



She

Candice Breitz

Glenn Brown

George Condo

John Currin

Jeff Koons

Yayoi Kusama

Chris Ofili

Jenny Saville

Cindy Sherman

Rebecca Warren

Lisa Yuskavage

she

Picturing women at the turn of the 21st century

Curated by **Jo-Ann Conklin**

Essay by **Ian Alden Russell**

David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University

Foreword

Spanning a period of twenty-four years — from 1989 to 2013 — *SHE* presents a broad-ranging selection of contemporary representations of women. The exhibition, which is drawn from a private collection, includes works by eleven of the most highly acclaimed artists working today. Within these paintings, sculpture, and videos are both convergences and divergences in style, concept, and intent. Some artists, notably Jenny Saville and Cindy Sherman, examine the position of women in society from an overtly feminist viewpoint. Others, such as Lisa Yuskavage and Rebecca Warren, wrest control of explicit sexual imagery from the hands of men. Yet others, such as George Condo, Glenn Brown, and Jeff Koons, show little to no concern with the politics of gender; instead they continue on the art historical path of depicting women as objects of beauty or desire, albeit to differing and individual ends.

Jenny Saville's massive and masterful paintings of obese women challenge conventional ideals of female beauty, while Cindy Sherman's *History Paintings* expand her critique of representations of femininity into the art historical past as she reworks portraits by Rembrandt, David, and Fragonard (included here). Candice Breitz focuses on Hollywood's portrayal of motherhood. Compiling clips from recent films in her video installation *Mother*, Breitz presents a less-than-flattering picture of the exasperation, insecurity, self-blame, and anxiety that these filmic women express about their maternal abilities.

John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage unapologetically embrace and exaggerate images made by and for men, from advertising to pornography. While Currin admits to a chauvinistic fascination, Yuskavage attempts to take possession of this previously male venue. Similarly, Rebecca Warren's sculpture *L* channels the comic imagery of R. Crumb's outrageously sexualized women. Working in unfired clay and bronze, Warren has developed a signature style of joyous and exuberant lumpen figures (often presented on light pink plinths) that have transformed her precedents from Crumb to Degas and Rodin.

The exhibition's discourse on gender is compounded by issues of race in the works of Chris Ofili and Yayoi Kusama. Reversing the spelling of "a negro," Ofili created *Orgena*, an icon of African beauty related to his *Afromuses* series. Confronting racial and gender discrimination in 1950s New York, Yayoi Kusama embarked upon her conceptual exploration of self-obliteration. She is represented here by a lesser-known painted self-portrait from a series that dates back to 1982.

Women are frequent subjects in George Condo's work (evidenced by his 2005 exhibition *George Condo: One Hundred Women* organized by the Museum der Moderne Salzburg and Kunsthalle Bielefeld). However, Condo is not particularly interested in

feminism. The same can be said of Glenn Brown. They are both, instead, deeply concerned with painting — the simple and not-so-simple application of pigment to canvas. Applying their idiosyncratic and highly identifiable styles to images of women, they parse the satirical, the humorous, and the grotesque.

For Jeff Koons, like Condo and Brown, “woman as subject” is secondary to formal concerns. His *Gazing Ball (Ariadne)* is a spectacular sculpture — a juxtaposition of a Classical figure reproduced in gleaming white plaster and a deep blue, reflective, gazing ball. In other works from the *Gazing Ball* series, Koons combines his gazing balls with plaster mailboxes, birdbaths, and snowmen. For Koons, women and mailboxes are the same; both are fodder for his world of Pop — no more, no less.

The works of art in *SHE* are lent from an anonymous private collection. I extend my sincere thanks to the collector for sharing these important contemporary artworks with the students of Brown and RISD, and the Rhode Island community. Such acts of generosity significantly enhance the programs of the David Winton Bell Gallery and Brown University. My thanks also to members of the collector’s curatorial staff, who assisted with every aspect of the exhibition.

It has been a great pleasure to discuss the exhibition and individual works with essayist Ian Alden Russell, who has sensitively negotiated a wide range of artistic concerns in an intelligent and informative catalogue essay.

