

## Q&amp;A

# A solo show for an acclaimed artist

BY GEOFF EDGERS

WALTHAM, MASS. — More recently than she likes to remember, Lisa Yuskavage's dreamy, colorful and racy paintings were selling for as little as \$2,000 — or not at all. "I could not get rid of them," the 53-year-old artist said recently, sitting in a gallery at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum as installers readied the biggest solo museum show of her career. "I had to borrow money from my mom."

These days, Yuskavage's work sells for as much as \$1.3 million, and her sprawling paintings, as influenced as much by Piero della Francesca as Penthouse, have earned critical praise. Just don't bring the kids, unless, that is, you want to try to explain that bare-bottomed girl sucking on a lollipop in "Triptych." "The Brood" runs through December. This excerpted interview took place at the museum.

**Did you ever think about softening your work? Maybe making it a little less explicit? There was that point where you were basically unknown.**

It was worse than an unknown. I was a tainted unknown. There is something worse than being unknown. My response to things, especially back then, was to step on the throttle again, harder. I decided I was making art for myself and I would just make the art I wished somebody else was making. I was going around to galleries, and there was a kind of art that was not being made, but nobody was making the thing I was looking for. I felt like, "Nobody likes my work anyway, so I might as well plow through here."

**With the titles as well.**

Who's going to buy something called "Mother-----?" I actually did make a small painting called "Eat Me."

**Is there something strange now about being praised by critics and selling works for more than a million dollars, basically about being embraced?**

I wouldn't say it's universally embraced and loved. Why aren't more museums working with me? On the other hand, I have incredibly positive press. I would tell you... I'm not vanilla and I'm not baking chocolate chip cookies in my studio. My work confused people because of the vulgarity in the work. It's not that I don't understand that it's vulgar. If you're making art, you're always thinking what hasn't been said. We're hundreds of years into this. Who needs another freaking painting? When you realize I have something to add to this. There are certain open-minded people who are really interested in being challenged.

**I keep reading that you're potty mouthed or tough talking, but you don't seem to swear, and you seem perfectly civilized to me.**

I do think that somebody at one time said it, and then a lot of people in the profession just repeat what sounds good. Maybe also people conflate me with the work. My work has had a potty mouth. There was a man who bought a drawing, he was very elegant, an Afrikaner. A white South African. They were very elegant people, and somebody told me he gave a tour of his collection and when he came across my drawing, which is called "Mother----- Three," he said, "This is the drawing with the unfortunate title." I've had art dealers change the title or refuse to say it. Not lately.

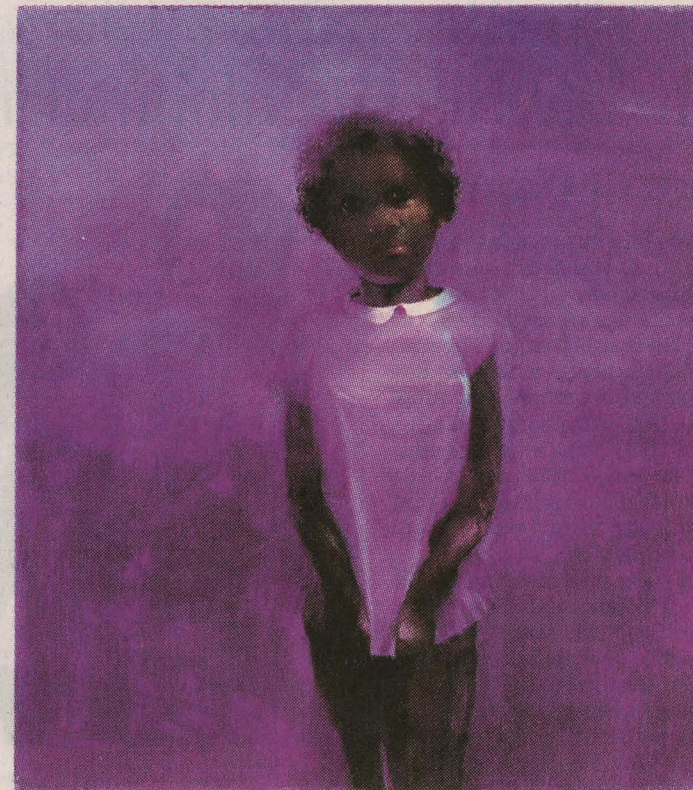
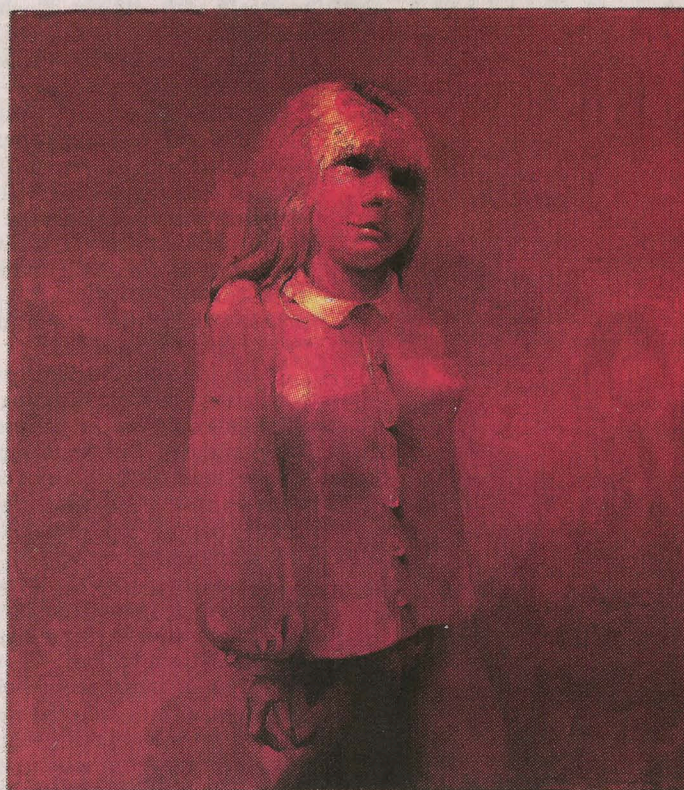
**Let's talk about one of your specific works in the show: "Triptych," which naturally features three separate canvases forming one scene. It also has two nude figures, backs to us, but quite a lot is revealed.**

