

LISA YUSKAVAGE

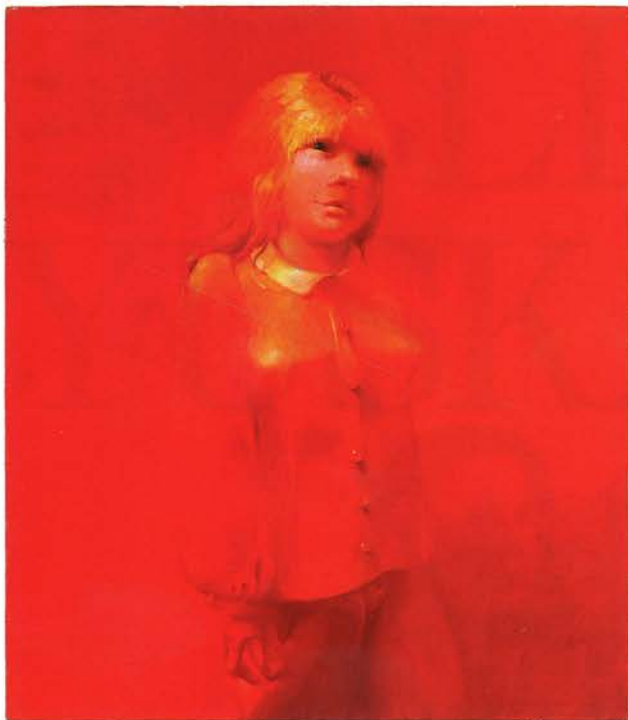
CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
"Lisa Yuskavage:
The Brood," at the
Rose Art Museum,
Waltham, Mass.,
through Dec. 13, and
the Contemporary
Art Museum
St. Louis, Jan. 15-
Apr. 10, 2016.

Interview by Jarrett Earnest
Portrait by Boru O'Brien O'Connell

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New York.

IN THE STUDIO





Lisa Yuskavage:
*The Ones That
Don't Want To:
Buttons*, 1991, oil
on linen, 34¼ by
30⅝ inches.

Images this article
courtesy David
Zwirner, New York
and London.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I followed friends to a celebration, not knowing the occasion. Down the steps, at the back of the bar, people were making passionate speeches in honor of the birthday girl. “When I was pregnant, Lisa asked if she could watch me give birth,” one woman said. “She had seen a close friend die of AIDS in the same hospital, and wanted to see someone be born there. She was incredible in the delivery room, rubbing my feet, giving me ice chips, welcoming this baby into the world. The birth was intense but she was fearless, always there. When it was over, I saw her photographing still-lives of the afterbirth next to a can of Dr. Pepper.”

The toasts to Lisa continued with equal intensity, humor and electric devotion. “My kind of person!” I thought. Once the dancing started, I turned to the friend I’d come with and asked, “Who’s Lisa? She sounds amazing!” “Oh, it’s Lisa Yuskavage!” she laughed, and pointed to a woman dancing to a disco beat in the center of the room.

The facts of Yuskavage’s career are well known. She grew up in Juniata Park, a working-class neighborhood in Philadelphia, then earned a BFA in 1984 from the Tyler School of Art, followed by an MFA from Yale in 1986. She became a major force in figurative painting in the 1990s, amid a torrent of criticism from feminists who argued that her sexualized distortions of female bodies were detrimental to the cause—charges she refuses to refute or even directly engage. As a result, she often appears as a bad object in academic and critical circles, as either an incredibly dumb feminist or a brilliantly cynical misogynist. In 2007 the *Washington Post* published a “special report” titled “Lisa Yuskavage: Critiquing Prurient Sexuality, or Disingenuously Peddling a Soft-Porn Aesthetic?,” where scholar Amelia Jones discussed actively disliking her paintings (“Everybody knows they’re soft porn, because that’s the first thing everyone says about them”)

while feeling frustrated by her inability to pin them down (“I refuse to react in a way that could be interpreted as orthodox feminism”). Jones’s consternation unwittingly echoes the statements that Yuskavage has made about her own work from the very beginning. Back in 1992, she told *tema celeste* magazine: “I offer no solution. I don’t believe there is one.”

