



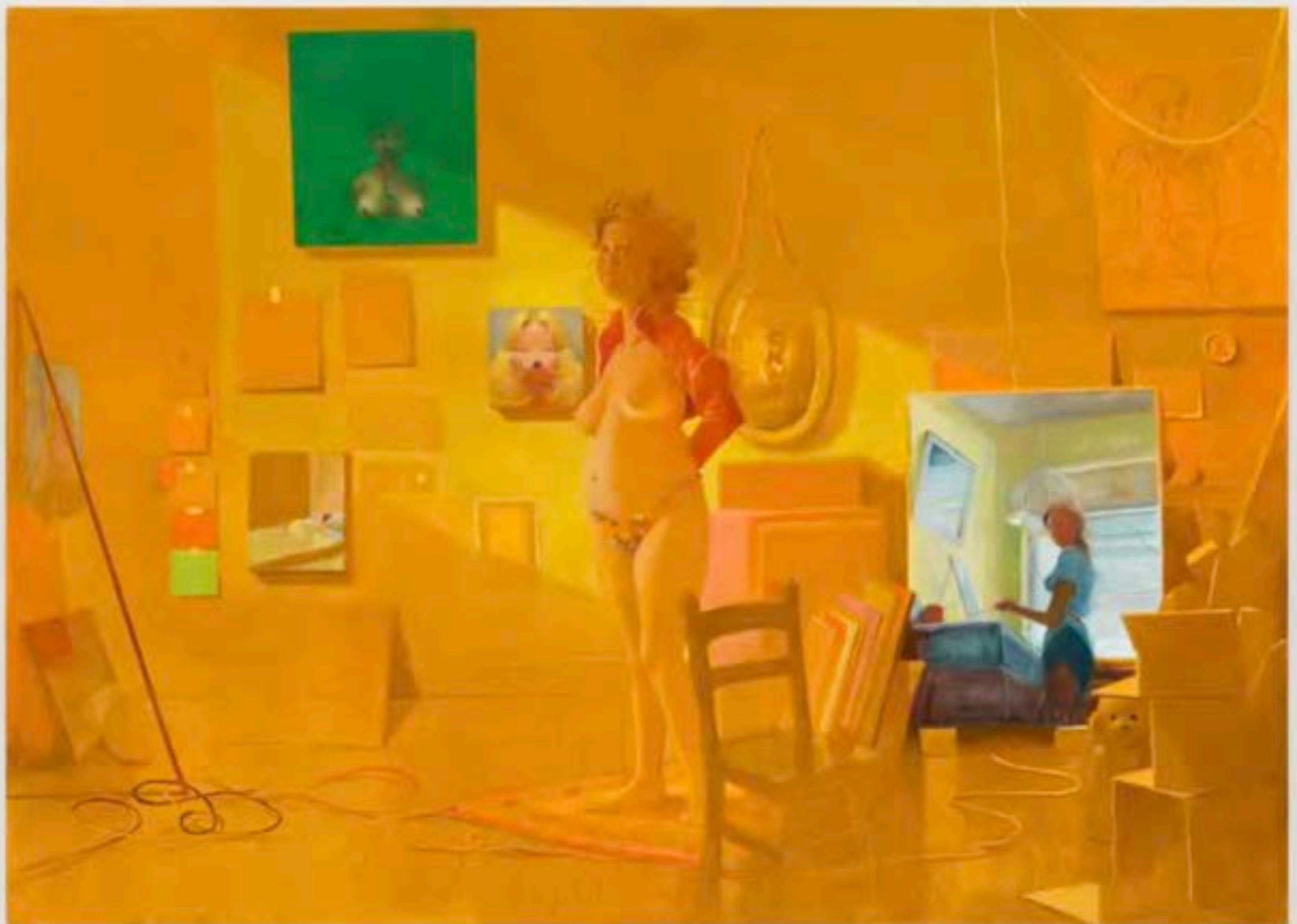
PROFILES

LISA YUSKAVAGE'S BODIES OF WORK

For decades, the painter has provoked viewers with raunchy, virtuosic, mysterious images.

By Ariel Levy

July 31, 2023



Like much of Yuskavage's recent work, "Golden Studio" is a surreal vision of the making of art—a place to meet up with past selves, with the dead, and with the techniques of other artists. Art work © Lisa Yuskavage / Lisa Yuskavage, "Golden Studio," (2023) / Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

Thirty years ago, when Lisa Yuskavage and Matvey Levenstein were young painters trying to establish themselves in the East Village, they got a message on their answering machine. An acquaintance who had invited the couple to a party wanted to let them know that people felt Yuskavage was “too much,” and that, on second thought, they’d rather she didn’t come.

Yuskavage was already depressed. She’d recently had her first gallery show—abstracted depictions of women folded over like swollen seashells, painted in what she later called “dark, slimy” colors. “I walked into that opening and I absolutely hated the show,” she recalled recently. “I wanted to take it all down and get out of there.” She confessed her dismay to the painter John Currin, a former classmate at the Yale School of Art, and he empathized. “They’re beautiful and everything, but it’s not you,” he said. The paintings were quiet, understated, unobjectionable. Yuskavage is not. People called her the Lenny Bruce of Yale because of her bawdy sense of humor. Now sixty-one, she described one art dealer to me as the kind of person who would “suck your pussy so hard it’d make your nose bleed.”

