

# A walk on the wild side at the ICA

By Marie Fowler

Special to Arcade

Take a walk on the wild side! Art aficionados who find van Gogh a little too mainstream may want to rush to the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania for a look at their newest exhibits featuring the work of artists Lisa Yuskavage and Mei-ling Hom as well as that of designers Hella Jongerius and Jurgen Bey.

They will find themselves shocked, intrigued and amused in turn. Philadelphia native Yuskavage's enormous color-saturated canvases in the major gallery space scream out for controversy — think *Playboy* cartoons.

A graduate of Tyler and Yale, she grew up in Juniata Park. Working in a figural style, she gives us images of women in varying stages of undress.

It's not a family show, unless you have teenage sons who think they have outgrown museums. Bring them here and you may have a hard time getting them back home again.

Yuskavage's women are varied, but nearly all provocative and the titles of her works are even more outrageous. (She admits to perhaps listening to a bit too much rap music when dreaming them up.)

Curator Claudia Gould likens the artist's body of work to the television sitcom "Sex and the City."

A catalog essay by Katy Siegel notes Yuskavage's admiration for Edgar Degas' studies of women and points out the difficulty in maintaining an image as a contemporary painter while depicting the nude in today's world.

"Blonde, Brunette, and Redhead" is a work on three separate square canvases. The androgynous redhead imp with a short frizzy halo of hair may put viewers in mind of 19th-century Belgian artist Leon Frederic. Her perky, upturned nose is but a point of white light.

By contrast, the blonde has no nose at all between her half-closed eyes ("bedroom eyes" as mothers used to say) and puckered mouth.

While her locks are wavy and flowing, the brunette's face is half-hidden by dark, straight hair — she appears almost as an image out of a child's story book.

The primary colors unify the compositions — a color scheme Siegel suggests was derived from Laura Ashley color charts, though viewers may find it hard to conjure up Laura Ashley here.

The "Transference Portrait of My

Shrink in Her Starched Nightgown with My Face and Her Hair" presents visitors with an image that recurs in the artist's work — a figure in a gown that looks rather like a fluted column. Elfin ears and nose and large dark eyes stand out.

Opulence and voluptuousness mark Yuskavage's work. "Big Little Laura" is a portrait against a diamond pattern that almost suggests the texture of frosting on a cake.

Round, juicy cherries are scattered throughout these works — is there a meaning intended?

"XLP" is a portrait in blue-violet of a trio of lovelies posed behind a fruit and flower still life at the front of the picture plane. The melon-like attributes of the young woman at center blend right in with the apples and pears.

Yuskavage's vocabulary is one of



Lisa Yuskavage's *Transference Portrait of my Shrink in her Starched Nightgown with my Face and Her Hair*.

long, pointed fingernails, plump and curvy thighs and obvious suntan lines. Pearls caress nubile necks and blouses have sleeves, backs, feathers and ruffles, but never ever a front.

She gives us hot young things who will never have need of a Wonderbra or bustle for effect. Free-flowing wavy tresses rival Rapunzel's. Even the fruit puckers.

Often one of her glamorous figures is contrasted with a background bedraggled, shrunken image in tattered scuffs.

The color is astounding. In "Day," yet another over-the-top beauty with an hourglass figure Mae West would have envied, stands before an open window through which sun-infused lemon yellow light floods.

A nude in "Honeymoon" is rendered in scarlet profile against a background of mountains with al-

most as many peaks and valleys as woman herself.

"Still Life Wearing a Wig" is a watercolor that seems stained into the paper in its ephemeral delicacy of pinks and blue violets.

A series of small sculptures in all-white cast hydrocal mimic in 3D the artist's well-rounded women. The group is entitled "Bad Habits" in general — titles of the individual works would not be appropriate in a family newspaper.

Here and there, an affixed pearl or artificial flower adds interest.

In the upstairs project space, Philadelphia installation artist Mei-ling Hom presents "Silkworm Grind," a cluster of three large silkworms that revolve in space, turned by cranks attached to the gallery ceiling.

These quivering, luminous forms are fashioned from transparent silk fabric and metal tubing. Cream, rose and jade are encased in yellow/saffron and gray/crimson.

An Asian-American who grew up on the East Coast where Chinese cultural traditions have been suppressed, Hom is aware of more enlightened practices in the San Francisco Bay area, for instance, where the Asian presence was always a part of the local landscape.

After spending time as an artist-in-residence at programs in California, Bangkok, Paris and Spain, Hom has made her work about Asian customs vis-a-vis mainstream America.

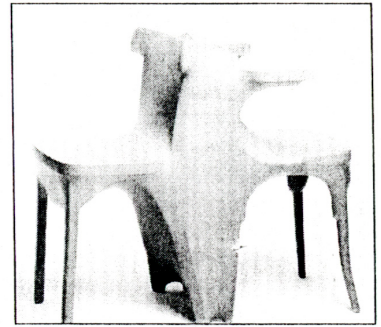
Her silkworms twist in never-ending spirals, causing a pile of ground spices beneath one of them to perfume the air, recreating the aroma of an Asian marketplace, much like the Chinese grocery store the artist's family operated when she was a child.

In the adjacent design gallery, Rotterdam designers Hella Jongerius and Jurgen Bey have created useful, everyday objects with a clever twist.

Part of the Dutch design movement Droog (meaning "dry," as in droll), Jongerius and Bey embrace a philosophy which eschews the excesses of the 1980s.

Bey scours the streets for found objects, which he resurrects, often re-assembles and covers. While Jongerius creates a set of china deliberately flawed, in defiance of production seconds discounted at outlets, Bey gathers odd pieces of dinnerware and coats them in silver to create a new set.

Tabletop designs even Martha Stewart never thought of include Jon-



Jurgen Bey's *Kokon Double chair*.

gerius' dragons embroidered on tablecloths — and running up and over and onto the very porcelain dishes atop it. Clever, but inconvenient when it comes time to decide whether to load either the dishwasher or the washing machine.

Jongerius fashions chairs of felt, foam and sheepskin and Bey transforms an occasional table covered in a matte gray PVC coating which is part of a series of hybrid furniture.

A round, pie-crust table with ball and claw feet has a curved chair back grafted into its center. Handy, one supposes, eliminating the need for end tables.

Bey's crystal chandelier is encased in a sleek cylinder — the look of something out-of-fashion is instantly updated and perhaps the laborious dusting generally needed for such opulent, but impractical, objects is also done away with.

The "Chair Toy" adds a whole new dimension to the disciplinary idea of time out. A needlepoint canvas stamped with the design of a crying little boy forms the back of the chair, while a tethered toy suggests (according to the designer) a devoted pet lolling at the occupant's feet.

A stack of books functions as a leg and reminds viewer of the chair's use. The reading looks heavy — Darwin in German or Dutch translation — all-in-all perhaps a chair for Mom's time out, not child's.

Given the eclectic nature of the seating furniture (not to forget the felled tree trunk fitted with chair backs), one visitor was overheard to ask the guard if a chair near the gallery door piled with newspapers was a part of the exhibition. No, it was the guard's chair, but still a question with merit.

The Institute of Contemporary Art is on the University of Pennsylvania campus at 118 South 36th Street at Sansom. Hours are Wednesday through Friday, noon until 8 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m.