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PAINTING

ISSUE NO. 143 \$9.95



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Lisa Yuskavage

Musings of an Edge-of-Towner

Interview by Robert Enright
Introduction by Meeka Walsh




Lisa Yuskavage, *Stoned*, 2016, oil and graphite on linen, 42.2 x 40 x 3.2 cm. All images courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London.



Out on a risky thin limb of approbation was where Lisa Yuskavage had located herself—a choice, she told us, when we talked to her 10 years ago. Tenuous, which felt right. It was at this point in the conversation that she raised the issue of pornography, an aspect of her work—“the benign presence of the devil” was how she identified it, and here the binary pull of the sacred and the profane in art history and in hers, too. She’d said, “It’s a constant theme for me: the struggle between the desire to be right and the desire to be wrong. I think it’s all just wanting to be true. And what is true and correct and right in art is often wrong in the world.”

In this current interview—many major exhibitions and much laudatory critical attention later—Lisa Yuskavage holds to the same position with a heartening consistency. She still says that when you’re an artist, you’re not making art to co-operate, that the artists whose work she admires—Guston and his Klansmen, Hans Baldung Grien’s unlovely crones and Diane Arbus’s cast of outsiders—are characters to be pushed to society’s edges, witches, maybe artists “out there stirring the pot and up to no good in the best way” and not here, she says, to please people. It’s an essential contribution.

While the titles of Yuskavage’s works offer suggestions, they don’t provide trackable clues to the meaning of the paintings. What is it we are looking at, how are we to read what we see? For starters, I don’t think a direct line is intended. It is the artist herself, after all, who says about her work that she was looking to see something she’d never seen before. What she painted, then, had to be sourced from her own being—her subconscious, which never failed to provide material, and her imagination. What we see often in colours, which become both the subject and a coherent unity with the subject, is a splendour of the imagination—familiar and at once inexplicable, where scale, nominal objects, accoutrements and dressings, events, alignments and weather have no apparent reason. Except if you take into consideration Lisa Yuskavage’s explanation that being raised Catholic encourages a belief in the supernatural and things you can’t see and can’t prove, which also includes miracles and that immaterial things get made into matter. Painterly transubstantiation is simple: the imagination is made manifest. “Painting, after all,” she says, “is a promise made flesh.” Colour is the primary tool used, with her consummate technique, to convey meaning or intention and tone. She holds close a quote from Philip Guston that she has transcribed onto her wall: “The figuration must be understood as another element layered over and working against the abstraction.”



The Art Students, 2017, speaks itself. Two art students are painting a third, a female figure, into being: the artist as progenitor. A trinity of figures—a triad, as Yuskavage describes them, and behind the three the sky is aglow in what the artist identifies as a supernatural phenomenon. The primary palette of red, yellow and blue is, she says, almost a character in her work. *Déjà Vu*, also from 2017, is a grisaille work with the five male figures like a painter’s preparatory cartoon in their pale sketchiness. In the foreground stands a young woman; her hippie-embroidered denim skirt is open and has slipped down to reveal an ideal Renaissance torso, round with the promise of fecundity. She lays one hand on the shaggy head of a squatting male, like a benediction, and the other, supported at the elbow by the male figure standing at the outside, slips into his hair at the temple. Her eyes are closed and she is lovely, transcendent, with her porcelain pink cheeks and her angel-like blonde hair, lifted from her face in wings.

Like the young woman in *Déjà Vu*, the figure in *(Nude) Hippie*, 2016, could also achieve a certain kind of transcendence. She stands aloft, perhaps on a mountaintop, and below and around her is a Tiepolo sky, such that it could be readily recognized as a chapel fresco. Her eyes are blue, very blue, and we note them as she looks over her shoulder at us, the strain of her swivelled head causing one eye to bulge in a somewhat heightened manner. This could be caused by the torsion or it could be the Rabelaisian amplification Yuskavage highlights in the bulbous, over-large noses she paints on some of the women, or the exaggeration of other body parts—buttocks, breasts, oddly foreshortened legs and feet, attenuated unmuscled arms, like figures from a Mannerist painting. Her hair is blonde, soft and long. If she is transcendent it can be in spite of or as well as our observing that she wears only hippie-patched jeans, which are scooped below her ample buttocks, and there also is the drawn-on, incomplete outline of panties. With this Yuskavage is employing a 16th-century application called *imprimatura*, a technique new for her, which she describes as a tinted layer below the paint laid over the surface and which affects the tonality of the painting, “giving it a unity and creating atmosphere.” Where the nude appears nude, it is in fact underpainted—a presence rather than an absence. Her drawn line calls our attention to her having painted around the form.

While each of Yuskavage’s paintings is a painting of something the artist hasn’t seen before—hence the impulsion to paint it—she is also mindful of art historical antecedents. I thought immediately of Vuillard, looking at *Lavinia with Bob*, 2016, and maybe

Bonnard, as well. Vuillard is an artist who Lisa Yuskavage says is never far from her mind.

The horizontal banding of the patterned rugs, the detailed vertical woodwork, a large plant occupying the left foreground and two figures being absorbed into the wallpapered background, the standing male figure dissolving, washing into it, the seated female slightly more visible, especially her highlighted green-stockinged left leg. Two horizontal bars of yellow sunlight cross the rugs behind them, enlivening the setting. It might otherwise seem that we are viewing the couple as though through the glass of a dreamy, sparsely furnished aquarium.

Pride and precariousness are two states an artist understands—the pride or confidence necessary to undertake the initial gesture and the risk of not knowing the outcome. Yuskavage must be aware of both. She said, “I constantly doubt myself and question my motives, but, having said that, there is only one thing I stopped questioning: that artistic doubt is a primary asset and integral to the process.”

I think of Lisa Yuskavage’s identifying artists as edge-of-townners, outsiders. We know this is true and both a desired and designated place, and necessary in order to see clearly and, out of that, make art. She has said about fellow art makers and “edge-ists,” “I want to use all of paint, light, colour, form, history, luminosity, touch, edge, line—but, in particular, light, to change their fate, to bring them out of the shadows, away from the edge and into the centre. And doing that feels transformative.” She can be confident that, once there, the view from the centre will rightly find them all seeking the edge once again, where she will greet them.

This interview was conducted by telephone with the artist in her New York studio on June 1, 2017.

BORDER CROSSINGS: When we spoke 10 years ago you had seen a Neo Rauch exhibition at the Met and you said, “That body of work doesn’t have anything to do with me now but in 10 years it might.” It seems that things sit for a time and then they become functional. Is that still the way you operate?