Those early paintings sold well, but Yuskavage suffered a crisis of faith that stalled her work for a year. “I’d started painting for some mysterious fancy person who didn’t even exist,” she said. “Like I was painting with my pinkie in the air.” After the message barring Yuskavage from the party, Levenstein had an idea: she should switch personalities with her art. “So you would make paintings that would get disinvited from the party,” he said, “but your personality would be demure, like those paintings from the show.”

Yuskavage returned to her studio with this idea swimming in her head. At the time, people were talking about “Blue Velvet,” David Lynch’s film noir about a drug dealer who coerces a lounge singer into sexual servitude. “I was so horrified by that character—you know, ‘Show me your pussy,’ ” Yuskavage said. “I thought, Why don’t I pretend *he’s* painting this?” The result was an unnerving picture called “The Gifts.” Against a seaweed-green background, a nude female figure whose arms are either missing or tied behind her back hovers above a little flotilla of decorative waves. It’s as if a woman is being forced at gunpoint to serve as the figurehead of a ship. “Then I shoved these goofy, trashy flowers in her mouth,” Yuskavage said. “And I could not stop laughing.”



The figure looked terrified, traumatized. She reminded Yuskavage of a seal in a PETA commercial who senses that he’s about to be clubbed. “A guy would never put that in the eyes of this figure, tell you she’s afraid,” she said. “But, because I am a female, I can’t not know that.” It was different from the work in her show in every way. The sludgy tones were replaced by vivid, saturated color; the female figure was aggressively exposed instead of allowed to hide. Yuskavage was elated: “I felt so great painting it—I was, like, ‘This has got to be right.’” Either that, she thought, or she was losing her marbles. “Listen, maybe I’m a bad person, but this is where the lights were on. The stream of content was endless.”

Her figures started emerging from a haze of *sfumato*, a technique that was popular during the High Renaissance, but executed in shades of Barbie pink and screeching orange—“candy colors,” Yuskavage said, “very American colors.” As her painting became more sumptuous and seductive, her subject matter grew increasingly unsettling. In “Big Blonde Jerking Off,” a blow-up doll with golden hair and a round hole for a mouth appears to be on the verge of exploding, both in orgasm and in substance. The creature—or object?—is an ambiguously animate bubble-being, propped up on thigh-like spheres, cupping her own hairless pudenda. “My work has a very unpleasant edge, and I’m aware of that,” Yuskavage told an interviewer who visited her first studio, a shared space on East Second Street. “From looking at advertising and being in the world and listening to men comment about women, listening to my dad comment about women,” she continued, “I know a lot about how to degrade a woman.”

These paintings hardly brought Yuskavage immediate approval. “People would come into my studio and say, ‘You cannot do this,’ ” she told me. “I got turned down for every grant. I couldn’t keep a gallery. It was just a world of ‘no.’ ” She lost her only devoted collector and appalled many of her feminist peers. “Yuskavage boasts no strategy of appropriation that might distance her work’s icky pandering,” the critic Lane Relyea wrote in *Artforum*, about a show in 1994. “The paintings’ real creepiness emerges at the moment of mutual recognition—they wink as if we too belong to the audience of drooling average Americans for which they’re obviously intended.” Yuskavage, he asserted, was “caricaturing women in ideological shorthand and raping them.”

In the three decades since, the art world has come around. “Bonfire,” Yuskavage’s apocalyptic scene of rampaging female peasants beating out fires under emerald-green skies, hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. MOMA has a painting from her last show, and two dozen older works. Her largest paintings sell for more than two million dollars.

Yuskavage's work has ranged widely, from small watercolor still-lives of flowers, fruit, and nipples to huge, eerie landscapes, which feel like a dream where you're not sure if you want to stay forever in the land of erotically tinged weirdness or wake up before something unspeakable happens. What has remained constant in her career is an extraordinary way with color, a penchant for scenarios that defy interpretation, and a fascination with rendering a particular kind of naked lady. "Why?" the curator Helen Molesworth asked Yuskavage in a recent interview. "Why have you made this outrageous, hypersexualized . . . white nude female figure the sort of centerpiece of your visual language?"

"Because," Yuskavage shot back, "that's the history of art."

One summer afternoon in Paris, Yuskavage and Levenstein stood before Manet's "Blonde with Bare Breasts," at the Musée d'Orsay. "They're so . . . *presentational*," Yuskavage said, moving close enough to see the brushstrokes. "Kind of the greatest breasts in Western art, in terms of naturalness." Asked why artists are so captivated by breasts, Yuskavage replied, "*Everyone* is obsessed with them. Go ask a baby." For artists, she said, the challenge is finding a way to paint everything besides breasts with as much passion. "Because the tit comes with—"

“—inbuilt interest,” Levenstein finished for her. Levenstein, Yuskavage’s husband of thirty-one years, met her in art school at Yale. He had recently emigrated from the Soviet Union with his mother, a classical pianist, and his father, an engineer who had survived the Gulag: “I was wandering the hallways, totally lost, and she came out of a classroom to wash her brushes.” Yuskavage, who’d just gained the freshman fifteen, asked him, “Did you know Yale makes your breasts grow?” Levenstein gave her a bewildered look: “I said, ‘No.’ But I was willing to consider the possibility.”

