

# On Renoir 

## Lisa Yuskavage <br> with Alison de Lima Greene

Alison de Lima Greene: Lisa, you have admitted to loving the work of many artists, from Giorgione to Philip Guston, but you've never touched on Pierre-Auguste Renoir's paintings. So I particularly appreciate you taking the time to address his work, both in personal terms and perhaps more objectively, as well.

Lisa Yuskavage: To be honest with you, outside of a few perverse conversations about his work here and there, I have never really given Renoir an incredible amount of thought until you approached me about this project. However, if you're going to participate in a discussion like this, you better have something original to say: It's not good enough to say: "I don't like it; I'm bored with the 'sweet' thing." These terms are too vague, based too much on taste. So I'm grateful for the challenge. And of course, growing up in Philadelphia, I saw a lot of his paintings.

ALG: Was this at the Barnes Foundation? Wasn't it rather inaccessible back then?

Lr: For our family the Barnes was very accessible. I used to go all the time - my first visit was probably when I was about eight. My grandmother lived in a neighborhood called Narberth, near Merion. It was where all the Irish families with nine children, like my grandmother's, had their homes so they could be servants to the Main Line. Violette was still alive when I was a kid, and my aunt took painting lessons with her.

ALG: Violette de Mazia? Albert Barnes's companion and the keeper of the flame?

LY: Yes, and since my aunt knew her, the Barnes was a soft, if grumpy, presence in our lives. It was understood as something of an irritant in the neighborhood; it had weird hours and half of it was always closed. But you got used to that, like the church hours in Italy. They would ring a bell and you would have to move along, but it also gave the place a sense of theatricality.

To get back to Renoir, I actually looked at him a lot, but there always was this puzzle for me: what is it about Renoir that does not give me any nourishment? I am a fan of anyone who provokes this many people for so long. There's something obviously unsettled about him, which I think is kind of great.

ALG: Yes. Our generation generally finds it a little hard to love his work.

Lr: Here's the first thing that I think is interesting about Renoir: There's obviously something enduring about his paintings, and it's not just because they are in museum collections. Plenty of things are in museum collections and then stop being shown. I then ask myself what is it about any given artist that actually lets them completely into art history to the point where they must continue to be seen as an indelible part of the history that we all agree is important. And truly the only answer to that is his influence on great artists who came after him. There was something in him that was really valuable and truly necessary to Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso.

My second realization about Renoir was that the Renoirs I like the least, the Renoirs I find the hardest to take, are obviously the most original Renoirs. The ones I find easier to look at - for example, Boy with a Cat (cat. 3) and Bather with a Griffon (cat. 7) - look so much like other artists. In other words, they are not his most original work.

But then he genuinely steps off into the great beyond, for which there is no precedent. There is no precedent, at all, for late Renoir, and this is where the complications enter in, and it is at this point that Renoir becomes problematic and an irritant. You cannot be moderately intelligent and love art and not stop in your tracks and say: "Something's going on here. What is this?" It goes so far beyond what taste I have, what tastes we have.

ALG: Ah, the thorny issue of taste. At one point you confessed to "spending hundreds of hours" looking at Edouard Vuillard. Why did he engage your attention? It's more than a matter of taste, isn'tit?

Lr: What makes Vuillard so genuine and original - not just vis-à-vis Renoir, but also vis-à-vis every other artist is how he treats intimacy in itself as a subject, his sense of touch, and the suggestion of embedded narrative. It's almost like he was telling secrets using the visual language of painting. But also, on a very simple level. I think his sense of color is something that hasn't been umpacked. He is a master of glowing grays and luminosity - both depicted and internal luminosity - even in the shadows. which never go to black.

ALG: Let's go back to Renoir's Boy with a Cat. Certainly it's a painting in which everything is intimate and not intimate, with imagery that turns Édouard Manet's Olympia (see fig. 60) on its head.

LY: Well, I see a homoerotic painting. I mean you don't make a picture of a boy like that - a boy's ass like that without making it about a boy's ass like that.

ALG: Not to mention the gaze, the way the boy coyly engages the viewer.

LY: I love that the cat is hugging him back - I never had a cat, being allergic to them. But there's something really intriguing happening here. It's what's going on with that cloth that really makes the painting. I could stare at it for a long time. And the way the boy's leg weaves not quite in and out of it, but up against it, is a very interesting deployment. But there is also so much Manet. It is a good painting, but it is not an original painting.

ALG: Renoir was twenty-seven when he painted Boy with $a$ Cat, and it's among his first mature works. Do you read this painting as the work of a young artist? Can you relate to it in these terms?

