



**Lisa Yuskavage**

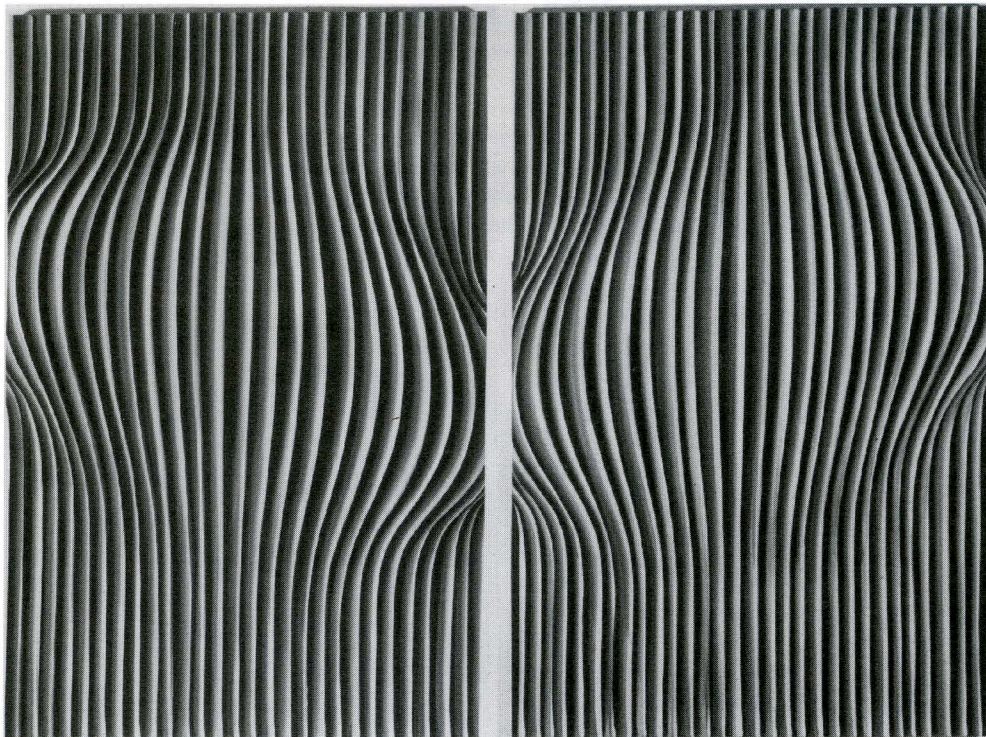
*The One's That Shouldn't: The Gifts, 1991,*  
oil on linen, 30" x 34".

THE SUBLIME, THE BEAUTIFUL, THE GENDER OF PAINTING  
*confessions of a male gaze*

BY  
BARRY SCHWABSKY

If reference to beauty has been practically banished from the vocabulary of criticism—though not, even among the most “advanced” elements of art’s public, from the informal vernacular of response and evaluation—this is because of its vagueness. No definite characteristic succeeds in attaching itself to the term. Not only are we unable to agree with each other as to what we mean by the words “beauty” or “beautiful”; I cannot even agree with myself. Here they may denote something grand and harmonious, there a fragile and tenuous quality, there again something dangerously seductive. Thus the old saw, *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. But the saw is double-edged, it cuts two ways. When we make a judgment of beauty, we are making a judgment about judgment—about taste, which is the capacity for judgement. To pronounce something beautiful is to make a claim for the perspicacity of my eye, my taste, some might even say my soul, and perhaps for the lack of it in any beholder who fails to recognize beauty where I do.

Beauty always retains the power of reproach—and for that very reason is always liable to be reproached in turn. *One evening I sat beauty down on my knees.—And I found her bitter.—And I insulted her.* Rimbaud may have been right to insult beauty if her existence merely mocked the ugliness he recognized in himself. Now



**Karen Davie**

*Um . . . #1 & #2*, 1993, oil on canvas, 90" x 60".

Since aestheticians began distinguishing the beautiful and the sublime in the eighteenth century, it has been clear enough that beauty is feminine; sublimity masculine.

about that pronoun: her. *La beauté*, in French, is a noun of feminine gender, so it would have been equally correct to translate the pronoun referring back to it as *it*. —*And I found it bitter*. But that doesn't sound very convincing, and not just because it fails to bring out the element of prosopopoeia, of personification in Rimbaud's text. Beauty, in our culture, seems always to be feminine, whether the language genders its nouns, as French does, or doesn't, as in English. Since aestheticians, notably Burke<sup>1</sup> and Kant,<sup>2</sup> began distinguishing the beautiful and the sublime in the eighteenth century, it has been clear enough that beauty is feminine; sublimity masculine. Kant writes, "The sublime *moves*, the beautiful *charms* . . . The sublime must always be great; the beautiful can also be small. The sublime must be simple; the beautiful can be adorned and ornamented." Of course, as Jean-François Lyotard has pointed out, the avant-garde traditions in art—I would be more inclusive and say, the Modernist traditions—all called strictly for the sublime. Is it any accident that

Lyotard cites Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*?<sup>3</sup> *Vir*, of course, is the Latin "man"; the rest is self-explanatory. Beauty, in the twentieth century, is as *retardataire* as it is feminine.

