



Studio, 2009, oil on linen, 70 × 74 1/2 inches.

LISA YUSKAVAGE

by Mónica de la Torre



Walking the Dog, 2009, oil on canvas, 77 × 65 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, New York.



Outskirts, 2011, oil on linen, 86 x 120 inches.

I've been to Yuskavageland—an improbable zone at the intersection of the European painting tradition, religious iconography, porn, and, I'll argue, performance art. Most probably, given its origin in the early '90s, so have you. The creation of a painter with a director's sense of narrative and character, this alternate world is populated by an ensemble of defiantly hypersexualized babes seen through a mutable gaze that, while female, often postures as a male gaze for kicks.

Yuskavage was once famously accused of being "too much." To this we owe her artistic breakthrough. Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips's thoughts on being too much inevitably come to mind: "we are too much [...] because we are unable to include so much of what we feel in the picture we have of ourselves." From this hot spot at the junction of psyche and picture-making emerge Yuskavage's pinups. They irritate and enthrall viewers precisely because they refuse to be pinned down. We're perplexed by their sexual orientation; are they hetero, lesbian, or bi? At once gorgeous and grotesque, frivolous and multilayered, debauched and coy, self-engrossed and pleased with themselves yet forlorn and longing for someone to regard them, Yuskavage's animated fictions do quite a number of things unambiguously. For one, they hook us. Like in-your-face human performers, they make us feel a discomfort in their presence which is impossible to dismiss. They beckon and confront us with the problem of looking, as in the flasher to the voyeur: "What are you looking at?"

Did I bring up the humor in Yuskavage's world, the dark, David Lynch sort? Not to mention its unsettling intelligence, manifest in its ability to hold, and open itself to, multiple, and often clashing, points of view?

— MÓNICA DE LA TORRE

MÓNICA DE LA TORRE I've had a lovely time in Yuskavageland in preparation for this interview. I made some interesting discoveries.

LISA YUSKAVAGE Oh, yeah? Like what?

MT We both wanted to be nuns as kids.

LY Well, they seemed smart, sexy, and powerful.

MT Sexy? (*laughter*)

LY As a little girl, in Catholic school, they were the first feminists I met. It seems counterintuitive, but these women rejected the normal system of life. The ones that taught me were quite smart. When I came to my senses, I realized it would actually be awful for me to live that particular life. I guess I liked the idea

of a calling, the intensity of it.

