

VITAMIN
P

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN PAINTING



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PHAIDON

LISA YUSKAVAGE When Lisa Yuskavage first hit the scene in the mid-1990s, her pastel-colored paintings of big-titted girls with pouty lips and vacant stares revealed a perverse, imaginative take on the female nude as receptacle of the male gaze. Her salacious exaggerations of the ideal female body, which borrowed as much from Mannerist distortions as from porno cartoons, were uneasily received. Too beautifully rendered to be vulgar and too kitschy to be art, they left in their wake a confused flutter of bombastic gossip. Like Sue Williams before her, Yuskavage gained instant notoriety—a “bad girl” reputation that reduced her complex dialectic of sexuality and shame to a mere spectacle of the naughty. Only recently have critics come to recognize her provocative brand of figuration as a significant practice. 000 The daughter of a truck driver, Yuskavage describes herself as a ribald girl from the wrong side of the tracks, and the dissonance this identity has caused her as an artist and a woman is integral to her work. By entangling feminine ideals of decorum and cultural prescriptions of taste with issues of class, the conflict she enacts between bodily self-loathing and sexual desire distinguishes her work from that of other figurative painters such as Cecily Brown, John Currin, and Jenny Saville, to whom she is often compared. Her burlesque clash of high and low, where bawdy girl meets society’s uncompromising mirror, seems closer in spirit to the films of Russ Meyer and John Waters. 000 *All I Got Are Big Boobs* (1996): Yuskavage cracks wise in the title of her black-and-white monotype of two female figures. One—a rigid, smiling form evocative of an Ionic column with a Greek temple for a chest—represents the artist’s shrink, a recurring figure in Yuskavage’s imagery. With chin tilted up toward the light that falls across her full, red lips (the only color in the image) and architectonic bust, she stands with serene confidence. Behind her in the shadows is a naked figure, presumably the artist, whose buxom breasts nearly outsize her head. 000 With a bachelor’s degree from the Tyler School of Art and a M.F.A. from Yale, Yuskavage has chosen to emulate the technical virtuosity of Old Masters (Bellini, Rembrandt, Tintoretto), whose sublime fusion of light, color, and space she transposes with abject guile onto her caricature vixens. Yuskavage also cites Degas as an important influence, as well as the more contemporary works of late Philip Guston, Mike Kelley, and Jeff Koons, whose plebeian sensibilities accord with her own. More resonantly, her cheesecake parodies evoke popular sources, from 1970s-era *Penthouse* magazines and Vargas pinup girls to Harlequin romance novels. But while Yuskavage stylistically paraphrases such clichés, her concupiscent girlies are always in a state of deformation—distended bellies, gargantuan asses, corset-thin waists, and uneven, pendulous tits threatening at every moment to turn pulchritude into grotesquerie. The long, vertically erect nipples of her figures in *Sweetpuss* (1996), *Good Evening, Hamass* (1997), and *Honeymoon* (1998), for example, become mini-penises at full mast; images of hyperbolic self-arousal that simultaneously mock male desire. 000 In Yuskavage’s most recent series, “Northview” (2000), named for the mansion in which her figures pose, her louche young girls seem to have grown older and more world-weary. Slumped in Victorian armchairs or gazing out of silk-curtained bay windows, they are visibly tired and for the first time absorbed in real thought. Like the artist herself, they may have finally made it over to the “right” side of the tracks but for now are exhausted by the gutsy exploits of their trespass. 000 Jane Harris

Born in Philadelphia in 1962, lives and works in New York Selected One Person Exhibitions: 2001 – Studio Guenzani, Milan; Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York; Centre d’art contemporain, Geneva 000 2000 – Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia 000 1999 – greengrassi, London 000 1998 – Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York 000 1997 – Studio Guenzani, Milan 000 1996 – Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, California; Boesky & Callery, New York 000 1994 – Lühring Augustine Gallery, New York 000 1993 – Studio Guenzani, Milan Selected Group Exhibitions: 2001 – “Lateral Thinking, Art of the 1990s”, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, California; “Works on Paper from Acconci to Zittel”, Victoria Miro Gallery, London 000 2000 – “Salon”, Delfina Project Space, London; Corcoran Biennial, Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, D.C.; Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; “Greater New York”, P.S.1, Long Island City, New York 000 1999 – “The Time of Our Lives”, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; Istanbul Biennial, Turkey 000 1998 – “Young Americans 2”, Saatchi Gallery, London; “Pop Surrealism”, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut 000 1997 – “My Little Pretty”, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago 000 1996 – “What I did on my summer vacation”, White Columns, New York Selected Bibliography: 2001 – Carey Lovelace, “Lisa Yuskavage Fleeced Out”, *Art in America*, July; Edith Newhall, “Lisa Yuskavage”, *Artnews*, April; Peter Schjeldahl, “Girls Girls Girls”, *The New Yorker*, 15 January; Roberta Smith, “A Painter Who Loads the Gun and Lets the Viewer Fire It”, *The New York Times*, 12 January; “Lisa Yuskavage”, *Artforum*, April 000 2000 – Katy Biegel, “Blonde Ambition”, *Artforum*, May 000 1999 – Marthe Schwendener, “Lisa Yuskavage”, *Flash Art*, March/April 000 1997 – Matthew Ritchie, “Lisa Yuskavage at Boesky & Callery”, *Flash Art*, March/April

1.



2.



1. *KK Thinking*, 2001, Watercolor on paper, 58 x 35 1/2 inches, 147.5 x 90 cm
2. *Northview*, 2000, Oil on linen, 55 x 49 inches, 139.5 x 124.5 cm
3. *Hair Puller*, 1999, Oil on linen, 20 x 14 inches, 51 x 35.5 cm
4. *Big Blonde in the Weeds*, 2000–1, Oil on linen, 84 x 72 inches, 213.5 x 183 cm



III Painting How?

