seeing it—was that point at Route 6 where you hit Provincetown and the sand dunes. I'd never seen anything like that—where somebody tried to put a road through something that kept on encroaching. It seemed really insane and great. It was like driving on the moon or something. Also, I really loved the foghorn. Sometimes still when I try to go to sleep at night, I think of the foghorn. When I was in Provincetown, I was an incredible insomniac. Because I was never busy, I was always trying to find ways to make myself exhausted, so I would pace myself breathing to the foghorn. It is incredibly comforting, that far-off sound, almost as if somebody's breathing.

AWL: Did the landscape or environment enter your work or your sensibility at all?

LY: It didn't enter my work. Of course, it affected me. I grew up in Philadelphia and I have lived in mostly urban environments. I actually love urban environments. One of the reasons I left Provincetown is that I couldn't thrive there. I didn't like the fact that everybody was so nice. There are a lot of nice people in New York—the drug dealers always hold the door for me—but I felt like I didn't have privacy in Provincetown because people knew you and would see you with people. The bad thing about Provincetown

is that there were people there. It would have been great if it was just me and somebody else, or just me. That's when I loved it most. If I want people I go to New York, and that way I can take them or leave them. In Provincetown, you don't quite have either. That's sort of a grumpy answer. As for the landscape, I guess the color in my paintings was already in a kind of earth palette when I got there and it continued. In a way, the paintings I did there never really looked good anywhere else. I had the Barn loft with the skylight, and I was mixing very subtle grays and they just looked like doo-doo in New York. I don't like the work I did in Provincetown at all, and I'm glad for that. I don't think people do enough of that. I took my time there quite seriously as a time to make work that would embarrass me anywhere else. I was making paintings about the life of Christ, really goofy Christian paintings that were not just goofy. I don't know what to say about them other than I was exploring how to embarrass myself.

PROVINCETOWN A R T S

AWL: So there's no connection whatsoever with the work now?

LY: Only that I learned how to get embarrassed and stand up to it. Potentially what I'm doing now is embarrassing work, except I don't feel embarrassed by it and I'm not afraid of what people will think. Before I came to Provincetown, I was at Yale, where the professors were so critical, so mean-spirited. When I got to the Work Center, I decided to do an exorcism on myself. I really am not a good girl. I played the good girl at graduate school and suffered a lot because of it. When I got to Provincetown, I decided I would do a thorough sweeping of the ghosts of every teacher I ever had. It took me several more years, but it was a good beginning. I think that's the classic reason why people go to Provincetown and the classic reason why Provincetown is a special place.

AWL: So the embarrassing subject matter you did in Provincetown was a sort of "take that!" to your Yale professors?

LY: Definitely, but I was talking to nobody when I was making paintings in Provincetown. That was part of the problem with them. After Yale, I decided I would put things in the work that I hadn't been able to get away with because the instructors would ask why? why? why? It's a very formal school—it's great for that reason. But you can imagine, combining Yale and Jesus! I did grow up with a lot of Christian iconography, and the paintings were not tongue-in-cheek, nor were they able to go into a church or religious setting either, because they were far too strange. I was being inspired by a book I was reading in Provincetown, *The Master and Margarita*, by Bulgakov, with all these images of Pontius Pilate and Christ. Right now my paintings are about shame, starting with the most basic kind of shame, the shame of one's body. I remember my opening in Provincetown—it was like "uhmmmmmm..." People didn't know how to take it. Religion makes people very nervous. I don't live as a churchgoer—I am a typical artist—but I find it interesting that certain subject matters are taboo, and I bet someday I go back to it.

AWL: That subject matter would be an avant-garde thing in New York right now, as opposed to sex, which is pretty ho-hum.

LY: Absolutely, but part of climbing the ladder in this whole business, the most ideal part of getting somewhere, would not necessarily be the money. It would be nice if life got a little easier, but the best part of it would be getting to the point where it doesn't matter what you say and people are willing to look at what you're doing and your overall history becomes part of your context. You command a certain amount of respect based on that context. So, we'll see about that Provincetown work!

AWL: Were there people at the Work Center who influenced you?

LY: One of my favorites was a writer fellow named Carole Maso. She was at such a different place from most of us. She was very hard working, but she always stopped at a certain time. I remember her telling me, "I never work on Sundays, that's when I do my laundry." I remember thinking, what a good idea! So that's how you get your laundry done!

AWL: Did anyone inform your work?

LY: In a way, Jim Peters. I don't want this to sound bad. I know if I were to talk to him directly, he would understand. But the way he depicts females really showed me something about the way men depict females and what men can take for granted. I like Jim's paintings. But I think of him, along with some other people I've known, as a point of reference for the desire, the gaze, that just comes so naturally in paintings that men do of women. I make work that is in some ways influenced by that gaze. I could say I've done it in anger, but I'm not going to say, "How dare they!" I think I came of age in a lot of ways in Provincetown. There was somebody I was close to—Michael McGuire. I was writing to Michael for a long time, though I don't really remember why we stopped communicating. I was intrigued by the writers. I had never been around them. I enjoyed their writer-speak, their snobiness with each other.

their vying with each other—who was supportive of who, who was suspicious of who, who was too profession-minded, and who was the *real* writer. I enjoyed watching it all. I couldn't possibly see it in the artists, because I was too much a part of that same pantomime of artists. There were a lot of unusual people, really wonderful people. I learned to suspend judgement of people. You see the big fisherman and you think, "Oh, there's a queer-basher," and it turns out he is queer or he's got friends who are. I like watching people from a distance—observing, rather than participating. So when I said I hated the people there, it was not really true. I just didn't want them to notice me. I never went back for a second year. I'm not snubbing them, I'm just waiting for my divorce or something. I'll take my second year when I'm having a crisis, maybe when I'm 50 or 60.

AWL: Any more memories?

LY: I remember we had an incredible snowstorm, and lost power. We went into the group meeting room, somebody lit a fire. It was one of the nicest nights. Everybody stayed up talking, and I think a lot of people ended up sleeping together that never would have slept together. I slept alone that night.

AWL: There you go being a good girl again.

LY: I didn't sleep with anybody when I was in Provincetown. That was one of the most unusual things. I know everybody there slept with somebody, but not me. I just drove to New Haven very

quickly every so often. But that night, we were sitting around and somebody said, "I wish we could have a drink," and somebody said, "I know where the trustees keep the liquor!" I had the worst hangover of my life. It was terrible. It was a lot of fun actually, a very good memory.



LISA YUSKAVAGE, 1992
TIT HEAVEN #19
15" x 11"
WATERCOLOR ON PAPER