Through all this, I’ve come to see Yuskavage as existing beyond the goody two-shoes world of *Art Since 1900*, living and working instead somewhere over the rainbow, where artists are having a lot of fun and not toeing any party line. When her work is seen as a whole, what first appears as chaos becomes a richly polyphonic worldview. Now we can do just that at “The Brood,” a 25-year survey that gathers diptychs, triptychs and a third form she calls “symbiotics” (single canvases engaging the concept of the diptych through intertwined figures). The show is currently at the Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Mass., and travels to the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis in the spring. We met to discuss the exhibition, and her art in general, last spring in her Brooklyn studio

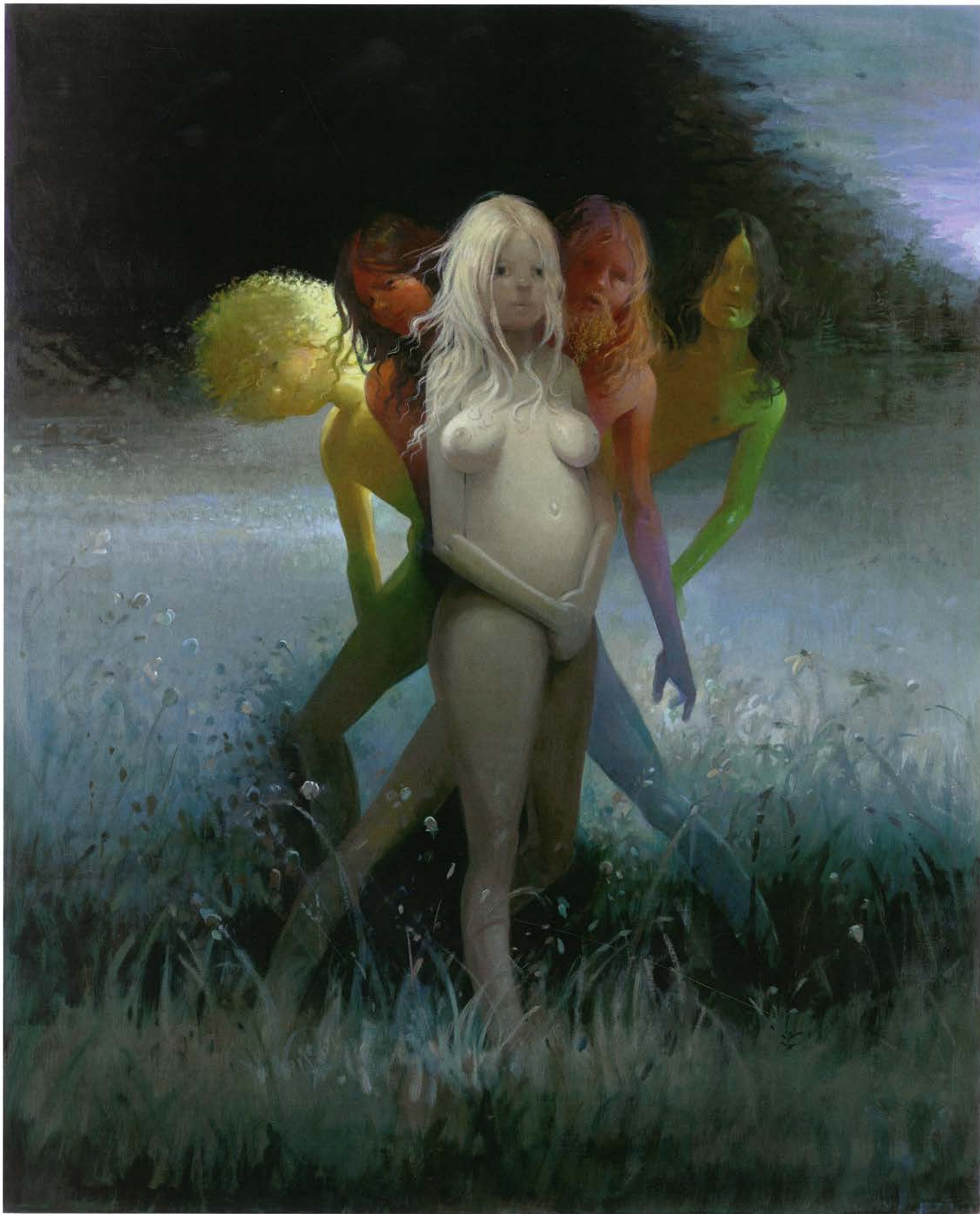
In its entirety, Yuskavage’s world is a grand comedy—rife with fantastical visions of both sunshine and shit worthy of François Rabelais. Her characters have Pantagruel’s appetite, humor and—most important—that giant’s heart. The artist’s presence with one friend as he died of AIDS, and with another as she gave birth, recalls the famous story of J.M.W. Turner strapping himself to the mast of a ship during a storm to experience the sublime. The difference is that Turner’s sublime was *out there*, in the vast tumult of a hostile landscape, while Yuskavage’s is *in here*, at the core of our basic, vital humanity.