Lr: Well, we both grew up in working-class environments. I, fortunately, did not have to work in a factory, like Renoir did, because I was able to take out student loans and go to college. I would say that I was able to become much more educated in many more subjects. But on his own dime (once he started having some dimes), Renoir took that big trip all through Europe to see the Italians and others in situ. He must have related to the qualities of sweetness and sentimentality he found in Raphael. And then he said he wanted to make things "pretty," as opposed to beautiful, which is a very provocative statement.

ALG: When you were in school, you found that some of your most important mentors were abstract rather than figurative painters, and you once mentioned that they have a different understanding of painting, that as artists they weren't afraid of the present. Do you find that Renoir operates in his present, if not ours?

LY: In school I remember being told to make paintings flat, And I thought, "Well, they already are flat, so can you help me understand what the opposite of that is?" I did take some courses, mostly drawing, with figurative artists, but then I noticed their limitations in that they would not look at the present. My response was: "What's the point of being an artist of the present if we're not going to look at the present?"

So after I learned what I needed to know to draw figures in space, I went back to nonobjective painting teachers and really started to understand how a painting functions as a painting without an image, and how important it is to show, not tell, so to speak.

Abstraction is ultimately the language of all art. If you look at very great Renaissance art, it is abstraction that is giving you the sense of religiosity; it is what moves us through art history. Obviously Renoir understood how to shift languages as he moved on from Boy with a Cat to later paintings like Parisian Women in Algerian Costume (The Harem) (see fig. 28), which is so classic and irritatingly Renoir. It's so Delacroix, a pastiche. But then, why couldn't we say the same thing about Picasso?

ALG: On several occasions you arrive at the same subjects as Renoir, although through different routes. For example, Underground (fig. 110) can be compared to Bather with a Griffon. Both paintings depict a standing nude in what appears to be a grotto. In Renoir's case, he was looking at Gustave Courbet's bathers as a point of departure. But you source your imagery elsewhere, correct?

Ly: For Underground and other paintings I sought out low sourcestadvertising, pornography, girlie and nudist magazines - just garbage. I'm actually sitting in my studio now with piles of folders filled with images I've pulled. Over the years I've started to notice that the authors of these images, the photographers, were looking at high art. I know for a fact that some, like Bob Guccione, knew a great deal about the history of art. So I became interested in how the process by which a painting evolved could replicate the process by which a painter evolved, and that it could be a self-reflexive, symbiotic relationship.

In the nineteenth century, someone like Manet, who was a very sophisticated guy, could take high art and bring it down by posing a hooker - not just any hooker, but a


Fig. 110
Lisa Yuskavage (American, b. 1962), Underground, 2010
Oil on panel, $8 \times 6 \mathrm{in}$. $(20.3 \times 15.25 \mathrm{~cm})$. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner
known prostitute - so that everyone would know he was playing this game with art. By bringing low and high together he was elevating the model, de-elevating the painting.

What interested me was how people who are producing advertising or low imagery have a desire for high art, so I decided to re-explore that image and then try to elevate it. In other words I wasn't so much looking at other art. I was actually looking at the thing and bringing it back to art.

ALG: Let's talk a little bit about scale. Renoir's paintings range from large to small - and some in this exhibition are very small. You make small paintings, too, and some you can cradle in your hands.
ty: For me, scale is so important because $I$ use the small works to experiment with color and composition. I've used small paintings as studies for larger paintings, and sometimes I use them to play with a painting after it's made, to revisit it, to come up with a different solution. And then sometimes I just make it on that scale because there's something about the scale of a small work that makes you feel you're glimpsing something - and this goes back to Vuillard - through a peephole. You feel there's a kind of voyeurism and intimacy.

ALG: Looking at Renoir's late paintings, such as Young Shepherd in Repose (Portrait of Alexander Thurneyssen) (cat. $5^{66}$ ) or Bathers Playing with a Crab (cat. 45), there's also joy there, not just kitsch. Would you agree?

Lr: Yes, definitely. Or, as Renoir said: "There are too many unpleasant things in life as it is without creating still more of them." ${ }^{\text {* }}$ He was an outsider who came to the inside and then left again. And this sense of escapism is in the work.

ALG: To put bluebirds of happiness in a painting in IgrI is a daring thing. You've pushed the envelope with your own work, particularly your idyllic paintings from around 2oro, with those lush, gorgeous landscapes. How did these come about for you?