Special thanks to Edgar Lagunia at Glenn Brown’s studio, Melissa Brice at George Condo’s studio, and Amy Silver and Katherine Hughes at Jeff Koons’s studio. Thanks also to Liz DeMase at Zwirner Gallery; Caroline Tilleard and Alix Greenberg at Skarstedt Gallery; Helen Cowdrey and Ariel Fishman at Matthew Marks Gallery; Michael Plunckett and Caroline Elbaor at Metro Pictures; and James McKee, Benjamin Handler, Harriet Mitchell, and Eugenia Ballve at Gagosian Gallery.

Jo-Ann Conklin

Director, David Winton Bell Gallery

Curator, *SHE: Picturing women at the turn of the 21st century*

Looking at Pictures of Women

Ian Alden Russell

I grew up as the only boy in a household of women in Richmond, Virginia. My mom, a single mother, was a feminist activist in the 1960s who transformed her activism into a career that championed domestic violence legislation at state and federal levels. During those years my mother, who embodied what I thought it meant to be a woman, would take me to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. I loved the galleries, getting lost in canvases and conversations with my mom about landscapes, history, and why people in paintings and sculptures had no clothes on. Alternately looking at Old Masters and my mother, these childhood tours planted the seed of a question that occurs to me every time I visit a museum: "how is it that my mother's self-image as a woman is so different from the images of women in art history?"

I was daunted when Jo-Ann Conklin first approached me to write an essay for *SHE*. The task of framing the work of eleven major artists whose lives and careers span over eighty-five years, touching on almost every medium, movement, and conceptual turn from 1960s Pop onwards, was a tall order. It was, however, the curatorial theme for the exhibition that I found the most challenging. The history of the image of the female figure in art is fraught; until the later 20th century, it has almost exclusively been created, critiqued, and authorized by men. Like my mother's career, the works in this exhibition owe much to the groundbreaking thinking of second-wave feminists. But like my mother's life, the art world has not stayed still. As much as the faulty culture of patriarchy still tells me to view art through the male gaze, the values I learned from my mother help me transcend this legacy and be mindful of including multiple ways of thinking about, embodying, and representing women. A scene from Chris Marker's 1962 short film *La Jetée* returns me to the moment when I was awoken by the project of shifting the agency of the gaze away from one dominated by men. We see a still image — a close up of the Woman's face, reclining, resting, eyes closed. Until . . . she awakes.

La Jetée tells the story of the Man, played by Davos Hanich (voice-over by Jean Négroni), who is tasked by his post-apocalyptic society with travelling through time

"to call past and future to the rescue of the present."¹ The key to his travel back in time is an image of the Woman, played by H  l  ne Chatelain — the object of an obsessive memory from his childhood, which he pursues as an anchor for his time travel. Self-defined as cin  -roman (a film-novel), the film is composed entirely of still photographs with voice-over. Almost as in a slide show, we are taken on a journey back and forth through time and memory — structured and held static by the gaze of the Man. That is until the still image of the Woman's sleeping face becomes a moving image. Her eyes open in real time, and she blinks. We are now watched, confronted. For a moment, the stability of the Man's gaze is broken. Where she had been a passive subject, the Woman now gazes at us, disrupting the sense of order in the flow of still images in the film. The aesthetic break from still to moving image provokes a visceral response: "... a gasp, a collective bodily intake of breath in every auditorium and theatre and lecture hall It is a gasp close to an experience of the erotic or the religious or both."² It is the moment we are shaken into a realization of our participation in the Man's penetration of time and his pursuit of the image of the Woman as both a visual possession and a source of salvation.