JARRETT EARNEST When you were a guest speaker in my class at the Bruce High Quality Foundation University (BHQFU) last year you talked about Giovanni Bellini, whom you described as “a man of deep feeling and great awe.” I think that has something to do with your ideas about belief in art.

LISA YUSKAVAGE I’ve come to experience art like a séance. Over time you can meld minds with artists: you laugh and feel their humor, or you are shocked by their sadness and grief. The main thing that comes across in Bellini’s paintings is the awesome potency and profound depth of feeling that made them. I’ve spent a good deal of my life looking at paintings, and what stands out to me is that, no matter when the painters lived, there are a lot of similarities among them. The work carries markers of the artist’s inner life—be it Carroll Dunham’s or Giovanni Bellini’s—for us to connect to. I find that humanity in art very appealing because it just cuts away all the layers of academia. Scholarship can buoy understanding in some ways but after a point can also drag you down, away from the art. Since contemporary artists are not hired by, say, the Vatican, we have the freedom to ask ourselves what we believe in and then to assert that belief. It’s actually a powerful liberty to own, and especially nice in our time when there are so many women’s voices in the mix.

The best paintings of depositions, crucifixions and entombments are images that are familiar if you’ve ever buried someone you love. Just today, I saw an image in the *New York Daily News*

Opposite,
Hippies, 2013,
oil on linen, 82¼
by 66½ inches.



Bonfire, 2013-15,
oil on linen,
diptych, 82 by 133
inches overall.





Asspicking, foodeating, headsbrinking, socialclimbing, motherfucking bad habits, 1996, cast hydrocal with artificial pearls and artificial flowers, five pieces, 61½ by 60 by 60 inches overall.



of the brother of Moises Locón Yac, who was killed in the explosion on Second Avenue on March 26, collapsing in the arms of a Red Cross worker. You see the same configuration in paintings of Mary Magdalene mourning Christ. I remember things through great pictures. When I look at Renaissance masterpieces I recall scenes like the one on Second Avenue—the profound grief of families realizing that their loved ones have been killed.

EARNEST The narrative parts of those paintings are usually understood iconographically, through the signs and symbols that let you know that the woman depicted is Mary Magdalene, for instance. Aside from that kind of literary content, I know you are *as* interested in the formal elements of the painting—how color, line and composition make up the image. Can belief be discussed in formal terms?

YUSKAVAGE Painters have always had to believe in formal language. It just didn't used to be called into question as much as it is now. It is a belief that pictures can be formally coded and tell a story, and that viewers will understand that code even if they are not painters themselves. In contemporary art the language of painting is like a dialect of ancient Greek—most people just don't understand it. Furthermore I don't know how many people are willing to relax and let the meaning of the painting unfold, but I like to think they will feel the power of the form, almost unconsciously, whether they want to or not.

EARNEST I've been thinking about the obvious aspects of painting, how it materializes things out of color. That's something that happens vividly in your recent paintings, like *Hippies* [2013] and *Mardi Gras Honeymoon* [2015], where color asserts itself as a powerful generative force.

YUSKAVAGE The interesting thing about *Hippies* is how those male figures jump out from behind the central woman, and the *painting* did that to me—in the process of making it, the men said, “Ta-da!” They came out of the work. And I had to ask myself where to take it next. I think that *Hippies* should have come after the portraits it was shown with at David Zwirner this spring, but it didn't, it came first. I decided to make six to eight portraits of incubi and succubae using the structural idea of a grisaille painting with a flourish of what is called *cangiantismo*, a sort of spectral color-wheel effect that contrasts the grays. In the 16th century the Italian viewer understood it as a signal that the supernatural had arrived.

