

Artist's work has taken her far, but is planted in her Juniata roots

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by Carol Denker

Lisa Yuskavage feels her first solo museum exhibition of paintings, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, is a celebration of her life, including the neighborhood she grew up in.

Although Yuskavage's exaggerated and graphic art might give the folks from her childhood neighborhood of Juniata Park some unease, the artist is cheerfully certain how her past led to her present artistic success.

"It's two-sided," explained Yuskavage.

"First, it's the tough-realist part I got growing up on the street," said the artist, "living in a row home on Claridge Street. And I always wanted to

keep that down to earth quality in my work."

Yuskavage pointed to her strong women figures, painted in vivid, edgy colors, brassy and comfortable with their sexuality.

"But there's the other part of my upbringing, very specific to just my family," said Yuskavage. "My parents insisted that I be educated, and worked very hard for that to happen.

"So I never stopped learning. After I graduated from Tyler School of Art, I got my Masters in Fine Arts from Yale," said Yuskavage. "I spent my third year [at Tyler] in Rome, where I saw so much art, I just steeped myself in it."

Yuskavage's education

shows. She handles her paint professionally, creating powerful spaces with color, and deftly describing a tiny hand or a mass of hair. And Yuskavage follows formal painting tradition when she shows several small studies, as well as plaster models, of the subject matter in her large paintings.

But her subject matter is not at all conventional. Yuskavage's images tend to surprise viewers, sometimes even shock.

When asked what her paintings 'mean', Yuskavage tries to say.

"It's obviously about the world of women, which is what I know about, so that's what I explore," said Yuskavage. "The images come from a deep part of

me. They're like dreams.

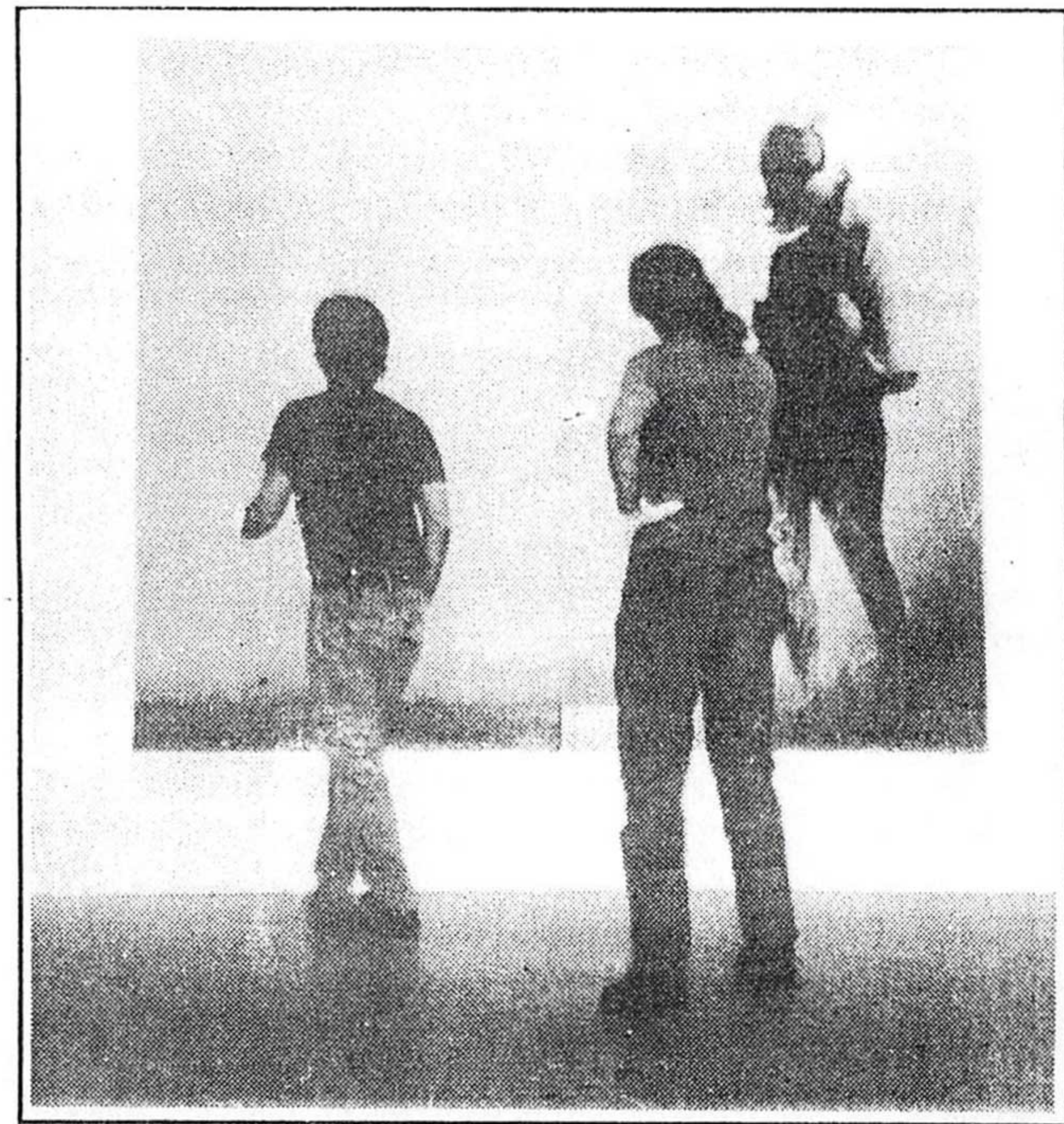
"But you really have to look for a long time before you find your reaction to these paintings."

