

# LISA YUSKAVAGE ON NINA SIMONE AND GIOVANNI BELLINI

Painter Lisa Yuskavage was a guest in my spring 2014 class “Object Lessons” at BHFU, the experimental free art school in the East Village. Each guest chose a book, film, or work of art for the class to study prior to a group conversation. Yuskavage selected a video on YouTube of Nina Simone performing “Feelings” live at the Montreux Jazz Festival (1976) and the documentary *Comedian* (2002) which follows Jerry Seinfeld and a fledgling comedian through the world of stand-up comedy. She also asked for everyone to look at Giovanni Bellini’s “St. Francis in the Desert” (1480) at the Frick collection. This text was adapted from the beginning and end of that two-hour sprawling conversation. —JE

**LISA YUSKAVAGE:** When I first found this clip, I am not sure what I was looking for but it was certainly not because I was looking for this particular song—I disliked it in the ’70s when it was played a lot on the radio—“feelings, nothing more than feelings whoa whoa whoa feelings.” I looked it up last night and read that Julie Andrews declared that she would never sing this song because it had no meaning whatsoever. My interest in this clip is really not about the song but rather what Nina does with it. Nor did I ask you to watch it because of Nina Simone fandom. Who doesn’t love Nina Simone? I have to admit that I watch this video for a long period just prior to painting. It contains a glimpse of something that is almost never or just seen. It allows us to watch a transformational moment in a great artist. When an artist is doing something publicly, often they’re very polished, distanced from the viewer. Part of the reason it’s important to do these types of talks at schools, where younger artists come in person and observe, is that it’s helpful to get a sense of what another artist is like, what is the cut of their jib, “what do they smell like?” or “what is their laundry detergent?” or whatever. All that kind of stuff somehow helps make people real, and at the same time it kind of helps you understand how this might be done, as opposed to looking at a glossy finished thing, which is never very helpful. Anyway, somehow I looked at this video of Nina Simone singing “Feelings” live. I never saw her perform but someone that I know did and said that she would get angry at her audience all the time, and I was fascinated by that—and wonder what’s that like? In this clip she’s definitely pissed off at her audience over and over again—you can see that. What you don’t see here is the beginning where she’s been playing another song and has been wandering around the stage saying, “Where is David Bowie?” And the audience is shouting, “Just play a song!” And she yells back, “Oh, shut up.” She’s in this weird dynamic with the audience, a real push and pull, but she’s very grand and puffed up and then she finally sits down at the piano and begins to play and just peels into this supposedly meaningless and cornball song “Feelings” which is not on any of her albums. She starts playing it in an improvisational way and then stops—and I think the audience may have been talking or whatever—and she says ironically, “Like ... a ... robot.” She’s getting very nasty with the audience now, and continues, “the ... robot ... is ... going ... to play,”—just being rude, in a really great way. “Okay?” Here is an artist having a head on confrontation with the audience: they’re NOT connecting with her and she’s attacking them, and then she somehow miraculously gets totally reabsorbed—playing this song that, for Julie Andrews has absolutely no meaning but for Nina, in playing the piano and singing the words, she loses herself so completely. I’ve never witnessed anything like it. Especially since she’s just been yelling at the audience three seconds before. Watching the fluid movements of her brain is what I found fascinating as a maker of art. To watch someone go from that much confrontation and being outside of themselves to what you watch here: an artist who is before your eyes, is traveling through time and space and connecting to the songwriter’s innermost heart—“Feelings like I’ve never lost you, and feelings like

I’ll never have you, again in my heart.” She is singing and then—she stops playing—and says, “Goddammit. Like, what a shame to have to write a song like that.” It’s so intense, witnessing this and she’s experiencing some profound emotional range that Julie Andrews said didn’t exist and I certainly never heard before. Nina’s in it, like deep, deep, deep. And she starts talking about the emotions, and the audience apparently didn’t know how to respond. They’re obviously stunned, and she then gets really nasty again, berates them, “Well come on people, clap!” I’m now dramatizing the whole thing in slow motion for you because it actually goes so quickly. I’ve watched it so many times, and you may wonder “Why would I want you to watch it?” I don’t know why I want to watch it other than I love watching a real inner transformation happening, and that’s what this is. It’s so rare to catch it.

[Nina Simone video “Feelings” plays.]

I love that the whole time, Nina keeps rooting for the audience. She’s like this person from outer space that is so powerful, so disconnected from those people, they just don’t know what to do with her. They’re clapping at the wrong times, they’re not clapping, and she just keeps coming back to bringing it and believing in them. It’s so intense. YouTube can be very intense. [Laughter.] And I just always wanted to show that to somebody.

