

On the occasion of her solo show at David Zwirner, on view till March 28, 2009, the painter Lisa Yuskavage paid a visit to the *Rail's* Headquarters to talk to Publisher Phong Bui about her current work.

Phong Bui (Rail): I read that right after your first one-person show at Pamela Auchincloss Gallery in 1990, during which time you didn't paint for one whole year, you read Patricia Bosworth's unauthorized biography of Diane Arbus. Somewhere in the book, she said in reference to her work, "I really believe there are things that nobody would see unless I photograph them," which affected you deeply. Could you talk more about that?

Lisa Yuskavage: I didn't like any of those paintings in the show. But after getting depressed, I realized there was a personal need to see something that would be created only for myself, no one else. I really needed to make works that revealed that sense of urgency, and I didn't care what it was as long as it could come out of that urgency. It's what one would call inevitability. We don't even know that the inevitability exists until you make things that are purposeless but nevertheless inevitable. Diane Arbus's urgency is part of what comes across in those pictures.

Rail: And that inevitability compels different readings, interpretations, or criticisms. Especially when it is created by a woman and deals with the fairly provocative subject matter of sexuality in painting. Western erotic art had always been about nude women that were made by and for men; Linda Nochlin wrote brilliantly in the early 70s about the general social expectations against women seriously pursuing art. In the 80s the NEA attempted to censor Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, and many others who were famously inflammatory. As far as women painters who have been similarly controversial, I would only count a handful, besides you, including Jenny Seville, Cecily Brown, etc.

Yuskavage: Artists of my generation came up right after that NEA episode and I knew there was not a chance in hell I was going to be supported by the government, nor did I ever have that expectation. I expected the opposite. When I decided to stop painting as a result of trying too hard to make a likable gourmet object. I had some dumb idea about what my relationship was supposed to be to painting; great painting was at the top, and I was at the bottom. Painting was big, and strong, among other things, and I needed to get on top of it. I needed to beat it down and say, "No, I'm the top." So how do I do that? I'm sure that any serious painter has to do somewhat the same thing.

Rail: Not an easy task!

Yuskavage: The first thing is to stop going in the wrong direction. When you put yourself in the position where you have nothing left to lose, and you get angry enough, you can decide to make paintings with all that anger. I am happily in touch with my anger, but then I've got to be careful. It's not good enough to just be in touch with it like serial killers are in touch with their anger. It's not enough to say, "I'm in touch with it! And I'm gonna share that with everybody!" You have to direct it creatively.

Rail: Anger can give you serious energy as long as you know what to do with it.

Yuskavage: You know the best stand-up comics are the angry ones.

Rail: Absolutely. That's when it turns to humor.

Yuskavage: Yeah, so for me, I recognized that painting is a limitless, layered, complex place where I could put my aggression or my love in the color, in the form, in the composition, and so on.

Rail: Since we're talking about anger in comics, your painting, "PieFace," has the same association.

Yuskavage: I knew the day would come when I would have to talk about that. [Laughs.] Well, first things first, many great comics are Canadian. I love their sense of humor. I think I must have been Canadian in my last life.

Rail: In fact, the film director who invented slapstick comedy was a Canadian, Mack Sennett. His films were known for their wild car chases and pie throwing.

Yuskavage: Pie-ing is an act of bringing someone off his or her pedestal. Jean-Luc Godard got pied, and he considered it a great privilege. Whereas people like Ann Coulter got pied, and didn't take it too well. Unlike shoe-ing, which we all know from Bush's final visit to Iraq, egg-ing, and a number of other things you can throw, pie-ing, apparently, still does not bring a very severe



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

penalty, partly, I suspect because the judges just crack up. They sort of giggle, like, "You got pied?" Because, unlike shoe-ing, unlike egg-ing, it's associated with comedy. It's both violent protest and comedy at the same time. Actually I had been thinking about painting it for five years. I think about things a long time before I do anything. At some point I started to look it up on the web, and I discovered there was this whole category called "Messy Fun," which is about people who like to throw food at each other as a way of getting sexual kicks. It's not something I was interested in, but I came across this person who had a whole website built around his obsession. At first I painted him, but then it seemed too sad, this overweight person dressed as a woman getting pied. It became less profound. Even though his performance was profound, my painting of his performance was not. So I moved on. I did it of somebody else, and it became better. Then I thought, "How do you develop it as an extreme lot of wrong?" You know that expression, "a whole lot of wrong"?

