

Painting as Cerebral Cheesecake

TIT FOR TAT

LISA YUSKAVAGE

Marianne Boesky
535 West 22nd Street
Through February 3

In the race for the most obnoxious female figuration, Lisa Yuskavage's luscious paintings of preternaturally endowed, pug-nosed nymphets run neck and neck with John Currin's equally brain-dead curvaceous cuties. Like Currin, Yuskavage calls upon a spurious Old Mastericity to buttress a taste for less exalted pretensions—chief among them the kitschy delusion of ersatz painterly grandeur. It's an unbeatable concoction, a skillful cerebral cheesecake that can put you in awe of the zonked-out, zipless technique. It can also make you wonder whether her gnomish chicks with jugs personify the male gaze by embodying its ideal object, or deconstruct the archetypal male fantasy of

the perfect plaything: younger, dumber, smaller, and more vulnerable than thou.

More to the point, perhaps, Yuskavage's gnarly darlings also internalize the stereotypical female condition. They exude a budding love-hate relationship with themselves that's equal parts mental inadequacy, physical distortion, erotic power, and aimless arousal. Absorbed in self-loathing and self-adoration, clad in little more than thongs and garters, these misshapen heroines mope and preen in a rosy bordello glow of tacky-tufted luxury. They're swathed in the lurid autistic haze of some smarmy romance novel, vicarious bearers of a slew of ambiguities.

We keep falling for Yuskavage's tricks, because the works are at once vulgar, beautiful, and oblivious—an irresistible combination. The artist cites Giovanni Bellini and other immortals as role models. But her art has more to do (culturally and/or coloristically) with Harry Cipriani's peachy fizz, the magazine *Jugs*, feminist scripture, tarted-up artiness, and maybe, in terms of sheer luminosity, Georges de La Tour. Like Currin's, her growing body of work isn't pure and simple political incorrectness. It's a mannered engine of ambivalence. —Kim Levin