**JARRETT EARNEST:** And there is nothing like starting a discussion by being punched in the gut emotionally.

**STUDENT 1:** You cut it before that part where she says it’s “embarrassingly soft.” I watched it this morning, and there’s a part where she’s like, “now it’s embarrassingly soft.” And she gets really quiet, and it’s like, *oh my god*.

**STUDENT 2:** She’s really conflicted about singing it, too. In a sense, she’s also questioning herself, it’s not just Julie Andrews—this is like a showbiz joke, this song.

**YUSKAVAGE:** I looked it up on Wikipedia last night in preparation for today—it has its own page, this song—it is listed among the “World’s Worst Songs,” whatever that means—things come and go as awful—but that’s why, in a weird way, it’s even more amazing.

**STUDENT 3:** She actually takes something that’s debased and elevates it.

**YUSKAVAGE:** That moment when she stops and says to herself or to the spirit of Morris Albert, “Goddamn,” I don’t know what I would have done had I been in the audience at the time. After she was just berating me—I don’t know if you’ve ever been in the presence of somebody where you can just never get it right. You know they’re great and no matter what you say, you’re just constantly wrong—Wrong! Wrong!—and you just start getting more and more intimidated. I can imagine how intimidating it was, but actually that audience that day got to see something that is more profound, and rarer at least, than seeing a baby being born. [Laughter.] And that’s the kind of thing I am looking for everyday—every minute of everyday—that’s what I want to see. Of course you’re never going to get to see it. It would be a worthwhile goal to bring forth that kind of intensity into the world every once in a while. It’s not about being sophisticated, it’s just about sharing something, going somewhere, and letting others witness it.

That’s what we are doing in the pesky business of art making, we people who are feeling, being empathic—I don’t mean to refer to that song—but we are the people who are feeling and creating visual philosophies for the world. What we are doing is utterly useless until it’s not useless. After 9/11 I was on a jury for the Sharpe Foundation, and this image goes up—and the problem with these juries, especially now, is that everything is digital and it all looks the same. This guy, Stephen Vitiello, was a sound artist and he had his studio at the World Trade Center, on the 100th-something floor. Luckily I had just heard on NPR a conversation with the artist, and I was the only one in the room who had heard it. Everybody was questioning what we were looking at, “What the hell are we looking at? Is that a Realist painting? What

is that?” And everybody was ready to pass but I said, “Wait a minute, I think that that’s a microphone and the view is from the World Trade Center. Let’s stop and read about this guy.” It turns out there was a little audio file. His work puts microphones on buildings and takes sound—you know, whatever, ephemeral, who the fuck cares, right? Until you really need it. It’s what we all do, it only is important when it’s needed, and that’s why we just need to keep doing it even though it seems utterly useless. There is a way in which everything has its place, and we can’t say when that moment is going to happen. Now that’s an extreme example, and those sounds are amazing—that building moved quite a bit, it swayed in the wind—and there is something very powerful about that work after 9/11 with the towers gone.



**EARNEST:** You also wanted to talk about Bellini.

**YUSKAVAGE:** I went to Tyler and they had a third year abroad. When I heard about it, wild horses could not have stopped me from going. I did whatever I could to earn the dough, I was a nude model, I taught swimming lessons, waited on tables, I did anything to save money to go. I finally got to Italy and it was really ridiculous because the painting teachers assigned us to make 100 paintings while we were there for three months—I hate that kind of teacher. First of all, maybe I’m not the kind of person that makes 100 paintings—what a dumb assignment. So instead I said, “I’m in Italy, I’m going out there, and I’m not going to be stuck in the studios, sorry dude.” I got very bad grades that year in every subject, but it was worth it. I remember I went on this trip to Venice, which is how I got into the Bellininess of Bellini. Even better than seeing something in person is to see it *in situ*, in the place it was made for, where it was meant to be. One November day at five o’clock in Venice on this field trip, it was cold and already pitch black outside. Our art history teacher, Flavia, had more energy than we did and she was running to see one more painting—most people went back to the hotel to get a drink. The guy I had a crush on was going with her to see it, and that’s the only reason I went too. We go to the Church of San Zaccaria and she put some money in the meter and these lights go on, and the painting lights up. It’s a Bellini painting called the “Sacred Conversation” (1505). I totally forgot about the boy—I forgot about boys for a long time after that—I was like “This is the best fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life.” It blew me away. I spent years trying to understand it—I had 10 minutes looking at it.