LISA YUSKAVAGE: I hope so. I always find it interesting when I think I have emptied out everything I could possibly use from something I saw a long time ago, some movie or book or a painting, and then more stuff surfaces. I think of my brain as an airport where things that I don’t even know about are scheduled to take off and land. Then there is a whole bunch of stuff that is sitting on the tarmac, which I haven’t had a chance to use. These things haven’t taken flight yet; they’re waiting for a destination. They’re still inside me. As per Neo, I am still a big fan but the work hasn’t yet directly informed my work. I still enjoy looking at it.

Are there ways that you can be the air traffic controller of your imagination and actually schedule, or call up things when you want them?

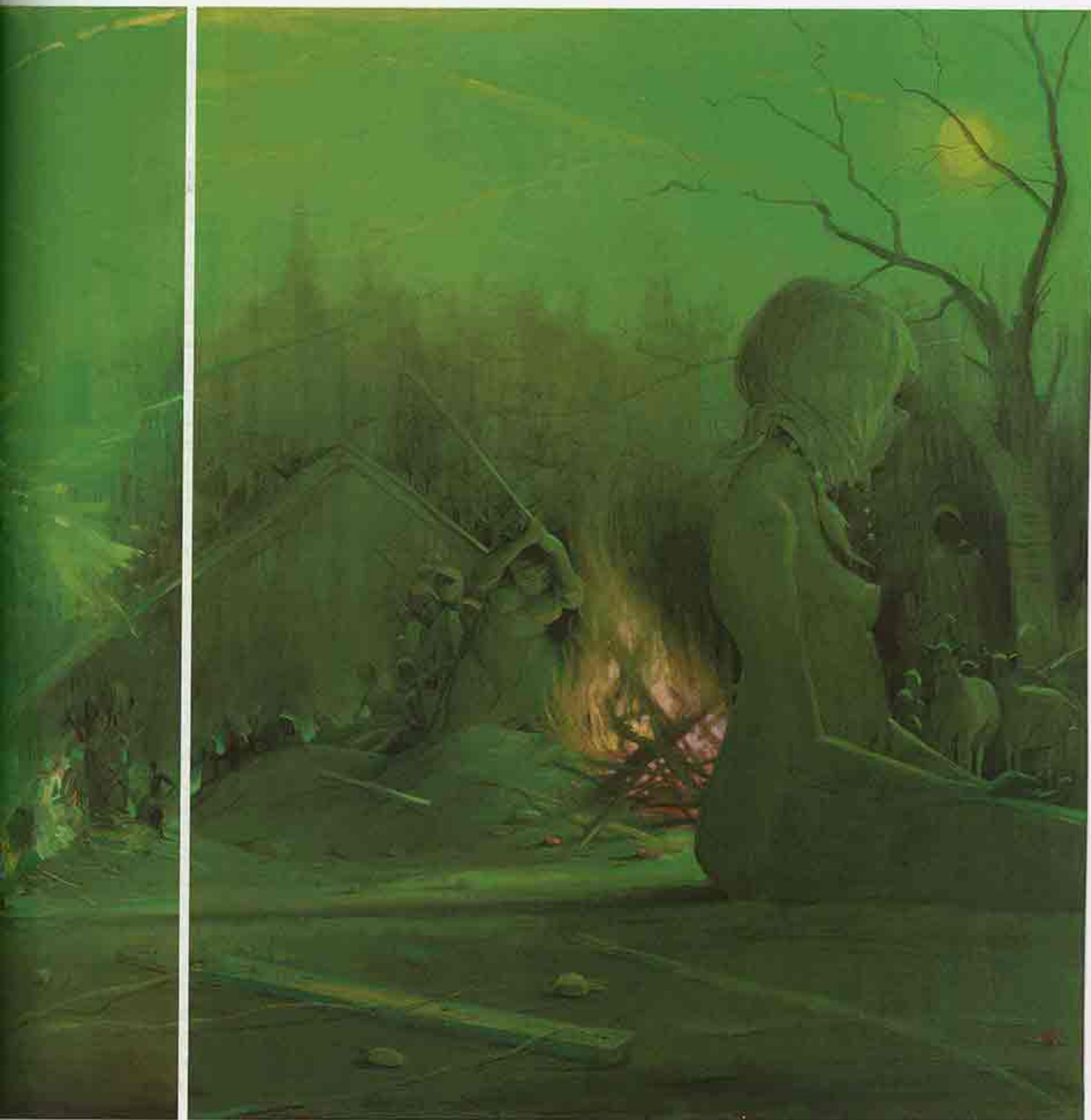
When I need something what usually happens is that my conscious brain makes a request to my subconscious brain. I’m hyper-aware of the ways I can find the answers to problems, either externally or internally, and everywhere I look I see the answer after I’ve asked it. It has to do with being very conscious.



Bonfire, 2013–15, oil on linen, 208.3 x 337.8 cm.

Were it not for you I wouldn’t know about *cangiantismo*. I knew about grisaille and close tonal values but I didn’t know there was a system of modelling that you could use in composing a painting. Is it something you knew from university or did you stumble upon it later?

To answer that I have to address your first question. I found out about it from a book called *Color and Meaning: Practice and Theory in Renaissance Painting* by Marcia Hall, a Renaissance expert who teaches art history at Temple. Oddly enough, when I was at Tyler School of Art, which is the art campus for Temple in Philadelphia,



I didn't take her class because I heard she gave a lot of reading homework. Later, everything that she had written became extremely interesting to me and I regretted my early decision. So I wrote a fan letter to her and I've never written a fan letter to any living soul. I told her she was like a rock star to me and that I would be honoured to meet her. I'm so much of a fan that recently I was in my studio and was thinking about interesting ways to conjure new things into existence. I asked her, if she was writing anything else, could I be an early reader? She was delighted and sent me some pages from a new book she was writing called *Color. Materials.*

Making. Marketing. Meanings. that covers the 15th century to World War I. Last summer the *New York Times* asked me to give a list of 10 books I would take to a desert island and her book was one of them. In *Color and Meaning*, I came across the four modes of colouring in the Cinquecento: *sfumato*—the smoky mode based on Leonardo—and *chiaroscuro*—the theatrical light and dark, which most people associate with Caravaggio. There were two more that involved bright colour. Since I was making paintings with bright colour at the time, I was fascinated to learn there is more sunshine and light in southern Italy, so there is more



The Art Students, 2017, oil and charcoal on linen, 203.2 x 203.5 cm.