The works selected for the exhibition *SHE: Picturing women at the turn of the 21st century* resonate in various ways with this moment from *La Jet  e*. The exhibition presents a selection of artists who have approached the female figure from 1989 to 2013. Within the works there are both convergences and divergences in relation to style, medium, form, concept, and intent. Tensions quickly become evident when we consider the work of Cindy Sherman, arguably the most iconic feminist artist, in the same interpretative frame as John Currin, whose sexualized images of big-breasted women have drawn harsh criticism for their brash chauvinism. The challenge is compounded when we turn to the gender and race critiques in Chris Ofili's exploration of Afrocentrism or Yayoi Kusama's performances and self-portraits. Each of the eleven artists responds to the representation and figuration of women in their own way. The intentions and interpretations range from feminist critiques to incidental observations — from feminism as critical subject to woman as compositional subject. Artists such as Glenn Brown, George Condo, Jeff Koons, or Cindy Sherman explore appropriation as a way of reckoning art history with contemporary art. Candice Breitz, John Currin, Chris Ofili, Rebecca Warren, and Lisa Yuskavage concern themselves more with images from popular culture, while Yayoi Kusama and Jenny Saville work from negotiations of their own self-image to render critiques of gender norms and ideals of beauty. We may wonder: are the artists here, like the Man in *La Jet  e*, appropriating subjects to compose new images? Or do the works (and, in turn, their source materials)

have agency? Where do they position us in relation to the gaze? Are these works passive subjects of our gaze, or do they look back at us? As in *La Jetée*, when the Woman opens her eyes, stares at us, and blinks, so too do the works in this exhibition force a consideration of the gaze and how we have represented and continue to represent the female figure in artistic production.

Appropriating Art History

Many of the works in the exhibition seduce us into a feeling of comfort or familiarity through their use of art historical or popular cultural source material. George Condo often borrows styles from other historical periods. His recent oil on linen, *The Banker's Wife* (2011), is a grotesque, cartoony, and quasi-cubist portrait of a nude woman. The style of the composition feels very familiar; the grotesque geometric distortion of the woman's face recalls Picasso's canonical late cubist portraits, and her smile welcomes us. There is, however, a style and color palette that feels distinctly different. In an interview with Ralph Rugoff, Condo described his practice and style: "What I'm thinking about is . . . that a single painting can have multiple language properties acting simultaneously to create a single entity. . . . I make sketches and sometimes I'm involving a number of images from different paintings, with slight variations at times. I think of them as themes and variations, composites of various psychological states painted in various different ways."³ More succinctly, Condo has said, "the only way for me to feel the difference between every other artist and me is to use every artist to become me."⁴

Women are a frequent subject in Condo's work, exemplified by his 2005 retrospective exhibition *George Condo: One Hundred Women*, organized by the Museum der Moderne Salzburg and Kunsthalle Bielefeld.⁵ One such work, *The Banker's Wife*, might elicit nostalgia for cubist aesthetics, yet the distortion and fragmentation of the woman's face and body in Condo's portrait presents an ambiguity of self that feels more current and contemporary. "I describe what I do as psychological cubism," says Condo. "Picasso painted a violin from four different perspectives at one moment. I do the same with psychological states. . . . I'll put them all in one face."⁶ In *The Banker's Wife*, then, there is both a distorted, malformed face as well as a smiling invitation that perhaps deflects our interrogation or eases our discomfort with the portrait. The title of the work introduces a chauvinistic dimension to our frame of interpretation. The woman is not given her own identifier. She is named only in relation to her partner, "the Banker," relegating her identity to a submissive role. Painted in 2011, it is difficult not to question the choice of title in relation to the displeasure felt within the United

larger works such as *Orgena*. These large-scale paintings present alternative images of beauty and the female portrait. In this way, they can be seen as similar to Saville's work. In Ofili's own words,

beauty is a simple exploration of line, form and shape, on a formal level. . . . But also the beauty is about a kind of joy and love of painting and an enjoyment of form and the female form as a symbol of beauty. There's a track by Nas called *Fried Chicken* (2008), which I think is about describing the beauty of a woman through the metaphor of fried chicken — one would not normally put the two together. In a way I'd like to be able to get to a similar place where I can describe beauty through other means.²⁹

Considered together, Ofili's large-scale portraits and the *Afromuses* form an exploration of figuration and the constructions of race within increasingly diverse societies. Noted by Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, "Ofili's arsenal of references includes figures from religion and popular culture, such as Adam and Eve, Nefertiti, Kathleen and Eldridge Cleaver, Thelonious Monk, or Erykah Badu and Common."³⁰ Working with popular culture, Ofili's paintings expand upon the critical discourse surrounding the art historical conventions of beauty dominated not only by Western traditions but also by Caucasian figures.

