

Juan Uslé at John Good

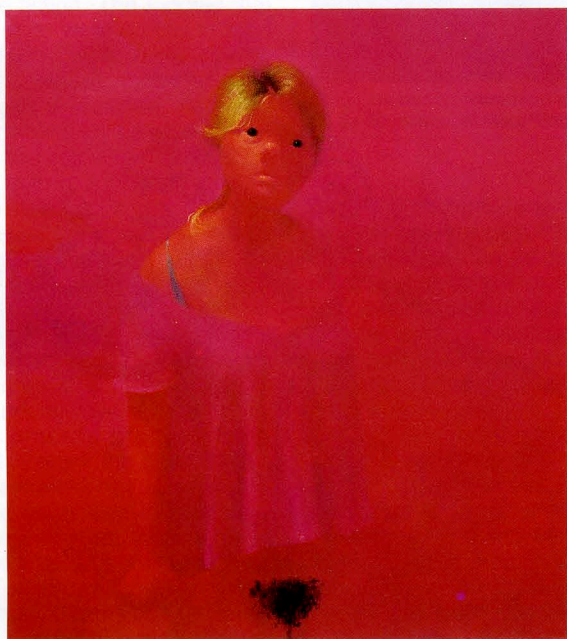
The Spanish painter Juan Uslé first garnered widespread attention in this country in 1990 through a series of group exhibitions, the best known of which was "Painting Alone," curated by Rainer Crone and David Moos at Pace. Most of the large abstract paintings in that show were monumentally fey, catalogues of effects obtainable by letting drizzly paint do its thing guided by little other than gravity. An air of metaphysical resignation hung over the entire enterprise, as though the artists had painted in a swoon. Uslé did not stand out in that wan company, I'm afraid, but in the last three years he has emerged as a painter with an arsenal of compositional tactics, and as a boisterous colorist. His recent solo exhibition at John Good indicated a substantial talent at work.

The full range of Uslé's sensibility appeared to be on view in this affably overhung show. There were three distinct types of paintings at least partially structured by the grid. In small vertical canvases iconic cruciform shapes are established by striated horizontal bands of paint staggered along a central fissure or a centered vertical band. The second group, with perhaps the most satisfying works, are large vertical paint-

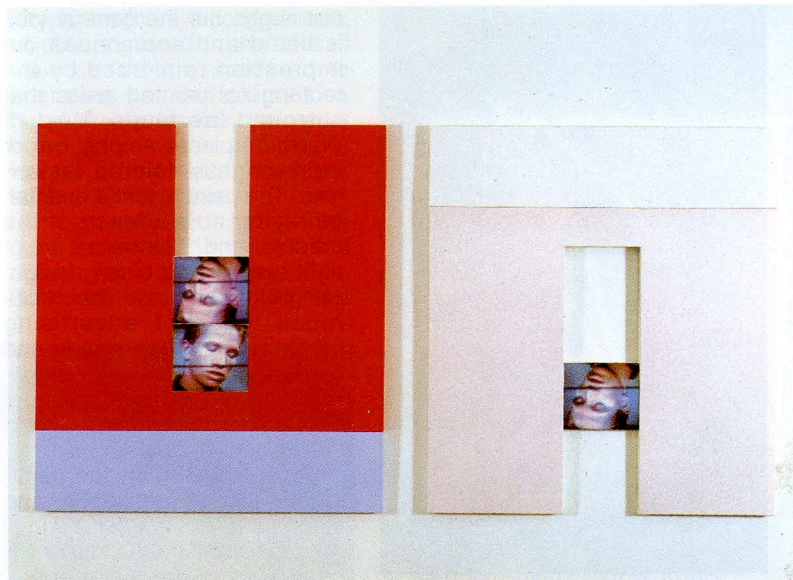
ings in which a plaid grid deepens in complexity through both linear and planar overlay and masking. The color schemes are more complex in these works, and Uslé introduces diagonal compositional elements along with asymmetrical balancings of light and dark masses. More problematic are horizontal paintings in which the overlay of textures and colors becomes clogged.

There was a fourth category of paintings, one in which the grid played no part at all. These intensely colored, loosely biomorphic gestural paintings suggest a strong link to Miró. The influence of Miró is also clear in the matte fluidity of Uslé's paint. Combined with his delicacy of touch, however, is a crispness and geometric attenuation in his drawing that invokes another countryman, Picasso. It's rare to see the styles of historical figures absorbed into a late Modernist pictorial vocabulary without an ironic sense of appropriation that is ultimately deflating. Perhaps Uslé was able to accomplish it because his paintings reach out of themselves to evoke a feeling of contemporary place—in his case the compartmentalized hurly-burly and geometricized solitudes of urban life, happily warmed by the late-afternoon light of a sunny disposition.