I didn't know it would be a triptych. The panel on the left, I started that painting and was working on that painting. What I heard were the words "It goes on." That's so weird. "Why do you keep doing that, Lisa?" I didn't realize it was me not playing by the rules. Okay, trust your instincts. You're hearing this, so follow it. I got back to my studio, and I have a long wall

with a big setback, and I got four extra canvases just to see what would happen. In the end, it ended up being a triptych. The reality of it having a specific narrative. It really works more like this. Have you ever been in therapy?

**No.**

There is a concept idea that actually is an idea in therapy, which is transference. When I was in my — I'll call it the "circling the drain" days — when I'd go around and around and not quite get sucked in, but I could feel the pull, I went to an NYU psychoanalyst. It was \$5 a session. But in order to let them give you therapy for \$5, you had to submit to a battery of tests. I actually did a Rorschach test, which was fun. A painting came out of that because I just kept seeing roadkill. There was this one test where they give you a picture, a family or boy sitting in a room, or a tree, and you just made up a story. And it was an associative test. I would just go on and on about what I imagined. It's the ability to associate, which is how that painting was developed. Having said that, once I was finished with it, I stepped back and had the viewers I like having in my studio.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LISA YUSKAVAGE AND DAVID ZWIRNER



E.J. CAMP/COURTESY OF DAVID ZWIRNER

**"The Brood," an exhibit of Lisa Yuskavage's work, is on display at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Mass., through December. At top are two of Yuskavage's works: "The Ones That Don't Want To: Buttons" (1991) and "The Ones That Don't Want To: Black Baby" (1991-1992).**

**And they explained why there are these women, very conservative looking, approaching the nude women?**

My husband looked at the painting and looked at the figures in the distance, and he said the reason why I put those ladies in the distance is because I thought it was very nihilistic to have an a-----, a vagina and somebody's butt looking at you. I don't want it to be so negative. I need some faces. But what faces would they be? My husband, when he saw it, he's the one who looked at it and said something like, "That's your first wave feminist critic saying, no, no, Lisa." They signal pretty much the opposite of the foreground figure, which is no shame, why are we so ashamed of that.

I guess the lollipop girl must be the ego. Then I looked at the fact that ego and superego is a structure, and there's the painting with three panels. There's a quote from Michelangelo, and it's a very old quote. He said that David was in the marble and all he had to do was remove the excess. I know that sounds, like, too freaky and magical. But when I finished the painting, I realized I just removed the excess.

**And if a critic said, "This is the id, this is the ego, these are**

**the judgmental feminists coming at you..."**

I, over the years, have seen things in my work that I haven't seen before. And can kind of go back and say, oh, that's kind of an interesting possibility. I think that's why something comes alive. You can only bring to things what you've experienced.

**You don't have any kids. But if you did, how old should they be to come and see this show?**

If they were my kids, I wouldn't have to explain anything. They'd get it. My work is embedded and intrinsic to who I am, and I think they'd be well-adjusted human beings who would probably become lawyers.

**What do you hope for when people see your work?**

The job of the artist is to get people to change how they see things. That is what I come to art for. When I saw Philip Guston's first show at the Whitney, I really didn't like it. And I wasn't the only person. And I went away and I couldn't get it out of my mind and came back to it, and now he's one of my favorite artists. We should be changed. Many people who are actually my best fans have actually said to me, "I hated it at first."

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