Compositions from Popular Culture

In keeping with Ofili's interest in popular culture and Saville's collaging of women's bodies in *Hybrid*, works by Candice Breitz, John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, and Rebecca Warren return the discussion to appropriation by composing images from fragments of popular culture.

Breitz's *Mother* (2005) is a six-channel video installation of chopped, edited, and looped clips of iconic Hollywood actresses in memorable roles relating to motherhood and femininity. The cast of *Mother* includes Faye Dunaway, Diane Keaton, Shirley MacLaine, Julia Roberts, Susan Sarandon, and Meryl Streep appropriated from the films *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *The Champ* (1979), *Mommie Dearest* (1981), *The Good Mother* (1988), *Postcards from the Edge* (1990), *Father of the Bride* (1991), and *Stepmom* (1998). *Mother* was first realized and shown with the companion piece *Father* (2005) — another six-channel video installation that focuses on Hollywood portrayals of masculinity and fatherhood. In both pieces, the protagonists have been extracted from the context of the original films and placed against a black background so that all we are left with is the actors themselves. Breitz has meticulously edited and arranged clips of their dialogue, looping them in short series of repeated lines of dialogue or sounds and physical gestures. With *Mother*, she creates a cacophony

of sighs and breaths, sobs and laughs. She stitches tropes of femininity and motherhood into a cast of hysterical women who appear fixated on the emotional stresses and anxieties associated with fulfilling society's image of a good mother. Like a Greek chorus, a consistent thread of non-linear dialogue runs throughout, revealing Breitz's ability to choreograph the din into an affective orchestration that evokes and critiques our relationships to iconic images of women.³¹ Breitz describes her process of "re-animating actors" as being "more about feeding on cultural corpses, seizing a piece of inanimate footage and trying to revive it. . . . The re-animated actors who perform for me in *Mother + Father* never acquire the fluid movement and full consciousness that we associate with 'life.' Like Frankenstein's monster, they jerk and twitch their way through the narrative."³²

Mother + Father is a continuation of Breitz's ongoing work relating to the relationships formed between celebrities and fans, as seen in works such as *Babel Series* (1999) or *Him* (1968–2008) and *Her* (1978–2008).³³ By decontextualizing the actors and orchestrating their repetitive performances of tropes of maternal or paternal behavior, Breitz reveals the way our consumption of Hollywood icons informs our own performances of gender identities. Reflecting on *Mother*, Breitz pondered, "are my feelings coincidentally just like these Hollywood feelings, or are Hollywood feelings based on my feelings? Did that Hollywood father just say the same thing that my father used to say to me? Does that Hollywood actress feel the same way about her mother as I feel about mine?"³⁴

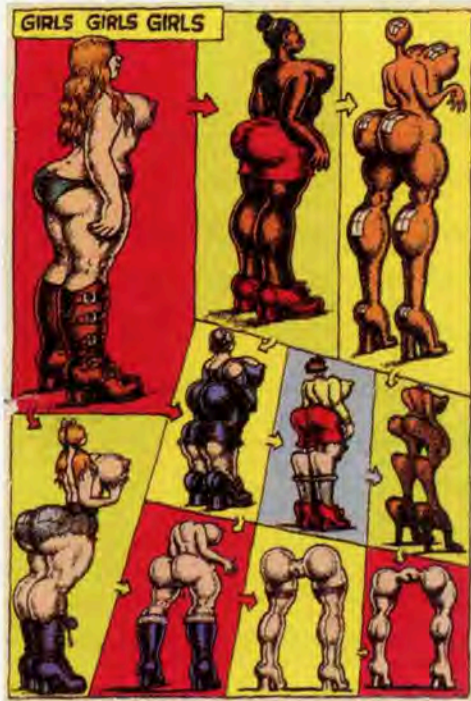
The influence and impact of the popular media on the ways in which we view and consume images of women is continued and elaborated upon in works by John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage. Both members of the 1986 graduating class from Yale University School of the Arts, Currin and Yuskavage's works share many similarities. Both painters create exaggerated, at times malformed, sexualized portraits of women derived from advertising and pornography. Both artists have also been the subject of controversy and debate with regard to their depictions of women. However, where Currin is complicit in the aesthetic objectification of women, Yuskavage attempts to disrupt this process. Known mostly for his paintings of women with anatomically impossible, enlarged breasts, Currin occupies a fraught position with respect to contemporary representations of women. He often works from art historical sources from Fragonard and Boucher to Norman Rockwell, and popular sources from R. Crumb to advertising. In doing so, Currin has produced an extensive body of work that perpetuates the historical sexualization of the female body. He makes no effort to hide the libido that is present in his work. As he explains, "when I hold a brush, it's a weird object . . . as if part of the female sex has been taken and put on the end of this thing that is my male sex to connect with a yielding surface."³⁵ In this sense, Currin's practice could be read as a brazen manifestation of late