—Stephen Westfall



Lisa Yuskavage: *Bad Baby I*, 1991, oil on linen, 34 by 30 inches; at Elizabeth Koury.



Julia Wachtel: *We Won the Cold War*, 1992, acrylic and screen ink on canvas, 50½ by 95 inches; at American Fine Arts. (Review on p. 106.)

Lisa Yuskavage at Elizabeth Koury

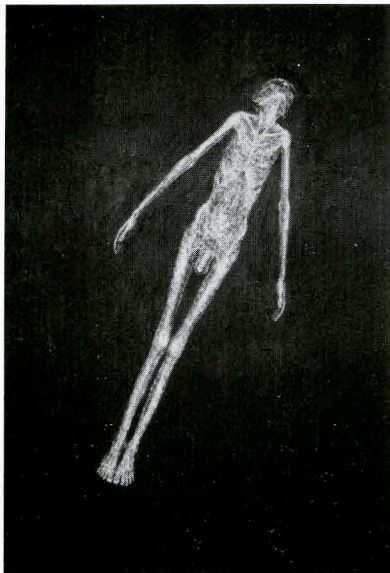
The pubescent girls in Lisa Yuskavage's paintings are a feather's breadth away from childhood, but their full breasts, naked or pressing against flimsy fabric, and hairy tufts conspicuous below immodest T-shirts, suggest an unchildlike sexual potential. Yuskavage showed them in a first solo exhibition in January. The girls are presented one to a canvas, isolated in jarring, unnatural colors. This seclusion, along with the girls' general passivity and sexual precocity, conveys the impression that they are undergoing a secret violation right before the eyes of a disturbingly implicated viewer. Dark little eyes stare out as if from the faces of sad Pillsbury Dough-Boys. In these days of proliferating child-abuse scandals, Yuskavage's paintings present a certain weird topicality. But their ambivalent construction of desire, along with a wonderfully inappropriate dark humor, complicates the interpretation.

In the works belonging to the first two groups in this series—"The Ones Who Shouldn't" and "The Ones Who Can't"—the girls seem particularly helpless: their arms, for example, are invisible. *The Ones Who Shouldn't: The Gifts* shows a girl reminiscent of Courbet's *Woman in the Waves*. Her pink breasts ride frothy, stylized waves, and a gaudy, artificial

flower has been stuck into her mouth. Clearly, she is to be seen and not heard. A meek resistance sneaks into the third series, "The Ones Who Don't Want To." *Bad Baby II*, for instance, ineffectually tugs at her shirt to pull it over her naked sex, and *Bad Baby I* clenches her fist.

The vivid ambients comprise closely related hues that play upon an absence of discrete boundaries. The girls' scanty garments, or their color-lit skins, are frequently so coloristically like their surroundings that it is difficult to tell where the ground ends and the figure begins. Hyper-charged in colors normally associated with visual pleasure, the paintings slowly reveal their compromising subject matter, but only after the visual seduction is underway. Scopophilia alone cannot account for the accusatory power these color-saturated nymphets turn against whoever attempts to seize them, if only by sight.

In her sexy watercolors, which were shown in a smaller gallery at Elizabeth Koury, Yuskavage has formulated an original viewpoint that feels distinctly feminine. She calls this series "Tit Heaven" for the plump breasts that emerge like hallucinations in the skies of lugubrious, piney landscapes or among cornucopias of voluptuous fruit. Any glistening curved surface in these moist environments promises a breast or



Natan Nuchi: *Untitled*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 108 by 68 inches; at Klarfeld Perry.

buttock, any highlight a sexual emission. One Arcimboldo-like matrix places the viewer at the opening of leglike swaths of fruit. They converge on a suggestively slit orb, as a seductive eye peers from above materializing belly and breast forms. Something delectable is out there in the greenish mists. These works are felt from within a haptic multiplicity of pleasure points, in a manner inimical to phallic singularity. Yuskavage's *Tit Heaven* offers pleasure without complications, and an alternative to the psychological dilemmas of jailbait.