"There are two problems in painting," a young but already notorious Frank Stella once told an audience of art students. "One is to find out what painting is, and the other is to find out how to make a painting."⁹ One of the possible distinctions between Modern and what we all seem to have agreed to call contemporary (rather than Post-modern) art would be to say that Modernist painting was more urgently concerned with what painting is. In general it was thought that if one could come to a clear sense of what it is, it would already supply or at least imply the answer—one might even say, the formula—for how to make it. Anything like virtuosity for its own sake would only hamper the complete realization of the defining conception. That is why Greenberg could say, for example, that "the onlooker who says his child could paint a Newman may be right but Newman would have to be there to tell the child exactly what to do."

Today, on the evidence of the most interesting work being done, the question of what painting is—the fundamental question for Newman, Lucio Fontana, Robert Ryman, and Daniel Buren—has been demoted to the secondary status once held by the problem of *making*. Today it seems that artists are more concerned with how to make a painting—again, this comes out in the obsession with style I mentioned earlier—or sometimes with how to use the materials, methods, concepts, or traditions of painting to make a work that should not necessarily be called a painting. *What it is will then emerge from how it is.*

Painters are merely the first onlookers of their own work. A thoroughly Duchampian view would say that is all they can significantly be, the fundamental artistic act being contained in the contemplative act of choice. A number of the painters whose works are included here would probably agree, for instance Hong Seung-Hye, whose paintings are industrially fabricated, or Francis Alÿs, who commissions some of his work from artisan sign painters. But the painters who are involved in making work by hand, through the preliminary act of choosing to enter actively into the productive process—implicitly asserts that there is more involved in art than choice or, at least, that there is something more to choice than Marcel Duchamp and his artistic progeny imagine. (The choice to make art in this way as opposed to another is probably no more a real choice than what has become known as "sexual choice," an analogy based on so much of the work itself, particularly that of Marlene Dumas and Ghada Amer, among others, bridging aesthetic investment and sexual desire.) Although this personal investment in the activity of forming the object can no longer be part of the definition of art, the specific contribution that painting can make to artistic thought more generally is probably related to the value of this choice to enter a realm beyond mere choice. That is, it has to do with this cultivation of the tactile dimension of things, of a plastic relation to materials that (because of the potential this relation offers for continual feedback between matter and sensation) is also a proprioceptive activity—to the indirect benefit of the viewer who partakes of this relation only imaginatively, though as vividly as possible. For the viewer, painting is a noun: the finished object we see. For the painters it can also be a verb: the activity in which they are engaged. When painters succeed in evoking and disclosing

painting—the-verb within painting—the-noun, as many of those in this book do (Suzanne McClelland being a particularly clear example), they offer the rest of us a rare gift.

If Modernism was, as I've said, an advance in consciousness—and if Conceptual Art likewise represented an advance in consciousness within Modernism—then we can never go back to seeing what is *in* a painting before seeing it as a painting. Even (or rather especially) the most apparently traditional painters you'll see in VITAMIN P, including those like John Currin or Lisa Yuskavage whose work may seem at times downright provocatively retrograde, depend on this assumption. Their paintings, like most of the work here, are always reflexively concerned with their own status as paintings. They are paintings, yes, but also allegories of painting.

IV Painting Where?

Once, art historical narratives were organized by "schools"; although the notion persisted into the Modernist era (Ecole de Paris, New York School), a new historical unit, the "movement" (Cubism, Abstract Expressionism), eclipsed it. But today an introduction to contemporary painting no longer forms a chapter in the chronicle of successive movements any more than it charts a geography of adjacent schools. Positions are now multiple, simultaneous and decentered.

It is no longer possible to presume to know all that is going on in painting. There are too many hidden corners. Even in the early to mid-1980s, it was still possible to imagine that painting, not in its eternal essence, perhaps, but in its present being, was *this* as opposed to *that*. This sense of certainty had apparently been the case for a long time. In his memoirs, Alex Katz, for instance, recalls that as a young painter in New York in the early 1950s, all serious painting was white and black. "You weren't 'allowed' to use color," he wrote, perhaps somewhat hyperbolically. Then after a big Bonnard show in 1953, "suddenly everyone was using color."¹⁰ Thirty years later, painting could not be categorized as a certain palette and not another—this aspect was *ad libitum*—but it seemed pretty clear that painting was figurative, for instance, rather than abstract, impulsive rather than systematic. But it used a space that was not naturalistic. Some people thought of it as expressionist, or neo-expressionist. Or as an expression of a minority taste, painting might even be abstract—a painter like Jonathan Lasker had his admirers already—but hardly geometrical or "minimal," which signified tired and academic. (Just as in the 1960s, by contrast, anything that smacked of lyricism or impulsiveness tended to seem boring, epigonal, provincial.) Sure, established painters may still have been working away in such modes (Marden, Ryman, etc.), just as there were still realists of one sort or another (Philip Pearlstein, Neil Welliver), but there seemed to be little room for new arrivals at either of those inns.

On the face of it, today there is no consistent "look," no particular method, style, material, subject, or theme that identifies a painting as credibly contemporary or, on the other hand, disqualifies it from consideration as



Kazimir Malevich, *Untitled*, circa 1916, Oil on canvas, 20 7/8 x 20 7/8 inches, 53 x 53 cm, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice

Kazimir Malevich, *Woman Worker*, 1933, Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 22 3/4 inches, 70 x 58 cm, Collection, Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia



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