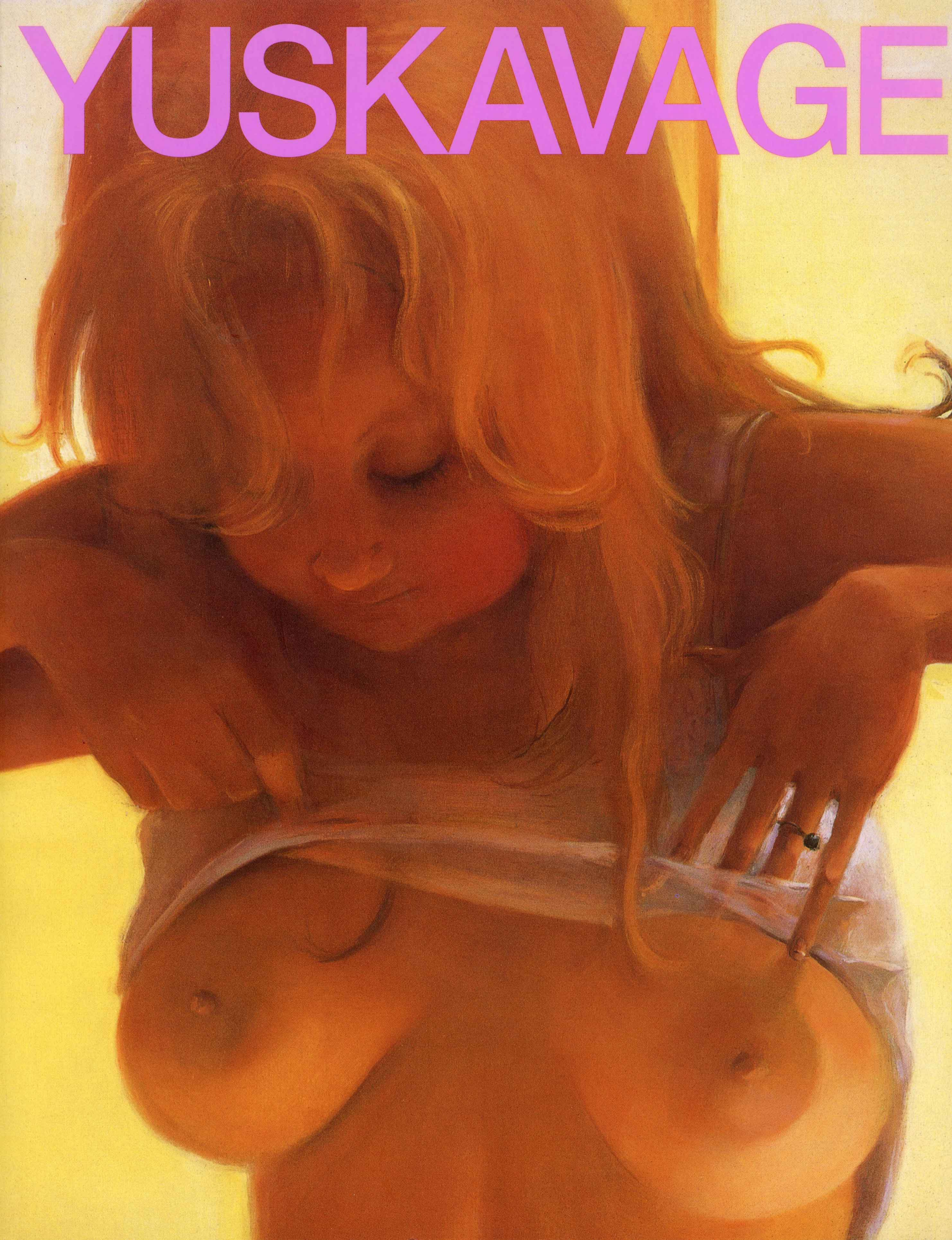


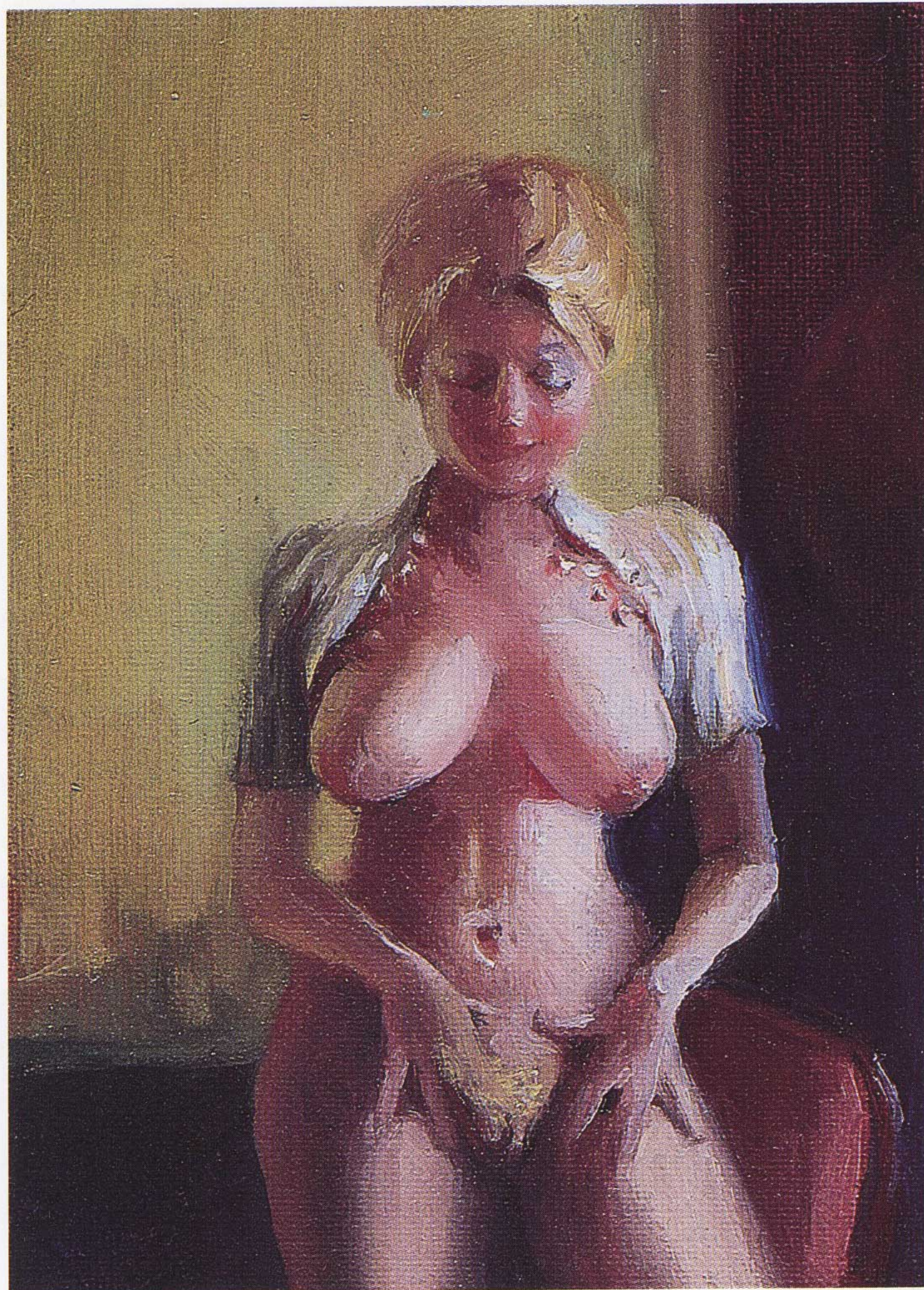
YUSKAVAGE



LISA YUSKAVAGE

Institute of Contemporary Art
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, PHILADELPHIA

DECEMBER 2, 2000—FEBRUARY 9, 2001



Screwing Her Pussy on Straight, 1997

OIL ON CANVASBOARD, 7 X 5

COLLECTION OF PHILIP GOLDENTYER, WASHINGTON DC

SCREWING IT ON STRAIGHT

Claudia Gould

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WORKING ACROSS THE STREET from the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York allowed me to frequent Lisa Yuskavage's solo shows in 1996 and 1998. The first time I saw a large body of Lisa's work in one place, at the 1996 show, I was taken aback—not quite horrified, but completely puzzled. I wondered: Why was a woman painting these types of paintings about women? When I returned two years later, in 1998, I was no closer to understanding what she was up to, except that I was much more *comfortable* with her work. I was certainly getting older and more comfortable with myself; was it a sign I was growing up? I was also beginning to understand that contradictions and change (in general, and as specifically reflected in Lisa's growing body of work) are not inherently vexing; they can be liberating as well. Two years later, and another two years older, I find myself not only enthralled by Lisa's images but curating her first one-person museum show.