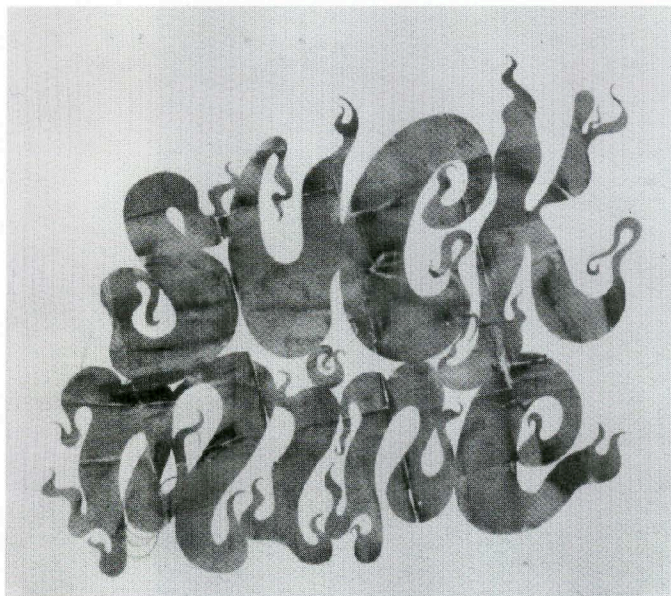
But must we continue to see it that way? The critical logic of the avant-garde, of Modernism, surely forbids us to leave this gendering uncriticized. In contemporary culture, the relation of the artwork to its viewer seems to be a quasi-sexual one, that is, the relation seems to be about pleasure, however ambivalent. In the literary field, Roland Barthes's discussion of *jouissance* in *The*

*Pleasure of the Text* was a primary manifestation of the theoretical consciousness of this. Some work by women artists these days seems to play with the gendered nature of this consciousness, turning the viewer's desire back on itself in some way. Sometimes aggression is the means, as in Marlene McCarty's paintings of phrases redolent of the deepest abysses of *déclassé* male-assholedom ("I FUCKED MADONNA"—Rimbaud would have understood). All spiffed up in the coolest off-road vehicle lettering, they're heat-transferred to the canvas (does that mean *ironed*?) with a kind of wavering care that's almost lyrical.

The desire of the viewer can also turn back on itself in more subtle ways, as in Karin Davie's *Sidewalk Paintings*, paired so that Bleckneresque stripes illusionistically curve to the rhythm of a walking body, and titled with phrases men have aimed at the artist on the street: *Hey Sexy, Nice*, etc. Both McCarty and Davie play with what I have called the "ambivalence of the cathexis," the inseparability of aggression and the recognition of beauty.<sup>4</sup> (It's really Davie's work that's meaner, since it comes on sweet but turns hard if you don't keep your cool, while McCarty's makes angry noises but yields its taboo pleasures if you're tough enough not to get scared off.) Lisa Yuskavage's paintings of young girls also seem involved with this: they are about being seen, a prototypical Modernist theme, but in a way that deals with this as a form of embarrassment or shame. So the viewer has to question the pleasure he takes in this viewing. Does the viewer come to share this shame? Does it magnify his sense of power and therefore pleasure? Is the viewer a he anyway? Consider this: I was walking down the street the other day when I saw two girls, about 12 to 14 years old, yelling playful insults at one another. Finally, one girl silenced the other by saying, "Well suck my big fat dick." That girl, I'd guess, could look at a McCarty painting

inscribed SUCK MINE without too many assumptions about who's talking to whom, or why.

One such attempt, the so-called Pattern and Decoration movement, which included the now almost-forgotten early work of Kruger, included an explicitly feminist strand that had to do with the reclamation of women's craft skills. But its simple reversal of hierarchies, the effort to make art that would be beautiful rather than sublime, comfortable rather than challenging, never amounted to much. A more rewarding outcome has been forthcoming on those relatively rare occasions when art, rather than reversing a hierarchy of taste, has confused the premises on which the hierarchy stands. For me, one such instance has been the landscape paintings of Helen Miranda Wilson—paintings that can only be called beautiful, but whose beauty has consumed the sublime.