20th-century chauvinistic objectification of the female body in American culture. His work presents an uncomfortable moral problem in our consumption of images of women.³⁶

In many ways, Yuskavage's paintings go beyond the limits of Currin's exaggerations and exploitations of the female figure. Her paintings take the male gaze to an absurd conclusion where women are reduced to only torsos with enhanced buttocks and breasts and crippled with stump-like legs or arms or other deformities. Norman Bryson argues, "Yuskavage does not place herself above the system or beyond its reach; her goal is just the opposite — to conjure the system in its full power, to record its operations without flinching, to fully inhabit its spaces, to be immersed in all of its currents."³⁷ In the artist's words, "I don't work from an elevated place looking down; if they are low, then I am in the ditch with them, I am trying to dig us out together."³⁸ Yuskavage's *Night* (1999–2000) is one of a group of works that appear more familiar to the viewer. Based on images from men's magazines, these works depict women in a somewhat cartoon-like style that pushes the composition further into a space of fantasy and fabrication. In *Night*, a woman is depicted with long, flowing hair, over-sized breasts, erect nipples, puckered lips, and deathly-thin arms. The figure pulls up her dress exposing her exaggerated, round buttocks. There is also an ambiguous cartoon female in silhouette that haunts the far background of the image.

Yuskavage's works of this period generally draw on source imagery from 1970s *Penthouse* and, perhaps, *Playboy* magazines. In this respect, she shares a similarity with Currin who also draws heavily from 1970s magazine advertising. Currin's work included here, *Entertaining Mr. Acker Bilk* (1995) is based on a Crow Light whiskey advertisement from the 1970s. It is one of a small group of works that include the figure of a man. Currin has replaced the dark-haired man from the whiskey advertisement with a more effeminate, fair-haired dandy. The whiskey glass has been removed, but the exaggerated masculine hand is still dominantly present in the center of the image. More pertinent to the discussion here are the changes he makes to the woman. In the advertisement, the woman is clothed in a dark turtleneck and denim shirt. She is the girl next door, a fresh-faced picture of outdoorsy wholesomeness. In Currin's appropriation, she has become one of his iconic, buxom women, her breasts spilling out of a strapless dress and wearing copious rouge, eye shadow, and mascara. This charged transformation of an advertisement is very much a continuation of Currin's sexualization of women projected onto historical imagery — something for which he makes little apology:

I dislike the idea that an image of a nude woman may stand for a certain idea of sin or temptation or perversity, or the opposite, of overcoming your inhibitions. It's a kind of cliché freedom. . . . And when I see other men doing nudes, they have to be really good. Otherwise,



Robert Crumb
Girls, Girls, Girls
 From *The R. Crumb Coffee Table Art Book*, 1997
 © Robert Crumb, 2012
 Used with permission from Agence
 Littéraire Lora Fountain & Associates, Paris

I just feel like, what is this supposed to stand for? If it's not even as good as photographic porno, why paint it at all?³⁹