Lavinia with Bob, 2016, oil on linen, 33.3 x 28.6 cm.

light-in-shadow, and painters reflected that in their work. That light, called *unione*, has to do with structuring brighter colour in the shadows and is connected to Raphael. Then *cangiantismo*, a rainbow effect of colour, which used to be shown on angel wings, has always represented the presence of the supernatural in art. Michelangelo ended up using it in the Sistine Chapel, where typically he employed it to create volume. Instead of going from a lighter to a darker version of red in the shadow, he would use a different colour, go from blue to orange, say, which was obviously not naturalistic. In other words, it was supernatural. Lately I have been using it as a way of structuring a painting, but I have always been very interested in the supernatural because I find the idea that life is just bricks and mortar to be too boring. The supernatural is very handy because you need to be able to imagine that there are things beyond this world.

You have always been involved with the relationship between figural representation and picture making. You painted multiple figures and used them as a way to investigate colour and close-valued tonalities. So, when you were doing colour-wheel paintings and the grisaille works, the figures ended up being props for a kind of painterly theatre. Is your tendency to fold subject matter into questions of methodology and technique?

I don't know another way. I have made paintings in the past where I tried to do things without following the old idea that content and form are of a piece, an idea that goes back to the beginning of art. At Tyler I studied with Stephen Greene, one of Philip Guston's students, and he taught me a lot about Guston circuitously, even though I was not an abstract painter. I knew that trying to paint the way Guston did would be like a sailor listening to the sound of the Sirens; you have to have cotton in your ears or you'll crash and drown on the rocks. The best lessons you can take from Guston come from reading his many lectures. I have had a Guston quote hanging on the wall of my studio for 30 years. I wrote it out by hand on a dry erase board where I keep quotes because I didn't want it to be buried. The quote is: "The figuration must be understood as another element layered over and working against the abstraction." In other words a head, for Guston, whether a Klansman's head, the lima bean head, or Nixon's head, was a shape and it had colour and it had a particular place as a painted thing. In a lot of contemporary figurative painting people have pretty good technique, they can make space and they can tell a story, but so much of the work is illustrational.

You refer to the "unbroken history of artmaking," a history of which you're now a part. More and more critics are arguing your highly significant role in the establishment of a new figuration. Does that put pressure on you in the studio or don't you care about it?

I feel a bit in between. I think that getting a lot of smoke blown up your ass can really unhinge an artist. If you start to believe you are that good, it's actually like negative drag in swimming or in running: it slows you down. You mustn't let it get into your mind. Having said that, you're running a race—and I am running a race against my own death—I'm 55 as of my last birthday and I'll probably be able to stick around for a while. But a couple of

years ago someone paralyzed my painting hand while giving me a massage and it was one of the most devastating days of my life. It made me realize that within the blink of an eye, what matters to you most could be taken away. Fortunately, it was only a crushed radial nerve. I tried to stay calm about it and the hand came back within four or five weeks, but it was a reminder that we are all here very briefly and that everything is a gift. I'm aware that we might be somebody today, but being somebody whom anyone cares about tomorrow isn't something you can be sure of.

You have talked about your place in the tradition of "juicy American figuration." Were you aware that you were carving out figurative territory for yourself?

I don't know about the juicy part but, yes, I was aware of that. I wasn't so much looking for the kind of attention I got as I was looking to see something that I had never seen before.

You have remarked that what interests you about contemporary art is its wrongness; if you were writing a novel it would be called *The Incredible Wrongness of Being a Painter*. Do you still approach the making of art with the idea that it is better to do it wrong than to do it right?

It has to do with the definition of "wrong," or actually the definition of "right." To be right means you are following a script. When you're an artist you're not making art to co-operate; you're making art as a form of protest against what has already existed, while at the same time embracing what has already existed. You have to come out of something but your job is not to repeat it. You have to do something wrong enough that you are creating your own path.

I want you to take me through the syntax of the making of a specific painting. Tell me about the diptych called *Bonfire*, which you worked on from 2013 to 2015. Why did it take the form it did and what determined its content?

I loved that in his late works Guston imagined himself as a director. All he had to do was create these *mise en scènes* in which he organized his cast of characters and then he let them wander around and get into trouble in these cities, in their cars and in his studio. So with some of my paintings I had been thinking along the lines of what would it be like to be a director with a cast of characters. That's part of the reason why *Bonfire* is so large and so full of things. It's epic because I imagine myself as the director pulling back as opposed to being close to something.

So how did you direct the making of the painting in your studio?

It started basically on the right side. I had done a small painting that I intended as a colour experiment, so I put on a layer of cadmium green. Sometimes I'll have some extra paint and I'll put it down, and then maybe a month later I come up to it with another bit of paint and I'll stick it on the canvas and it begins to suggest something to me. In *Bonfire* I happened to have another colour on my brush, an opaque, permanent green light, and I brushed it at the top of the painting and the brush marks left what looked like an edge of trees. All of a sudden it seemed like a night sky in this green world. That same day I took a third green, maybe a cinnabar, put it on my finger, pressed it into the corner, and it looked like a moon. Instead of a bright colour the cadmium

green started looking like a dark colour. I went to a lighter colour and then to an even lighter colour, so it became moon, sky, trees. Then, because the cadmium green was completely dry, I took some raw umber and started drawing with it. There is a massive amount of source material lying around my studio and I remember them all and have a ballpark idea of where something is. I was looking for a kind of peasant-like figure with a headscarf and I found one. If you think of all the locations where you can put a figure, it was very odd to situate her all the way to the right, facing out of the painting. It felt like some sort of theatrical move, as if she is conscious of the proscenium at the same time that she becomes the proscenium. Then I asked myself, "What is happening behind her?" and somewhere in my mind I remembered this Goya etching of a peasant beating a corpse.

It's an image from "The Disasters of War"?

Yes. This woman was very matronly and with a stocky build, and she was holding a stick over her head, beating a corpse. I was really shaken by looking at the image again. I didn't want her beating a corpse, so instead I put in a fire. I had had a dream earlier that year about walking in the woods with a dog on a moonlit night and I came across a recently put-out fire with very hot ashes, and for some reason that image popped into my mind. So I thought, "Okay, I have created this night scene where something very spooky is happening." There is an Elizabeth Bishop poem called "The Waiting Room" that I am fond of and there is a wonderful song by the band Zero 7 called "In the Waiting Line," so I started sketching in this long line of people waiting their turn at doing whatever the woman was doing. It was then that it felt like I had found the right image. I was putting things together in a stream-of-consciousness way.

