



lisa's women

PORTRAIT BY MARIO SORRENTI

These aren't your father's nudes. Painter **Lisa Yuskavage** has tarted up the classical genre—and has had a rip-roaring good time doing it.



HAIR BY DIDIER MALICE FOR FREDERIC FEKKAI; MAKEUP BY LINDA FAVALETTI; STYLING BY ANNE COVATTA; PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK



Lisa Yuskavage, an endearing jumble of earthy and motherly, feminine and bawdy, voluptuous and stout, is sitting in a café not far from her painting studio in downtown Manhattan and remembering the first time she was invited to lecture at her alma mater Tyler School of Art, outside Philadelphia, in the early Nineties. "I was like a pig in s---," she says, beaming. "I was so happy because I got to be a big-shot artist and talk about my work. So one of my teachers stood in front of the whole school and said, 'We all got together, the faculty, at the lunchroom, and we were trying to think of what to say. What was Lisa like as a student?' My memory of being

there was I worshipped them. I was happy every minute. I had a 4.0—oh, a 3.9. I screwed up one class when I was in Rome. I got a C- in printmaking. It was just too much work. But I was a total nerd. I didn't even relate to a lot of my peers because they were kind of goofing off, and I would be like, 'Shh!'"

So, Lisa, how did the teacher describe you? (Interrupting may be rude, but whip-smart and articulate though she is, the loquacious Yuskavage has a way of getting lost in her own stories.)

"The word they came up with was 'ornery,'" she says, crestfallen. "And I was so devastated, I almost couldn't talk. Ornery? That's a word my mother always used for me. I was in a panic because I had been revealed in a way that I didn't want to be revealed. And I remember thinking, Did they talk to my mother? Because it's a weird word, right? But maybe because I've been in therapy for so long, I have to take into account the fact that it keeps coming at me. And it's not a bad thing. Like, if your daughter was described as ornery, you'd maybe be a little proud, right? Because it means that she's not quite going along; she's feisty. See, that's the thing, my work is really not about going along."

Indisputably. In the history of art, no subject has captured the imagination quite the way the human body has. One could stroll through the Metropolitan Museum of Art and reasonably conclude that the ancient Greeks and Jews had yet to discover the practical benefits of clothing. With a few notable exceptions, including a couple of guys named David and Adam, those nudes have been predominantly of the female variety; their creators, male. One could also stroll down a beach pretty much anywhere other than Brazil and reasonably conclude that said male artists had been very forgiving in their renderings, employing brushstrokes that were a precursor to Photoshop.

Then there's Yuskavage, 44, whose canvases depict a very different version of the female form. Bulbous breasts pointing hither and yon, ample bottoms, splayed legs, obvious tan lines, fat squishing out over the armholes of sleeveless shirts—hers are not great beauties in the classical sense. The most obvious reading, one that critics have found it difficult to avoid, is that these are paintings about sexual politics: the woman artist reclaiming and upending the nude. Yuskavage, though, insists they are heavily personal and psychological works, not feminist screed. (It should also be said there are feminists who view the work as misogynist.) "People say, 'When are you going to paint a man?' I say, 'When a man inhabits my imagination,'" she says. "To them, it's like, men painted women, and so I should be the one that goes, 'So there!' Lisa Yuskavage's job in their minds should be to give it back to them. I have no agenda towards that end. I don't think that the painters who painted women were saying, 'Gotcha!' Corot, Manet, you know, the history of art—I don't look at it as anything other than glory."

While Yuskavage maintains "I'm not a political artist," the truth is a little murkier. The politics at work here is that of class; with each saggy-breasted, blowsy bottle-blond, the artist seems to be giving the American middle class the finger. She herself self-deprecatingly jokes that people probably see her work as "detritus from some white-trash imagination."

Yuskavage grew up in a working-class neighborhood of Philadelphia. Her father woke up at midnight to drive a truck delivering Mrs. Smith's pies. Her mother was a homemaker. Lisa and her older sister, Marybeth, attended Catholic school. Despite their own lack of higher education, Yuskavage's parents insisted their children go to college and graduate school. (Marybeth is now a physician.) Yuskavage, who'd shown an early interest in art, went to Tyler and then on to Yale for her M.F.A. "My parents were thrilled because it was Yale

and they got to put a sticker on their car," she says. "They still say, 'My one daughter is a doctor, and my other daughter went to Yale. Period.'"