**Marlene McCarty**  
*Untitled (Suck Mine)*, 1993, heat transfer on canvas  
 82" x 72".

I remember what first made me feel self-conscious about being a male viewer of a work by a female artist. It goes back to when I was first thinking about writing about art, that is, to about 1983 or so. I remain grateful to Barbara Kruger (though I could hardly be pleased with the direction her art would soon be taking—"I shop therefore I am"), because it was simply the use of the word "you" in her work of the early '80s that made me realize that I was being addressed in my maleness: "We won't play nature to your culture." Her pronouns were implicitly marked by gender. (The "you" Kruger's work addressed was so clearly male that I sometimes wondered how women saw these works—were they just supposed to stay out of the line of fire and cheer from the sidelines?)

Kruger's works are clearly meant to be received as avant-garde, and therefore as touching on the sublime. They are aggressive, they are simple and certainly not ornamented, their scale has become larger and larger as the productive resources available to the artist have increased with her success. Meanwhile, a number of other artists in the '70s and '80s were working from different assumptions, attempting a full-scale revaluation of the beautiful.

Wilson's paintings are small because dense. This density is most immediately a physical, material quality, only afterwards an intellectual or emotional one. It's what gives her paintings their objectness, as it used to be called, a sense of physical concreteness that is more reminiscent of certain kinds of abstraction than of other landscape paintings—although some of the abstractions to which they bear the strongest affinities do refer, in turn, to landscape; think of Carter Ratcliff's apt perception that "the Mardenesque

object looks denser than the Mardenesque image."<sup>5</sup> The Wilsonesque image, if I may be allowed the phrase, is usually one of immense clarity, and the very delicate yet very determined linearity with which she renders, for instance, what seems like every foreground branch and leaf in a painting like *October, Still & Clear*, affects a story-bookish candor that turns out to be what I trust least in her painting. There's too much held in reserve here, too much distance, for such intimation of naive directness to ring quite true.

For Wilson is a painter of distances. Not for her the thick underbrush of a Neil Welliver, or the decoratively cropped detail of a Joan Nelson. More likely the view is from a height, where vision is filled with mostly miles and miles of air. Often the point seems to have to do with just how far the terrain can stretch away—a distance that's almost measurable rather than a nebulous depth. But that makes it sound drier, more rational in intention than I think Wilson's work really is. The tension between the painting's concrete presence as object and its evanescence as image is the tension of desire—the *desire of the painting* to fulfill itself by absorbing or being absorbed by the eye of the beholder. The immensely soft Tuscan hillsides of *La Terra di Vergelle* seem to open themselves up as though to embrace and fold the viewer into themselves, in contrast to the nuanced darkneses of *Red Moon*, which, as its hidden shapes and shadows emerge in time, would rather seep slowly into one, like subtle tastes on the tongue. Such paintings obviate any theoretical critique of "visuality" insofar as they teach that the eye can be more than just an eye—protean, it can be a hand, a mouth, and yes, even a mind. In contradistinction to the commonsensical wisdom that opposes—in the name of what can only be a holistic oneness of body and mind, perception and perceiver—what it would call the fetishization of a single sense, they

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**Helen Miranda Wilson**

*La Terra di Vergelle*, 1991, oil on masonite panel, 8 3/4" x 11 7/8".

propose the counterintuitive visionary truth that, as Paul Celan once wrote, "You are/where your eye is": an emptying out of identity rather than a plenitude; impelled, paradoxically, by longing, an intellectual and sensual refreshment in place of satiety.

Landscape as a genre occupies an ambiguous position in relation to the beautiful and the sublime. A wild or desolate landscape was a typical sublime object for the eighteenth century—although in *The Critique of*

*Judgment* (1790) Kant criticized this understanding of the sublime, remarking that, for instance, "the broad ocean agitated by storms cannot be called sublime" because "one must have stored one's mind in

advance with a rich stock of ideas, if such an intuition is to raise it to the pitch of a feeling which is itself sublime." A consideration of the work of Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, or Mark Rothko will show how far Modernism took art in pursuit of this Kantian abstraction of the sublime. Yet the underpinnings of their work were always redolent of the idea of sublime landscape, and the work of an artist like Judy Ledgerwood shows just how simple a matter it can be to coax those underpin-

nings back to visibility. Since abstraction raised the sublime to a higher power, it might be argued, the representation of landscape can no longer lay claim to the sublime; its early role having been surpassed, landscape would be merely beautiful.

Wilson's work sets the very distinction spinning, though unlike Ledgerwood's, offers no explicit comment on the art of high Modernism. The vast views which Wilson's paintings command refer to a tradition of the sublime, but her miniaturization of those views seems to return the sublime itself to an idea of beauty, of the small and ornate. The paintings' address to the viewer—not so much from one gendered identity to another as from one physical density (one body) to another, sighted one—seems not so much to suppress the idea of gender as to clear away any assumptions about it, to let it work itself out on a case-by-case basis. I know how my account of the "opening up" and "embrace" of *La Terra di Vergelle* can be read as revealing something about my desires or fantasies as a male viewer. But since the painting is about eliciting such effects of the embodied materiality of vision for their own sake—not about judging or pre-empting them—my becoming aware of this seems interesting, not embarrassing. The sublime is a "negative pleasure," the pleasure of a threat or difficulty overcome. Perhaps the experience of beauty itself has come to be threatening enough to encompass the sublime. All pleasure is threatening when it becomes self-conscious.