But as part of the waiting line you reprise variations of two of your own earlier paintings, *Hippies* (2013) and *Piggyback* (2006). They weren't in the study. What happened was I liked the small painting so much that I decided to make a large one. My next move was to get the canvas to mimic what I had done unconsciously; the rehearsal was over and now I had to paint it. I put down the cadmium green, let it dry for several weeks, came back with the other paint and tried to make it look like the accidental sky, put in the moon and then sketched in this girl. I started putting in the waiting line but it didn't want to be the same. The other thing that happened was that as I was staring at it, it looked like only half a painting. The waiting line needed to be bigger, and also the figure sitting like a proscenium felt like it needed its twin. As it turned out, it was missing its other half. When I got to the big painting I struggled a lot. If you're going to spend this much time and energy on something, you have to ask yourself what you really mean. So I ruminated and I thought, "It needs its mirror image." What was interesting was the way I moved forward. I took a second canvas and covered it also in the cadmium green, continued the sky again with the lighter colour, so then I had two canvases: one pretty much blank with just the hint of the landscape, the other one almost finished. I sketched in the girl as a mirror image, but I decided to do it freehand to see if it would come out really wonky. I measured from the top of the painting to the top of her head, and from her nose to the side of the canvas; those were the only tools I

allowed myself in drawing her again. Once I had her sketched in, I took an iPhone picture, de-saturated it, printed it out on matte photo paper and then started drawing into the image the several different directions in which it could go.

But on the outer edge of the painting's right-hand side, there are also a shepherd and a herd of sheep.

Yes, things came and went. I painted things in; I took them out. I basically was feeling my way through and that's why it took me such a long time. From start to finish, from first putting that cadmium green on that small painting until I finally put in the orange on the left-hand side, it may have been a three-and-a-half-year-long process. It was really waiting for the answer and then putting the answer in place over and over again. In retrospect I see that both the subject of the painting and the process of this painting were the same: waiting.

It's almost as if you tell yourself a story to make the painting happen.

I'm basically trusting the things that occur to me. I've had to hone my bullshit detector and my editing process but I've had to trust myself more at the same time.

Was there a time where you didn't trust yourself?

Constantly. I've wasted a lot of time not trusting myself and I'm still working on that. Some people I know claim I am the most confident person they know and that I'd probably be insane if I trusted myself more than I do. I constantly doubt myself and question my motives, but, having said that, there is only one thing I stopped questioning: that artistic doubt is a primary asset and integral to the process.

One of the observations you have made is that art is like a séance. In a séance, is the communication only with the people you call on, or do some participants arrive unannounced and unbidden? The reason I ask is because you are painting men more than you had before. All of a sudden a guy appears and, as you said, you couldn't just banish him. Was that particular séance one where it was too late to get rid of him?

That may have occurred around the time I last talked to you. It was funny the way he showed up. He was a tourist or an adventurer and he showed up in the background of a painting called *Tourist* (2008). That is one of the first sightings of a man. I was talking to a writer some years back and she asked me when will a man enter my work. I said, "When one enters my imagination." But I actually painted a guy years before in the "Bad Habits" work. He was called *The Feminist Husband* (1996) and he was between a rock and a hard place, which is where a feminist's husband inevitably ends up.

Did you actually join Grindr, the gay dating website, as a source of research?

I don't know at the time my motives for joining Grindr. I found out about it and I thought it was fascinating. Whoever invented it is a total genius, because it puts these unlikely things together: GPS technology and getting laid. I am fascinated by people who take liberties with anything, or people who feel extremely free.

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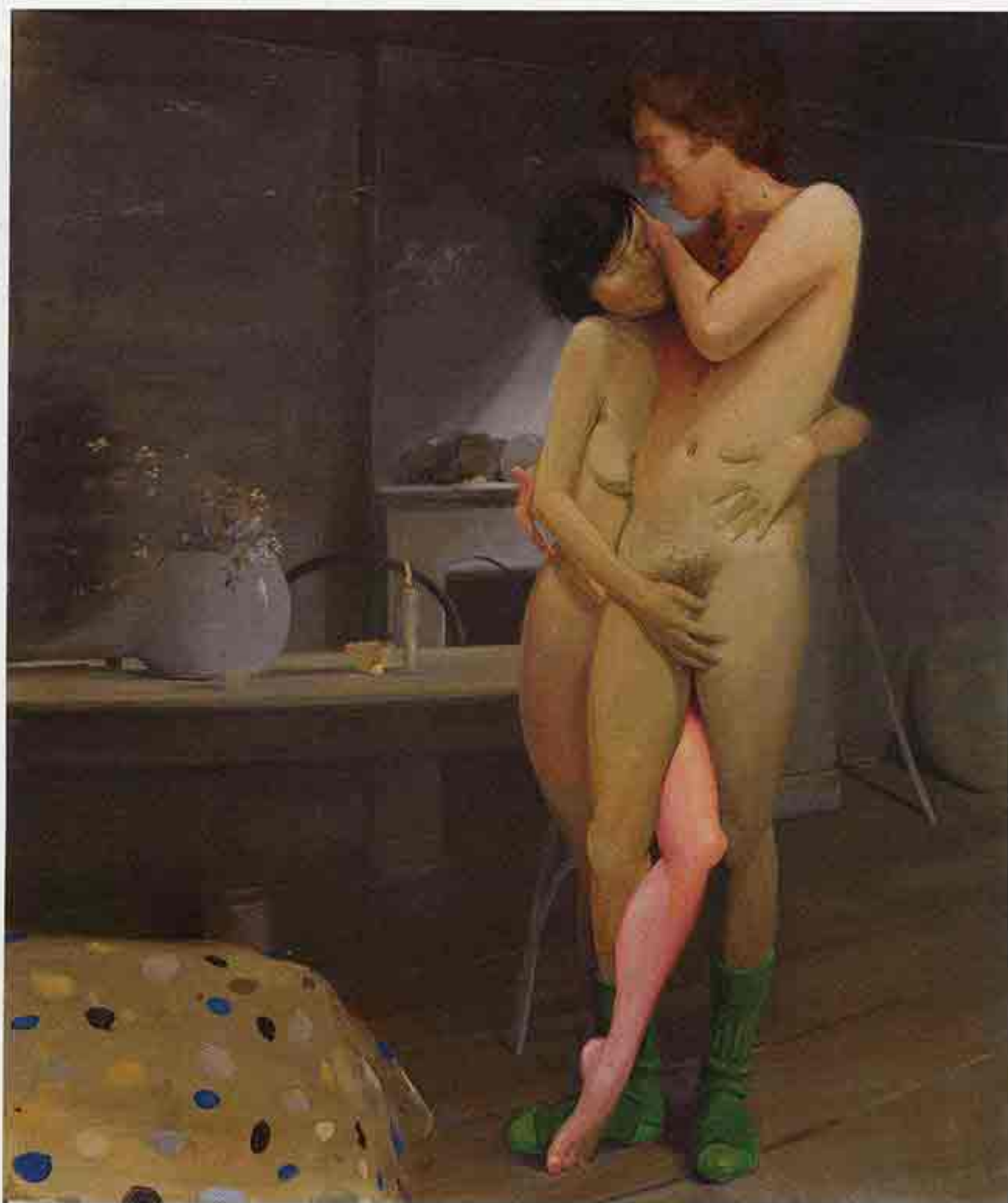
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Ludlow Street, 2017, oil on linen,
196.2 x 165.1 cm.

