

Interview with Lisa Yuskavage for TRUTH

**HERE'S WHY WE LOVE ART:**

Because some of the best artists are women. And they're making art about stuff that everybody should be take seriously-- like the power of pretty.

The women in Lisa Yuskavage's paintings may strike a resonant chord in teen moms and teen-mom wannabes of both sexes and all ages. They're strong, lovely, playful, scary, and just a little shocking in their sexiness-- which is probably just like the adult you wanted to be when you were a child. We wanted to hear the artist talk about these amazing creatures who inhabit her paintings, so we asked another artist to discuss them with her-- Barbara Pollack, whose large-scale, out-of-focus photographs somehow manage to give a very precise view of the friends and relatives who are her subjects.

Lisa, whose work is handled by the Boesky & Callery Gallery in New York, and Barbara, whose work is handled by the Holly Solomon Gallery, also in New York, had not met when the following exchange took place, this spring. And they didn't meet for the exchange, either. The method Lisa and Barbara chose to conduct their discussion makes perfect sense to us busy, Web savvy gurls: e-mail!

## THE POWER OF PRETTY



Date: Mon, Apr 21, 1997 11:17 AM EDT

Subj: p-form exchange

From:bpollack

To:yuskavag

Dear LY,

Barbara here. I was tickled pink you wanted to do an e-mail exchange for *TeenMom*. This e-mail stuff reminds me of slam books in junior high school (did you have those?), where intimacies got revealed because of the format (notebooks passed around the class-- sort of truth or dare.) Anyway, let's talk about your babes. I think of them as babes-- not girls, or women, or goddesses, or bitches. They are incredibly sexy to look at, yet I don't feel threatened by or in competition with them. Why is that, do you think? Are they real, at least to you? do they have names and identities? Or are they just teen moms?

## THE POWER OF PRETTY

Date: Mon, Apr 21, 1997 2:17 PM EDT  
Subj: Re: ink blots  
From: yuskavag  
To: bpollack

Dear Barbara,  
Without being evasive, I really want you to enjoy my images with whatever associations that might arise for you. I do think of the whole business of looking at art as Rorschachian... The paintings acting as a shrink for the viewer to have as much transference as is possible. So what strikes me about your reading is not so much in calling them "babes," but in that your associations of your not being in competition with them. Do you tend to feel in competition with babes?



I never feel competitive with beautiful, sexy women and that is not so good, because I just say to myself, "Ok, you win... I will get out of the way..." Then I sort of enjoy their company... And speaking of slam books, I remember that when I put one together, I wrote "Who is the babe of the eighth grade?" Everyone wrote the usual suspects--

Kathy Kennedy, Michele Kontract-- and then there was this one who wrote my name... I was so pissed at this girl-- Cindy Horst or something-- for humiltating me like that I "offered her out." (Do you remember that term? It's like the 70's teenmom version of "I'm gonna kick your ass.")... She was very confused at my response and assured me, as I was beating her up, that she was being sincere... How's that for some insights into my work?

I like to think of my characters as "The Brood"... Have you seen that movie? It is by Cronenberg. It is about a woman who is the main suspect in a series of brutal murders, but her perfect alibi is that she is locked up in a mental hospital, so couldn't have done the deeds... Her mother is the first one to get hacked to pieces and then her husband's girlfriend, I think, and so on... Then you find out that her special therapy is producing these creatures, which are manifestations or personifications of her different neurosis... They then go out and "heal" her by killing the responsible parties. Cool, huh?

I have always had the inclination to personify things, which I think comes from reading too many Greek myths as a kid... But I took notice some years back that I kept accidentally calling the paintings "she," "her," etc. So I decided to make the images inside these painted bodies be images of what the spirit of the painting itself would look like... kinda like the image we have of Venus for Love, or Hades for Hell, but more of an obscure source. The original reason I made the images look pubescent is that I always equated the experience of puberty as everyone's collective memory of heightened vulnerablity... at least it was for me... and I was hoping to equate that collective memory of fragility with my own and the painting's feelings of being vulnerable to the viewer. Really, I know it sounds nuts, but it's true.

In my first show there was a great example of that in a painting called "The Ones that Don't Want to: Bad Baby." The formal elements interacted with the image so that "Bad Baby" was seemingly pushing out to the viewer wanting to be seen and hoping to interact but then simulaneously withdrawing into her hot pink colorfield though the use of

obscured edges... She expressed for me fucked up boundary issues... Also I liked how that whole group of work (which all had group headings like "the ones that don't want to", "the ones that don't know how", "the ones that can't" and "the ones that shouldn't) expressed the awful girl dynamic of "look at me, now don't look at me".

There is a cool word, invaginate, which sums this up... I like that it has the root word "vagina"... But it literally means to simultaneously pull in and push out.

To answer the question about the names and identities of the work, yes... I do name them: My most recent show at Boesky, I showed a group of five sculptures that each had names: Foodeater, Asspicker, Headshrinker, Socialclimber, and last but not least, Motherfucker. The collective title to that group is "Bad Habits"... These being a small sampling of the personifications of my bad habits...I paint from these "models" and I then get funny titles from there: Like a small simple study of the asspicker yielded the title "Wee Asspicker"... Or the Motherfucker and the Foodeater each posed for the left and right sides of a triptych (center painting called "The Feminist's Husband") and they each transformed themselves into "Motherfucking Rock" and "Foodeating Hardplace". Well, I have got to get out of the house and get some stuff done, so I'll look forward to your reply... I do like the teenmom thing and did you ever see my painting which kinda looks like a teenmom? It is called "Big Blonde Jerking-Off"... I was in my over-the-top phase...

Lisa

## **THE POWER OF PRETTY**

Date: Mon, Apr 21, 1997 3:13 PM EDT

From: bpollack

Subj: Re:ink blots

To: yuskavag@is2.nyu.edu

Ly:

Incredible. E-mail chat is working better than a phone interview, because on the telephone now people are so

incredibly self-conscious about being quoted. In e-mail, there is surprisingly less of a need to sound bite. Weird. By the way, where are you from, where were you a teenager? Looks like your teen culture had-- has-- impact in a lot of ways



on your work, but it's hard to say. It could either be present teen culture at work-- MTV, Tankgirl, post-My Pretty Pony-- or your teen culture, which was when? 1970s? Like, for me, my teen culture was Patti Smith, even though at the present time, teen culture was equally Patty Hearst, Joni Mitchell, and Sissy Spacek in *Badlands*. I don't remember much more. As an art type, I was pretty disconnected. If I saw your work when I was a teenager, I would have hated it-- and hated that a woman was doing it. Now I am lots more into the fun of being a girl. But, all in all, your work makes me time travel, in and out of lifetimes, rather than stick in one.

I am leaving you a lot to chew on, because I just found out my office is closing in ten minutes for Passover, so I won't be back on-line until tomorrow a.m. Have fun!

bp

Subj: post pretty pony  
Date: Tue, Apr 22, 1997 5:04 AM EDT  
From: yuskavag

To: bpollack

Dear Barbara,

I spent the first twenty-one years of my life in Philadelphia... In a bluecollar neighborhood called "Juniata Park." (Most people would know it as being near its more famous and much more white-trashy neighbor, Kensington, or "Fishtown.") My dad delivered pies for Mrs. Smith's (pies for birthday, pies for Christmas, pies for Easter) and my mom was a "homemaker"... She predated Martha Stewart in her ability to make decorations with trash. She turned her wedding dress's train into my christening gown and basinette cover, and made four sets of slipcovers (yes, one per season) with matching drapes. I think she could have been the artist.

I went to The Philadelphia High School for Girls from '76-'80. I think that the experiences that I had in an all girls school for four years has had a big affect on my way of imagining things... We were loud and brash and had a big appetite for talking about sex... Most of the lunch breaks



were spent gathered around a *Playgirl*, reading the sexual fantasies and pretending to be grossed out. I had two best

friends, Kathy (the girl from the 8th grade slam book) and Karen. We were a blonde (KK), a brunette (KM), and a redheaded (me). "Charlie's Angels." My nickname was "The Yus" and I dated the most coveted boy in the neighboring boys school... I was unapologetically a disco queen... Loved *Saturday Night Fever* and wore major kick-ass platforms and bell bottoms... I remember the platforms were made out of cork, and my girlfriends and I would sit on our stoops in the summer and listen to the radio and inlay them with sequins.

Sounds like you were much cooler than I was... I still have bad taste in music. You'll have to come to my studio and check out the CDs. I was pre-MTV and still don't have cable, not that I don't want it... I couldn't afford it and want to get it and catch up... I love TV and feel really bad that I am missing stuff all the time. I really love Madonna... I have no interest in that movie, though... I like the really dumb stuff... the ballads, etc.

Your last comments: "...I would have hated it and hated that a woman was doing it. Now I am lots more into the fun of being a girl than I was then." It makes me want to understand you more, as I don't understand completely what you mean. What is the "fun" now vs. what it wasn't then? Why exactly would you have hated that a woman was doing it? I have never thought about things along these lines and I guess that may be a prerequisite for doing my work-- being cut off to certain things. What is it about the work that makes you travel in and out of times?

Anyway, sorry that I didn't get your e-mail until tonight... I'll check tomorrow at around 11:30 a.m. or call me.

Lisa

Date: Tue, Apr 22, 1997 11:54 AM EDT

From: bpollack

Subj: Re: post pretty pony

To: yuskavag

Hi lisa,

It's Tuesday morning and I was very happy to be greeted by your e-mail. I don't want to get too far afield from your



artwork, but we have a lot of similarities in our backgrounds that sort of amaze me.

I went to an all-girls junior high/high school in NYC, called Hunter, and we also brought in *Playgirl*. I remember one girl smuggling in some green-covered porn novel that we all devoured in no time. So, I guess, like for you, sex wasn't so much forbidden as out of reach and foreign. When I say I would have hated your work when I was in h.s., I meant that I was into heroines like Gertrude Stein, famous writers, women who were serious and accomplished things, in my mind. I was deeply opposed to fashion.



Black turtleneck and the same pair of jeans for weeks on end was my style. Still is, in a lot of ways. So I saw (or felt) that sexiness would stand in the way of what I wanted to get done. It felt like a trap.

But back to your work. The women in your paintings feel really naughty and powerful even though they're pink and pretty. I love that in my gut though I don't know why (how's that for astute art criticism?). Maybe because, now that I'm a mom, I see how much power my kid, Max, gets from

his boy toys-- Ninja Turtles, Power Rangers, X-Men-- and I think it's weird that girls are made to reject Barbie, etc., to attain power. There's something in your work that feels like playful power. Playing with sex, playing with others, teasing, even playing with our own pussies. Do you think of this work as play? as playful?

When I said the work sends me in and out of time, I meant something like I feel, as viewer, that I am a lot of different ages when I look at your work-- girl looking up at women, teen comparing myself to other teens, woman-- well, that I am not so sure of, anyway. So I guess I want to know how old are you and how old are you in your head when you make this work. I want to get a sense of the time-zone the paintings are taking place in.

PS: I appreciate how much time you're putting into this. Let's do just one more back and forth and call it a day. So I'll look for your reply, send you one more set of questions, and end with your last answers. If there's stuff I haven't asked you want to get in, feel free to stuff it in.

Thanx

BP

Subj: Re: Barbie as power?

Date: Tue, Apr 22, 1997 8:25 PM EDT

From: yuskavag

To: bpollack

Hey Barbara,

I think that I learned something or more accurately, relearned something from your incredibly honest and thoughtful insights into the kid/power thing:

"Maybe because now that I'm a mom, I see how much power my kid, Max, gets from his boytoys-- Ninja Turtles, Power Rangers, X-Men-- and I think it's weird that girls are made to reject Barbie, etc., to attain power. There's something in your work that feels like playful power."

It's really cool that you learned from watching your son... It is not logical to let boys follow their intuition and tell girls that their intuition is wrong.

As for my intuitions, I think that I possibly prefer to work figuratively as a retarded extension of the way I played as a child... I hate to admit that, but I can see the correlation. Especially in terms of how much I anthropomorphize the paintings.

I can remember going to Ireland when I was seven and bringing my doll (yes, Barbie). And I told her that she was a very fortunate doll to get to go on this trip. I think that the Feminista worry about girls and dolls is that dolls will make them want to grow up to be just a mother. It didn't happen to me, and I also don't emulate Barbie. It is



just play and developing fantasy. I had my family telling me every other minute that I was smart and that I will go to college and be what ever I wanted to be... That's the important thing, no?

I like making cross-references with terminology when I am working, i.e.: to manipulate, relationships, intensify etc. I like that manipulation in artmaking is such a positive trait and it has such negative connotations in

interpersonal relations. So when I am making a painting and I am really going to town on the manipulations, I can clearly hear the painting beg for mercy. I do talk back; it keeps it interesting. I think that this is like playing, for sure. I like that you brought up "playing with others." That usually bugs people. Not me. I like it when I am provoked.

I am about to turn 35 on May 16th. I don't have one particular time zone that I paint in, but I do definitely role play... So everything is possible.

The only other thing that I could think to stuff into this, although I think that it is full enough, is to say that I think about light when I work the most of any element... And color, but they kinda go together. I never have the opportunity to get that in anywhere, as I have to reap the trouble that I sow from all of the other "provocative" elements in the work. My friend Amy suggested that I may be additionally leading viewers away from getting to thinking of light by some of my titles: "Wee Motherfucker," "Hamass," etc. It is hard for me to think if that is the problem, or what. What do you think?

I have the hope that my work is kind of a self-portrait. I have been told that I have some of the same characteristics as the work: wry, ball-buster, goofy. I don't know. But I understand that the work is not too easy on the eye sometimes and I am still trying to understand why... Best of luck with this.

Lisa

Date: Wed, April 23, 1997

To: yuskavag

From: bpollack

LY--

Terrific! Cool! So now we know all about how you play vis-a-vis work. And it seems like so much fun, to be engaged in making these paintings. So, what left when you're not painting? what do you do for fun? Music? Clothes? Dancing? or Yelling?

look forward to your reply--

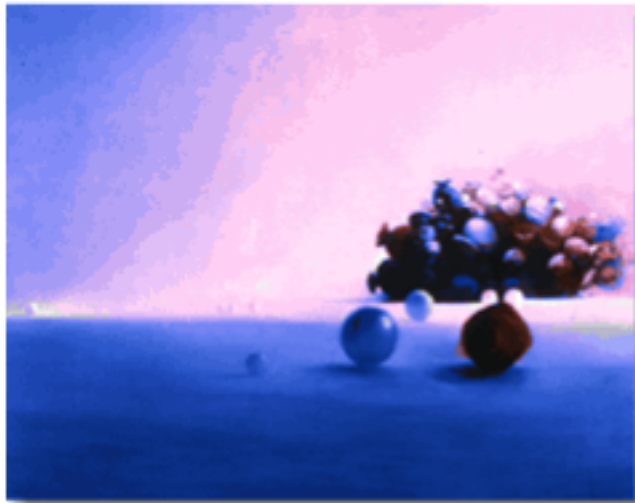
bp



Subj: Re: yelling  
Date: Wed, Apr 23, 1997 4:04 PM EDT  
From: yuskavag  
To: bpollack

Barbara,  
I usually don't know what the hell to do when I have free time... It is a terrible trait in my family... We usually cannot stop working... But I do like to go to the gym, and I love massages and facials and all of that indulgent girlie stuff. I love getting together with people one-on-one for dinner and talking. I like to go to libraries and research stuff, but this is work... It's a fine line between work and play for me. I go to movies like most people.  
I do yell at as many people as often as possible.  
You thanked me before for all of the time I put into this:  
It was actually fun.

So I can thank you too! Should we ever meet in person? Will you be at the New Museum on Thursday night for the benefit?  
Lisa



Subject: Re: yelling  
Date: Thu, Apr 24, 1997 10:03 AM EDT  
From: GOARTnews  
Subj: Re: yelling  
To: yuskavag@is2.nyu.edu  
ly--

Don't think I'm making the New Museum tonight. But I'll call you tomorrow and we'll make a date. Thanks again and again. Its been fun for me, too.  
bp