Yuskavage likes painting roundness and volume in general. Many of her works are ornamented with brightly colored balls and beads—it’s as if they roll around her studio from one canvas to the next. They are a reference to one of Yuskavage’s favorite paintings, Bosch’s “Garden of Earthly Delights,” which is dotted with mysterious berries being variously consumed, inhabited, and excreted. They are also a rebellion against the dictum that serious artists should never indulge in the decorative. “We went to art school at the tail end of modernism, and modernism is all about flatness,” Yuskavage said. “People didn’t render objects and, like, put *highlights* on them. You’d be considered a reactionary fool. So I always liked the idea of the wrongness of rendering. And then add to that you’re rendering a *tit*—that’s like double wrong.”

They moved on to look at “Olympia,” Manet’s portrait of a nude reclining in bed, staring directly at the viewer, as a servant presents her with flowers from an admirer. “She was a known prostitute,” Yuskavage said, “and it was considered very salacious to put her as the Venus. Manet is basically saying, ‘One of you sent her these flowers. This is not any old Venus: this is *your* Venus.’ ”

Giving the culture the nude that reflects its preoccupations—the Venus that it deserves—has been central to Yuskavage’s project. “I’m not capable of overlooking reality,” she told me. Her first show of work that felt true to her vision featured the “Bad Babies”: four young female figures looking angry, awkward, and uncomfortable, exposed from the waist down, suspended in Yuskavage’s luscious *sfumato*. “That feeling of the figure being *caught* in the paint was really interesting,” the artist Sarah Sze, a friend of Yuskavage’s, told me. “There was a kind of empathy you had for it.” To be young and female is to be looked at—to be trapped in being looked at—and Yuskavage made the looking as confounding for the viewer as it seemed to be for the subject. The celebrated figurative painter Kerry James Marshall said, “Lisa’s paintings call out in a fairly irresistible way, which is maybe one of the reasons that people have so much trouble with some of them. I mean, you’ve kind of got to say, ‘Is there something wrong with me? Or is there something wrong with that picture?’ ”

Unlike John Currin, who has also become famous for applying Old Master techniques to the vulgarity of the present, Yuskavage has never had a major museum retrospective. (“I was using soft-core porn first—just look at the dates,” Yuskavage said. “But it’s a bad idea, so, like, let’s not brag.”) Yuskavage was galvanized by a Willem de Kooning retrospective, held at MOMA in 2011. “Each room showed a very distinct body of work, and I was, like, ‘I could do that—I’m *going* to do that,’ ” she said. “And people are going to be, like, ‘I didn’t know she was that fucking good at it for so many years!’ ” She laughed. “I’m Little Miss Underestimated. They think I just do the tits.”

Most recently, Yuskavage has been painting surreal images of spaces where art is made. In “Golden Studio”—a massive work in the glowing colors of marigolds and honey—a woman with a rounded belly stands in peaceful contemplation, surrounded by empty boxes, extension cords, and, on the walls, what Yuskavage calls her “ground-zero paintings”—previous works that marked a leap forward in her evolution. The studio paintings feature prominently in her new show at the David Zwirner gallery in Paris, her first solo exhibition in France.

Yuskavage likes to invent rules to push against in her work, and for the new paintings she decided that she had to appear in each one in a cryptic form—as herself from behind, as her previous work, or as some kind of avatar. Self-portraiture has historically been considered a lower subject, which is to say a female painter’s subject; for much of the nineteenth century, women artists in the West generally weren’t permitted to work from nude models, so they turned to the mirror. But an artist who represents herself by painting her previous work in a fantasy studio is painting what she does, not how she looks.

When Helen Molesworth visited Yuskavage’s studio recently, she was impressed by the moxie of the new paintings. “I was, like, ‘Oh, snap! You’re really going to take this on,’ ” Molesworth said. Yuskavage was choosing a subject associated with Velázquez, Matisse, Vermeer, Braque, and van Gogh. “It’s the A-team all-stars all the way,” Molesworth continued. “If you were going to make a list of the great paintings, a lot of them would be studio paintings. And the reality is there are not a lot of pictures like that by women.” She added, “In my opinion, the scale and the ambition of that work exceeds something like having a show at a gallery in Paris: the ambition of that work is aimed squarely at The Museum—capital ‘T,’ capital ‘M’—as an institution.”

At the Musée d'Orsay, Levenstein and Yuskavage went downstairs to visit Courbet's "The Artist's Studio," perhaps the most famous example of the genre. "He's painting a landscape, with a nude model watching him—it's so dreamlike," Yuskavage said. "It's got all the figures from his previous paintings. Time is folding in and out." She had decided to call her own show "Rendez-vous," because her paintings were a place to meet up—with the dead, with the techniques and tropes of other artists, with past selves. Yuskavage moved toward the center of the canvas, where Courbet had painted himself at an easel. "People are coming and going, it's like a party, and he's just working on this landscape dutifully," she said. "Doing his thing and not noticing that anything else is going on."

At the turn of the millennium, the Whitney Biennial featured three Yuskavage paintings: two luminous, lascivious nudes and a portrait of a woman who looks intelligent but uneasy, "her eyes rolled heavenward in the buggy, exaggerated style of an El Greco saint," as the *Times* put it. The picture, "True Blonde IV (At Home)," appeared in ads on the sides of New York City buses. The subject was Yuskavage's oldest friend, Kathy, with whom she has been close since their girlhood in Juniata Park, a gritty section of North Philadelphia. Kathy was the model for many of her early paintings—her first Olympia.