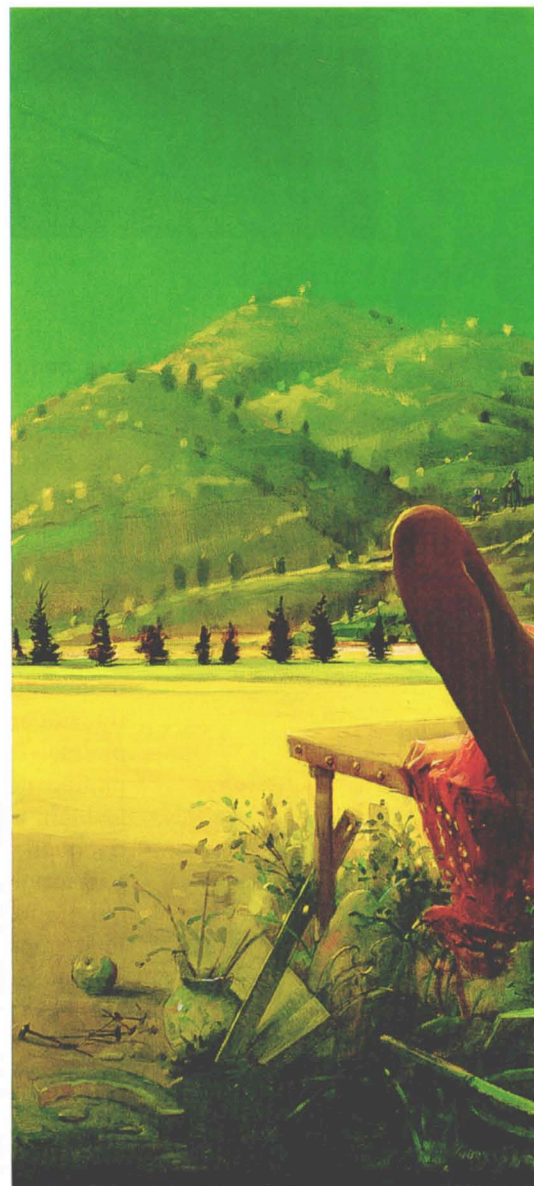
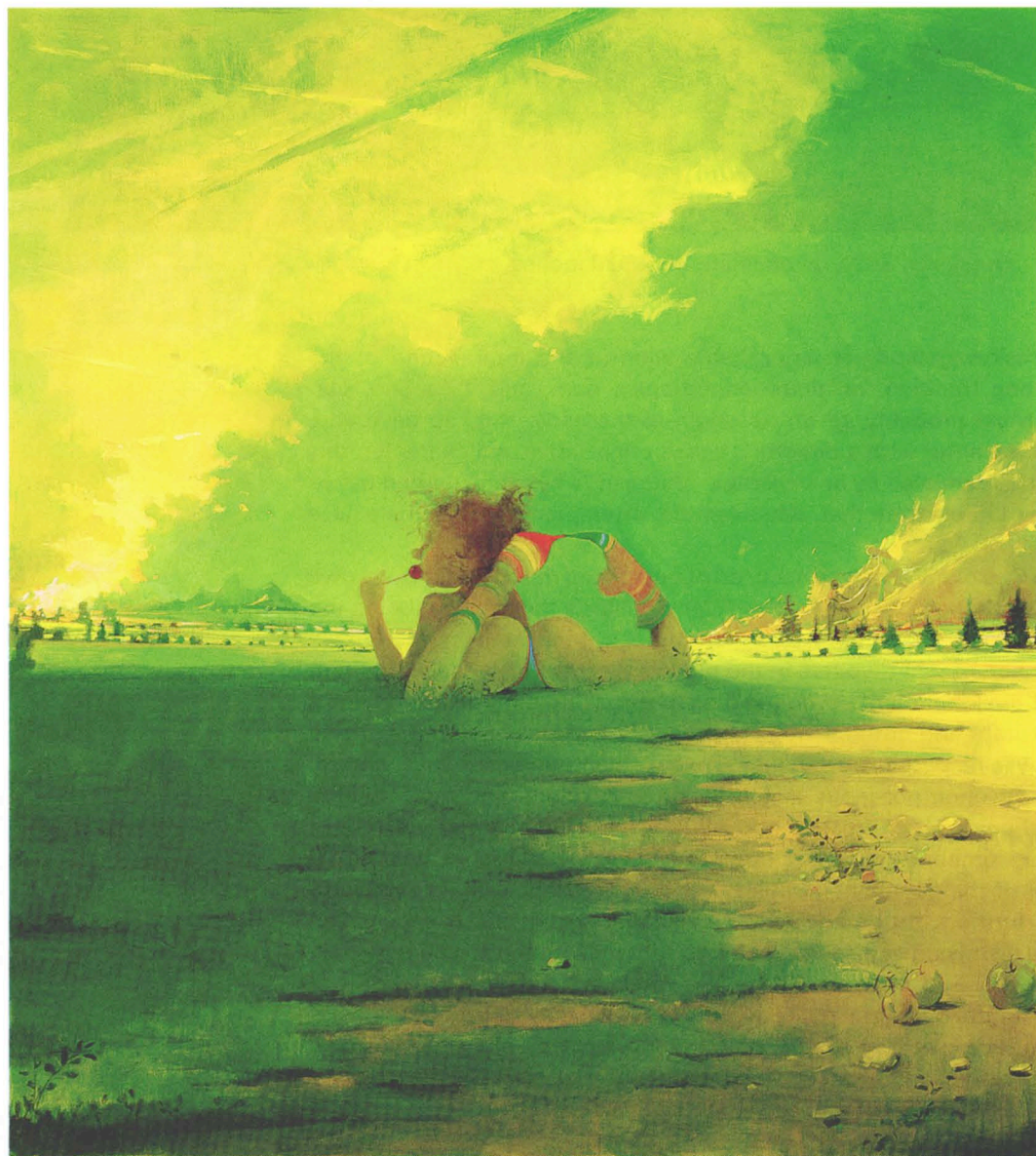
MT I didn't really know why I wanted to be a nun until, as a teenager, I read the poems of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a Mexican feminist nun in the Baroque period. She wrote these incredibly perceptive poems about men's patronizing relationship to women, and shunned patriarchal society so that she could study and write.

LY It was because of the intellectual and spiritual intensity of those Sisters who taught me that I developed the habit of always admiring my teachers. By the time I went to art school, I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my college art teachers. I could not believe how wonderful my professors were.

MT You had a hard time in grad school at

Yale. Tyler, your undergraduate university, seems to have been more nourishing.