I've done grisaille paintings with flashes of intense color over the years. One painting like that would surface as an isolated element in a body of work every now and then. When *Hippies* appeared I wanted to see what would happen if I just stayed with it and didn't let up. I really didn't know where I was going, but at some point the art critic Christian Viveros-Fauné came to my studio and said it reminded him of the “Bad Babies” series [1991-92]. Both groups of paintings personify color. I remember looking at my palette table and telling Christian, “I just want to make this come alive.” It's such a stupid idea, and yet I think that is what I did. I just had to keep believing in it. When things went wrong, when they veered off course, I would tell myself to just trust the process.

So much of my work is about doing the very obvious. Making art is like finding your Excalibur, the sword in the stone. It's right there and others can tug and tug, but you have to be Arthur to pull it out. Anyone can decide, intellectually, to

make paintings where “colors come alive as characters”—but try to do it! Few people can pull it off. You have to have lived your life in a certain way, and have believed all along that that is possible, in order to make it work.

EARNEST One thing that helps me make sense of the moral, erotic and political complexity of your paintings is your interest in the filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder. The group of actors he worked with accumulated an emotional power from film to film. They didn't necessarily play the same character, but the actors nevertheless carried a certain emotional and symbolic significance into each new situation. I was thinking about “Bad Habits” [1997-2000], the paintings that use figures from a series of small sculptures you made. I wondered if that is how you thought of them?

YUSKAVAGE That was partly why I made the “Bad Habits” sculptures in 1995. In going from painting to painting I was “recasting” my characters every time. I had to get to know them one by one and understand what they mean. I realized through Fassbinder that it would be interesting to have your blonde—your Hanna Schygulla—as one person in an ensemble of actors who each play a range of characters. The range should be small—you can't make people be something they're not. Fassbinder was aware of how to use everyone's qualities. Their fading looks, like Fassbinder's own physical deterioration, became his material. They all had to be very smart and not vain to allow this to happen. Fassbinder's actors came from the theater and theater is close to sculpture, so perhaps they had an awareness of the sculptural properties of their bodies.

I arranged the “Bad Habits” figurines into groups, which I studied to make the paintings. I was thinking about how Tintoretto made wax figures to illuminate scenes and understand complicated lighting. “Bad Habits” is about light. To keep my focus on that aspect of the work, I didn't want to have to keep reinventing characters. I could have kept working on that series forever but I made myself stop. I realized that as an artist I was about more than that, so I forced myself to move on.

EARNEST Fassbinder's films are melodramas, with actors performing emotional extremes. As an audience member, I find it extraordinarily affecting—I cry real tears for them. The emotional connection of melodrama seems close to what you want from painting.

YUSKAVAGE One of the ideas about art that was gaining momentum when I was student, which I heard but didn't take seriously, was that psychology has no place in painting. And so, as a 19-year-old, I responded by putting it back there, boldly and for no good fucking reason.

Cool kids always think their shit doesn't stink, but Fassbinder reminds us that our shit does stink, and on top of that it's rotten, and it's OK to admit that. We're all human. I'm interested in formal language and emotional content—formalism and feelings have a perfect marriage, if you can handle it. Looking back, I realize how much of the work was led by a rather dry and clear process and yet the results are anything but dry. I set a path and let the weirdness and eccentric stuff come up on its own; all that content just found a place out of the orderly way I had set up the process.



Foodeating
Hardplace, 1996,
oil on linen,
42 by 36 inches.

EARNEST Contrary to what many people might think, I know you and your paintings are concerned with humanity and moral complexity. How do you characterize that part of your work?

YUSKAVAGE I love Solzhenitsyn's writing for his insights into morality and humanity, and today I came across a quote from *The Gulag Archipelago*: “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” I love that idea. If you think of yourself as “good,” you should think about how easily you could be evil under different circumstances. It's important to embrace the range and try to comprehend it. Philip Guston said something similar when he talked about imagining himself like Isaac Babel, who wrote about riding around with the Red Army during the Polish-Soviet War, witnessing rape, pillage and killing. Guston was able to envision himself not only through the lens of the Italian painters he adored, but through the hooded figures of Ku Klux Klan. He recognized that the enemy lies within.

EARNEST If imagining the Cossacks allowed Guston to confront violent evil in his work, what is the equivalent for you?