A few weeks before her show in France, Yuskavage was walking down Claridge Street, on the block where she grew up, and called Kathy to say she was in town.

"Oh, you're slumming it!" Kathy, who still lives in the area, said.

"Kathy was always the pretty one, and I was the dork," Yuskavage explained.

“You weren’t a dork,” Kathy told her. “You were smart.”

“You were smart, too, but you had your good looks to rely upon.”

“Yeah, they really did me right.” Kathy, who works as a train operator, gave a little snort. “I did so wonderful.”

When they were teen-agers, Yuskavage used Kathy as “bait” when she wanted to meet guys. Together with their friends, they made the “Tit Papers”: drawings and musings about their burgeoning bosoms. “We were always very sexual, even when we were little,” Kathy told me. “Not experimenting or anything, but talking about it and reading about it. Her parents had ‘The Joy of Sex.’ ” Yuskavage later made a series of paintings of images from *Penthouse* which she had examined with other kids in the neighborhood. She’d found them both arousing and confusing. “If this is a girl,” she remembers thinking, “then what am I?”



Painting "The Gifts," Yuskavage was disturbed but couldn't stop laughing. "Maybe I'm a bad person, but this is where the lights were on," she said. Art work © Lisa Yuskavage / Lisa Yuskavage, "The Ones That Shouldn't: The Gifts," (1991) / Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

In Juniata Park, girlie magazines seemed to lurk in the crevices. “These were pictures I used to see buried behind toilet tanks and hidden under car chassis, places where they thought we couldn’t find them, all around our neighborhood,” Yuskavage told me. “It wasn’t just my dad—everybody had them.” The cartoonist R. Crumb, another artist drawn to lewd humor and enormous breasts, was raised nearby. “There’s a certain playfulness with vulgarity where I come from,” Yuskavage continued. “And then there are these creepy edges that are not safe for kids.”

A teen-age girl from the area was raped and mutilated in the summer of 1972. Her torso was found days later in one place, her legs in another; Yuskavage and her friends asked a Ouija board what had happened to her head. The woman who lived behind Yuskavage’s family was raped in her home, as her baby slept upstairs. In leafy Fairmont Park, where Yuskavage used to go to sketch, a man with a knife pulled out his penis in front of her when she was eight. That same year, Kathy told Yuskavage that a relative had threatened her with a gun and forced her to perform fellatio, and that he had been assaulting her since she was five.

“There was violence in the neighborhood,” Yuskavage said. “Our house was like a submarine of order in, not quite a slum, but . . .” She looked around, unable to find the right word for the surroundings: block after block of low-slung brick row houses with patches of lawn punctuated by white plastic chairs, fake flowers, and statues of the Virgin Mary. It was a warm day, but Yuskavage was wearing her favorite Rick Owens black leather motorcycle jacket. “My mother sewed all our clothes when we were kids, and I was always very well turned out,” she continued. “Apparently we were lower middle class, working class, but, because everyone was the same, I didn’t feel like I didn’t have anything.”

Many of her friends' parents worked at factories nearby—a chemical plant, a button manufacturer. Her father, who died in 2021, drove a truck delivering Mrs. Smith's pies to diners; Yuskavage once saw a document that listed his salary as twelve thousand dollars. "He resented it when I used the term 'white trash,'" she said. "He felt that he had provided a very good home for us—which he had. But he wasn't an urchin like I was. I had much more of a street life."

While Yuskavage's father was working and her mother was taking care of the house, she and Kathy would ride bikes and smoke cigarettes by the railroad tracks, or loiter outside delis asking adults to buy them beer. "A lot of the kids we grew up with are dead," Yuskavage said, on the phone with Kathy. Mostly, though, they remembered having fun. "We drank Malt Duck sitting in Kentucky Fried Chicken and caused a huge scene," Kathy said. "Because we were classy!"

Yuskavage's family countered what she called the "downward pressure" of the neighborhood. "You could very easily become a human waste product," she told me. "But my parents' expectations, it was almost like they were Jewish: 'You're not allowed to be a failure.'" Like her sister, Marybeth, who is now a doctor in California, Yuskavage was always clear that she would get out. Kathy told me, "Her parents nurtured her artistic interest. They sent her to special classes, and they sent her to a better school than we were supposed to go to."



“Bonfire,” Yuskavage’s apocalyptic painting of female peasants beating out flames, hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Art work © Lisa Yuskavage / Lisa Yuskavage, “Bonfire,” (2013-15) / Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

Yuskavage excelled as a student—in Catholic school, at the Philadelphia High School for Girls, and then as an undergraduate at the Tyler School of Art and Architecture. There, for the first time, she found herself surrounded by people who came from more money. “I felt sorry for myself, because all the rich kids got to live in the dorms,” she told me on Claridge Street. “And I had to live here, you know, five miles away.”

Tyler offered a junior year abroad in Rome, and Yuskavage worked as a lifeguard for years to save up for it. Still, she could afford only the first semester; her boyfriend at the time and most of her classmates stayed on. “On my last night, everybody got up from dinner because I lashed out: ‘I can’t believe you get to stay in Italy, and I have to leave!’ ” she recalled. (She added, “I’m not an alcoholic, but I do need to apologize to people.”)