LY Well, I mean, who wants to shoot down an 18-year-old? I had never met an artist before I went to Tyler. I was one of those annoying students who loved every minute of school and got As out of pure joy. I was really into it. The faculty seemed to have a great life . . . The fact that artists were teaching to earn a living certainly seemed better than some of the other manual labor-type things I saw people around me do to make ends meet. I assumed that I would follow in my teachers' path and tried very hard to do so. But the problem is that with my personality and the kind of work I ended up doing, I just could not get hired at a university to save my life! As a funny little aside—in the days before computers, when there was no Grammar Check, for years and years I was sending



out cover letters to colleges that said in the first sentence, "Dear Committee, I applying . . ." I missed the word *am*. They probably thought I had a seriously low IQ. Or that English was my second language.

MT Thanks a lot. (*laughter*) This was in the late '80s, right?

LY Yes. I eventually crowbarred my way into a job teaching Continuing Ed watercolor classes at Cooper Union to ladies and gentlemen after work. All the while, I was continuing to pursue being an art teacher in the university setting. I kept scouring the College Art Association Bulletin and applying for teaching jobs, but kept getting rejected. In my careful rereading of the listings, I noticed that one of the requirements was to have a "significant exhibition record," so I decided to polish that up. The end result was

that the art world was open but the world of academia was shut tight to my kind.

MT You lucked out.

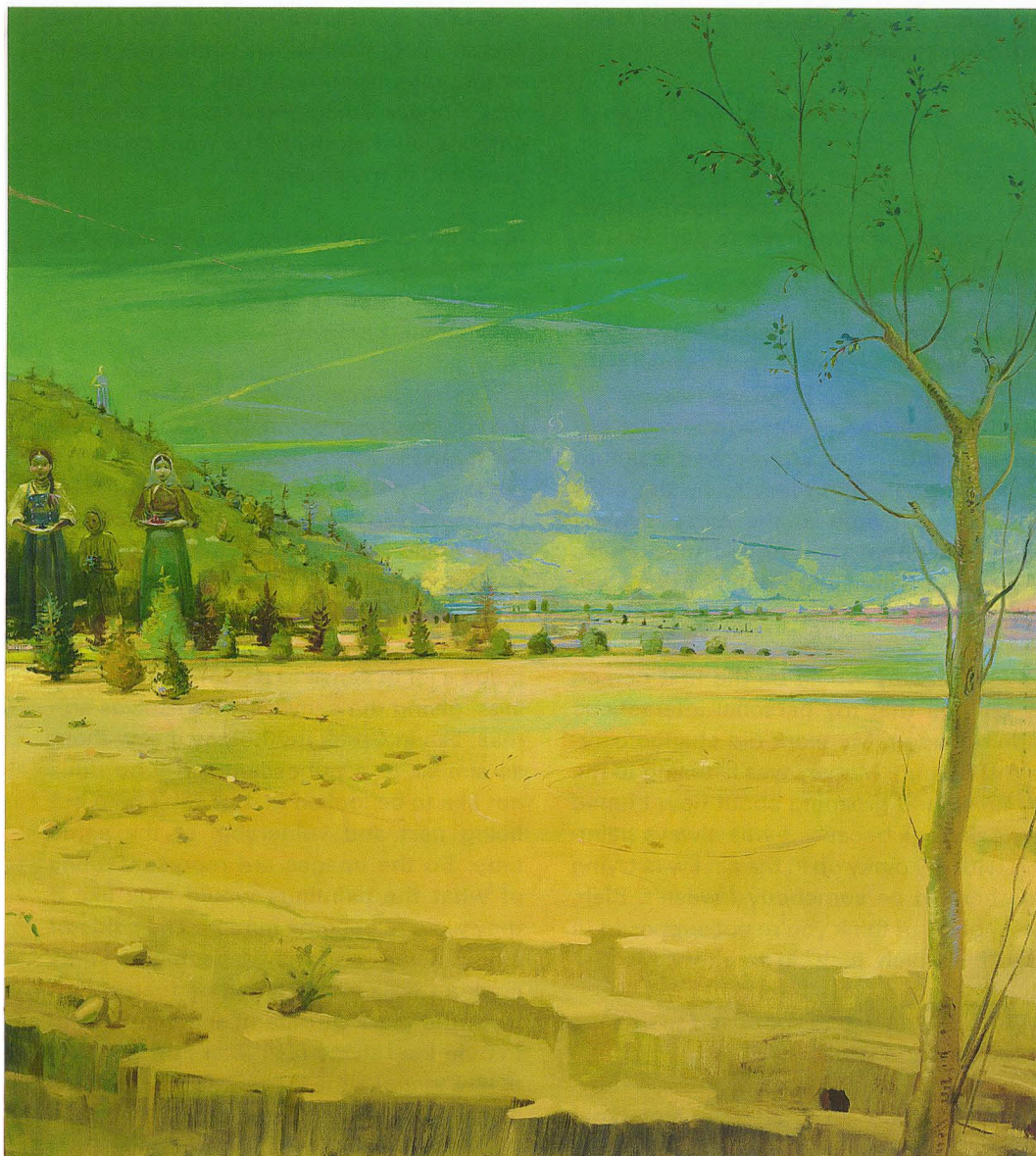
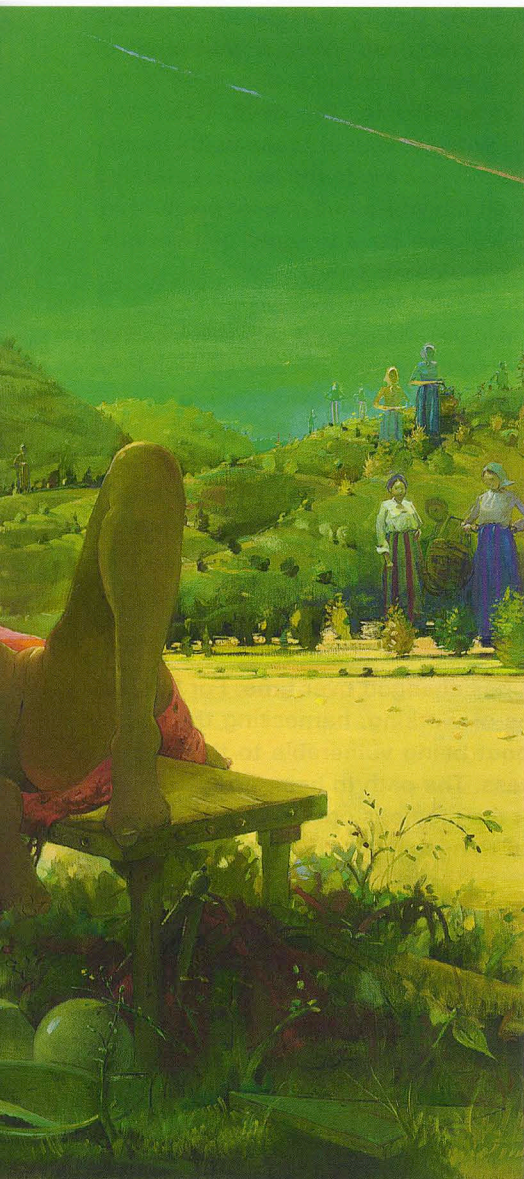
LY That is the serious truth. To the young artist who may be reading this: consider the possibility that you might actually be lucky when you get rejected from stuff. (*laughter*) Because of this streak of what appeared to be bad luck, I fell into my life as it is today. At that point I'd simply never met anyone who made art full-time and therefore didn't know it was possible to be *just* an artist. All that role-model seeking ended up being irrelevant in the end. I had to go where I was wanted, more or less, and find my own way.

