

Drawing Room

John Morris
D'Amelio Terras
525 West 22nd Street
Through October 3

Stay-at-home artists, introverted, obsessive, and a bit batty, are stepping into the limelight, with work that harkens back to a handmade era and looks forward to an increasingly digitized world. John Morris appears to be one of their number. This self-taught artist, a 33-year-old resident of Queens, makes his debut with an exhibition, at once vast and scaled down, of six years' worth of drawings (his entire oeuvre) in two rooms at D'Amelio Terras.

Laid out on tables, each accompanied by its own glassine envelope, these small works are displayed like specimens of nature. Drawn and stamped with wax crayon, graphite, ink, and colored pencil, each offers a microcosm of lines, dots, ellipses, and circles, in delicately mutating color—pale yellows, milky whites, aqua blues. At once organic and unearthly, Morris's drawings seem like fragments that have floated free from a parallel universe. Singly, they're cause to linger, but their greatest resonance lies in relation to one another, in series that recall the rhythms of architecture or musical composition.

The artist cites Bach and Klee as influences, but his strange harmonies also draw upon unconscious memories of the hand and body. His few titles are taken from the names of start-up computer companies (*Radiant Systems* or *Concentric Network*, for example) or their stock-market ticker-tape numbers, and he sometimes dedicates drawings to capitalists and entrepreneurs, revealing an interest in self-propelled and proliferating structures. A cosmographer, his work tends toward those remote regions where intimate cellular structure echoes the patterning of the universe. Yet it can also seem as subtly imperceptible and personal as a fingerprint. Amid the noisy commotion of the season's opening in Chelsea, this quiet show commands attention in the manner of a whisper.

—LESLIE CAMHI

Purple Nipple

Lisa Yuskavage
Marianne Boesky Gallery
51 Greene Street
Through October 10

BY PETER
SCHJELDAHL

Lisa Yuskavage is an extravagantly deft painter in oils of cartoonish, often anatomically impossible bimbos, nymphets, and other female travesties with hyper-charged libidos and the self-esteem of cat litter. Most are young, but even the more adult ones ooze moist innocence. They would be pathetic if we could pity them or contemptible if we could scorn them. As it is, the paintings rule out such comfortable responses. To behold Yuskavage's creatures is to dive into an existential soup with them.

Yuskavage's pictorial universe, an important development in recent art, seems suffused with oddly passive loathing. Like static electricity, the work's grotesquerie yields voltage without amperage—an energy that causes shocks when touched by the mind but that can't be drawn off to turn on bright-idea light-bulbs. As for standard checklists of gender issues and so on, the critic Lane Relyea has said it well: "To attribute a critical position to Yuskavage's canvases seems a cowardly response, like reining in outlaws by deputizing them."

The intelligent way to look at this art is dumbly.

Dumb, in fraught kinds of ways, is how Yuskavage's characters look, though plenty smart is how she paints them. See, for instance, pubescent *Big Little Laura*, wearing a girly barrette and a spiked dog collar, gawk into an effusion of heavenly light. She has a red bead in place of an undeveloped breast. The background is a quilted, beaded yellow fabric, suggesting a padded cell in a fabulously expensive madhouse. Look closely at Laura's eye: two minuscule strokes of pale orange account for a "glazed" expression that gives the whole painting its wacked-out emotional tone.

The artist says that all of her personae are partial self-portraits sprung loose by her interminable psychoanalysis with a woman shrink whose physiognomy makes guest appearances in the paintings—most often with a button nose whose local nuances range from pert to piggyish. The gallery announcement for this show is a photograph of Yuskavage's profile in silhouette, her own nose bent back with (I am told) tape.

Yuskavage's theater of the self points to Philip Guston and Cindy Sherman, among other artistic forebears. What's new about it is a blazing, steely clarity in realms of lugubrious, molten feeling—the keynote of a tough-minded current revival of Surrealism by painters including Yuskavage's friend and former classmate at

panting purples, hot pinks.

I swooned at Yuskavage's cunning light effects in a painting called *Honeymoon*. Vaguely evoking Disneyish high-end animation, this work concerns a long-haired girl in an open robe who

They seem nice sorts who have sexuality as others have the Ebola virus.

Is this why Yuskavage's art feels so timely? Today more and more people try to maintain decent principles for and about sex, and what happens? Sex goes click-clack like a Japanese Transformer toy and stomps all over everybody's peace of mind, not to mention each morning's front pages. If you think that our society's burgeoning sexual angst isn't about you, too, you may have gone and had yourself presciently neutered.

Yuskavage, Currin, and their peers promote the wild wisdom that we must, finally and again, deal seriously with the bottomless givens of our nature. Moralistic and legalistic reductions of human motives have attained absurdity. Now we need credible public languages for raw private truths, at once untropical and very specific. The biggest artistic news of our day is the rediscovery of a nearly perfect language near at hand: painting.

Painting can square public with private experience like no other visual medium. Its main demands on an artist, in this pursuit, are only that he or she be, first, adequately skilled and, second, a sufficiently interesting person. We need to believe that every mark on the canvas is a decided, completed deed of hand and mind, capturing a vision and a sensibility and not just waving at them. If we feel that anything about the painting could reasonably have been done better or even differently, the game's over.

Is a painting off-putting in some way? This is all to the artistic good if we are confident that the painter knows exactly what we are looking at. The repulsive element then becomes the precise hint that, hardest to take, must be taken. It becomes a warranty of urgency and sympathy,

calling our own anxieties out to play. This is where being interesting comes in. It doesn't matter how well a tale is told, if the tale won't thrill.

Yuskavage passes these minimum tests of mastery. She does so with a strenuous determination that risks brittle, tiresome overemphasis. Her surreality is never safely remote from arbitrary freakiness. And now and then, overloaded with mannerisms, a picture will go stone dead. (See the one titled *Loved*.) Banking everything on the accuracy and honesty of her immediate idea, she courts failure that isn't just relative. This is exciting. Remember when contemporary art was an adventure? With the likes of Yuskavage around, it is adventurous again. **M**



Blazing, steely clarity in realms of lugubrious, molten feeling: *Honeymoon* (1998)

Yale University John Currin. Like Currin, she takes outrageous images as a basis for operations of astonishing aesthetic and psychological subtlety. For viewers, it's like being bopped with a bladder by a clown who turns out to be Immanuel Kant's smarter sibling.

Yuskavage's work is beautiful in the same way that it is dire: hanging fire, always incipient, deliberately never fulfilled. It can wear you out with unconsummated pleasure. Like Rembrandt—with Giovanni Bellini, one of this sneaky savant's declared canonical heroes—she paints figures in shadowy atmospheres of chiaroscuro glazes ignited by expressive, daubed highlights. But her palette, even for shadows, is hardly Dutch: shrill golds,

kneels on a bed, backlit at a window that gives on a lusciously painted grisaille mountain range. Riveting is the tiniest flick of a highlight on a huge, upturning, purple nipple. That's right, I said a huge, upturning, purple nipple, which furthermore appears to be made of some translucent, hardened gel.

Yuskavage's figures broadcast crazed sexual signals, but they are too bizarrely synthetic to be even remotely pornographic. Arousal is another content, like loathing and beauty, that raises a mysterious rumpus just offstage. Yuskavage delivers husky undertones of erotic mystery in a grating, forget-about-it squeal. Not only nipples perk violently. So do those noses. Meanwhile, the characters radiate wistful vulnerability.

ROBIN HOLLAND