I love the idea of some guy sitting in his living room and he gets horny and he sends out a signal, like a bat signal, and suddenly he can see that 250 feet away there is somebody who is also horny and wants to have sex. I thought the idea of the id running amok with an iPhone app was the most genius mixture of tech and the oldest story on earth. The short story by Kafka called "The Country Doctor" has always been important to me because it deals with that subject of the id. Earlier, we were talking about wrong and right. This is like the id and the superego. These are old Freudian ideas that, while they may not be relevant to psychoanalysis, are still relevant to artmaking.

Your dudes, as your titles name them, are a combination of a classic hippie and Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait as Christ*. In some way they are the same guy?

This goes back to your original question. When I was in school I had this book on Dürer and I noticed that he was a really hot guy. In his self-portrait he is startlingly good looking. There are no photographs of him so we don't know what he really looked like

but that's how he chose to depict himself. I like to think of it as Dürer's dating profile on Grindr in which he exaggerates his good features. Not only does he look totally doable, but he purposefully fashioned himself after the likeness of Christ. It is actually a bit sacrilegious. I knew about that work and those two thoughts had long been buried in my head, but when I painted the first tourist guy I didn't know I'd end up painting some guy called *Dude Looks Like Jesus* (2014). So I had this thought in my mind about Dürer and Jesus and how this relationship between high and low can play itself out. I went on the Internet and just dumbly typed in "dude looks like Jesus." I have a favourite game I play by myself where I think of a weird expression and Google it, and what comes up is amazing. So when I threw out "dude looks like Jesus"—I'm not somebody who says "dude" a lot but it just came to me—all these blogs and "curated" collections of pictures started showing up. It was a source material bonanza for what I was thinking. I realized "dude looks like Jesus" is 'a thing' and Dürer, who comes out of history, is one of them. And then I wanted him to look a little bit like a rapper because a rapper is the opposite of a hippie, so I

started to look at rappers and hip-hoppers, where you always see the top of their pubic hair and you think their pants are going to fall down and their dicks are going to flop out. I didn't do that. Then I Googled something like "dude has amazing dick," since I wanted a very convincing-looking dick.

You mentioned the notion of sacrilege in Dürer's depiction as Christ. You were raised Catholic and you have talked about a way of thinking that places things in binaries, good and evil being the most obvious. Do you think Catholicism had an influence on the way you make art?

I'm wondering if where you're going with this Catholic thing is to ask if we have sex on the brain. That may be true; everybody in my family is pretty funny and bawdy about sex. But Catholicism was probably the first awareness I had of the formal, because there is a formality in the Mass. Whether you like them or not, you have to admit they are quite pretty. On any given day the colours of the priest's chasuble change. There's also the hierarchical structure of a church. You are in a significant building, not just any old building, because Catholics work towards form. They don't take over a garage or a house. I mean, religions went to war over all this shit about iconography and statuary. But, for me, it was less the gildedness than the idea that there are all these structures; there is always counting, the idea of three gods in one, the dualities. Somehow those structures order your brain—the Stations of the Cross, specific days of the week assigned to different saints—it's a very formal thing. I ended up parting ways with the Catholic Church when I was in eighth grade. It was quite simple; it is an extremely misogynist culture and I was totally turned off by it. I didn't even get to the bottom of how misogynistic was the sense of natural male superiority, but it was something I had to get as far away from as I possibly could. I also think that being a Catholic encourages you to believe in the supernatural and in things you can't see and can't prove; you believe there are miracles and that immaterial things get made into matter. I think that for an artist, the idea of thought being made flesh is important. Painting, after all, is a promise made flesh.

One of the lovely things about the painting called *Déjà Vu* (2017) is its sense of gesture, the way the woman's left arm is cradled at the elbow by one of the dudes and how she in turn tousles the hair of the men on either side of her. They are gestures of quiet, erotic intimacy. Did you want the painting to have that kind of touch?

Yes. There are usually two things happening at the same time; the touch wouldn't make sense if her eyes were open. In the earlier versions her eyes were open and I didn't like it, and the minute they were closed it made sense. The painting felt like a vision of what she might be seeing projected on her eyelids. In earlier stages and for a long while in *Déjà Vu*, there was another squatting male figure at the bottom right who created a sense of symmetry. He was extremely lovely and he was my all-time favourite male. He had to go because the painting was not working with him there, so I took him out. But when he was there I thought of another painting and I realized that the figures in *Les Femmes d'Alger* are doing this kind of lurid squatting. So the *déjà vu* quality in the title had to do with that, but also words, for me, mean that

everything is a memory of everything else. There is an inevitability. I love the famous story of how Michelangelo imagined that David was already in the marble; he simply got rid of the excess. Now that this painting exists, I like the idea that it always existed.

I'm fascinated by your use of details. In an early painting called *Wrist Corsage* (1996), it's not the corsage on the woman's wrist that draws our attention but rather the woman's generous derrière. Similarly, in a piece like *Cookie* (1998), the way the girl dips the cookie into her coffee cup is exactly the way the priest would put the communion wafer in the chalice at the Consecration. But the point of looking is to see "behind" the corsage and to see the labial cookie, which is the most edible thing in the painting. Are the details meant to be distractions or decoys for some other message the painting intends?