Anyone who knows me knows better than to call me on Sundays at 9pm. I rarely miss an episode of *Sex and the City*, HBO's weekly program about four women in their thirties living and working in Manhattan. The dialogue is smart, provocative, and startlingly true to life. (You can hardly believe it airs on prime time American television.) The characters talk about the kind of stuff you dare only say to yourself and maybe—just maybe—to your closest friends. For instance: In one recent show, Samantha (the most sexually adventurous character) reveals over lunch that her newest partner has “funky spunk” and, alluding to the popular slang for oral sex, says “Well, girls, they don't call it a job for nothing.” Charlotte (the prim one) promptly walks out, and Carrie (the narrator) cancels her order of rice pudding.

A gay male friend of mine says he loves *Sex and the City* because it is as outrageous as the gay scene was in the seventies. But many people are uncomfortable with it, even threatened by it, except women of a certain age—from, say, sixteen to sixty.

If *Sex and the City* levels the playing field by giving voice to women and

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their sexuality, so, too, does Lisa Yuskavage. Like HBO's hit sitcom, Lisa's paintings are audacious and provocative; almost all of her women look sexually ripe. If you disregard her subject matter and focus on the virtuosity of her gorgeous technique, Lisa hits you over the head with such titles as *Asspicking, foodeating, headshrinking, socialclimbing motherfucking bad habits; Good Evening, Hamass; and Screwing Her Pussy on Straight* (referring to a woman who, in Lisa's lexicon, knows who she is and what she is doing). I hear these titles and my jaw drops. But, however much Lisa's work prompts some people to walk out and others to cancel their rice pudding, it assuredly rewards those who, like me, keep coming back for more.

The women in *Sex and the City* are, of course, fictitious, and Lisa's women are, too. The fact that they are unreal (or, as Lisa insists, "only real as paint") is what stumped me. As a feminist, I did not like her women and did not understand how a thirty-something woman could paint these images. I am a product of a culture that wants to believe everything we see, has a need to define things and neatly package them, and ultimately seeks understanding and resolution. Yuskavage makes this impossible: She teases us, contradicts herself, and constantly changes. This is a reflection of her own intellectual growth; a provocateur, she fights tooth and nail to keep things open, unresolved, *complicated*.

We explored some of these issues, and more, in a recent interview.

CLAUDIA GOULD: *In preparing for this interview, I have been reading a lot about you. There seem to be little contradictions both on your part and in statements by writers that you admire who use words that I know make you cringe—"bimbos, nymphets," etc. Do you see these women as "bimbos" with low self-esteem?*

LISA YUSKAVAGE: I am quite conscious that I am creating a fiction. If I didn't, I wouldn't be able to construct and manipulate them aggressively as paintings. I have always thought of the image as a personification of the painting itself. It is the layering and intersecting of how it is painted and what the image is that creates the meaning for me. I do feel puzzled, perhaps naively, about some of the language used by others to talk about them. Words like "bimbo" are problematic for me, as they describe a lofty distance and a lack of empathy; I am a great deal more empathic than ironic toward the paintings. I think you can see that if you look at the light and how they are painted. I don't work from an elevated place looking down; if they are low, then I am in the ditch with them, and by painting them, I am trying to dig us out together.

CG: *The thing is, we do see them as people. Is this just my problem? Am I misunderstanding things?*

LY: No, that's not your problem alone. Most people are more equipped to interpret subject matter. I am asking or daring the viewer, I suppose, to just look at it as a painted thing, as a kind of layered spectacle.