YUSKAVAGE Misogyny. There is no exact parallel to the story. I didn't read a great writer like Babel who contextualized it for me. What I learned from Guston is that if you point the finger at yourself first, then you are freer. Misogyny is so rampant, extreme and insidious that it doesn't get called out nearly enough. A lot of men, including gay men, are misogynists, and a lot of women are too. I've experienced it personally



Day, 1999–2000,
oil on linen, 77 by
62 inches.

from so many, and I can therefore assume that because I live in *this* society I must have absorbed it too, so if I want to talk about misogyny I have to first acknowledge the aspects of it I've absorbed. I'm not the kind of person or artist, nor do I admire the kind of person or artist, who proselytizes, pontificates or points outward at others. I admire Guston and Diane Arbus and Fassbinder because they show a myriad of internal conflicts. That's what art is—a struggle filtered through the self. That is how it becomes generous.

EARNEST In your “Penthouse” series—which includes *Day* and *Night* [both 1999–2000]—you translated pin-ups into your painterly idiom. Is the idea of the internal struggle why it was important to you that the figures in these paintings come from issues of porn magazines you found as a little girl, magazines that belonged to your father and your friends' fathers?

YUSKAVAGE Yeah. Next question.

EARNEST At BHQFU you described artists as “we people who are feeling . . .”

YUSKAVAGE Empaths—

EARNEST Is that part of what you think it means to be an artist?

YUSKAVAGE Some artists would say that it's the most ridiculous thing they've ever heard. But you're asking *this* artist, and I would say, yes, absolutely. There are no rules to being an artist—every artist has a different role to play. And empathy is definitely a big part of mine.

EARNEST How does belief come into play in your studio, while you're painting?

YUSKAVAGE I often wish I could go to my studio and

paint all the time, but I can't. I often feel disconnected, as if I'm waiting for instructions. It's absolute torture. The first third of the time it took to make these recent paintings was spent going in every day but ending up with nothing. Then, slowly, something started to happen.

There are great Caravaggios in San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome—the Saint Matthew cycle. The first painting, on the left of the small chapel, is *The Calling of Saint Matthew*. Jesus points at Matthew, who sits across from him with his head down. Matthew is the only one who isn't looking at Jesus. On the opposite wall, on the right side of the chapel, hangs the third painting that shows the end of the narrative, Matthew's martyrdom: Matthew lies on the ground and some guy with a sword is standing over him, just about to murder him. Imagine how you'd feel in that moment! I stared at the painting for so long, fascinated by how everyone is freaking out except for Matthew, who is reaching up. What is he looking at? It's an angel leaning over a cloud and extending a palm, as if holding a stick to a drowning man. You realize that Matthew is a man who lived and died with belief in eternal salvation, which is why he's being murdered—he's dying for his beliefs. It's interesting that Caravaggio depicts him *seeing* his salvation. Everyone else sees horror and chaos, but Matthew sees an angel extending a palm. In this painting you witness him becoming something.

So, to answer your question, when I think of being an artist, I think of the central painting, between those two, showing Saint Matthew as an old man taking dictation from an angel, doing divine work on earth. The man depicted in the painting is a nincompoop and the angel is impatiently counting on his fingers, as if Matthew isn't keeping up. It's so funny: that's Caravaggio's wit. The Passion of Saint Matthew is one of the most beautiful testaments we have, but here he is shown as a very ordinary man. I believe Caravaggio related to Matthew because of how beautifully this story is depicted, with so much feeling and sensitivity. The three paintings show the utter transformation of a man over time.

EARNEST I can't imagine belief as having any part in the postmodern conversation at Yale when you were a graduate student there in the '80s. How did it go over?

YUSKAVAGE Ever since we were at Yale together, John Currin has said he admires my ability to believe. I remember once in a critique of my work, my teacher William Bailey was furious that it didn't have enough “fiction building.” He quoted Magritte: “*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, Lisa!” I said, “But I want the paintings to be real!” To which he snapped, “Well, that's not a good goal.” John was at that critique, and he jumped in, saying: “I actually think it's amazing she thinks they're real!”

It was a very important argument for me, because I understood that there is an orthodox way of looking at things: “This is a representation. This is not a pipe, it's a painting. It's not *real*,” which feels pretty obvious and rather dull at this point. There was this other possibility that seemed juicier and more fucked up and hopeful. And I did have to come to a synthetic approach to making, but once I could do that, I could also believe in painting again, and make it real again. I've taken it to that next step, and my gamble is to succeed or fail at *that*. ○

Opposite,
Dude of Sorrows,
2015, oil on linen,
48½ by 40 inches.