MT I was thinking about the crisis you had after your first show in 1990. It seems disarming, in retrospect. You stopped

painting for a whole year. How long after grad school did you have that show?

LY It was four years after I graduated. Too soon! I did not connect to the paintings once I saw them on the gallery's walls. In my studio they were still interesting to me. What an awful evening to have to pass—I was being so-called celebrated at an opening and dinner and all I wanted to do was quit painting. After that, I considered switching to making films or perhaps writing fiction. But I knew so much about painting and nothing about the other forms. I eventually realized that it was not painting, but my attitude toward it, that was the problem. I was looking *up* at painting as if it were the blue-blooded,

Triptych, 2011, oil on linen, each panel
70 1/8 x 77 1/4 inches.



überelite kid that I was *lucky* enough to hang out with, and I was the dorky kid from the other side of the tracks who's always faking it to be part of the right clique. In other words, I was playing bottom to its top.

MT At that conversation with Rob Storr at the 92nd Street Y last year, you said that to be a good painter you can't be a bottom in the studio, you have to be a top.

LY You just can't paint from that position; it makes you weak. Well, it makes *me* weak. The real problem is that when I feel beaten down by something, I'm not my best, smartest, clearest self.

Those paintings in my first show were the last hiccup of being a grad student; they were about pleasing the authorities. I knew I needed to totally rethink painting for myself, but *how* was the question. I spent a year not painting and just thinking, reading, watching movies, and looking at art. There's that story that's been reused over and over again.

MT The Matvey [Levenstein] one? I love it.

LY I was disinvited to a party, the reason being that I was "too much." Now, Mónica, you've invited me to parties. Am I too much?

MT Not to me! Your husband Matvey's excellent advice was to switch places with your work; that you bring your personality down a notch, become a little more polite, and put all that provocativeness into your paintings—get *them* to be the ones who're not invited to the party. What I don't buy about the story is that unless you were seriously too much, I don't see your personality having toned down...

LY Oh, Matvey would be the first person to tell you that my personal interactions didn't change. My work did change overnight, though. Matvey was listening to me moaning and groaning about how I hated my paintings because I was always painting with my pinky up in the air. I was trying too hard to be somebody I wasn't. Blah, blah, blah... I think you're not supposed to say "blah, blah, blah" in an interview.

MT As if what you're *supposed* to do mattered much to you!

LY Yeah, right! So what this switching-places exercise taught me was that there

was *already* a character at play in my work. Without realizing it, I was using painting as a way of pretending I was this demure, graceful person. The only character I was letting out between 1984 and 1990, for some reason, was this timid social climber; the other characters inside of myself I left completely dormant. Interestingly, that demure persona of mine is the dumbest.

MT It lacks agency, almost. But it's paradoxical because it's not like you weren't doing anything at that time—you were going to Yale, you were making paintings, and putting yourself out there. It's a persona that's not aware of its own agency.

LY It's flaccid, a pleaser. And, like I've said, another person could make wonderful pictures in that character, but not me. As an artist you're supposed to spend your life doing something that'd be an utter waste of time for anyone else. And even so, there's no proof you're not wasting your life making some total crap. At any rate, upon receiving Matvey's advice, I began inhabiting a totally different persona. And all the lights went on in my head and in my studio.

MT How did you arrive at the idea that the type of paintings that would be "disinvited to the party" had to deal explicitly with female sexuality?

LY During that period when I wasn't painting and I was just going around galleries in SoHo, there was a painting I was looking for that I wished someone would make. It occurred to me that I was the only one who could make that image exactly as I wanted it made—it was an Excalibur moment.

I knew it was slightly bizarre, but it made a lot of sense to personify the paintings, giving the canvases themselves animas, like in Greek mythology. I saw them as similar to a pubescent girl who does not like to be looked at, but can't help but being pert and vulnerable at the same time. So the images are representations of what the paintings would look like if they were to become human. They did not enjoy being impotent spectacles—they couldn't walk away or defend themselves from the glare or ogle of the viewer. But I could load these characters up with the ability to make the looking feel bad for everyone involved. The exchange would go like this: Okay, go ahead and look all you

want, but it's going to be unpleasant for both of us. The figure was in a sfumato field, and though its edges were dematerializing, the eyeballs were always hard and fixed on the viewer. Those paintings were angry to boot. And fun to make. They really confused a lot of people.

MT Wow. Let's talk more about this shift. You've said you adopted a different point of view; at a given moment you approached your subjects through the perspective of Dennis Hopper's character in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. We use point of view to discuss narratives in films and fiction, but of course the idea applies beautifully to representational painting. What other points of view have you taken on over time?

LY It's a good question. I might have to get back to you on that. When I made that jump, *Blue Velvet* had just come out. I remember thinking that Hopper's character, Frank Booth, a psychotic criminal, was the creepiest. What a wild point of view! It was so wrong, and such a fun ride—sympathy for the devil. I bet he'd be disinvited to one of those polite dinner parties... it just made me laugh. Laughing in my studio was a hell of a lot better than attempting to be an overly self-serious, suffering woman artist.

MT You've mentioned elsewhere that embarrassment has served as a clarifying agent for you, allowing you to access "surprising pictorial solutions." As someone who finds embarrassment potentially impairing, I'm very curious about this. Do you still experience embarrassment? I'm sure you've gone beyond the pale of what you thought you could do more than once.

LY It has changed over time. For the purposes of working, harnessing the shame is about being vulnerable to the creative process. The path to being truly connected in the studio is opening up to all manner of things.

MT Speaking of which, it seems fair to say that your new work has more layers, a richer complexity. Your early paintings focused on single subjects in neutral spaces.

