

Lisa Yuskavage

at CHRISTOPHER GRIMES, 6 January–17 February

Mildly stated, Lisa Yuskavage's work never seems quite right. More hotly, it evokes unequivocal repulsion. In the guise of technically deft and brightly colored paintings, a controversial array of wayward, libidinal young females emerge from dreamy fields of pigment. Heightening the abusive tendencies of her past imagery, several of Yuskavage's familiar prepubescents are now depicted as oddly superficial dolls (or more appropriately, dollies), with "openings" instead of eyes, belly buttons, or mouths, like those of the blow-up variety. Highly fetishized with deformed and exceptionally idiosyncratic features (including hideously mountainous and distorted breasts and thighs), their attitudes call out in every sense that they are "here to satisfy." At complete odds with itself—nasty, prohibitive imagery versus pure medium and penetrating color—Yuskavage's paintings meld taboo subject matter with richly hued and luminous monochromatic backgrounds.

The most blatantly aggressive painting in this exhibition is *Rorschach Blot* (all works, 1995). Built like a monument, fleshy and shaped like that church-and-steeple thing you may have done with your hands as a kid, this figure-turned-sex-receptacle, with its legs frozen wide apart in an aerobic half-squat, reveals all her erogenous apertures. Our attention is focused on the girl's genitalia, which tops off an intensely worked yellow space framed by her legs and flanked at the bottom by a shadow, on which she staidly balances. In sharp contrast, the girl's upper torso—literally fading at places into the background—is flaccid, one nipple jutting upward while the other slides off to the side.

Like those banned Calvin Klein ads, Yuskavage's paintings tread dangerously close to the perverse. With or without the help of a psychotherapist, interpreting their iconography may potentially transgress into a Freudian field day. The pervasive absence of a phallus (read penis envy) becomes particularly obvious through symbols like a faucet (*Faucet*), and the subtle, yet unmistakably penile-shaped, shadow in *The Early*



Years. And if the disturbing, O-shaped mouths weren't enough to suggest it, the ripe, tropical cornucopia of pigments are just a few more hints of the vagina itself. Most of these girls are situated in rooms (Freud's symbol for the uterus), while two ambiguous oval-shaped portraits in *Fleshpot* hover like an ever-lingering mother and father. It doesn't take long for one to get carried away and begin to see other, perhaps innocent, symbols as covert, sexual devices. The proliferation of odd and fleshy ears, swollen bellies, and the unusual width of the parts in the figures' hair all contribute toward the viewer's own paranoia about what one's own potentially deviant sexual behavior or thoughts might add to the work.

In a frightening fashion, the visual history of women as the object of art here meets a woman as perceived by herself; Yuskavage's endeavor, in effect, demonstrates deep vulnerability. Exorcising what may pass as artistic fear along with a strong dose of Catholic denial, the artist bares, to extremes, her liability as a female painter. At the same time, Yuskavage creates a parody of the common notion of painting as masturbatory activity by hyping up the usually male-prescribed fetishistic attributes of the female to the point of grotesque distortion, while simultaneously making lush, exquisite paintings.

There remains something extremely refined about these paintings, with their Vermeer-like treatment of character, light, and sensitivity to feminine finery. Think of Vermeer's women with their ermine-trimmed jackets bathed in golden light, at their toilet, or standing in pervasive silence, all strangely comparable to several of Yuskavage's paintings. As in Vermeer, color is paramount in Yuskavage's works, and most of the backgrounds are studies in the light and dark ranges of a single hue. The triptych *Blonde, Brunette, and Redhead* offers a spectrum of color, where shifts in tone and manner are extremely seductive.

In Yuskavage's case, too much of a good thing threatens to become quite the opposite: It may appear utterly repulsive. Yet behind her confrontational paintings lies a sly sense of humor, as required for such painful, self-examination. In a refreshingly non-didactic way, Yuskavage makes clear that, just as the conventions established by modern psychology fail to deal with the complexity of our emotions, the act of making beautiful color-field paintings in a postmodern culture is insufficient. The artist has the last laugh, though, validating a form of psychoanalytical activity while creating powerful art.

Julie Joyce is a writer and curator living in Los Angeles.

Lisa Yuskavage
Rorschach Blot, 1995
Oil on linen
84" x 72"