Rebecca Warren's sculptures also engage in the dialogue established between Yuskavage's and Currin's work. Both Warren and Yuskavage have co-opted images of women created by and for men and transformed them for their own ends. Warren's *L* (1999) is a complement to the cartoony and grotesque figures of Yuskavage. *L* is a clay sculpture of two exaggerated striding legs in platform high heels, joined by a pelvis and exposed vulva and standing on an MDF sheet with wheels. Like her earlier sculpture *Helmut Crumb* (1998), *L* is based on a figurative form taken from the world of R. Crumb. In R. Crumb's *Girls, Girls, Girls* (1997), we see Crumb's process of reducing a monstrous and sexualized female figure to minimal components, a pair of nude legs in platform heels connected only by a vagina.⁴⁰ Warren's use of Crumb's image creates a tension between a man's struggle to come to terms with an empowered feminine sexuality and a woman's agency to transform material into an image of her sex.⁴¹ Where Crumb's illustrations are fraught, Warren's are joyous and flowing. They display the energy and presence of the sculptor in the worked texture of the clay.⁴²

Warren's sculptures interrogate femininity and surface, reveling in a tactile, almost sensual, control of material. When asked by Julia Peyton-Jones and Hans Ulrich Obrist about her exploration of the female figure in sculptural form, Warren replied,

you can get very carried away with the idea of the surface of the clay and the shapes and the marks of the artist. A state arises where these body parts almost suggest themselves in that movement; it's almost as if the tits add themselves. Also these additions can interrupt that reverie in some way. . . . I think interrupting the surface is a way of interrupting other things that are in place and taken for granted. If these interruptions are provocative, then they play on the permission that I myself as a woman or as an artist am supposed to have been given from elsewhere. Well, from where?⁴³

Warren's play with the question of permission to render the female figure reveals something of the underlying tension inherent

in representing women in contemporary art. Her primary focus, however, is on the enjoyment of material expression. She focuses on the clay and her hands and not the fraught reflexivity associated with the permissions her gender may or may not entail. However, Warren does admit that her work does not escape this problem: "for whatever mysterious reason, you'll find that I'm rarely included in exhibitions with other women and I'm often included with male artists who've done something I thought was quite interesting and liked."⁴⁴

Conclusion

As is seen in the work of the eleven artists exhibited in *SHE*, however the subject is approached, depicting the female figure is weighted by visual and cultural history. The artists shown here have found various compelling ways to work with and through this fraught history. The act of appropriation is present in many of the works as a means of making art history accountable to the contemporary moment. Popular culture also offers vital source materials for critiques of the troubled nature of our gaze and its relation to our appreciation of the female form. For example, in Glenn Brown's *Filth*, the woman is incidental — no more than the subject of a composition. By contrast, in *Night* by Lisa Yuskavage, the depiction of women is the subject and concern. In Cindy Sherman's *History Portraits*, these projects become one and the same — woman *is* subject and woman *as* subject. While the hand, persona, and style of each artist is present, the source materials — whether found images or the artists' own self-images — are also present. The exhibition moves away from an exclusively male-dominated composition of the female figure. In some works, the figure of the woman is relegated to a passive presence, while in others the bodies are endowed with more agency. The tension between the works is unresolved, like the wider issue of gender equality. Collectively, the works in *SHE* remind us of this unfinished negotiation and the importance of our participation (and our inherent implication) in the processes of reconciliation. As in the iconic moment in *La Jetée*, *SHE* gazes back at us, implicating both the artists and ourselves in the reconciliation of conflicting approaches to the depiction and representation of women at the turn of the 21st century.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jo-Ann Conklin for the opportunity to reflect on these works and the lives of these artists. I would also like to thank Alexis Lowry Murray and the rest of the staff of the David Winton Bell Gallery for their help in the editing and preparation of the text. I also owe a great debt to Peter Hocking and Jane Androski for their support, camaraderie, and critical feedback throughout the writing of this essay.

— IAR

Ian Alden Russell

Providence, Rhode Island, September 2014



Lisa Yuskavage

38

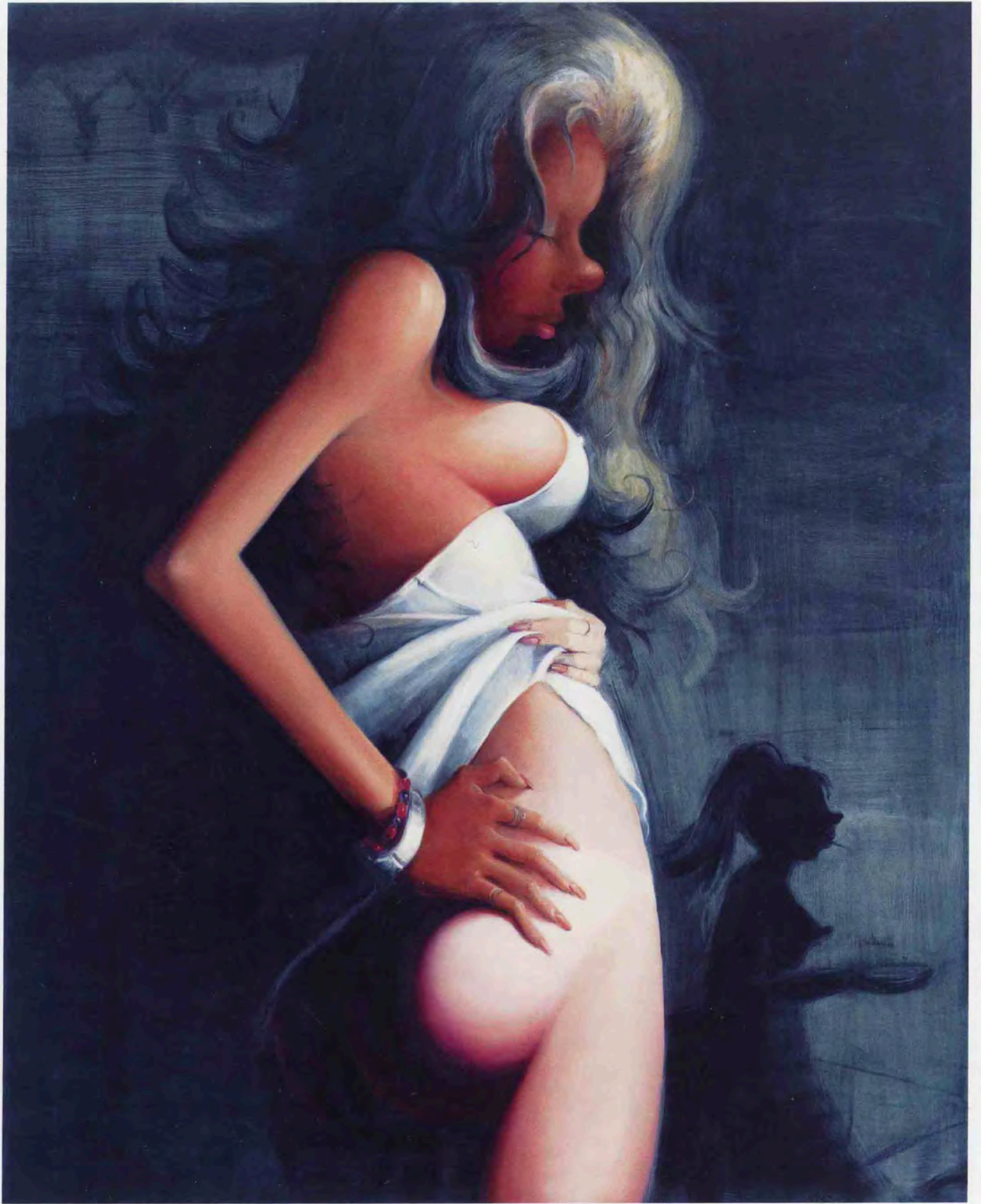
Night, 1999–2000

Oil on canvas

77" x 62" (195.6 x 157.5 cm)

Private Collection

© Lisa Yuskavage. Image courtesy the artist
and David Zwirner, New York/London



DAVID WINTON BELL GALLERY, BROWN UNIVERSITY