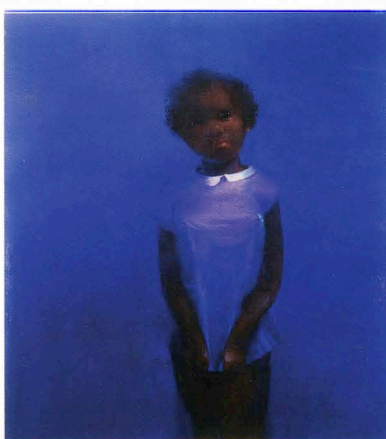
LY Initially I played around with making monochrome paintings. All of them in a vivid color whose range I would then

expand: e.g., hot pink, which then moves closer to warm pink, and then hotter, light, cooler, and so on. I was also working with a single iconic figure. The monofigure and the monochrome were very connected in terms of their psychological impact, their full-on intensity. I'm thinking of the *Bad Baby* paintings of the early '90s, as well as the *Big Blondes*. In some of my recent work, I am still playing with monochromes—in paintings like *Studio* (2009) or *The Smoker* (2008). These are huge green pictures inspired by that big, luminous green screen that comes up just before movies start at the theater.

The work in the early '90s was also entirely fictional: I was working without a source. Everything was invented. I loved working that way, and still do. I had a lot of experience as a student drawing the figure from life. I got so much out of it. I would draw the figure in class by day, and then, at night, go home and invent paintings. I came to understand how to synthetically develop a space with a body, how to create order—a rational or synthetic system that allows you to register information and then use it to create something without looking at it. There was some sort of a source, however, as I was looking into my own imagination and also looking at the picture itself. I'd see things in the painting that I had not planned, and then would bring them forward.

MT Eventually, you used models: both maquettes and sitters. The monochromes as grounds shifted into light-infused, intimate interiors—boudoirs, bedrooms, and domestic spaces. Now your more recent subjects have stepped out into the world and populate much larger landscapes. I'm fascinated by how impossible these landscapes are in relation to perspective and the figure. The ratio is utterly wacky. There seems to be a connection between the gaze's scope, the intimacy of the scene depicted, and the paintings' scale.

LY The paintings got larger *because* of the landscapes. Everyone knows how big people are, more or less, and the point you're always working around is: is it *under* or *over* life-size? When you want to put a number of figures into a picture, and have X amount of space around those people, you're just talking about creating a larger screen. In film it would be a tight shot versus a wide shot. I suddenly wanted a wide shot, so the scale got larger.



The Ones That Don't Want To: Black Baby (Bad Baby II), 1991–92, oil on canvas, 34 1/8 x 30 inches.



The Smoker, 2008, oil on linen, 60 x 42 inches.

I've made tiny little pictures with figures in landscapes, but those always seemed imaginary. The more recent ones are becoming more physical. You actually have to move across the room to look at all of the elements in them. Looking becomes a bit of an adventure. Painting them certainly is.

MT These landscapes are so realistically depicted; I have the triptych I just saw at your studio in mind. And the juxtapositions between the figures and landscapes are so not-of-this-world that they seem more surreal than fantastical to me.

LY I know what you mean, but this actually feels more metaphysical to me. De Chirico's *Scuola Metafisica* has always been more interesting to me than Dalí's or other surrealists' work. Surrealism, at

its best, is actually automatism. The process in these new pictures is not so much automatism as free association—to make that big triptych, for instance. As I mentioned, to develop that picture I played a parlor game with myself.

MT An exquisite corpse, with the break between the panels prompting you to imagine the picture's continuation.

LY The idea of the exquisite corpse is that the players trigger each other's imagination, and the final product, the corpse, is unknown until the end. If I could have fragmented myself enough to not know what was going on with the other canvases, it would have been rather interesting.

MT You did that initially, though. When you worked on the first panel you had no idea that it would be part of a triptych. I'm fascinated by how you mined the potential of the break between the panels. There's the figure in the central panel that recalls Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*—I don't know if the reference was intentional. And then there are those intriguing figures in the third panel, those awfully stern peasant women.

LY Well, for the far-left panel I had first made a painting reusing a figure from a prior painting, *Walking the Dog* (2009). I decided not to change the figure at all in terms of its scale, pose, or costume, but to completely remake the scene around it.

MT Do you do this a lot? You also frequently use found images. Would repurposing some of your own images be part of the same method of displacing an image from its original context, creating alternate scenarios for it and therefore altering its charge?