Rail: Yeah.

Yuskavage: Does a whole lot of wrong make a right? I was very interested in testing the boundaries of what's wrong, and keeping it within the pictorial. Painting, as you know, is a very conservative medium, and I embrace a lot of the conservative aspects of painting; I'm neither trying to work on shaped canvases, nor cut holes into the surface, etc. But then, how do you push it near to absurdity, and is it still painting? Apparently Jackson Pollock used to say to Lee Krasner about his work, "But, Lee, is it a painting?" And so I thought, well how do I do this, and say, "Is this even a painting? What the hell am I looking at here?" And the danger is that maybe you went too far, maybe you sunk too low, or it's all wrong. I am willing to accept the fact that at the end of the day, whenever that day is, it may be a complete disaster. Taking that chance inspires me. But then the ability to identify the problems in your paintings also depends on your willingness to make failed paintings: a painting is as interesting as its problems.

Rail: That's the thing about struggling; it can easily be misread when you're not that introspective. For instance, de Kooning was once walking down the street

with Rudy Burckhardt and some angry young painter came up to him and said, "Mr. de Kooning, how do you like it when everyone's painting like you?" referring to the third generation Abstract Expressionist painters. De Kooning responded, rather calmly, "Well, it's not my problem. They could always paint the good de Koonings, but they could never paint the bad ones."

Yuskavage: That's so true, because the good work solves the problems and never repeats the same solutions. That's what's juicy for me in painting, is that moment when something clicks and the painting yields its solution. Pictorial solutions come to me, but you have to be in a clear state of mind to be able to see it. Because who the hell knows what it is? It's never the same.

The "PieFace" image doesn't come from any one place. The gesture in the neck and shoulder was based on the beheading of Nick Berg by Islamic militants in 2004. I was in Rome at the time, and saw the whole thing on Italian TV. He made a gesture of being tickled when the cold steel of the sword touched his neck. What was so interesting was living in Rome and you're looking at these images of martyrdom in old paintings and all of a sudden it's on the nightly news. You see that what is considered ancient is not ancient at all. Seeing that beheading reminded me of Caravaggio's "The Martyrdom of St. Matthew," at San Luigi dei Francesi. I've seen this painting at least forty times, and after Nick Berg's murder I saw the axe in the painting so much more clearly.

Then her boobs, which are like water balloons, came from another found thing. The color is totally invented in order to set up the cream. So from this to that, you have the whole drama of the painting. As for the background, I just wanted it to stay as background so it doesn't take away from the strength of the singular and centralized image. This idea of being mean and being cruel is in here. I'm not avoiding that, but there is a certain kind of covert Expressionism.

Rail: In spite of the fact that she is both seductive and apologetic at the same time. It's kind of a strange picture.

Yuskavage: And if somebody said, "That was the worst painting made in the year 2008," I'd say, "Fine." But it is an important painting for me. Needing to be liked is very weak. We don't work in the corporate world. Of course it's lovely when people like your paintings—but it's the best when you're appreciated on your own terms. I remember reading in Bette Davis's biography (she's one of my favorite actors), that when she was once asked about the great secrets of her success she said, "to suppress the desire to be loved by the audience," and "brown mascara."

Rail: I agree. Did you begin to paint in high school?