She was a sullen presence upon her return. “I was, like, ‘Where’s my cappuccino? Where’s my Fabrizio?’ ” Yuskavage said. Then, one night, she had a dream that she was on a class trip and saw, carved into tiles, the Latin phrase *vincit quae se vincit*—she conquers who conquers herself. “I woke up in a sweat,” she said. “And that has been my motto ever since.” She became “violently focussed” on painting. Suddenly, all the masterpieces she’d seen in Europe seemed like sources of information. From Bellini’s “Sacred Conversation,” Yuskavage understood that figures from different eras—or dimensions—could be made to meet on the canvas. In the work of Vuillard and Courbet, she saw the pleasures of painting intimacy, of turning color into feeling.

Yuskavage made her first ground-zero painting: a portrait of herself as a shapely, faceless young woman in blue shorts, painting in front of a shaded but bright window. From the alley behind her old house, she pointed out her bedroom window, still overhung by the tacky plastic awning that appears in the painting. “I had been a genuinely ordinary art student,” she said. “And then it was like something happened, and I was no longer alone. I was no longer disorganized. It was like I was *connected*.”

The work that came next—“big, sexy paintings” of swimming pools—got her into Yale, but the Ivy League environment proved alienating. “I felt like people could really smell the class on me,” she said. “I felt pretty white trash then. What my dad never could know was what it was like for me to come into contact—this hot-cold contact—with the fancy art world.”

It was not until years later, after Yuskavage had encountered the work of artists who traffic in the abject—Mike Kelley, Hans Bellmer, Paul McCarthy—that she found a way to combine her rarefied education with the perspective she had acquired in her old neighborhood, on violence, humor, misogyny, sexuality, and faith. “When she embraced, as she might put it, vulgarity, it had the effect of ordering her technique and ordering her visual vocabulary,” Currin, who lived with Yuskavage and Levenstein in Hoboken after Yale, said. It wasn’t just Juniata Park that Yuskavage was incorporating into her work; it was anything that had ever been a source of shame. “Lisa and I share a moment of embracing things that had become embarrassing about figurative painting and just using them aggressively,” Currin continued. “Letting the silly illustrational things have a voice, and the glee of illusions.” It was as much the painters as their paintings that were mortifying. “The figurative painters in art school had a weird kind of moral superiority,” Currin said. “They’d play classical music in their studio and get up early, and they kind of had the same attitude as bicycle people in New York—like they’re doing something *good* for the world.” Yuskavage expressed a different intention: to “make fun of it all, and then make up with it like a scorned lover.”

One afternoon, David Zwirner was at his gallery in Chelsea, looking at a Yuskavage painting called “Northview (Impressionist Jacket),” which hung on his office wall. “This is a problematic one,” he said. “It’s so beautiful.” Against raspberry-colored drapery with orange tassels, a slender woman in flowered underpants gazes out the window, bathed in glowing pink light. Everything—the figure’s hair, her skin, the curtain, the velvety golden furniture behind her, and, of course, her breasts—looks soft, sensuous. “This is a very attractive young woman, right? I mean, you could really . . . get there,” Zwirner continued. “The male gaze is a big issue, you know what I mean?”

Nothing irritates Yuskavage as much as the suggestion that she is producing what her husband calls “stroke material for the patriarchy,” because that’s what buyers want. “What about all the years and years and years when that wasn’t true?” she fumed. “The paintings were inexpensive—and nobody wanted them!” Her nightmare is that a dealer will imagine her target demographic as “rich businessmen who like big tits.” As Zwirner looked at “Northview,” which he’d bought at auction on the secondary market, he conceded, “I think this painting’s first buyer was *that* guy.”



Yuskavage told an interviewer who came to her first studio, "My work has a very unpleasant edge, and I'm aware of that." Photograph by Rudi Molacek / Courtesy the artist

Zwirner started his business in 1993, the same year that Yuskavage showed the *Bad Babies* at the Elizabeth Koury gallery, in SoHo. “In the early nineties, there was very little painting,” Zwirner said. “It was the time of Matthew Barney and Robert Gober—a lot of sculpture, a lot of film and video. There was this recurrent rhetoric that painting is dead.” Koury’s gallery went out of business months after the *Bad Babies* show, and, though Yuskavage had exhibitions elsewhere, she didn’t establish an ongoing relationship with a gallerist until 1996, when she met Marianne Boesky. “I knew I shouldn’t like her work, but I did,” Boesky told me. “My generation of women, our feminist training was not to encourage or support any kind of objectification—even though she was turning the male gaze inside out.” The gains of the women’s movement seemed fragile, and a kind of cautiousness pervaded; the First Lady, Hillary Clinton, was still dressing like an astronaut’s wife. “We had achieved acceptability as women, as long as we didn’t go too far, and Lisa went too far—in everything,” Boesky said.

For her first show at Boesky’s gallery, “*Bad Habits*,” Yuskavage made maquettes out of Sculpey personifying her unwanted traits—“foodeating,” “socialclimbing,” “asspicking”—and then painted portraits of them, exploring the way light fell on the sculptures, a technique borrowed from Tintoretto. The formal question excited her: If you paint a portrait of a statue which looks like a painting of a woman, is it a still-life or a portrait? It was also a way of tweaking critics who said that her paintings exploited women. (“What women?” Yuskavage said. “There are no women. These are painted things.”)

