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A PROVOCATIVE PAINTER

Should her work be praised or panned? A show in the artist's Phila. hometown lets viewers make the call.

By Eils Lotozo

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Juniata Park, where blocks of tiny rowhouses abut what's left of a dense factory district, might seem an unusual place to nurture the sensitive soul of an artist. Yet homegirl Lisa Yuskavage, a Girls High grad and Tyler alum, has soared to prominence in the New York art world in the last five years. And it's been a mighty controversial trip.

Critics have declared her strange, vibrantly colored paintings of opulently fleshy female figures, often in stages of undress and sometimes lacking eyes, an "important development in recent art," in the words of former Village Voice critic Peter Schjeldahl.

But her work has also horrified some critics. Dubbed one of the "Bad Girls in Art," a group of young women painters in New York who employ sexual imagery, Yuskavage has been accused of courting attention by using shock tactics. One peeved critic deemed her



Images such as "Night" (1999-2000) have offended some critics.

vaguely surreal paintings "knowingly dreadful." Her figures have been likened to Barbie dolls hurt in a terrible car wreck and then subjected to botched cosmetic surgery.

In person, the down-to-earth Yuskavage, 38, does not come off as anyone's idea of a bad girl. She is serious and articulate about her work, which she once described as being about "things in myself I feel incredibly uncomfortable with and embarrassed by."

Yuskavage lives in New York with her husband, Matvey Levenstein, a fellow painter she met in graduate school at Yale. This week, though, she was back in Philadelphia, staying with her parents while she prepared for the opening of the first major museum retrospective of her work, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, opening tomorrow. Last weekend, we caught up with her over lunch at a Juniata diner.

See **ARTIST** on C3



AKIRA SUWA / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Lisa Yuskavage, who grew up in Juniata Park, stands on the roof of her New York studio in a 1996 photograph. At left is one of her lush, colorful — and controversial — female figures in an oil on linen titled "Good Evening Hamass" (1997). A retrospective of Yuskavage's work will open tomorrow at the Institute of Contemporary Art.



A provocative painter returns to Phila. for a retrospective

ARTIST from C1

Question: In the blue-collar Philadelphia neighborhood I grew up in, deciding to be an artist was like deciding to go to Mars. How did a Juniata Park girl make it from there to Yale, and to the big leagues of the New York art world?

Answer: It was always in the air that I was going to get a higher education in whatever I chose. It was always something that was in my family: The most important thing was to be educated.

And I was always encouraged. I was never discouraged from being an artist. They never said, "How are you going to make a living?" My father had a job driving a truck delivering Mrs. Smith's pies from midnight to noon. It's not the worst job in the world, but I think he would have preferred doing something with his mind. But there wasn't the opportunity. I remember he said to me, "Don't do what I did. Do what you love, and everything will work out. You'll always find a way to survive." Where did he get that? It was an incredible gift.

Q: When did you realize you wanted to be an artist?

A: I was in the seventh or eighth grade at Holy Innocents school. I was trying, like most kids, to define myself against my older sister, who was very gifted in math and science, and I got very interested in copying cartoons. I was going to be a cartoonist at first. Then I started making my own books of poetry and I needed illustrations for them. At first I cut out pictures from magazines. Then I wrote some corny poem about "the things I love" and I needed a drawing. I remember I was surprised at how good it was. After that I never stopped. I just drew and drew.

Then, somehow, I had this realization that if I went to Little Flower, stayed in Catholic school, they wouldn't let me be an artist the way I wanted to be an artist. My mother had talked about Girls High. But I wasn't a particularly good student and I got really terrible conduct grades. My mother always used to say to me, "I know you're really smart. You don't fool me." And she said if you want to go to Girls High you have to get straight A's. So I turned myself around in order to follow what I wanted.