Yuskavage: Sort of. I went to Philadelphia High School for Girls, which was a good school. I was very well educated academically, but I wanted to become an artist badly. They didn't have a good art program so in my third year of high school I said to my mother, "I need to go to art school, but I don't think I'm getting enough information at this school," since the art teacher, who didn't like me, was teaching jewelry and other craft-related techniques. Somehow, to her credit, she found the Tyler School of Art Summer Program, which was quite amazing because my parents didn't have any money, but she gave me a blank check and I took the bus out to Tyler and I ended up signing up for a drawing class, not a painting class as I originally intended, because the teacher was handsome. But, in the end, it ended up being a genius class. I didn't want it, but I got what I needed. So with that experience, I then applied to Tyler and I got in.

Rail: But even when that is the case, most artists we know, when they were young, including Philip Pearlstein, Andy Warhol, had to study other applied arts in order to make a living. Not like in the last two decades where young people thought of art as a potential career. Had you ever thought of, let's say, becoming an illustrator?

Yuskavage: No. I was lucky, I suppose. Even though my dad drove a delivery truck, and would leave the house at 11:30 every night and come home at noon the next day, he used to say to me, "Don't do anything you don't want to do. Do what you love, take a risk." So in that sense, and every other sense I really am indebted to him. I always assumed I would teach art, but could not get a real teaching job, so I found other ways to make money, such as life-guarding, teaching water-robics, and painting houses. But my favorite was teaching water-color in Central Park to retirees, which was a wonderful experience. I charged

them twenty-five dollars a day and we would meet at different locations in the park and pray it wouldn't rain. My parents' encouragement helped me have the guts early on to make some very tough paintings. I remember getting my first review, and while I was expecting some sturdy criticism of my painting, what I received was an attack on me personally. It took me a long time to realize that you can't serve up tough paintings and expect to be stroked back with a feather. I remember one review that said, "She thinks that we're all as thick-skinned as she is." It made me realize, "He's right. I kind of do." I expect myself to exercise emotional range and bring that into the paintings.

Rail: Which brings to mind your affinity with Guston, whose late paintings were always about mediating the subtle differences between the issues of good versus evil, figurative versus abstraction, and so on. I remember an episode that occurred while he was in the Coronary Care Unit at some hospital in Kingston, a psychiatrist would come around to check his psychological condition and began to ask him all sorts of questions about his past—this was told in his daughter Musa Mayer's book, *Night Studio*. Guston's response was, "You know what Rilke said on the subject." Obviously this psychiatrist had not read Rilke before. Guston continued, "Rilke said, on refusing to enter psychotherapy, 'I'm afraid if my devil leaves me, the angel will take flight as well.'"

Yuskavage: There's an incredible energy in that too, like we said before.

Rail: Yeah. And similarly, I always felt that, while Guston identified the use of the horizontal line with Morandi's eye-level tabletop, therefore making the forms so monumental—which is what you wrote in your tribute to his retrospective at the MET for the *Rail* in November issue of 2003—it was the late de Chirico that also had an impact on Guston.

Yuskavage: I totally agree. Those de Chirico paintings are not known or shown here in the U.S. at all. It's as if there is a ban on them.

Rail: I found your affinity for both Guston and de Chirico very telling because, not unlike you, they both had their differences with their critics. For de Chirico, it happened twice. In 1919 after he wrote the essay "Valori Plastici" (The Return of the Craft), he abruptly ended his metaphysical period in favor of—



"PieFace" (2008). Oil on linen. 48 x 40.25 x 2 inches. Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery.



"Reclining Nude" (2009). Oil on linen. 72 x 51 x 1.5 inches. Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery.

Yuskavage: —classical paintings.

Rail: Exactly, inspired mostly by Signorelli and Raphael. And then in 1939, he did it again by adopting a New Baroque style influenced by Rubens and late Renoir. As for Guston, we know of his legendary show at Marlborough in 1970, which consisted of those great paintings of hooded figures with truncated bodies, sometimes in cramped interiors.