Yuskavage took the show's title from Philip Guston, one of her heroes, who depicted his bad habits as eating, smoking, and painting. In the nineteen-sixties, Guston made a series of disquieting paintings of Klansmen, cartoonish hooded figures going about life in the city. In "The Studio," he had an artist-Klansman painting a self-portrait while puffing on a cigarette. "He had to put on a Klan hood to talk about the ugliness that was going on—not only out there but in his own heart," Yuskavage said. "I want to be that kind of artist. But how do you do that as a woman? You have to point the finger at yourself. And then you have to allow people to call you a misogynist."

As Yuskavage's career gathered momentum, her friends started having children—first Kathy, then her frequent model Yvonne Force Villareal, then Currin. Yuskavage began to paint her figures rounder than ever, with beach-ball bellies and bursting breasts. A critic in *Artforum* gushed that the images looked as if "Pierre Bonnard were interested in what it might feel like to be pregnant." Yuskavage and Levenstein decided not to have children themselves. "I was going to fuck either kids up or my work up, and I decided not to fuck up my kids," she said. She welled up when she told me that the decision was "not without a certain amount of sadness." But, Boesky said, the focus helped: "She was able to really push forward in her career at a pace that was on track with her male colleagues."

Yuskavage ended her relationship with Boesky after nine years, and she soon joined Zwirner, a move that generated gossip. “People think David stole me, like a horse or a dog,” Yuskavage complained. “I have agency. He didn’t just lead me by my muzzle out of the front yard.” In fact, Zwirner did not immediately agree to represent Yuskavage. “I did something strange I’ve never done before or after,” he said. When he was visiting her studio, he asked if he could borrow a painting and live with it in his office for a while. “I picked the painting I liked the least,” he recalled. “And when the week was over I was completely in love with it.”

In the eighteen years that Yuskavage has been with Zwirner, her prices have quintupled. “The pendulum has swung the other way. Now there’s endless amounts of painting—most of it figurative, a lot of it not very distinguished,” Zwirner said. “As the art market has broadened dramatically globally, for new clients in Asia, India, the entry point is figurative painting.” But not all figurative painting. Collectors in the conservative quarters of the Middle East are not going to hang the average Yuskavage in the living room.



The women in Yuskavage's recent work tend to look curious and engaged, rather than distressed.

Art work © Lisa Yuskavage / Lisa Yuskavage, "The Artist's Studio," (2022) / Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

In Zwirner's view, the reason Yuskavage hasn't had a major museum retrospective is that her paintings still make people uneasy, both ideologically and intellectually. "Very sophisticated European collectors have often had problems with her work," he said. "It's the vulgarity. They can't get past it." Both the difficulty and the strength of her paintings is their mysteriousness: they provide no obvious narrative. "It short-circuits meaning. Like, what does that *mean*?" Zwirner said, gesturing at "Northview." At a moment when virtue signalling pervades conspicuous consumption, plenty of collectors want art that validates their politics and affirms their world view. "If I take you downstairs to Luc Tuymans's show, we can talk about each painting: 'It's about the Ukraine war,' and 'It's about America, about politics,' " Zwirner said. "And I get you to that elevated place where meaning resides, where we feel safe. When you have something that kind of shuts that down, it's very uncomfortable."

A few days before Yuskavage's show in Paris, she stood in the gallery with Levenstein and Hanna Schouwink, a senior partner at Zwirner. The space was luminous under a spectacular skylight, but "Golden Studio" wasn't working on the side wall, where several young men wearing white gloves were holding it up. "It's getting lost peripherally—there's not enough contrast at a side angle," Yuskavage said. "Please, move-ez vous!"

Levenstein suggested making space for "Golden Studio" on the opposite wall by moving a ruby-red painting called "Artist on Model Stand" to the gallery's front room.

Yuskavage looked distraught: "Why do you want to take it out of the show?"

“We could just look at it,” Schouwink said.

Levenstein interpreted for her: “It’s a hard no. As a feminist I know, No means no.”

Another arrangement was suggested, and silently the glove-wearers swapped “Golden Studio” with its neighbor, a smaller picture, mostly green, in which a blond female nude sits on another woman’s back while casually inserting some flowers in her anus—another Bosch reference. Schouwink was excited. “Chromatically, this is really interesting—there’s a kind of rhythm to it,” she said. “Almost like color-field paintings.”

Color-field paintings—originated by Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and others—were intended to do away with representation, instead declaring forthrightly that they were paintings, made of paint. This is something people in the art world like to tell civilians when talking about Yuskavage’s work: subject matter is only a small component of a picture, nothing to become overly fixated on. “People are very content-driven,” Sarah Sze said. “But it’s like saying, ‘Emily Dickinson’s main subject is death.’ Who cares?” In the history of Western art, certain subjects—the nude, the studio, “Jesus and his friends,” to borrow Yuskavage’s phrase—are so prevalent that they have become almost incidental, vessels for the artist’s decisions. “When you look at a lot of paintings, if you’re not a painter, you’re not thinking about color,” Sze continued. “But it’s *all* color: that’s all you’re looking at.”

To further complicate matters, people in the art world will also tell you that color by itself is meaningless. The way the brain interprets a color is entirely dependent on the colors it is juxtaposed with, a phenomenon famously explored by the German artist and theorist Josef Albers, who once led Yale's department of design. "His ideas are in the groundwater at Yale," Molesworth told me. "Lisa won't like me saying this, but she has the most extraordinary Albersian color play." Her palette, Molesworth pointed out, is drawn from fantasy: "It's not *cued* to anything."