The public schools then had this

If You Go

The Lisa Yuskavage exhibition runs from tomorrow through Feb. 9 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 118 S. 36th St. There will be a free preview reception from 6 to 8 p.m. tomorrow. Information: 215-898-5911 or go to www.icaphila.org

thing called the mentally gifted program. We were taken to concerts and ballets and we went to the Philadelphia Museum of Art every week. I still remember everything they talked about. I was just riveted by it. Another thing we were able to do is go to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts on Saturdays and draw the nude, which was a big thing for high school students to do. ... I was just in love with it. I felt like I had found my home.

Q: Speaking of home, I understand that you had to live at home in Juniata in order to go to Tyler School of Art. Did you feel like a second-class citizen as a commuter student?

A: Not really. It wasn't until I went to Tyler's Rome program that I realized I was poorer than the other students. I had to go back after one semester and everyone else got to stay. I was very aware of the class differences then, and I was very angry. But seeing all those paintings in Italy was incredible. ... I saw one in Venice that changed my life [a madonna by Giovanni Bellini]. I knew I wanted to make paintings like that.

Q: It's a rare thing for an artist to reach the point you have: earning a living through the sales of your paintings. Did you always know it would happen for you?

A: For 10 years I did not survive by making my work. I did many things to make money — bartending, life-guarding. ...

I always thought it was important to find grace in what you do. I thought it would be very ungraceful to stay in New York and struggle, taking up space. I made a deal with myself. Somewhere around 40 or 45, if things didn't start to change, I'd move out and make room for someone else to try. Things would get a little better,

then they'd get a little worse. I'd have a show, I'd get written up in art magazines, but then the dealer would go out of business and she wouldn't pay me.

Q: How did you come to start painting the images that have gotten so much attention?

A: I always had an instinct I wanted to paint female figures and I wanted my paintings to be strongly psychological. I was always interested in Freud and the concept of the id and in challenging taboos in subtle ways. And I always knew I wanted to be a really, really good painter, so that the painting would be delivered with undeniable power.

But I had a show in 1990 and I went in the day they hung it, and I saw that my paintings were incredibly well-behaved and demure. Yet people who know me know I'm go-

ing to be the one to say the thing to shut the party down. People say, "Lisa, don't go there," and I'll go there. But in my paintings, all of the provocative stuff was way down deep. I realized I needed to make what was covert overt.

The woman whose gallery I was showing with at the time was so gentle. She liked gourmet paintings. I realized if I could make work that she hated I'd be on the right track.

Q: At first, some critics talked about your work as some kind of feminist manifesto having to do with the sexual objectification of women. Was this accurate?

A: Not at all. I'm not a manifesto-type person. I have a feminist hump which goes up. But I'm not a person who has ever been interested in political art. ... Maybe it's an odd thing to say on the eve of a museum show, but I

really consider the making of art a private enterprise.

Q: Some critics have called your work an important development in contemporary art. Other people have been deeply disturbed by your work, likening it to soft porn. Does this surprise you?

A: When I went through this process of turning my paintings around, I knew the consequences were going to be that a lot of people were not going to like them. Not everything is for everyone. It's funny: a lot of women have reacted against my work, saying, "How could a woman paint images like that?" Well, isn't that repression? ...

I really think people bring to the work something of themselves. It depends on what your tilt is and what you're willing to believe. Apparently someone called the ICA

and asked if the image on the invitation card to the show was child pornography. I think the person who says that is more dangerous than whatever I'm doing experimenting with painting. That's reckless.

I have an aunt who is a Catholic nun. She thought the image, which is of a girl pulling up her shirt, was a very tender painting. She said, "I just thought it was very sweet. She got up in the morning and she pulled up her nightgown and said, 'Oh my goodness, where did these come from?'"

There's a difference between what goes on in art and what goes on in life. I think if someone fears something in my work, they don't believe you can actually let loose the id and have it stay where it belongs, in the fantasy world.

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Lisa Yuskavage calls this 1995 work "Transference Portrait of My Shrink in Her Starched Nightgown With My Face and Her Hair."