Yuskavage: Like de Chirico's amazing and weird "I Gladiatori" paintings. The figures are all compressed against one another. He took great liberty not only in distorting the bodies physically, but also in the way he manipulated them plastically. Not to mention there is this homoerotic feeling about them. Unfortunately, it's not that easy to have an opportunity to see those paintings in person. What is so great about those paintings is that you think, "My God, I'm not even sure this is a good painting." It's like walking with smooth shoes on ice. It's so slippery, you really have to decide whether it's even art, let alone whether it's good or bad. Those piles of figures, even though we know they came from Signorelli, they're still his brilliant reinvention. If it continues to stimulate, then it's something. What I've learned as I've gotten older is to never doubt something that intrigues me.

Rail: At any rate, while looking at the pose of your "Reclining Nude" with her two hands leaning backward, and legs spread, one up, the other down, I thought of the Balthus painting, "Theresa Dreaming," from 1937, at the Met. The pose is of course reversed.

Yuskavage: If you stare at her crotch long enough, you imagine that you see a stain on her underpants. Maybe it's just the pentimenti. Hey Phong, you're not trying to link me with Balthus's perversions, are you? [Laughter.]

Rail: But that's the thing, I think one of the reasons why Balthus was never fully appreciated was partly because of the strong American puritanical view of sexuality. Very few care to know the reason why Balthus only illustrated the first half of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* for example.

Yuskavage: I have to say that—this is very subjective—but when we talk about Europe, especially in the past, we're talking about art that is made mostly for the upper classes. They were not trying to get the working class in the museums like we were and still are. Americans do not have that old and historical tradition like Europeans. You don't change class in America just by getting rich or going to college.

Rail: True. Let's go back to something you said earlier about your attraction to *Penthouse Magazine's* "Pet of the Month" from the 70s. You liked Bob Guccione's soft photographs because they reminded you of Vermeer's paintings, which is interesting because Guccione started out as a painter but had never trained as a photographer, so out of necessity, he applied his knowledge of painting to his photography. How would you otherwise describe the way you depict light in your painting?

Yuskavage: Light is an organizational tool for space. If you look at painting throughout the history of art, you can see how painters use light and lighting differently. When I made small sculptures out of Sculpy, which is a children's clay, back in 95, I wanted them to be white because I was thinking of Morandi's white bottles, painted under northern light. Tintoretto, on the other hand, in order to capture lighting, would make small wax maquettes and place them in candle light. I placed my sculptures under different conditions of light, until I felt the lighting was interesting to paint. But the bottom line is, as we know it: light and color and lighting is what dictates the space and mood of painting.

Rail: But the problem is, as we've been taught, either you model the form with gradation of tones or, if you want to use color, you have to break them down stroke by stroke, which was what the Impressionists did.

Yuskavage: Actually, you can do it through rendering with pure color and not just tone. It's called *contigismo* and was practiced by Michelangelo.

Rail: You model your forms with a very limited palette. Sometimes no more than two or three colors. Even if there are more colors, especially the ones with more complex interiors, they operate within a pervasive and monochromatic range of color. Is that a fair observation?

Yuskavage: There's a small painting of Vuillard's at the Met, which is painted within this chromatic range of green, and he managed to make such beautiful and intimate paintings, yet they're also very flat at the same time. Of course this is truer with his small paintings than with the bigger commissioned works. There's also a difference between colorful and color. When something has color, like in music, it has the right kind of pitch that makes the space function as a whole. In one of Rob Storr's essays on Guston, he wrote that Guston created his own personal set of primaries, from white, alizarin crimson, cadmium orange, to cadmium red medium or deep and permanent green. That was all he needed to use to make his space believable.

Rail: And the space in "Snowman," as believable as it is, the image of the naked baby in the cold, snowy landscape is very strange one indeed.

Yuskavage: That baby painted the whole show.