—Faye Hirsch

Julia Wachtel at American Fine Arts

Julia Wachtel's previous paintings used cartoon images taken from kitschy greeting cards, offering both a critique and apotheosis of American bad taste. In her latest works, Wachtel has moved from cornball to cool. The seven paintings in this exhibition each place a silk-screened photographic image of a face within a Minimalist abstract painting. The faces are photographed from the television screen during talk shows, with the horizontal line of the TV roll bifurcating the image. Sometimes the face is presented twice, with one of the abutting images turned upside down.

Occasionally, as in *Massapequa*, the facial expression is

distraught, but the general look is bland and anonymous, an impression reinforced by the rectangular painted areas that surround the faces. Most of Wachtel's pieces employ two or three brightly colored rectangles. The paint is matte and flat, betraying no evidence of the artist's hand. This is an art of right angles and clean design, with nothing messy. The colors recall those of advertising brochures, annual reports and corporate trademarks. *Doughnutville*, for example, features the orange and pink hues used by the Dunkin' Donuts chain.

For all their color, the paintings are oddly antiseptic, and titles such as *Another Year at the Mall* and *I'm OK, You're OK* contribute to the air of ennui. Wachtel seems to suggest that our individual triumphs and tragedies have been reduced to fodder to be cast into the maw of network TV. She no doubt sees her work as a critique and exposé of the superficiality of American culture. The danger here is that, just as you can't burlesque burlesque, it's hard to deliberately ape a banal image without similarly inducing boredom. Wachtel's paintings are sociologically apt but not esthetically interesting. She makes her point, but the images don't remain in the viewer's memory.

—Reagan Upshaw

Natan Nuchi at Klarfeld Perry

Nuchi's is an art set drastically apart from school, fashion or trend. His untitled canvases are mournfully simple in their structure, one which he repeats mercilessly: within dimensions that can run to 120 by 67 inches floats a skeletal, bald, elongated male figure, seen in profile or facing the viewer. The figure—painted in dark-hued acrylics—glows almost phosphorescently against slightly mottled, otherwise all-over black grounds. The viewer is forced to confront, repeatedly, Nuchi's uncompromising visions of mortal decline and decay, emaciation and near-death.

Nuchi, who was born in Israel in 1941, has lived in the U.S. since '74. His work has always been figurative. Until the mid-'80s, he was making reliefs of paper and wood that incorporated life-size figures, many maimed (one, for instance, with

half a leg and half an arm) or otherwise afflicted; inscriptions in Hebrew read "enigma/hero." By '85 he was painting much as he does now, but "enigma" is still a key word for his seldom-shown oeuvre. What can one make of a near-skeleton, floating slightly downward, eyes funereally closed, skin-and-bone arms rigid at his side, penis and scrotum intact in the darkness as poignantly obscene appendages? Nuchi gives no explanations, but, considering his background, one can't help but see the work as Holocaust-inspired, the grisly figures totems of death-camp existence.

The figure may also lie backward or float upright, arms drawn over his chest, or drift with his head thrown back and arms akimbo. The fact that these positionings vary suggests that he is still, somehow, alive—or has been resurrected via the giant scale and sere, colorless acrylics Nuchi employs in the work. Such corporeal remains could legitimately be interpreted not only as victims of the Holocaust, but finally as ciphers of the ultimate human condition. In any case, one is forcibly struck by the dark compassion that Nuchi brings to his depictions of the living dead, and the relentless memorialization that, at times, borders on the *terribilità* of the esthetic sublime. His vision amounts to a nihilistic humanism, a black spiritual

dynamism in the face of death and the horrifying portion of human nature that has brought about so much death. It's a grim vision indeed, but one that suggests that a face-off with our deepest dreads can yield unremittingly cathartic effects.

—Gerrit Henry

Al Loving at June Kelly

The current enthusiasm for cool, distanced, conceptual strategies threatens at times to transform abstract painting into a purely cerebral undertaking. Al Loving reminds us of the pleasures to be found in visual seduction. His paintings—actually collages of painted paper mounted on Plexiglas—are pulsating tapesries woven from whiplash lines, colorful scroll forms and an occasional straight line. Set slightly out from the wall, they glow with brilliant color while incorporating the shadows behind them as part of their careening, shifting energy.

In their compositional complexity and their reliance on basic forms like the spiral and the rectangle, these works bring to mind the wall constructions of Frank Stella. There is an essential difference, however. Stella's works, for all their glitter and neon colors, maintain a certain austerity. Clearly removed from nature, they celebrate their artifice, and the occasional touches of handwork seem more parodic



Al Loving: *Wythe Street*, 1992, painted collage mounted on Plexiglas, 80 by 86 inches; at June Kelly.