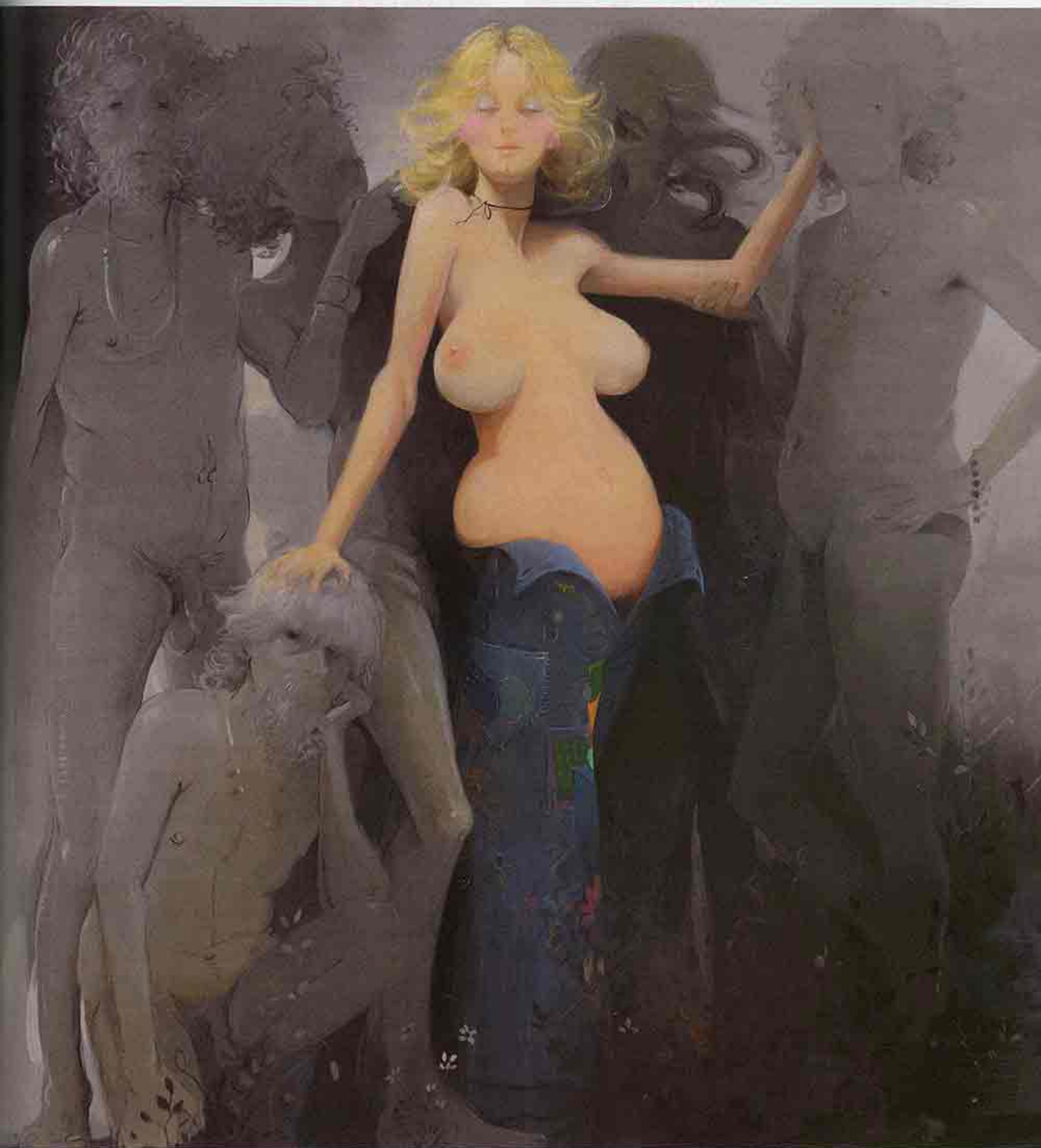
I think sometimes the whole painting is a decoy for something else. As you point out, the cookie may be a communion wafer in disguise, but then the labia are also a distraction. All the lurid stuff is actually a distraction from the much more elevated idea that is really going on. Or maybe it's the other way around.

You have said that pornography in your work is "the benign presence of the devil." I love the idea that you have performed a genial rehabilitation of good old Lucifer.

There is an obvious difference between showing derrières and labia, whether for erotic entertainment, as distractions to talk about other things or to do a high/low thing, and the fact that genuine evil is present in the world. My feeling is that if you are still able to have a sense of humour, you should definitely try to use it.

The smaller version of *Super Natural* (2017) is called *Witchcraft* (2017), and the latter title makes sense of the broom on the hearth behind the naked woman. This raises the whole notion of a clue in the painting that might help the viewer better understand what they are looking at. The naming provides a clue.

For me, the witches in Hans Baldung Grien's paintings, etchings and drawings are some of the best images ever. John Currin did such a direct and terrific cribbing of the poses of Grien's witches that I almost had to completely avoid them. But what I liked in Grien is they are un-fuckable crones who are too damn smart for their own good. I read a bit about the paintings, and the women he was portraying weren't witches as much as strong women who were pushed to the edges of society. Hans Baldung was fascinated by these women. Maybe they were the local healer, or somebody with a weird sense of humour, or a woman who did not want to have children, who did not fit neatly into society, and they ended up being cast out of town. Maybe they were somebody who today would be an artist. What I like about the Hans Baldung thing is it reminds me of Guston's Klansmen and how so much is going on at that edge of town. I like the idea of Guston Klansmen and Hans Baldung witches all being pushed to the edge of town, where they're up to no good. Guston made a painting called *Edge of Town* (1969) that is in MoMA's collection and that's where I got the idea. I am a big fan of Diane Arbus, and her characters are outcasts and edge-of-townners, too. But in Hans Baldung's time the people who lived at the edge of town were called witches. It makes me think that artists are witches,



Déja Vu, 2017, oil on linen, 203.2 x 203.2 cm.

whether we're male or female, and we're out there and our job is to be stirring the pot. We're up to no good in the best way; we're doing our own handiwork at the edge of town. The poet, the artist and the hippie are edge-of-townners, pushing at the edge of society. I never thought of the characters in my paintings as low, but if they are low, then I'm painting them in order to elevate both of us. I want to get down into the ditch and give us both a hand up. I want to use all of paint, light, colour, form, history, luminosity, touch, edge, line—but, in particular, light—to change their fate, to bring them out of the shadows, away from the edge and into the centre. And doing that feels transformative.

You do some fascinating things in the work for the Zwirner exhibition in London. I'm interested in the changes you make in *The Art Students* (2017) and the smaller version called *Suburbs* (2017). In the former you construct a variation on the Pygmalion story where both the guy and the woman lying on the ground are painting the model woman into existence. The woman doing the painting is only just sketched in; she has the same density as the watering can in the right foreground. Are the smaller versions always in advance of the larger paintings, and do you use the smaller versions to try out ideas and see which ones work the best?