Rail: And how you contrast the baby, which is painted in color, with the rest of the painting's grayscale...

Yuskavage: I was always looking at Giorgione, especially "The Tempest". Not only was he able to integrate an ominous landscape with a gentle nude woman nursing her baby and the soldier standing on the left in the foreground, Giorgione essentially achieved a painting with no known iconography, which is a form known as "poesis." None of us will ever know what the hell is going on. It's that mystery that I love.

Rail: How about Beccafumi?

Yuskavage: I became more interested in Beccafumi after reading David Reed's essay, "Reflected Light: In Siena with Beccafumi" in *Arts Magazine* (March 1991), where he chose a group of paintings and analyzed their reflected light in relationship to highlights, shadows, silhouettes, and so on. And then when I went to Siena to look at those paintings at the Pinacoteca, what I discovered was that all the figures were up-modeled in color while their shadows were very murky.

Rail: They're so discordant against the surrounding architecture, and quite irrational and unbalanced in their compositions.

Yuskavage: And while I was there looking, the light bulb turned on in my head. I remembered David's continued list: sunrises, sunsets. And I realized that Guston, who was not exactly a painter of light, had painted sunrises, sunsets, and light bulbs as symbolic images. Like I said, when you love someone's work, you don't obviously take their whole vocabulary. You could only take one thing, and the rest should be left as theirs.

Rail: That's true. Did you read any art criticism while you were in school?

Yuskavage: Well, it was in my third year, 1983, after having spent a semester abroad, I went to drop/add and all the cool classes were taken, and the only class that was left was a class called "The History of Art Criticism." I took it and it turned out to be quite enjoyable; I took part two the next semester. The professor was Terry Dolan who is now the Dean of Tyler. We read everything starting with Plato up to the 20th century thinkers on art. One of the most resonant ideas that

came out of the class for me was Baudelaire's idea that art emanates from three points: the self or the personal, the outside world or contemporary life, and art or art history itself. And I still believe that triad to be true.

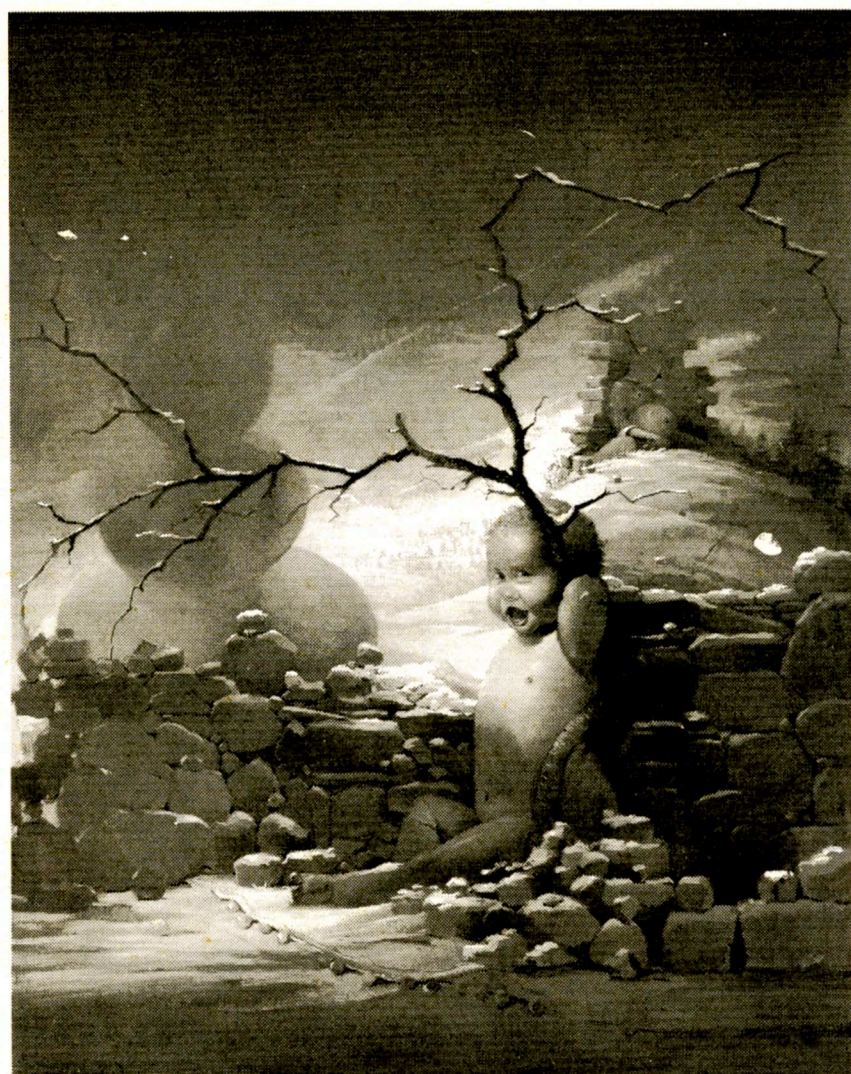
I also read Dr. Marcia Hall's book, which was not a critical take, but an historical look at color, which was also quite influential. The book is called *Color and Meaning: Practice and Theory in Renaissance Painting* (1991), and is very helpful in thinking about rendering with color. The problem with an art education of the latter half of the 20th Century for a figurative painter is that thinking about rendered space is not taught, so most of us had to teach ourselves through looking at painting. It was certainly true in my case. Part of the struggle is that there's so much information in the history of painting, you kind of have to ask yourself what and how you want to go about things that are important to the growth of your painting. To me, it was always about light, which involves colors and space. I see loads of connections, for example, between Caravaggio and Beckman, or between Fra Angelico and Monet.

Rail: Or Poussin or Cézanne, whom he loved.

Yuskavage: What I was really interested in is how you could push in all these different directions if you understand the system, which is where a lot of the playing with the small paintings comes in, until I gain some clarity before the big painting. I find it amazing how much I have access to things I already know, but to be focused enough to access all of it. Yes, it is the greatest pleasure when I can do it, when I'm there in my studio, and the fact that I can hear my inner voice that is so much smarter than I am.

Rail: How about the other "PieFace" in the interior with a rather aggressive yet erotic pose, as if she is urinating over the cushion? Yet, once she gets transposed to the outdoors, you painted her on top of a mountain, with her head up, looking like either a sacrificial bird on a nest or some sort of religious or mythological image; whether it evokes the image of the crucifixion or "Prometheus Bound," we're not so sure. But it's a very frightening image.

Yuskavage: All of those readings are very insightful and useful, and I certainly am aware of those subtle references. But what is also important to me is that you don't only reference high art. The only thing that I never want to do is to create these things and go, "Mmm, I am just so damn safe here; this is good, high-quality stuff." I like the idea that this all might be put in the crapper. I read Zadie Smith's really great lecture, *Speaking in Tongues*, which she gave at the New York Public Library, days after the election, about the role of uncertainty and the shifting ground that Barack Obama represents for her and for the country. Once I was asked to give a commencement address at Tyler, which was the hardest thing I ever did—I actually gave the money back because I was afraid that I did it so badly. I went out and I bought every book I could find about commencement addresses [laughter]. But in the end I felt incredibly depressed, because I was giving a commencement address to art students, and all these other commencement addresses are like, "you have this bright future," and "you're gonna go get 'em" and "you have this great degree," and here I am giving this commencement address to a bunch of unemployable people. So my commencement address was called *The Role of Uncertainty in the Life of*