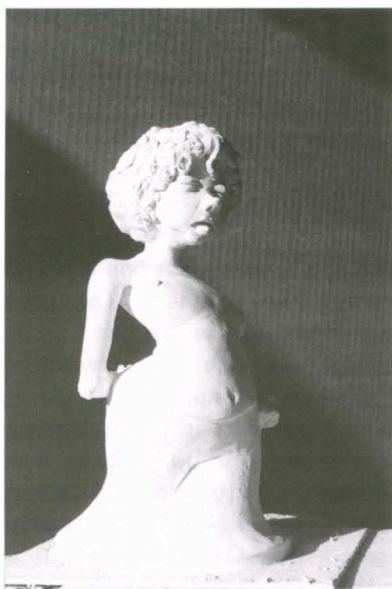
LY Yes, the repurposing has been a very interesting thing for me. I've always been interested in how people like Fassbinder reused actors, Hanna Schygulla and even himself, for example, over and over again in his films and plays. Like an ensemble theater group, but in film. Or Philip Guston, who said he was just letting his characters—the bean head or the Klansmen, for instance—play out *mise-en-scènes*. This frees the artist up to develop other aspects of the work.

It also relates to the process I used around 1995 through 1998: making maquettes out of clay to use as models for



Good Evening, Hamass, 1997, oil on linen, (two parts) 42 x 45 1/2 inches each.

my paintings. The first maquette was not invented from scratch: I made it from looking at the painting in front of me, *Faucet* (1995). Once I turned that image into a three-dimensional figure, it became *The Motherfucker*. Collectively, the maquettes were called *Asspicking*, *Foodeating*, *Headshrinking*, *Socialclimbing*, *Motherfucking Bad Habits* (1996). I was interested in how a character in one of my paintings was one thing, but then if I changed the lighting on the sculpture, the character would look different—I'd interact with it differently,



A Bad Habit (detail), 1995–2011, Giclée/pigmented inkjet, 17 7/8 x 24 inches. Courtesy of Universal Limited Art Editions.

it'd become something else. Often I play with my subjects, speaking of point of view ... I end up directing them.

MT So what was the new scenario for the figure from *Walking the Dog*?

LY Oh, yes, so going back to the triptych, at first it seemed as if I was making a single painting with this recycled figure. I was almost finished with it when it occurred to me that the picture needed to continue. The year prior I'd made another painting where that had happened: *Wilderness* (2010). I'd made a left panel and then added on a right panel. It seemed so ballsy to do that. Actually, I've done that several times in the past, but did not think of it as a potentially interesting process to be explored. In the earlier days, like when I made *Good Evening, Hamass* (1997), I didn't question it, I just went, Ah, fuck it, just plop another panel on. It's a very non-Western way to work, to just add on. This time, though, I realized that there was something more afoot. I was having this dialogue with myself, wondering, Okay, is this a weak painting move, or is there something to it? But then an inner voice said, No, it's really interesting, there's more! I stopped working and analyzed what was happening. The tiny little beginning of a process was trying to emerge. Though it was unconventional, it was full of potential. I described it to the people with whom I talk about work: it was like playing solitaire and exquisite corpse games together. I thought this

would become a diptych, and since this was a game that only I was playing, I decided to create *two* different options to the "what's next" question?

It takes a while to get these canvases made and delivered, so I quickly ordered two of them. Once I had them I put all three of them up, side by side—I didn't know whether that panel I had already painted would go in to the right or to the left. I was just playing around with the image, wondering if the character was looking at something off to the left.

MT And you had to imagine what was going on around her, since there was nothing on the two empty canvases yet.

LY The painted panel that existed already looked like it belonged in the center, but it kept moving left. Subliminal stuff kept playing out. The process reminded me of when I was doing monoprints as a grad student at Yale. I used to go into the print room and ink up the plate—I've always been a big fan of Degas's monoprints—and would start pulling images out of the black ink, from the unknown. It's like reaching into the blackness.

MT The unknown being the subconscious.

LY Yes. It's a blackness playing out on many levels. So for part of the triptych's process, I put the canvases up on the wall in a bunch of different positions, stepped back, took cheap snapshots. I drew on the printouts to get possible ideas of what

They did not enjoy being impotent spectacles—they couldn't walk away or defend themselves from the glare or ogle of the viewer. But I could load these characters up with the ability to make the looking feel bad for everyone involved.

was meant to be there, took more snaps, and printed them out. Nothing was doing it for me.

Then I painted a study of the painted panel on a small canvas and tried to imagine what came on the right. That's when this *Étant donnés*-ish crotch-shot showed up. That small painting, *Given and Nel'zyas* (2011), is the result. The next thing I knew, I was painting on the third panel. I was like, I can't believe this thing is now 300-and-some inches long! Why stop now? Why don't we just keep going? And when I added the sapling on the far right, it stopped the action, which is what I wanted. It's a specific tree—one of those weedy trees that you cut back hard and it keeps on coming back. Placed there, it's a bracket that tells the eye, Stop! It's the idea of the abstract versus the narrative purposes of something. It's not just a line that stops the action; it also represents regrowth. It's the potential—this painting could keep going, but we're going to stop.