Since childhood, Yuskavage said, she has had an innate sense of the way color operates, "almost like a kid who can look at a keyboard and know instinctively how to play it." Through the decades, she has found ways to challenge herself with ever more complex chromatic games. For her 1995 triptych "Blonde Brunette and Redhead," Yuskavage made three paintings using classical shapes—sphere, cylinder, and pyramid—in a color methodology called *unione*, favored by Raphael, in which the extremes of the spectrum are excluded so that a painting feels settled, harmonious. She used red, yellow, and blue ("three colors that have seemingly nothing in common") but softened their clashes by executing them in pastels; the shades were based on a color chart from Laura Ashley, because that's where she imagined her shrink bought her nightgowns.

“Her color is kind of hypnotic,” Kerry James Marshall said. “You’re compelled to try to penetrate the color to see all the other things that seem to be kind of hidden in there.” In “Big Flesh Studio”—named for its predominant color, flesh ochre—paintings are being made amid stools, easels, flowers, nude models, and, as ever, balls, in a blaze of oranges, pinks, and reds. It is gorgeous but confounding: Where is the light coming from? Which figure is on which plane? “The way the light and the color will just wander all over the place in Lisa’s work, you think about Burt Bacharach,” Currin said. “It’s like ‘Pussycat, pussycat . . .’ Oh, my God, we’re in a different key, and we’re one bar into the song!” ”

For some Yuskavage admirers, her nudes are just a means to an end. “Yes, there are boobs everywhere, but it’s actually so unbelievably not about boobs,” James Rondeau, the director of the Art Institute of Chicago, told me. (During Rondeau’s tenure, the Institute has added four Yuskavage paintings to its collection, three of which are boob-free.) “It’s more like, you’ve got to have your knockers out—and they’ve got to be *huge* and *weird*—if I’m going to really talk to you about a landscape of acceptance.” What Yuskavage ultimately seeks to provoke, in this view, is empathy: for the figure, for the painter, for the victimizer and the victimized, the low and the high, the self who is staring, lost, at the conflagration of color.



In "Artist on Model Stand," Yuskavage appears as one of her avatars. "People will say, 'But you don't look like that,' " she predicted. "But it's a painting. I can look any way I want." Art work © Lisa Yuskavage / Lisa Yuskavage, "Artist on Model Stand," (2022) / Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

In Paris, as the picture hangers took a break, Yuskavage brought me to see the back of the gallery. In a small room near the offices, next to a Delacroix odalisque, was an old painting of hers called “Pond.” In a sickly palette of chartreuse, Army green, and light blue, one kneeling nude leans back on another, who is gripping her breast in a primordial bog. “I was working through this sense of having a weak self and a strong self and needing to carry the weak self,” Yuskavage said. The figure in the foreground has her knees spread, and a three-fingered hand—it’s unclear whose arm it’s attached to—is poking her vulva, which is strikingly oversized, like that of a camel in heat. Yuskavage, looking at it with evident pride, said, “That’s one meaty pussy.”

At the opening of Yuskavage’s show, guests were greeted by “Artist on Model Stand”—placed in the front room, as Levenstein had suggested. (As usual, Yuskavage was out of step with feminist orthodoxy: “no” had meant “maybe.”) In the painting, an intricately rendered screen stands behind a distinctly Yuskavage nude with a jaunty facial expression, icy, sexy tan lines, and massive grisaille breasts. Zwirner, grinning alongside it, said, “The welcoming committee!”

Yuskavage, in a flowing Dries van Noten dress splotted with fuchsia, green, and yellow, appraised the painting. “People will say, ‘But you don’t look like that,’ ” she predicted. “But it’s a *painting*. I can look any way I want.” In the works at Zwirner, Yuskavage’s women looked mostly contemplative and curious, rather than terrified. The painting that she thinks of as the show’s most important—“The Artist’s Studio,” named for Courbet’s masterpiece—has one of the Bad Babies in the foreground. She is still wearing only a pink T-shirt and her pubic hair, but she seems at ease now, and instead of clenching her fist she holds a palette in her hand.

In the painting's background is Yuskavage, dressed up as a peasant, as she sometimes was when modelling during art school, "because clearly that's my vibe." She describes her physique as "sturdy, as my Irish grandmother used to say—like I can drive an ox or plow a field. I was made for hard work." In a way, labor was the subject of the show. All the paintings depicted artists' tools: they were stacked with canvases, laced with vinelike cords from projectors used to cast images, studded with the nails that connect linen to stretcher frames. "For me and I think for Lisa, our pictures are not about us, the artists, as some kind of visionary persona," Kerry James Marshall, whose own studio painting hangs near Yuskavage's "Bonfire" at the Met, said. "It's in the fact that we are laborers in an arena in which spectacular things can be made."

Yuskavage's paintings are built to last for centuries; in the early nineties, she took a class on art conservation when her friend Jesse Murry was dying of AIDS and she wanted to preserve his paintings. "Sometimes I think that's the working-class thing in me," she said. She motioned at a painting within "Golden Studio," a representation of that first self-portrait she made on Claridge Street, standing in front of her shaded bedroom window: "My dad put up that awning forty-five years ago, and it's still there."