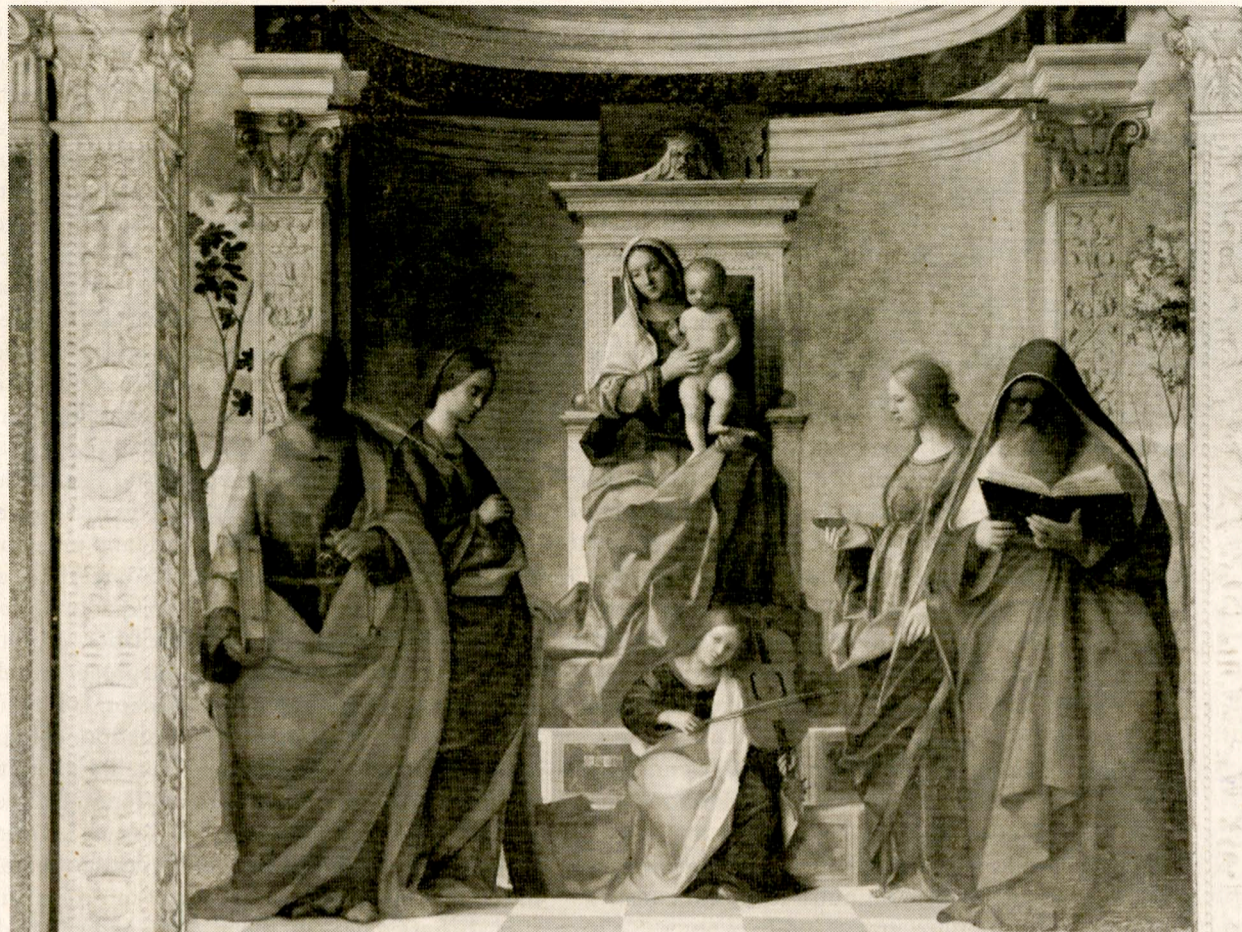
**EARNEST:** Could you talk a little bit more about what the Bellininess of Bellini is?

**YUSKAVAGE:** Well this is the point, you go to Venice and you get it. There’s a term *poesis*, which sounds kind of bad—I don’t like the sound of it, because it sounds limp, but it’s not. *Poesis* is also in Giorgione; it’s paintings which, for the first time in history, have no narrative—the narrative is created by the viewer. I was one of the only kids at Tyler who was neither Jewish nor an atheist. I had been raised Catholic and so I knew all the stories behind all the paintings and all the kids asked over and over “Lisa, who is this saint, what are they doing?” I walked into San Zaccaria and I saw this amazing Bellini painting with no narrative, unlike any other works we had seen, and then the fact that the title was “Sacred Conversation.” For years I studied it, and I think *poesis* is important because it is essentially formalism as narrative.