Self-consciously, one may begin to wonder about the validity of reflections that can lead from patently confrontational art such as that of Marlene McCarty to the apparently formal, self-absorbed work of Karin Davie or Helen Miranda Wilson. One answer would be that what connects them need be no more than one viewer's

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## Art depends on a morality of pleasure.

in our faces. Williams's painting, as a matter of fact, shows a woman's facial orifices invaded by erect, dripping penises. The painting actually has a serviceable composition, although it's a graphically rudimentary and unimaginative one. It brings to mind the immediate predecessor, Robert Mapplethorpe's infamous photograph showing the act of "fisting,"—another rudimentary centralized composition, centered, in fact, around the stretched anus. You may remember that the then-director of the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art (where the controversial Mapplethorpe show originated), Janet Kardon, invoked that composition (unintentionally hilariously, in my opinion) at the trial of Dennis Barrie, the director of the Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati. Barrie was being tried for showing allegedly obscene art to the tender citizens of Cincinnati. My point is that even such dare-you-to-look artists as Sue Williams and Robert Mapplethorpe are, in these two works at least, at pains to employ some conventional "good-lookingness," some attenuated aspect of aesthetic quality in the formal sense, to get you to look twice at their works.

Overemphasis on shock, is, I think, a problem in contemporary art that may be passing. The Mapplethorpe picture is 15 years old, and young artists aren't imitating its ilk that much anymore. And the Williams phenomenon is slowly revealing itself as a pale, art-schooled imitation of what's called "outsider art," that is, art by people who really *are* tormented and dysfunctional and didn't just learn the look of those things at Cal Arts.

Artists have all kinds of misguided and/or delusory ways of kick-starting themselves into making art. Artists make art (some

of which turns out to be infused with beauty and quality) for all kinds of reasons not directly evident in the art: to make money, to impress a powerful clique of collectors, curators, and critics, to win express or implied contests with competing artists, to curry favor (or to avoid losing it) with their peers, or to get into the knickers of someone they're attracted to. Very seldom, if ever anymore, does an artist make art consciously to redefine beauty and quality. If s/he does, s/he probably keeps his/her mouth shut about it.

All of the foregoing, I realize, should strike me, its author, as embarrassingly conservative. But it's a product of more than just the bio-mental process of slowing down into incurable old-fartism. Some of it is due to getting a bigger picture than I used to get—in the '60s, '70s, and about half of the '80s—from running around with, almost exclusively, artists my own age and students younger than I am, looking mostly at contemporary art in the galleries. These days, for several reasons, I see a lot more old art in museums than I used to. And I can see that Raphael and Sargent had something going back then. The dawn comes, you say sarcastically. But I mean, now I can really *see* it like I couldn't when I was still reacting against the echo of some fusty old art-history professor singing me his un-credible praises. Nobody could be *that* good, I used to grouse. Well, now that a lot of water has gone over the dam in my artistic life, I can see that they were that good and that their works of art are that good. And you can't ask anything more of art, can you?

Peter Plagens is a painter and art critic for Newsweek.

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pleasure—and that the pleasure that cannot give its own rule, against the grain of institutional categories, must be an insipid one at best. Art depends on a morality of pleasure. The preference for the sublime over the beautiful is founded on the realization that, paradoxically, a negative pleasure is more intense than a direct one. That recognition is apt, but fails to take the plasticity of intention into account; once I have recognized direct pleasure as "inferior," it too becomes a negative factor, and therefore something that can be overcome to achieve the intensity of negative pleasure. Beauty turns out to be the perversely discreet form of the sublime.

Barry Schwabsky is a freelance critic based in New York.

#### NOTES

- 1 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757.
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and*

*Sublime*, 1764—but as we shall see Kant would come to a subtler understanding of the issue by the time of his third Critique a quarter-century later. For a discussion of the gender implications of the aesthetics of the sublime—though it fails to properly distinguish between Kant's early and late positions—see Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), especially pp. 74-80.

- 3 Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," tr. by Lisa Liebmann, *Artforum* (April 1984), pp. 36-43, reprinted with alterations in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 196-211. See also the "Appendix: Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism," tr. by Régis Durand, in Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 71-82.
- 4 Schwabsky, "Girls Lean Back Everywhere," *Karin Davie: Odisques* (Los Angeles: Kim Light Gallery, and Miami: Jason Rubell Gallery, 1993)
- 5 Carter Ratcliff, "How to Study the Paintings of Brice Marden," *Parkett 7*, (1986), pp. 22-26.

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