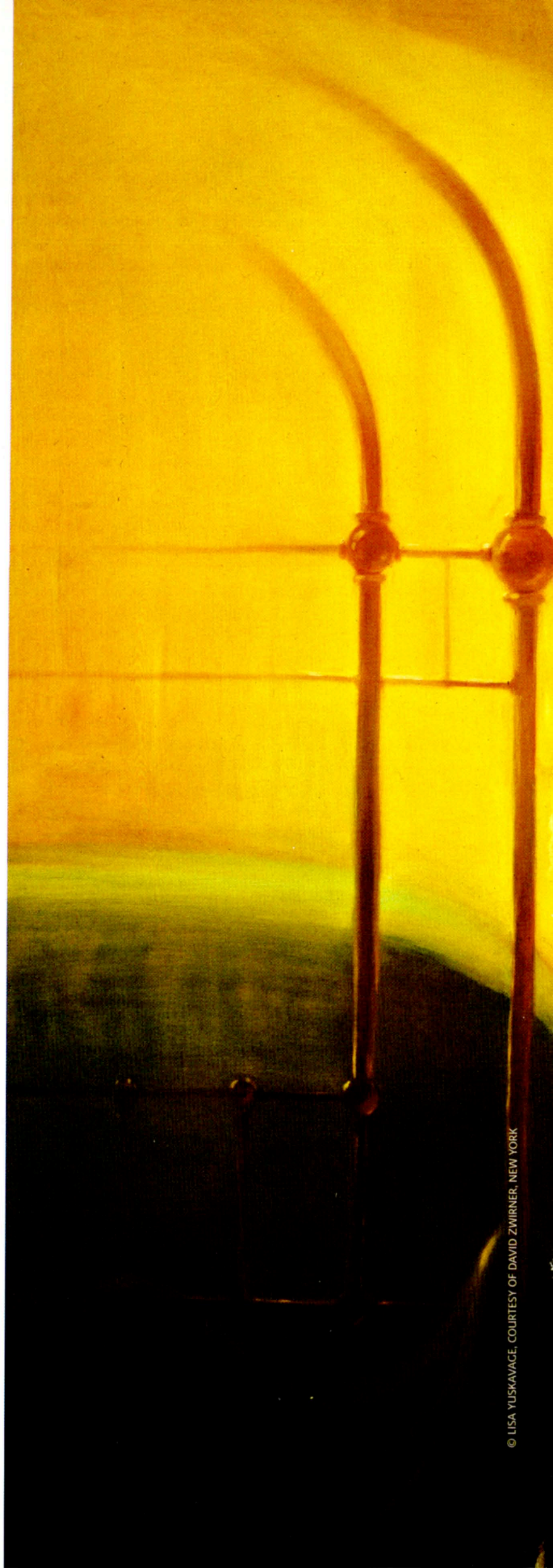
To help pay her way, Yuskavage had a work-study job loading the slide carousel. One day during her first year, the work of an applicant named Matvey Levenstein, a recent immigrant from the Soviet Union, showed up. "I wasn't supposed to say anything," she recalls. But when she saw his paintings, "I actually said, 'Is he single?'" Later, when he matriculated, she was so embarrassed that she avoided him. Then one day after a lecture she noticed a group of female classmates flirting with him. "And I just walked over and said something like, 'Do you want to buy me lunch?'" Levenstein took her up on it. "He was not liking me very much," she remembers, "so I decided to whip out my most impressive aspect of myself. I thought, I gotta throw down here. So I asked him if he'd ever seen this painting called *The Sacred Conversation* by Bellini. It changed my life. He said, 'Oh, that's my favorite painting.'" She went on to volunteer her analysis of the painting—which is of two martyred saints, Mary and baby Jesus—as a "meditation or prayer" about the moment of peace that comes just after death. "He went to hang out with one of his buddies," she continues, "and he said to his buddy, 'I just had the most amazing conversation with Lisa Yuskavage.' And the guy said, 'Ah, she's an idiot. Forget about her.'" Levenstein, also a representational painter, didn't listen, and the two have been together ever since; they married in 1992.