MT It's self-reflexive of the process itself. And what about the peasant women? They look rather concerned with the decadence of the characters surrounding them. And they're all fully clothed...

LY They could be anything! I was thinking of 19th-century Russian peasants. I've always been interested in the presence of peasants in paintings, in Bruegel's and Bosch's, for instance. They ended up being the superego in this painting. As I stepped back, I realized that if they're the superego then, I guess, the splayed figure in the foreground is the id. She doesn't even have a head; it's all the bottom giblets. There's also that mess of stuff under the bench on which she's lying—I like to refer to that stuff as tools of reason, but it's a mess, because your subconscious is a mess that reasons. Or a place of reason that is chaotic. I liked how it couldn't be concealed. It's like seeing under her bed and gleaning her true state of mind.

MT It's props strewn about: vases, apples, empty bowls, canvases, rulers.

LY And lots of weeds. Like they've been there for a long, long time. Even the stuff under the chair is self-reflexive of what the painting is like in that I allowed a rather open and subliminal system to create the work. Somehow everything fell into place—the id, ego, and superego found their way in.

MT The id is headless and therefore blind, the peasants are looking out at the viewer, and the ego is the figure turning away from the other characters. She might be the culprit, though she's playing innocent.

LY People say "I lost my head" when their behavior lacks reason. That figure with the striped socks on the left, the one I reused from *Walking the Dog*, is the ego. She's definitely responsible for the action. She is like the character in the Kurt Weill song "Pirate Jenny"—she's just waiting for it all to come to a head.

The self-reflexiveness of the picture is a joy for me, because although it is very organized, it came completely out of disorder. It was not about planning, it was about *finding*. Even the fact that there's an isosceles triangle organizing the plane that they're all sitting on was a big surprise to me. Once I saw that it happened into the painting, I seized the opportunity and made it even clearer. Also, finding a title for this painting was a long process of elimination. I tried and rejected everything until I realized it should be called the most obvious thing—*Triptych*—because of how things constantly kept arranging themselves in tripartite structures, either triangles or triads.

I don't want to shut down the meaning of the painting—that's the problem with too much yakkety-yakking about one's work. I want to open the meaning up. I used images of 19th-century peasants because there must be at least one of them running around inside of me somewhere, and, also, because I didn't like how the painting was all crotch-shots. The painting needed a face somewhere, but not just *any* faces; *those* faces. There's something about peasants that seems very sincere.

MT The work, ultimately, is a landscape—the peasants are connected to the land. They're closest to nature. There's so much artifice in the rest of the painting.

LY Right. So what do I think those figures are? I didn't know what I was opening up by using 19th-century peasants. I'd forgotten about the *nel'zyas*. When Matvey and I went on our honeymoon—not the luxurious, umbrella-in-a-drink kind—we went to Russia, after the Soviet Union had collapsed. He had left the Soviet Union in 1980 and had not been back since, so we decided to go. Moscow in 1992 was a cross between the 19th century at a standstill and an extremely sophisticated, technologically advanced place. It was interesting for me to see it; my grandfather is Eastern European and I am a peasant all the way around, descending from Italian, Irish, and Lithuanian peasants. So we were going into all these different museums—the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, for example. The docent ladies with their babushkas, their slippers, and their housecoats would sidle up to me and say, "Nel'zya!" It means *don't*!

MT Don't what? Don't touch?

LY Just don't! Whatever the hell you were thinking of doing, just don't! (*laughter*) So when Matvey saw the peasants in the triptych he said, "Oh, it's the *nel'zyas*!" That's what we came to lovingly call the ladies at the museums, since they kept saying that over and over, no matter where I went. Then it dawned on me: what is the superego's job? It says, Don't!

It's like the stuff under the bench in the middle panel—the tools for measurement. It's all a mess but somehow it all comes together, most of the time. In the midst of all of this, is an awesome fucking ride. I'd never made a painting that was that grand without having an idea of what it was going to be. The same happened with the other big new painting you saw at the studio, *Outskirts* (2011). When I was making it, I was thinking, Oh, my God, this is awful! I felt like I was on an amusement park ride, screaming, Let me off this ride! It's making me sick! But by the time I was done, I thought, I want to go again!

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