CG: *You want to keep it dangerous?*

LY: I prefer to work from the point of view that what I am doing is wrong rather than right. And I also like to keep in mind that it isn't truly dangerous, it's just fiction. But I also know how powerful good fiction can be. I read *Anna Karenina* this summer, and I walked around traumatized about Anna's demise; I felt as if someone had actually died. What affected me was not so much the suicide but the way it was described. It is compelling because of how Tolstoy allowed his characters to be full of contradictions and ambivalence. I was very drawn in because of that.

CG: *Now that you are painting your friend Kathy, who is a real person, doesn't that change things for you?*

LY: Yes, it does. A lot. I was looking for a way to change the drawing in my paintings, to continue the exploration of "What is a model?," which I started with the little maquettes. As far as studying light, the maquettes were great, but in terms of linear drawing, they set me up in overly mannerist and cartoony territory that made the reading of the paintings quicker than I intended. I also wanted to up the ante by having not only a real person pose but someone that I cared so deeply about, and whose own narrative might inform some of my pictorial choices and possibly open up options. I wanted to see what it would be like to turn something real into a painted thing to see if I could sustain my ability to keep it fictional.

CG: *It's made up. It's still not real.*

LY: Yes. It's still just an object, and it's still a constructed pictorial object.

CG: *This brings up Peter Schjeldahl's quote in a review about your work: "Painting can square public with private existence like no other visual medium. Its main demands on an artist, in this pursuit, are only that he or she be, first, adequately skilled, and, second, a sufficiently interesting person." Isn't that what other people are talking about?*

LY: I don't think that there is an uninteresting person alive. It's just that not every-

one has access to themselves, to the full range of their emotional life. This is why my work often embarrasses me and why I need it to embarrass me. Being embarrassed allows me to access more surprising pictorial solutions. I don't know precisely how, but it seems to function as a clarifying agent.

CG: *This brings up your titles. You said that when you named some of these paintings, you never expected them to see the light of day. Some of these titles can be considered vulgar or taboo, but to me they're very funny. How do you feel about that?*

LY: I just didn't think it would matter, because no one was paying attention. I was also listening to a bit too much rap music. Now, I have to face up to how aggressive they seem. I feel a little bad about them.

CG: *You do?*

LY: Sure. But I do have a funny story for why I called that one painting *Screwing Her Pussy on Straight*. It is a direct quote from friend, painter, and grad-school classmate Jesse Murry. He came to my studio, one day back in 1991, and took a long look at some painting I was working on, and said, "Honey, you have got to have your pussy screwed on straight to make these paintings!"

CG: *In other words, you've got to know what you are doing.*

LY: Specifically as a woman. I now know exactly what he meant. It is so easy to let it get all out of whack.

CG: *Do you find it liberating?*

LY: Sure it's liberating, but then I feel bad about it. I guess that would be your typical Catholic reaction. I laugh, I feel guilty, and I waver.

CG: *We talked yesterday about what makes your mouth water?*

LY: What do you mean? What kind of art?

CG: *What gets you really excited? What art makes you passionate?*

LY: Dense, layered things: movies, books, paintings. I have been in love with Phillip Guston's late work for a long time now, and rely on a lot of what he said about his own practice: "There is an ongoing battle between the form and the subject matter." His work is boundless and generous; it's as multilayered and woven as a

Beethoven symphony. I hate stingy art.

CG: *What would you say are some of your most complex paintings?*

LY: I don't know how to answer that, but I can say that one painting that is still a puzzle to me is called *True Blonde Draped*. I like how it reflects classicism. I am very interested in art history, but I am not in love with the past. It was hard for me to work with that image, because there was so much about the person posing that I had to consider while painting it.

CG: *It's Kathy; right?*

LY: Yes. Dealing with her presence stripped me of all of my antics. I wanted to see if I could let the image lead, and trust that the paintingness of it would still take over. I guess that was the joy; it was a real dialogue between the image and me. I am fond of all of the paintings of Kathy because I am dealing with someone else's generosity in lending their life force, in trusting me.

CG: *Why do people think that your work is political?*

LY: Because they want to believe that it is. I am interested in art, not politics. I am interested in giving myself the freedom to paint.



kk, 1998

OIL ON CANVASBOARD, 9½ X 7
PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK