



lisa yuskavage

Yuskavage's paintings represent the worst cultural nightmares of most liberals. Although her work is technically accomplished and beautifully executed, her choice of subject matter suggests a continuing traumatic reaction to the discovery (whether real or apocryphal) of her father's *Penthouse* magazine collection when she was still at an impressionable age. For better or worse, Yuskavage's introduction to the world of exploited female bodies continues to dominate her visual description of the world. From her first exhibitions in the early 1990s, Yuskavage has deployed an unusually hard-hitting response to misogynistic cultural norms. Rather than supplant this mode of representation with a more uplifting one, or attempt to correct it outright, Yuskavage prefers to exploit it on her own terms, transforming anatomical exaggeration and display into disturbing questions about the troubled intersection of beauty and sexuality in contemporary art. In Yuskavage's canvases, the anatomically challenged female is shown in an eternal dream-state, hovering over the artificial horizons like humourless sentinels. In *Motherfucking Foodeating Still-Life, 1997* a hefty blonde turns towards us from the misty background, her inscrutable expression reinforced by a lack of corporal substance from her thighs downward. The circular forms scattered about a receding plane seem to be issuing from her vagina, as an ominous redhead glides into the shadows on stage right. The diptych *Goodevening Hamass, 1997* opts for a more conventional desert setting. On one side is the title figure, her *derrrière* transforming into a massive topographic element that appears to recede into red dust and billows of smoke; on the other is a stereotypically perfect arrangement of flowers in a vase, towards which the giant figure seems to be making her vengeful way.

The role played by feminism in Yuskavage's work is worth touching upon, if only because it seems eagerly to revive the mostly rhetorical dispute between those who feel that personal liberation demands that the imagination be entirely unfettered, and those who worry about the possible negative impact of imagery that quotes the demeaning status quo without an explicit challenge. In Yuskavage's view, the far greater danger lies in the perpetuation of largely mythic viewpoints about age, shape and sexual submissiveness in the construction of ideal feminine beauty. Her figures may not be beautiful in the conventional sense, but they make a strong case for the much greater monstrosity that occurs when women, who look more like Yuskavage's models than those in fashion magazines, wind up feeling devalued when they see the latter's impossible standards reflected back at them. Yuskavage's women may be ponderous and even horrific, but they also signal a continuing problematic raised when standards for depicting women are still being re-written by the subject-authors.

Dan Cameron



opposite. Lisa Yuskavage
Surrender, 1998
Oil on linen
91.5 x 91.5 cm

this page. Lisa Yuskavage
Goodevening Hamass, 1997
Oil on linen
106.5 x 228.5 cm



above, Lisa Yuskavage
The Feminist's Husband, 1996
Oil on linen
106.5 x 119.5 cm



right, Lisa Yuskavage
Interior: Big Blonde with Beaded
Jacket, 1997
Oil on linen
213.5 x 183 cm