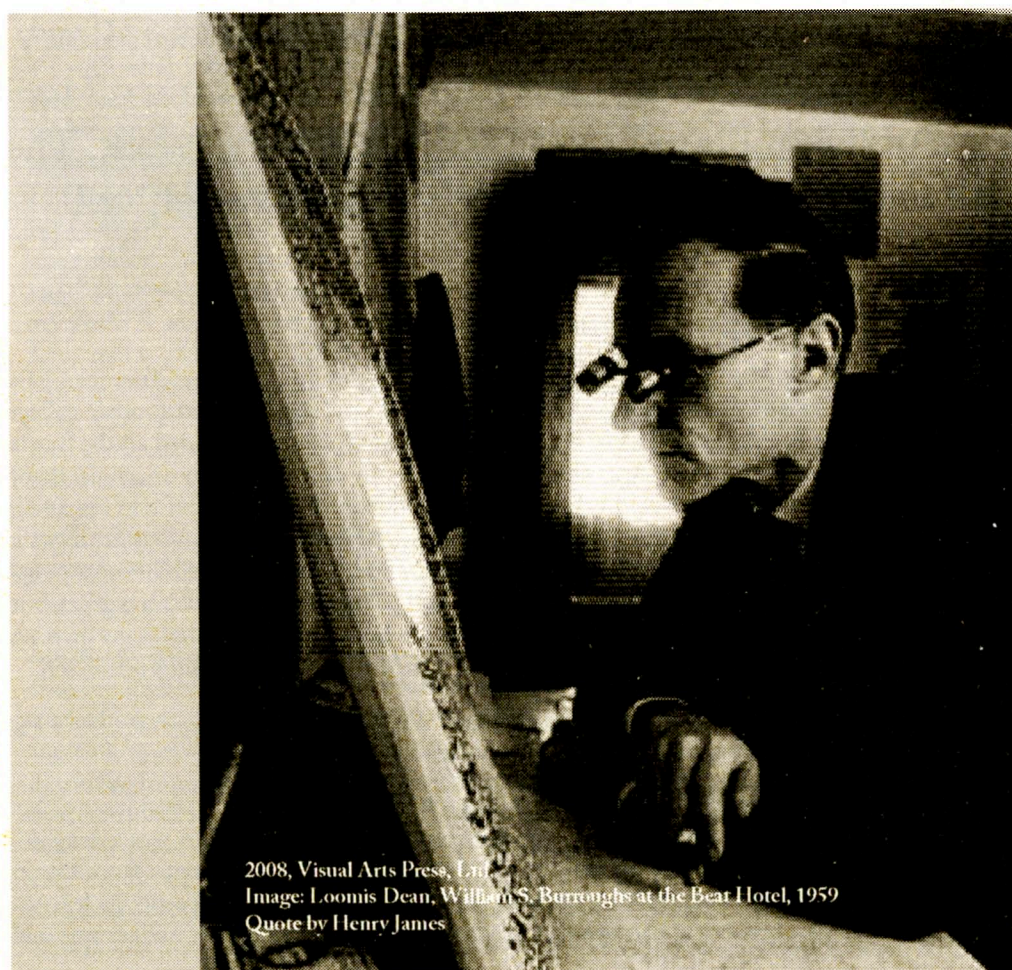


"Snowman" (2008). Oil on linen. 72 x 57.5 x 1.5 inches. Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery.

an Artist. The important thing right now is how we need to learn to live with uncertainty, with not being sure if what you're doing is any good. I don't care if you have retrospectives at some museums, it still might be terrible. Uncertainty may not be a prized and valuable attribute in American life, but it is probably one of the most important and valuable things that you can have as a human being. For sure, it is the one thing that you really need as an artist.

Rail: Do you think that you occupy a space that has not been previously occupied?

Yuskavage: Painters have to create space for themselves; they have to transform what others might see as an un-occupiable, two-dimensional, razor-thin line. By bringing their focus and their imagination closer and closer into it, that line potentially opens up and transforms itself into a gigantic cavern of space, in which there is endless potential. **BR**



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Image: Loomis Dean, William S. Burroughs at the Beat Hotel, 1959
Quote by Henry James

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