

Art

Female Trouble

A plea for an art world star to return to her dirty-secret past



Women on the
verge: *Painted
Things*, 2006

David Zwirner Gallery

Lisa Yuskavage
David Zwirner
525 West 25th Street
Through November 18

Zwirner & Wirth
32 East 69th Street
Through November 18

BY JERRY SALTZ

Lisa Yuskavage's new color-infused paintings of naked sloe-eyed girls with melon-like breasts, erect nipples, and contorted bodies have the presence of lap dances. While they're alluring and taboo, they are also self-conscious, extremely calculated, and repetitive. Women who work in strip clubs tell themselves they're "turning the tables on men" and that they "have the power"; the men, meanwhile, pretend the lap dance is a chaste way of "not having sex with that woman." As one lap dancer recently put it in *The Guardian*, "There's no intimacy. One person is there because they're being paid; the other is paying for sexual kicks."

This is happening with Yuskavage's recent work. Not only is it becoming repetitious, but Yuskavage is using women as bait. This is fine; all is fair in love and

war and art. The problem is, her viewers aren't taking away anything other than momentary kicks. Gone are the satire, irony, cruelty, joy, ferocity, self-doubt, awkward sexuality, and the other wonderfully unresolved darker feelings about lust, gender, and power that once fueled Yuskavage's portraits of femmes fatales, ugly ducklings, and imperfect monsters. The artist Nancy

Spero once talked about wanting to use women's bodies to transcend the male idea of women in a man-controlled world. Yuskavage's recent paintings are doing the exact opposite: They're just reinforcing those ideas.

Yuskavage is now a star. Her work sells at auction for a million dollars; she is featured in this month's *W*; the current issue of *Vanity Fair* calls her a "supernova." But before 2001, Yuskavage's work was rawer, funnier, more abstract and wicked. She was adept at casting classic types—the blonde, the brunette, the redhead—and giving you just enough information to trigger conflicting thoughts. She mined unpopular graphic styles like *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and Laura Ashley catalogs. Her color was less programmatic and more gaudy. Her subjects were skittish, in-your-face, latent, and blatant.

Back then, Yuskavage painted women masturbating, with bushy pudenda, and with their legs spread so wide it was almost embarrassing to look at her work. She rendered voluptuaries lifting their blouses to expose pendulous breasts, and freakish beanpoles regarding their bodies with wonder, shame, emptiness, and bliss. If a man had made these paintings he might have been kicked out of the art world. But something about the anger, insight, abjectness, and self-love/hate told you that this work wasn't painted by a man. This was 19th-century salon painting via Vargas, Russ Meyer, Maxfield Parrish, Botero, romance novels, kitsch, Hallmark greeting cards, Celestial Seasonings packaging, fantasy, folklore, horror, and history. Yuskavage had a huge ambition; she wanted everyone to look at these slow-burn paintings.

Unfortunately, everyone—including, I think, Yuskavage—has now shifted the discussion away from the uncomfortable sexuality and psychology presented in these works toward something more palatable and polite. Instead of being about sex, dirty secrets, doubt, and storm-tossed desire, the conversation around Yuskavage's work has devolved into a totally bogus discourse about skill. Because the subject matter is no longer embarrassing, tantalizing, or repellent, everyone has fallen back on the infinitely inane, absolutely empty incorrect

cliché: "She paints so skillfully."

Obviously, Yuskavage has skill. Like her colleague John Currin—who is often compared to Botticelli, Cranach, and Dürer—Yuskavage, who has been likened to Vermeer, Raphael, and Bellini, is a solid painter. But "skill" shouldn't just mean being competent or being able to render the figure realistically; it's nowhere near as important in art as originality, surprise, obsession, experimentation, the willingness to publicly embarrass oneself, and something visionary. Skill is about being flexible and creative. Until recently, in fact, Yuskavage's strength wasn't her "skill" at all: It was her weird way of making everything into a cartoon and exploding stereotypes.

At her exhibit in Chelsea, Yuskavage gives us 10 paintings of women either alone or in pairs; uptown there are a batch of better, smaller paintings. Downtown you might momentarily think, "Oh, these are different aspects of the same woman." For me, the glimmer of hope in the Chelsea show is that while I don't like these paintings, I like some of the things I find myself thinking about while not liking them. First is her rococo-meets-sicko-luminist color. Yuskavage dips into a seedy Fragonard palette of pinks and yellows. Then there's the nicely dicey relationship in her work between photography, observation, and imagination.

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Finally, I admire that Yuskavage paints with a hook. This is a very mid-1990s thing, but good or bad she can almost always make you look, however briefly.

The downside to the downtown show is that's almost all that's happening. You look briefly, then the paintings turn into one-liners masquerading under heavy glazes. Worse, however, some of the better paintings look too much like her compatriot, Currin, who is now deploying skill in far more complicated ways while taking you to ever more twisted and challenging psychic and stylistic places.

In 1996, I saw a Yuskavage still life that revealed a lurking problem in her paintings. Without the hook of the women, it seemed as if Yuskavage's work could someday just look like brainy calendar art. That's beginning to happen. Yuskavage's ambition is fierce; her imagination is inventive; her dexterous hand and wily color can be weapons again. But she must transcend the market's definition of skill and stop using her women mainly as punchlines and come-ons.

Around the Corner
Orchard
47 Orchard Street
Through December 17

Time Machine

Viewing the Lower East Side through a slow-motion lens

This stinging, typically smart, if a bit dry, group show at Orchard looks at art, the Lower East Side neighborhood, and the gallery itself. It examines some of the effects that gentrification has had here over the last 100 years, and how this now hip gallery might be contributing to the situation.

The work on view reads like a memento mori and an evidence file. Whether you call this art taxonomical, indexical, evidentiary, or just cataloging, it expresses strong emotions about place and time. Fifty-two-year-old German photographer Petra Wunderlich presents 12 black-and-white photographs, all the same size, all shot on the Lower East Side, of former and current synagogues. She's a latter-day Atget documenting the disappearing city by way of the just-the-facts Bechers. The pictures show how buildings are boarded up, graffitied over, even converted into Buddhist temples. Zoë Leonard presents 12 color dye transfer prints of idiosyncratic Lower East Side storefronts. In little display windows we see piles of sweaters, furniture, and fabric samples, as well as signs for cold beer and tax/divorce lawyers. It's a form of installation and folk art that also

touches on the survival of the weakest.

The canny organizer of this show, Christian Philipp Müller, 49, plans to give walking tours of the neighborhood in which he'll highlight artists' homes, including the domiciles of Dan Graham, Milton Resnick, and Ken Jacobs. Jacobs himself has three amazing film trailers on view in the gallery. One of them offers footage shot in the 1950s and offers the saint of the Lower East Side himself, Jack Smith, wearing cellophane angel wings as he zips around an unsuspecting passerby.

The weird thing about this show is that it makes you see the world through a slow-motion lens. You glean how certain neighborhoods—especially this one—are slipping away and turning into something different. It also makes you realize that as a viewer at Orchard you're a part of that process. **JERRY SALTZ**