Indeed, after staring at one of Yuskavage's huge oils, an unclothed woman looking through rich red drapes, one is moved, feeling a heady sense of dream-like adventure.

Yuskavage has traveled far from her Juniata Park origins: she has taught at Princeton University and shows her work in New York, Milan and London galleries. Yet Yuskavage says her everyday artistic explorations are the most exciting adventure.

"My father told me, 'Do work you love,'" Yuskavage said. "He emphasized

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Workers at the Institute of Contemporary Art hang one of Lisa Yuskavage's pieces for her first solo museum show.
/C. Denker

Lisa

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that above all else, and I am grateful."

Gene Yuskavage drove a Mrs. Smith's Pies truck for most of his working life, leaving at midnight. He took a second job doing aluminum siding, to provide for his family

"My father worked really, really hard," said Yuskavage, "and so did my mother. In fact, that's where I get my work ethic.

"I've worked as a bartender, a lifeguard, and now as an artist. I begin early and work til late," said the 38-year-old Yuskavage, who has built up a huge body of work.

"Now that my parents are retired," said the artist, "my father does the cooking. He'll be making all the desserts for my opening!"

Which led to the obvious question: what do her parents think of her provocative paintings?

Smiling, Yuskavage answered evenly. "I think my father is proud of me, though he doesn't understand a lot of my work," she said.

"My mother is more into art," said Yuskavage. "We go to museums together and she really tries to understand what goes on in the art world.

"My mother is amazing," said Yuskavage. "She became the Tumor Registrar at Temple Hospital, because she went back to school at 50-something, when both her children were in college.

"I want to tell my students about my family's faith in me. When I see very talented kids leave the art field because their parents are frightened they won't get a job, I get upset," said Yuskavage.

"I would say absolutely the most important factor in my success was my family's support.

"I kept going, and working, and I finally got what I wanted—to have my first museum show at ICA," said the artist. "It can be done."

Yuskavage's exhibit at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 118 S. 36th Street, is on display through February 9. Hours are noon till 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

Lisa Yuskavage will also take part in "Artist in Dialogue" on January 31 at 6 p.m. in Meyerson Hall, Room B-3, at 34th and Walnut Streets.