Often, but not always. In some cases I will do a "road less travelled" after the fact. But there are no rules. There was a time, from around 1996 to 1998, when I made hundreds of small paintings in a given year. Now, I probably make four or five. I use large paintings as the studying ground for another large painting because there are certain things that can't get pushed in a small scale, so the process is constantly evolving. I got the small painting of the *Suburbs* to an interesting point. I thought about the fact that so many of the images I am working with are either single figures or couples, and the couples, the dyads, have been very, very important to me lately. So *The Art Students* gave me the opportunity to work with a triad and not a dyad. I have several triads in my work. One is called *Triptych* (2010–11), and then I have a painting called *Blonde, Brunette and Redhead* (1995), and the rainbow that appears behind the art students is the exact red, yellow and blue in that painting. I could have called it *Sorbet Rainbow* or *Easter Rainbow*.

I thought of it as the colours of Neapolitan ice cream.

If you look at this painting I made in 1994–95, the blonde is a particular shade of yellow, the brunette a particular shade of blue and the redhead a related shade of red. Red, yellow, blue is a triad and so creating a triptych became very appealing. It became a resonating force. Painting a triad is itself about creation, so in *The Art Students* I was suggesting that doing their homework as dutiful art students created this supernatural phenomenon behind them. These specific tones of the primary triad are almost a character in my work.

In the piece called *(Nude) Hippie* (2016), there is a residue of this idea that painting is about the making of a painting. When I first saw the image I thought the hippie was wearing a pair of flesh-coloured panties but, what I'm seeing are actually drawn lines, a kind of sexy pentimento. Those drawn lines make it seem as if she is also an art student who has been painted on.

The interesting thing you're picking up on there is something I have started to do recently. It's also in the painting called *Stoned* (2017). What I've been doing is exploring what does a toned ground give you in a painting. That idea is not original. It's called *imprimatura* and was invented in the 16th century. A tinted layer just below the paint, it's an expressive device that affects the painting's tonality, giving it a unity and creating an atmosphere. Actually, all my experience with pastel has come through because when you work in pastel, you don't work on a white piece of paper: you work on a toned paper. In my last body of pastels I was exploring how to make my own toned paper, so that the tone was not just one colour but was multiple colours. When I decided to come back to painting, I started to take this idea of toning something and instead of putting in a white ground and then toning it, I came up with this idea of putting pigment into the lead white using a mixer, almost like an electrical mixer in the kitchen, and putting it in a tub of paint. In this case I put raw umber pigment into the lead white, completely mixed it in and then spread that out on the canvas so the colour was embedded into the ground. It was almost like the colour of cardboard. So in *(Nude) Hippie* and *Hippie (Nude Bra)* from the same year, the word "nude" refers not only to the fact that the figure isn't wearing clothes but also that the painting there is unpainted. The painting is not just of a nude; it is also nude, showing its skin, in a sense. I haven't put any paint on it; it is painted around. It's a form of bas-relief.

In the past you have used what you described as "corny old nudist magazines," as well as *Penthouse*. But what is the source for the newer paintings being shown in London? Are they photo-based or Internet lifts?

All kinds of things. None of them are new lifts. A lot of things have been around my studio for years and years. I used to go to the New York Public Library, where they have a collection of photos taken from books and magazines, and I would look at anything and everything. I wasn't looking for anything specific. When I was a young artist I had more time on my hands than ideas for art. I would spend 10 hours a day just sifting through things. If something resonated I would pull it and at the time I would have to go to the Xerox machine to get a copy, or I could check it out of the library but then I had to return it. Eventually, I had all these things sitting around in drawers. These images have circulated around and around and have become almost like family members. Like I said before, these things were flights from another country that have not taken off. They were scheduled a long, long time ago. I may have pulled them in 1990 but they landed only in 2017.

That's a long flight. You do a delightful thing in *Ludlow Street* (2017), where the young woman's pink-stockinged leg wraps around her lover's leg, and he is wearing these floppy, bright green, wool socks. It is a very different painting from the smaller version: you don't include the highlighted ceramic vase sitting on the table and you also put in a different kind of candlestick. What determines those small choices, choices that affect the painting in ways that go beyond the scale or proportion of the change? The formats of those paintings are very different. The large one is narrower. It has to do with where I place the figures. I place

them much further to the right and not in the centre in the big painting. It felt too balanced, and I wanted the bigger painting to feel like a world out of balance; I wanted them to feel like they were in this stark environment and that they were creating their own energy. I was interested in the feeling of them-against-the-world.

Interestingly, you pull back the intensity of the candle, so it's not a Gerhard Richter candle, and you remove the painting on the wall behind them. The result is that it focuses more attention on them than in the smaller version.

I painted both their bodies alternately with pink and green. Their pinkness or greenness is complementary. What I was trying to work with is the idea of a man and a woman as a complementary couple and the idea of red and green as complementary colours. But they are joining and intertwining as opposed to contrasting in their oppositeness.

I adore the pattern on the bedspread in the large version. It looks as if Vuillard and Yayoi Kusama got together as interior decorators.

Vuillard is never far from my mind. When he was good, there is no one better at colour.

You said looking at his work taught you how to make a picture. Was that a structural measure rather than a tonal one?

The thing that is really nice about Vuillard, even more than Bonnard, is that the Vuillards have more weight. They feel less French in a way. Quite literally, there is more black in them and there are just touches of black in a Bonnard painting. The Bonnards feel like marzipan, and I mean that in a good way. But Vuillard actually uses more umbery colours, and you can move around his best paintings through colour or through line or through scale. I think they are some of the most wonderful things that were ever made. I'm a very big fan, but having said that, I'm not so interested in the later portraits. The difference between those late portraits and a painting like *Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist* (1893), where his sister is bleeding into the wall, is really the difference between illustration and painting.

In your work you have painted women masturbating or touching themselves in various erotic ways, there are suggestions of amorous relationships between women in many other paintings, and in the "Black Bunny" series certain specific sexual activities are depicted. But for the most part you have stayed away from

explicit sexual acts, whether gay or straight. It would be easy to take your subject—the body—and have it engage in more directly sexual acts. But you don't do that.

No, I don't. I'm going to answer your question circuitously. When I was looking at the paintings of the couples, like *Wine and Cheese* and *Ludlow Street*, I was thinking, "Where have I ever seen this particular kind of tenderness in the history of art?" After all, they're naked and they're touching each other's genitals. It's about corporal love but also about something higher that comes from that. I realized the only time I have even seen anything like that in art—and I could be wrong—is in the paintings of the Madonna and Child; in particular, the several hundreds painted by Bellini.

I had a book that I can't find anymore that included every single Bellini mother and child painting that ever existed. What is amazing is the amount of intimacy and quasi-sexual interaction between this nude boy and his mom. While I'm not a mother, I know from women friends that it is very sensual and, at times, erotic to be with your baby. It's a body. That doesn't mean you cross a line and have sex, but it is intimate. It is of the body. I think in these mother and child paintings you see Bellini as this human being who had children and who probably watched the women around him taking care of babies. So what I was imagining was having that kind of touching between a man and a woman, because we were all babies ourselves and we were all touched like that at one time.

I think the memory stays with us. The only other time I have

seen that kind of touching is in late Picasso. In certain of the beach paintings there are babies sticking their fingers in their parent's ears and touching them in playful and unconsciously erotic ways. But it's very tender. What I was really playing with was, "How do you depict tenderness?" In my last show in New York the two paintings I was not done with, that I was in the middle of and that I wanted to explore further, were paintings of couples: one called *Mardi Gras Honeymoon* (2015) and another called *The Neighbors* (2014). What was really important to me in *The Neighbors* was that it be clear that they were both laughing. The idea was that they were engaged in this top/bottom business where she is standing over him and seemingly kicking him, but he is laughing. It is playful and people being playful is an interesting subject. But fucking? Unlikely, but never say never.

One of the things you do in *Mardi Gras Honeymoon* is that you locate a turquoise bead from her necklace exactly at the point



(Nude) Hippie, 2016, oil and graphite on linen, 121.9 x 101.6 cm.

of her pubic patch, and it electrifies that part of the painting. Yes. Thank you. Nobody else has commented on that. It's actually a robin's egg blue, not greenish blue.

In a way it intensifies the relationship between the couple and it protects the viewer from getting too intimate with the figures in the painting, because your work can invite a voyeuristic response. Catherine Lord, a queer woman, writes that she looks at your paintings and they are a turn-on. I react to them in the same way. But sometimes you don't want to enter the painting, because the event is between those two people and something about that small bead of the necklace shields the couple from our intrusive presence.

There is always a moment in a painting where it really clicks and, for me in that painting, it happens with the darkness of the sky and the storm at the horizon. What was really intimate was the way they were touching one another and how he is touching her thigh and is being changed by her, and then her hand is on his hand and she is being changed by him. The figuration being another layer in the abstraction. A kind of emotional formalism.

They are becoming one another through a colour transformation?

They are changing each other slowly. This kind of thing happens with people; you touch each other and you change each other. I love the backdrop, because in all relationships there is the backdrop of weather. Not just the weather of your own mood but the weather of what is going on in the world. It's about the zeitgeist: weather is the mood of the times.

You have used surrogates to give voice to your paintings in fascinating ways. The title *The Brood* itself, which comes from a David Cronenberg movie, provides you with a way to make paintings that have characters in them who aren't you but who are projections of you. I was equally fascinated to read that at a time when you were less productive than you wanted to be, you saw David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet*, and Frank, the psychopathic character played by Dennis Hopper, gave you a voice through which you could talk to your paintings in a preposterous, exaggerated manner. You've used these surrogates to project yourself into your works in ways that have been extremely productive and also psychologically affective.

Yes, because you do whatever it takes to access the aspects of your mind that need to be free at any given moment. At that time I needed to take on the role of a terrifying misogynist and a persona more twisted than a rapist. Frank uses words to humiliate his victim, and I was thinking about the scene as a way to get molested visually. Coming at paintings from the point of view of a sweetheart was getting me nowhere. It wasn't dialling in any part of my brain that was original. The hysteria of *Blue Velvet* frightened me, and the woman played by Isabella Rossellini—this helpless, beautiful thing—reminded me of a painting. I needed to have that helpless, beautiful thing turn around and become the murderer, which is where *The Brood* comes in. So it could transform. I started trying to project this kind of negativity into the paintings and it came

back at me with a real attitude. As it turned out, I had a lot of fun doing those paintings.

I would go further than "fun." You're offering a profound and rather remarkable conception of the role painting can play in giving form to the human imagination. It's tough and gutsy. In your reckoning the painting is both an act of vengeance and retribution as well as a vehicle for salvation. What you're saying is moral, but not everyone will want the painter to assume the role of a rapist who violates the viewer in some way.

Because Frank doesn't touch his victim, he violates through the eye and through what he says; so what comes out is, "Show me your pussy." When I was painting I was forcing the image to show itself, and then it got to talk back; it got to punish back. There was so much joy in that process because, as I said before, I was finally able to show myself something that I had not seen anywhere else.

Years ago we interviewed David Salle and the American novelist Jack Hawkes together and we talked about the imagination. One of the most compelling things that came out of that conversation was David's notion that you have to be able to make the things your imagination entertains, no matter how objectionable they may be. It doesn't mean you go out and abuse children or tear people apart, but the imagination must remain untrammelled. I think of it like this: I have been fondled and violated as a female, and hate the persistent violence that goes on towards women and girls. Yet, I have to stand up for Nabokov's conjuring a sick fuck like Humbert Humbert, and the world would be a poorer place without the *Women* by de Kooning and the song "Kim" by Eminem. All mean. All violent. All great art.

You received some pretty savage reactions when you first exhibited, but your work remains complicated and contentious. If you were Paul Simon, you'd be singing, "Still edgy after all these years." You have never settled into any comfort with the work. I've learned to appreciate that. If everyone agrees that you're wonderful, then there is probably something wrong with what you're doing. I'm interested in all ideas, no matter where they come from. In 1999 a woman did my astrology reading and she kept saying my mission on this earth is to be a provocateur. She told me something pretty great: that the job of the provocateur is important. I laughed and said, "Jeez, I thought I was just a pain in the butt." But I do sometimes wonder. I get letters from people who say, you paint so wonderfully, why don't you just knock it off with the smut, or, why don't you stop the strangeness of your work? You could be such a great landscape painter, or such a great portrait painter. Why are you making troubling paintings? But painters shouldn't be the equivalent of a soft rock station; we're not here to please people. I'm trying to have you live with something that keeps on nibbling at you and, for that matter, myself, and that changes the way one approaches things.

Why settle for nibbling, why not biting? Nibble is too gentle—there might be teeth in the event.

Are you calling me a *vagina dentata*? ■