At Yale, her work was steeped heavily in art history; she says she was largely oblivious to the contemporary scene. (She also claims to have never said a word in class; take it with a grain of salt.) "I was a real conservative painter," she says. "I made tiny paintings that looked very 19th century-ish. They were very similar to the work I make now, except that they look totally different. They're paintings of two women in a space, and they were not engaged."

As graduation neared in 1986, she learned the heavy truth about how much debt she'd incurred with student loans—about \$700 a month. What she hadn't realized was that, thanks to her frugal grandparents buying her stock in Philadelphia Electric in lieu of presents throughout her childhood, she had enough money to pay it off in full. After moving to New York's East Village, Yuskavage nabbed her first solo show in 1990. The paintings were of women seen demurely from behind. The night of the opening, which should have been the highlight of her nascent career, Yuskavage was miserable. "I looked at them and said, 'I hate this work,'" she recalls. "There was a very important part of me missing from them, and it was truly the most authentic part of me, not the learned part."

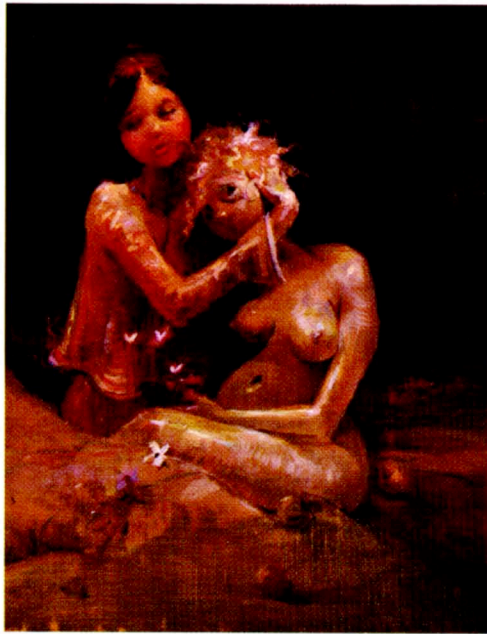
Painter John Currin, a close friend from Yale with whom she regularly trades critiques, came to the opening and found the work contrived, confirming her doubts. "I maybe said something like, 'Don't go down this road. This is for losers,'" Currin says now, a little sheepishly. (Yuskavage maintains he did it in a gentle way.) "Compared to most things you see, they were pretty good. For Lisa, they were pretty bad. She wasn't as confident back in the old days as she is now."

Around the same time, she and Levenstein returned home one evening before heading out again to a party only to find a message from the host disinviting them. It seems another guest didn't want her there. "I must have been surrounding myself with people who were so proper in a kind of unoriginal way," she says. "People used to say, 'Oh Lisa, she's too much.'" It was at that point that her husband suggested perhaps she should swap identities with her paintings.



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Left: *Swamp*, 2005, oil on linen. Right: *Painted Things*, 2006, oil on linen.

At a loss for how to proceed in the studio, Yuskavage fell into a period of deep depression, during which she did not work for a year. “I basically had some sort of breakdown. I just thought and thought and thought. I felt that maybe painting clashed with my class consciousness and that I was ashamed of my working-class potty mouth.”

Yuskavage found a shrink, who was then seeing patients for \$5 an hour at a clinic run by New York University. “I thought she was too prissy, and it just drove me nuts,” Yuskavage says. “But I realized I really wanted to be prissy. I wanted to be her.” Fifteen years later, she’s with the same therapist (and has even made a painting of her), and she credits therapy with helping her learn to channel her anger and insecurities into her work. “You know, this sort of ‘I’m not this enough, I’m not that enough,’” she says. “Nothing grows in that soil. If anything, it’s toxic. And I remember thinking, Wouldn’t it be interesting to use that as fertilizer and not try to be like, painting is this high, holy place where only beautiful things happen.”

