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CULTURED



ROLE REVERSAL

Though she has little in common with the girls portrayed in her confrontational paintings, **Lisa Yuskavage** opens up to Linda Lee about being the "bad-girl artist."

PORTRAIT BY SIMON WATSON

If we say “bad-boy artist,” a number of names come to mind, mostly guys who partied to excess, made spectacles of themselves—Larry Rivers—and some who died young: Jackson Pollock, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Dash Snow.

But say “bad-girl artist” and who comes to mind? Usually, Lisa Yuskavage. Her biggest backers—the gallery that exhibits her work (David Zwirner), the museum giving her a career-spanning show in September (Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University) and the publishers of a concurrent survey and monograph (Skira Rizzoli)—describe her work with words that most would consider critical: controversial, unsettling, cartoony, vulgar, confrontational, grotesque. Her oeuvre includes pneumatic babes lounging around half-clothed, holding flowers, spreading their legs, touching themselves and sometimes each other.

Yuskavage notes that Chuck Close once explained to her that it was considered acceptable for women to paint nudes as long as they weren’t vulgar. Yet it is the vulgar that excites her.

Lisa Yuskavage (use-KAV-age) is in fact a pretty good girl, long-time married to another artist, Matvey Levenstein, raised in working-class Philadelphia, a Catholic schoolgirl. “I’m a stable person,” she says. “I’m not a druggie.” Yuskavage’s father was a Teamster. While attending the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, she was able to live at home and walk to school. “In art school there were the kids who were out there. I lived at home; my mom had my dinner waiting—chicken, baked potato and steamed broccoli. I wore pigtails all through school. I thought I looked like a total dork.”

Art was fancy, and she was not. As she entered graduate school at Yale, relieved that she was not driving a forklift, she tried to become one of those fancy people who made and appreciated art. MFA in hand, she began doing highly skilled, polite paintings: demure backs rendered in delicate oil on linen.

Seeing those paintings hung at her first show

led to a crisis. Wrestling with her very identity, Yuskavage stopped painting for a year. When she picked up her brushes again, everything was turned around: the models now faced forward, brazenly, often wreathed in violent colors. She says that she resonates with a sentence from a letter by Gustave Flaubert, “Be regular and orderly in your life like a bourgeois, so that you may be violent and original in your work.”

“I’m pretty crazy inside my head,” she says. “People think I’m gay, polymorphous—like there’s something wrong with that? I don’t foreclose on any of the possibilities. I’m going to be a gay man with a big dick in my studio. When the door opens and the spirits come in, I decide whether or not to banish them.” Though open to possibilities, there’s one thing she’s certain of: “The spirit that doesn’t work in the studio is the goody two-shoes.”

Yuskavage is a figurative artist. With abstract art, the most critics can usually say is whether they like it or not, if the materials and size have changed and what the colors convey. But in figurative painting, the artists’ skills—as well as their subjects—become targets. If a work is too perfect, it’s a throwback, imitation Classical or, worse, an illustration. If it’s gestural, it risks becoming a cartoon. And if it’s a portrait, everyone is a critic: Why is this person here, looking like this? Who is this person, anyhow, and why are her breasts so big? In recent years her oils, pastels, watercolors, etchings, prints and sculptures have grown to include succubi, nude dudes (her word) with long hippie hair, a silent chorus of stern, fully clothed peasant women and verdant fields stretching toward softly folded mountains.

“She’s begun to imagine not misbehavior, but bad girls creating a new society,” says Christopher Bedford, the Henry and Lois Foster Director of the Rose Art Museum. “Maybe they’ve shed some of their habits.”

Yuskavage, at age 53, is widely considered to

be one of the most important representational artists of her generation; others in that cadre include John Currin, Kara Walker, Will Cotton and, combining abstraction and representation, Cecily Brown.

“We’re very competitive but in the best way,” she says of Currin, who was a classmate at Yale. “We enjoy each other’s successes, but we both want to be better than the other one. I’m jealous because he made it impossible for me to paint teeth. Certain people end up owning certain things. But I did the big boobs first; then he made them more absurd. We both decided to stand our ground.”

Bedford sees Yuskavage’s more recent work as beyond the big boobs. “I do think they are paintings of the mind and not the body, although she does paint hot-button body parts instead of more mundane things,” he says.

What’s important to her is that young people have become fans. “I represent some sort of freedom to them, being a badass and being free. I love that the galleries are open. There are young people every day taking selfies, posting on Facebook.”

She has kept a few of her own artworks for sentimental reasons, or because they didn’t sell. “There’s a watercolor of my living room that I tried to donate to three different auctions. The saying ‘I couldn’t give it away’? It’s true.”

She is in the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Her paintings broke the \$1 million mark at auction a decade ago. And yet she is still reluctant to read her own reviews. “I’m a tough broad,” she says, “but I’m a very sensitive person. There is so much feedback. I’m like a little daisy on a pond.” Her husband reads the reviews and gives her the gist. Otherwise, she says, “I really wait a long time, like years.”

In a way, she’s still that dorky girl in pigtails. But still, she says, “Even if no one wants my painting, I can still make the damn things.”

David Zwirner





Artist Lisa Yuskavage with *Bonfire*, 2013-2015, at David Zwirner gallery

PORTRAIT BY SIMON WATSON