**EARNEST:** What was it you found in the painting years later?

**YUSKAVAGE:** It’s an extremely contemporary, modern idea. In the “Sacred Conversation” if you just follow what you’re seeing, you don’t need to know anything about St. Francis, you don’t need to know that it’s Italy—the humanity in the work comes through the visual language. Pictorial language, if you’re a painter or if you like to look at paintings, is simply the construction of the painting as

emotion. You can see it from a mile away, it's aggressive. The painting's aggressive, the painting is mournful. The "Sacred Conversation" painting in Venice has four saints, and none of them are looking at each other. None of them seem to be aware of anyone else in this alcove. Bellini painted the alcove, which actually does represent the church, it has the same architectural details and everything, and he painted a make-believe window with light coming in. I think that the state of mind of Venetians is part of what led to the ability to think this way, in this kind of dreaminess. It's a dream, the way dreams don't really make sense but within dreams they make perfect sense. They seem to be nonsensical, and every character in it is you. You look at this painting and see the two male saints, the two female saints, then there's Madonna and child on the throne and then there's an angel playing the viola. And you have to ask yourself where's the conversation? Nobody is talking, there is no conversation. So what's happening? Then you realize the conversation is a psychic one and I truly believe that painting communicates through form psychically. It speaks through the mind. I think that in great art something happens like that. I don't mean *psychic* like the gypsy in the storefront who wants to read your palm—"Pretty lady, come here!" I think it's amazing you can really feel something like mourning and loss, and that's what a lot of those paintings are about. And then, the Bellini painting, the "Sacred Conversation" painting,



Giovanni Bellini, "The Sacred Conversation," San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505. Oil on wood.

When I first started making punchy art people started punching back at me, and I was like "whoa that hurt!" I realized after a while, I hit them first, and that's fucking awesome—you connected, and they're connecting back, now it's game on.

when I looked at it again and again and again, one thing I realized was that all of these people didn't even speak the same language, they're from different countries and they died at different times in history, and in this painting, in this alcove, through representation, through the sleight of hand, the gift of representing something in this light, you believe they're there. He brings them together, and obviously they didn't live at the same time as the baby Jesus, because Jesus supposedly, if you follow the narrative, had been crucified. For these people to die and be made saints, this kid was grown up and dead already. So, what's going on in this room?—I realized that this is blissful heaven. This is a depiction of life after death. I looked at it again and I thought "Oh my god, all of these people died in excruciating pain." And then, this painting is so peaceful, there's such peace there, it's like when pain stops. It's a very profound painting and

I think that Bellini has this ability to transmit all that. He was a person of great feeling and of great awe. He was a believer.

In that Seinfeld thing they talked about stand-up being like going up there in your underwear. I think painting can be far more horrifying than that. I'd go up in my underwear any day. If I could go into the gallery and stand in my underwear as opposed to have a show, it would be a cinch. People would come in and make fun of me, I would make fun back. That would be easy. The real problem is to show something and be even more vulnerable. To let even more out. Believe in stuff. I guess that's kind of why, when I looked at all the things I gave you today, I was thinking "Don't be afraid to believe in stuff. Be open." I want to keep being a sucka, and I don't want to get jaded. When I first started making punchy art people started punching back at me, and I was like

"whoa that hurt!" I realized after a while, I hit them first, and that's fucking awesome—you connected, and they're connecting back, now it's game on. I'm going to be black and blue, but I like contact. I like art as a contact sport. I know what it's like to make art that is not heard, and I don't know if you feel that way, but it's very painful. It's very painful to make art and there's absolutely no audience for it. Not even bad; bad is better. But in the process of all of that you must not let it change you and the sort of art you make. It's like people calling my paintings "horrible" or then "old masterly." I agree with it both half the time but I don't want it to change me. I want to remain vulnerable. Goddamn. ☹

LISA YUSKAVAGE is a painter living in New York. Her next solo exhibition will be in April at David Zwirner, New York. *The Brood*, a survey of her polyptychs, opens Fall 2015 at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.



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Photo: Exhibition of works by Cindy Sherman at Metro Pictures Gallery, 2008