During her depression, though she couldn’t bring herself to paint, she continued to look at art and found herself energized by the highly conceptual work of Jeff Koons and Mike Kelley. Finally, her husband’s words still echoing in her head, she put a canvas on her easel and painted two eyes in the center. “Now it’s looking at me,” she recalls. “And I just made the painting.” The result, *The Gifts* (1991), painted straight from her imagination, is a portrait of a well-endowed nude emerging from a green mist. “I shoved flowers in her mouth so that she would shut the f--- up. I remember saying, ‘Shut the f--- up.’ I walked away and I said, ‘Oh my God, that was so much fun.’ And it stopped being a painting that anybody who had liked my work prior to that would like.”

Indeed, many of the visitors to her studio were appalled at the series that evolved, called “Bad Baby.” The oils looked like a peculiar cross between Hallmark cards, as Yuskavage describes them, and skin magazines, which she later occasionally used for source material. One collector, she recalls, said, “Wrong, wrong, wrong, God!”—and made her cry. “These paintings were vulgar, and they were full-on tasteless,” she says. “They were very sexual. They were like, um, girls with big, thick bushes. It was just wrong. And I realized that wrongness was important to me.”

To Currin’s eye his friend was on the right track. “I can’t remember whether I was happy or worried that somebody turned out to be really good,” he says with a laugh. “Lisa didn’t have it in her to become a bad artist. When she stopped being as withdrawn as she was, you couldn’t really hold her back. It’s about allowing your painting to embarrass you, and I think that’s what she started to do—letting her natural personality, this loudness and strength, come through.”

The transformation of her style was like a baptism for Yuskavage, though she has a more colorful way of describing it. “It’s almost the difference

between what you thought was pleasant sex and then an orgasm,” she says, “which I think for women is a very memorable moment. It was all very nice, and then suddenly it’s like, Aha!

“There was no going back,” she continues. “I was going to pursue that feeling for the rest of my life.”

Her depression lifted. But even though the provocative paintings had gotten her own attention, they remained largely unsold until her first show at what was then Boesky & Callery, in 1996. Since then, though she has not been without detractors, Yuskavage has steadily built a loyal following, and her prices have climbed well into the six figures.

“She holds that surface so taut with her intelligence,” says friend and fellow artist Richard Tuttle. “Her paintings are all about edges, like the edge between provocative and disgusting, between good painting and bad painting, between being psychologically entrapped and psychologically free.” In terms of technique, Tuttle equates her with Vermeer and Courbet, other painters of light. “In Lisa’s case, it’s almost a pure gift; it’s in the wrist. She can do something with a brush the rest of us can’t. For people who are crazy about painting, it’s like an addiction. It’s like being mainlined with the best heroin on earth.”

In her latest body of work, which will be on view at her new gallery, the red-hot David Zwirner in Chelsea, and at its uptown counterpart, Zwirner & Wirth, in simultaneous shows opening October 18, Yuskavage takes on two women at a time. Unlike the sedate pairs she painted in grad school, these women are half naked and, well, touching, or even climbing on top of each other. But while de Chirico’s somewhat homoerotic gladiator paintings were one inspiration, Bernini’s sculptures, including *Apollo and Daphne*, in which one character seems to be emerging from another, were a more important influence. Still, Yuskavage is ready for the lesbian comments (she jokes that Levenstein is her beard). “There are so many complex female relationships that are about closeness, that are not sexual and that have not really ever been explored,” she says. “You know, the dullest blade would be saying ‘lesbian.’ Okay, put that in there as one of many possible ways that women can have complicated and intense dynamics.”

For some of the paintings, she used two sisters as models. “I told them this is not about sex; this is about power struggle,” she says, “and every sister knows about that. Relationships with women are always so much more fraught, like the mother-daughter, sisters.”

For other paintings, she actually found inspiration watching her two dogs play—which she admits is “hokey”—and for still others, she simply relied on experimentation. She is, by nature, an intuitive painter, one who considers her studio a lab. Her measure of success or failure: her gut instincts. “Sometimes I paint and I go, What the hell have you done, Lisa?” she says, her excitement growing. “Oh boy, you are really in trouble now.” —JULIE L. BELCOVE