Currin said that one of Yuskavage's advantages was being raised in a religious family. "I envy just knowing how to do it—to believe in this completely far-fetched, phantasmagorical situation," he said. "Religion in society, it's not smart, it's not sexy. But, in the world of painting, faith and religion manifest themselves as higher intelligence. You look at 'Sacred Conversation' and it's kind of absurd not to believe in God, in the context of that painting. All the great magic geniuses, belief is everything—it *is* the talent."

A few years ago, Yuskavage made a series of prismatic paintings of hippies: long-haired women and men in various states of undress, frolicking in nature or fornicating at home, the men all seemingly as oily and patchouli-scented as the ones in her parents' copy of "The Joy of Sex." Her inspirations were, as ever, both high and low. She had been contemplating Marcia Hall's academic work on the way that *cangiamento*, shifting color in Renaissance painting, was used to indicate the presence of the supernatural; she had also been Googling "dude that looks like Jesus." Yuskavage began "Spectral," from that series, by painting Johannes Itten's color wheel as her ground. ("It was the most boring, laborious thing I've ever done," she said, but she'd refused to hire an assistant, because "that would be like getting someone to eat for me.") After drying it with fans for weeks, she covered it with a translucent layer of white, and then painted on a nude figure peering through a fence, into a rainbow that glows between the posts. Yuskavage's friend Jarrett Earnest, an artist and a writer who had come from New York to Paris for her opening, said, "I think Lisa has an ambition of communicating with, you know, God, and with our higher self." In a painting like "Spectral," the tones are pushed so far that they register as transcendent. "Color is the thing that redeems the image," Earnest said, discussing her work in a recent talk. "That colored light is animated by belief."

Yuskavage rejected the Catholic Church when she was twelve, "on feminist grounds," she said. But she admired the nuns so much for their passion and devotion that for a time she wanted to become one. "I don't mind having believed in something," she said. "Thinking there is *nothing* doesn't really help with art."

Yuskavage and Levenstein live with their cockapoo, Phillip, in a Manhattan apartment decorated by Billy Cotton, a designer whose work has been on the cover of *Architectural Digest*. The front hallway is covered in custom French wallpaper with velvet flocking, which also appeared in Claude Chabrol's film adaptation of "Madame Bovary." There are photographs by Diane Arbus, lithographs by de Chirico, and a painting by Kara Walker, held up by specially made brass rails to preserve the wallpaper.

The couple also owns a Craftsman cottage on the North Fork of Long Island, on a hilltop with gardens rolling past the pool to the sea. "When we got it," Levenstein told me, "I used to joke, 'After the revolution, all of this will belong to the people.' " Once, when Yuskavage's parents were visiting, her mother saw the price tag on a jar of fancy jam and started laughing uncontrollably. "She couldn't stop," Yuskavage said. "And I was so embarrassed."

James Rondeau told me that Yuskavage has clung to an outdated story about her place in the art world: "I now resist the outsider, working-class narrative. Lisa is actually the ultimate insider, and no one knows it—including Lisa! Like, let it go. You're crushing it! You've been crushing it for decades. She's not given sufficient credit intellectually, because everyone's stuck on outsider-troublemaker-not-invited-to-the-party. It's, like, No! She's Elizabeth Taylor now. She's *Gwyneth*."



Yuskavage's first show of work that felt true to her vision featured the Bad Babies: four young female figures, exposed from the waist down, looking angry, awkward, and uncomfortable. Art work © Lisa Yuskavage / Lisa Yuskavage, "The Ones That Don't Want To: Bad Baby," (1991) / Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

One hot summer night, Yuskavage and I were walking down Sixth Avenue toward her apartment when we came upon a man passed out on the sidewalk under his wheelchair, with his pants around his ankles and shit smeared all over his backside. “I try never to forget that the thinnest hair separates him from me,” she said. “Under the wrong conditions, we would look that way, smell that way. I learned from Diane Arbus: we are all freaks. Arbus and Guston, they’re not finger pointers, and I really admire that.”

Through the years, it has enriched Yuskavage’s art for her to maintain a sense of connection with lives that are more brutal than her own. She mentioned a quote of Guston’s that she liked: “He said, ‘I think a painter has two choices—he paints the world or himself.’ ” She noted another possibility: “Maybe the interesting third direction is that you can be an empath.” She recalled the day when Kathy, eight years old, told her about the assaults she’d been enduring at home. “She awoke that in me at a very early age,” Yuskavage said. When Kathy eventually saw “The Gifts” and the Bad Babies at an exhibition, she said, “These are about me, aren’t they?” It took a few weeks, but Yuskavage realized that they were.

For Yuskavage’s art to be potent, she requires ugliness—or, at least, the residue of ugliness, to lend her paintings a faint sense that, despite the glamorous color and the playful illusions, all is not well. “I always wanted my work to feel like, Yes, there’s violence, but it has fallen away, and you’ve risen out of the ashes through the act of painting,” she said. That sense of oddness and fearfulness has tended to present itself subtly in her recent work. But, for Yuskavage, her otherworldly paintings still present the world as it is, with all its contradictions. “My father always defended me and said, ‘Lisa does a lot of weird things, but she always tells the truth.’ ” ♦

Published in the print edition of the August 7, 2023, issue, with the headline “Bodies of Work.”

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