

Text Francis Summers

NICELY ORDINARY NUDITY

LISA YUSKAVAGE LIKES TO PAINT BIG-BREADED WOMEN WHO - IN THE WORDS OF HER FRIEND - 'HAVE THEIR PUSSIES SCREWED ON STRAIGHT'. SLEAZE MET THE CREATOR OF THESE POPULIST PORTRAITS OF MAMMARY ENHANCED VIXENS TO DISCUSS SEX, REMBRANDT AND ARTISTIC IMPOTENCE.

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hen first exhibited, Yuskavage's paintings prompted much artworld confusion. Perversely sentimental yet overflowing with a polymorphous sexuality, her work intelligently substitutes a slippery low-brow jug-fest for chaffingly dry high-brow theory. Like fellow New Yorker artists John Currin and Sean Landers, Yuskavage is part of a trend that pushes the cutesy-pie dumbness of kitsch imagery way beyond the pleasure principle. Playing with vagaries of taste, behaviour and decency, her pictures of slack-jawed and stacked bimbos allude to an outrageously exaggerated *Playboy* fantasy in a manner than vacillates between the sinister and comedic. ➔



Lisa Yuskavage, *True Blonde on a mountain top*, 1998, courtesy of the artist and Greengrassi Gallery

► The work is not ironic, however. Far from it - Yuskavage freely admits her proximity to the images: "I don't work from an elevated place looking down; if they are low, then I am in the ditch with them, and by painting them I am trying to dig us out together." Her early works, such as *Rorsharch Blot* or *Fleshpot*, (both 1995), were images of women as receptacles, their faces cruelly transformed into those of nose-less sex dolls. These works seemed to condemn cultural spectacle as one of continual and uninterrupted immediacy; their mouths always open, but not to form words. More recently, in a series of paintings made in 2000 - all titled *Northview* - the women have become increasingly introverted, more at ease with their sexuality, yet seemingly trapped in some soft-core cage of luxury and indolence.

Yuskavage is keen to point out that her work has very formal origins, that it was only over time that it became imbued with a difficult sexual nature. For example, the image of a pubescent girl in 1991's *The Ones That Don't Want To: Bad Baby*, resulted from an experiment that combined the language of colour-field formalism and her interest in Rembrandt. As she explains, it involved making a work that was reflexive in its identity as a painting: "What I was doing at the time was trying to be conscious that the painting was looking at me... these images are representations of, or personifications of painting. Of how a painting might feel."

Denying more recent readings of her work as a statement of a programmatic feminist ideology, Yuskavage insists: "I really don't want my work to have a critique. I want my own opinions to be as much out of it as possible. I want it to be purely about allowing the viewer to take whatever they like, without the heavy hand... It's more about something poetic than a manifesto, or a treatise on how to look at women, or how not to." Her work has much in common with other contemporary artists, such as Kara Walker, whose images of a disturbed Uncle Tom fantasy shows a strategy of gleefully misusing appropriated cultural symbols. Yuskavage takes on similarly inflammatory images, and treats them in a provocatively ambiguous way, refusing the simplistic black and white dialectical politics of previous generations: "It's not part of my consciousness to use my work as a tool to try and teach something. I think that it's anti-didactic."

As for the formal origins of her work, Yuskavage is deeply involved with a tradition of painting that goes back to a pantheon of 'painters of light' including Bellini, Tintoretto, and Degas, all from whom she has borrowed several skills and techniques. As she enthuses, "I'm not aware of the hard edges of my work, on all levels, because I'm completely involved in the light. Light is a really positive place to be engaged." Another more recent frame of reference is the late Philip Guston, a painter of the Abstract Expressionist generation who went on to make garishly ugly paintings that resembled cartoons, depicting a whole variety of the bad habits of our times: "He went right for it, the 20th Century. The racism, Jew-hating and the self-hatred that might be behind that. I thought that was something I would try to attempt if I could, to try to use his example of saying 'I might be my own worst enemy'."

Yuskavage's take on art-making is that it should be a more considered affair, allowing a degree of accessibility along with many complex layers of meaning. Equally important to her is the ridiculing of the pretentious self-importance of art. "I need to take art off the pedestal. Art as a super-serious business scares me into impotence", she admits, adding modestly, "If you treat it like this incredibly serious business, the first thing that you have to do is admit that you absolutely suck and that you'll never get anywhere."

The real impetus in Yuskavage's work seems to be the need to expose the self as necessarily failed and foul in order to properly celebrate identity. As for her use of predominantly sexual imagery, she admits that, "Sex is shame, power, powerlessness, and it's the most direct and convenient way to embarrass myself."

Through self-exposure and the admission of not always being a happy, shiny person, Yuskavage's work is a portrait of our times as a world of optimistic self-loathing, an expression of the complex range of negative and positive emotions that we all feel. That is the tellingly universal quality to her work. Or, as she puts it, "I think that there is something nicely ordinary about what I do." ★

Lisa Yuskavage is at the Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva, May 17 until August 26



Lisa Yuskavage, Northview, 2000, courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery