

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Daughters of the revolution

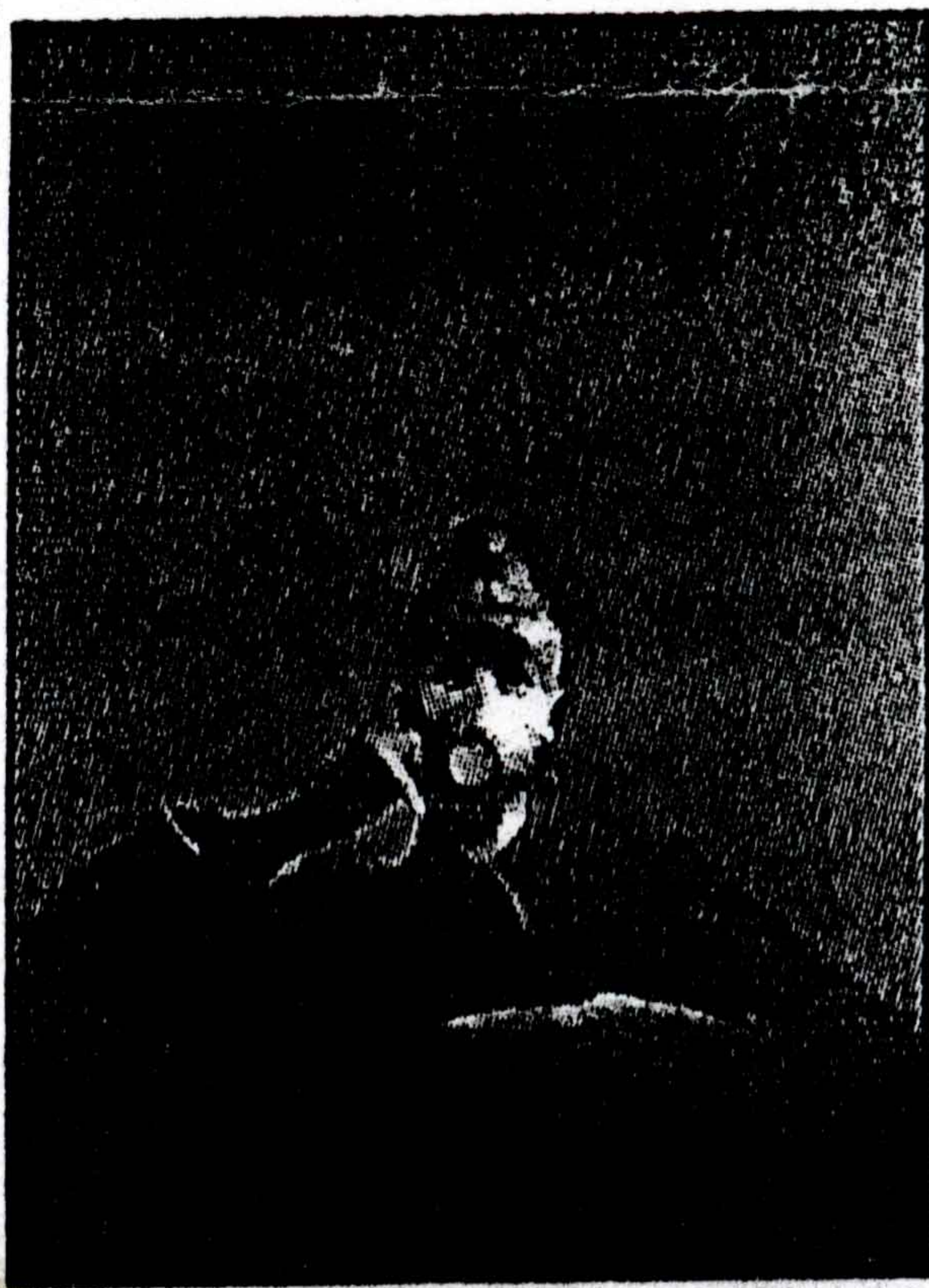
Contemporary feminist painting reweaves the old themes in new images.

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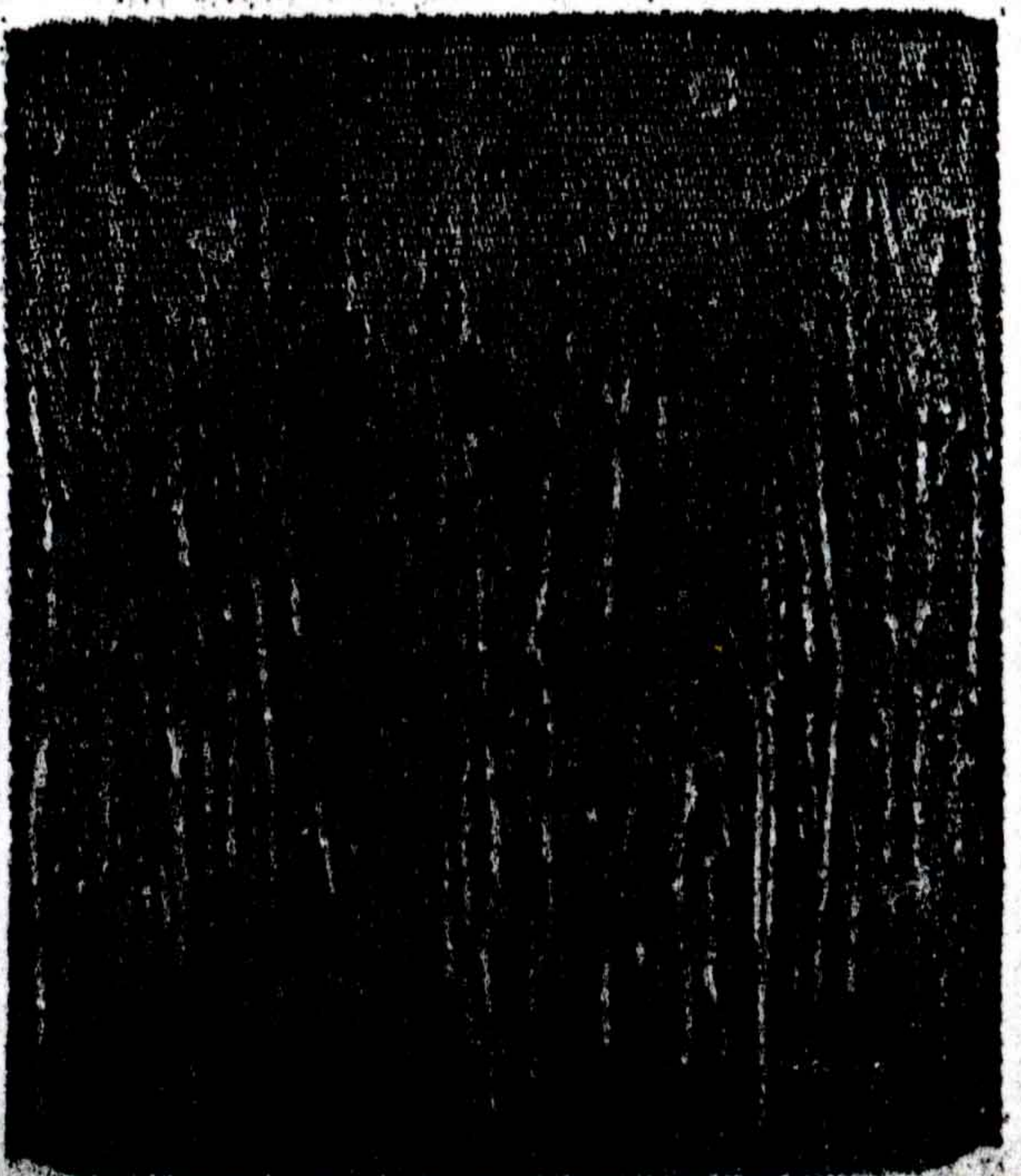
Women's work" is never done. In feminist art, at least, the pictures change but the themes stay the same.

An exhibition at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art indi-



'Big Camille'

LISA YUSKAVAGE



'Mater Rose #5'

SABINA OTT

icates little advancement since the first flowerings of feminist sensibility in the art of the 1960s and 1970s; since Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" place settings celebrating famous women; since Hannah Wilke's aggressive assertions of sexuality; since Lynda Benglis' sinuous and sensuous wall sculptures.

"Women's Work: Examining the Feminine in Contemporary Painting" at the SECCA offers a look at what the next generation has built on this foundation. Chief curator Jeff Fleming's survey of contemporary feminist painting is both amusing and engaging, a welcome look at the work of mid-career painters who are beginning to assume some of the prominence of their predecessors. But with a few key exceptions, it finds these painters, most in their mid-30s to mid-40s, treading a well-traveled route, chanting the shibboleths of "difference," "the other" and "the male gaze" at all the checkpoints.

It is not as if these issues are no longer significant, or that the real problems behind have gone away. Women still earn less than men, and Sports Illustrated's swimsuit issue still hits the stands every winter. That's why a painting such as Lisa Yuskavage's "Big Blonde Squatting" resonates effectively.

From a brilliant yellow background emerges a fleshy figure, with the rounded face and big-eyed gaze of those kitschy 1960s cute-kid posters, but smoking a cigarette and crouching in nude profile. It is unclear whether the ample form is meant to appeal in a Rubenesque manner or to repel as

SEE SECCA, PAGE 3G

SECCA

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1G

simply fat — both from the “male gaze” perspective, of course. And the one flash of contrast in the painting opens a question about just what she is doing hunkered like that. And so Yuskavage manages to treat a familiar idea with both bite and ambiguity.

Her other contribution to the show, “Big Camille,” similarly employs an almost monochromatic palette, suggesting that the figure is somehow of the background, and it presents a dainty Victorian lady lifting a cup from its saucer, not to drink but to cover her mouth.

Lari Pittman, one of two men in this show, or Phyllis Bramson, who is closer in age to the earlier generation but of this one’s mind, engage in over-the-top image-making that is both witty and carnivalesque. Pittman employs a 1950s print-ad approach, busy compositions with text and sweeping arrows, to open questions about our gender ideals, while Bramson constructs travesties of traditional pictures, exploding even the rectilinear frame, with luscious and lascivious images of Cupid, Adam and Eve, and other recognized avatars of accepted sexuality.

There is some stinging wit in these works. As Fleming points out in his catalog essay, humor is one of the strategies favored by these painters. Feminists hardly have cornered that market, however. Humor is a postmodern given. Nurtured by a century’s worth of iconic irony and raised on stand-up ridicule, contemporary artists not surprisingly look for laughs.

More to the point, these artists reshape the rebellion of their predecessors. Whereas the “pattern

painters” of the 1970s offered lively “women’s work” as an alternative to the sterility of modernism’s minimalist dead-end, these painters laugh at the deadly earnestness of the abstractionist gods of the 1940s and 1950s.

The argument, of course, is that the art world is “male-dominated.” And what better example than the “heroic” painters of that era and their critical reputation-makers? Revisionist theory sees Jackson Pollock and his pals as engaged in a priapic exercise, or the breast-pounding of alpha males.

Even more sedate color-field painters, such as Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland or Gene Davis, can be understood as ego-mongering in that male-dominating way. Linda Besemer targets the rhythmic-stripe paintings of Davis in her “Fold #4” and “Fold #6.” Instead of painting on canvas — male practice — she paints her stripes on glass, then peels the acrylic curtain from the surface and drapes them over rods so that we see two contrasting surfaces. For good measure, they are lightly spattered, as if further to disavow the pristine antecedent.

This is funny and critical, but it can be seen also as a clever investigation of form and technique that, in its way, advances what it apparently subverts. It is important to remember that some women have, in fact, advanced abstract art, although Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell and Grace Hartigan are sometimes cast as dupes of the men running the show.

In her otherwise apt investigation of a feminist alternative, “The Re-Enchantment of Art,” critic Suzi Gablik tells of Hartigan refusing to take on a 36-year-old woman as a student because the woman should have started paint-

WHAT

“Women’s Work: Examining the Feminine in Contemporary Painting.”

WHEN

Through Sept. 30, Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sunday, 2-5 p.m.

WHERE

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 750 Marguerite Drive, Winston-Salem.

ADMISSION

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ing much earlier — this being an example of the insidious male ethos swaying Hartigan. It could be, too, that Hartigan, having invested a lifetime in her work, was a little put-out. (As it turns out, the woman was undeterred and had a successful local career.)

To quote that most loathed of male-gazers, Sigmund Freud, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” Sometimes that painting of a woman is just a painting, however much Catherine Howe might insist on male-gaze stereotypes. Her loose, broad-brushed compositions reprising typical art-class poses do not tell us much we do not already know. Yes, the female form has been over-idealized, and art has had much to do with it. There are, by the way, male models in art classes and pictures of men in museums.

Nicole Eisenman takes a more

involved and vaguely humorous view in “Art Class,” in which the sketchy, russet outlines of a mass of men press upon a woman seated before an easel. They could be art-historical figures; one, at least, looks like Picasso. The woman, who appears to reflect rather than paint, is limned in black, as is a figure in the lower left corner that either embraces or tussles with one of the russet males. Although Eisenman clearly implies that art history weighs on the woman, she does so with some ambiguity. The woman does not appear to be oppressed by it, but dealing with it, or simply ignoring it. The men crowd her, but they are not necessarily menacing; one even bears a child on his shoulders.

The most refreshing aspect of this exhibition is its insistence on the importance of the image. With few exceptions, these are not crudely expressed screeds or conceptualist statements masquerading as paintings. Say what you will about the politics of Besemer’s “Fold” paintings, they are striking objects. Jim Isermann, the other male artist here, takes up the traditional women’s craft, weaving, to produce supple and beautiful “paintings” in hand-loomed cotton.

Sabina Ott’s rose paintings are splendid compositions in oil and encaustic that assert a sensibility at once feminine and feminist. In “Mater Rosa #5,” the outlines of roses, in a gridded pattern, are incised in shimmering cascades of gold wax.

Just as their predecessors, such as Wilke, insisted on the pleasure of sexuality on their terms, some of these artists insist on the pleasure of the image, on their terms. And that might be the most subversive turn of all.