Lr: I was interested in creating mood. You can have a figure against a backdrop, but I think the dynamics of weather and atmosphere feel very vital. and then the background figures
started to add more and more to this dynamic. I started to get really interested in the dynamies of not just color, but also of who else is watching, those nel'zahs (naysayers) in the background - not birds of happiness.

Kitsch feels like the desire to avoid decay and death. Jeff Koons could be the perfect artist of our moment to be the equivalent of late Renoir. He even said: "My work is a support system for people to feel good about themselves." Milan Kundera, in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, talks about how in Fascism, in Communism, the aesthetic of kitsch dominates the conversation, promoting the idea of mankind as invincible. Which of course we never are; death and decay win. So kitsch is this irritant because it's pushing so dazzlingly toward happiness, and it annoys people for that reason.

ALG: Well, talking about this push toward happiness, one of Renoir's very last paintings is The Concert (cat. 68) from rgr9, painted the year he died. I can't stop looking at that picture. At first I could not figure out what the kneeling figure was doing, or where her hands were, until I discerned the lute that she's strumming in front of her. The other figure looks out with a directed gaze at the viewer, an engagement rarely seen in Renoir after Boy with a Cat.

Ly: Right. Well, it's self-absorption versus theatricality. In most Renoir paintings there's no one addressing the viewer. It's all self-absorption. The viewer is not important. The subjects are not even aware they're being viewed.

ALG: You've also explored the difference between absorption and the outward-looking gaze.

LY: In some of my earlier paintings it was important that the models stare at and confront the viewer directly: But I didn't want to be only confrontational, so later, in the Penthouse paintings, the figures are extremely self-absorbed:

ALG: And there's a certain demureness implied by that self-absorption, no matter how much is displayed.

LY: Right. I recently made a painting called Bedheads (fig. III). The moment is postcoital. The man isn't looking at the viewer at all: he's putting his trousers back on, and his hair is all mussed up. And there is what you might believe


Fig. 111
Lisa Yuskavage, Bedheads, 2018. Oil on linen, $773 / 8 \times 621 / 8$ in.
$(196.5 \times 157.8 \mathrm{~cm})$. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner
is a woman - it's hard to tell, you can't really see anything about her body - but she's staring directly at the viewer. So this one is a combination of the two.

ALG: Couple in Bed (fig. II2), another new painting of yours, really surprised me. Not that you've introduced the male figure, because the male figure has been appearing in your work for three or four years now. But you are introducing a different bird's-eye view and tilting space.

Lr: That painting may be just an outlier or an opening to something else, like the things I see as relatable in Renoir's The Concert. It feels like a bas-relief to me, emulating a shallow space that is maybe three inches deep. And that is something I was thinking about with Couple in Bed, that these figures felt like they could be on a wall. They're much bigger than life-size, which is apparent when you stand in front of them, and they also feel like something on a ceiling fresco, as if they're floating above you.

ALG: Thank you, Lisa. Any last thoughts on Renoir?
LY: As many people tend to do, I believe Renoir "came home" at the end of his life, giving in to who he was at the beginning. You take this long journey, you try to become sophisticated; in the end I see the porcelain. Not just that he had a job at a factory painting porcelain, but that aesthetic was everywhere in his early surroundings. I think he genuinely grew up in a place where "low taste" was the sensibility. When I look at his nudes, I see Renoir moving far away from the human figure. His women become these vessels. And the surface of these paintings feels so decorative, and decorated. And I think of late Matisse, because he became interested in the decorative as a place to really explore. It's an intellectual game that very few people get.

You know, art does not do it for everybody. And Renoir doesn't do it for everybody. And yet he persists. I really do think that the serious conundrum is why. And I think that is a worthwhile thing to try to understand. What is it that makes his work persist? And it's not just because a lot of people like it. I think the answer really lies in understanding who has loved it.

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Fig. 112
Lisa Yuskavage, Couple in Bed, 2017. Oil on linen, $771 / 8 \times$ $701 / 8 \mathrm{in}$. $(195.9 \times 178.1 \mathrm{~cm})$. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner

Published by the Clark Art Institute on the occasion of the exhibition Renoin The Body, The Senses, presented at the Clark Art institute from Jume 8 to September 22, 2019, and at the Kimbell Art Museum from October 27, 2019, to January 26, 2020.

Renoir: The Body، The Senses is organized by the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, and the Kimbell Art Museurn, Fort Worth, Texas. This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. The Clark's summer 2019 exhibitions and programs are made possible in part by generous support from Denise Littlefield Sobel. Major contributors to the presentation of Renoir: The Body, The Senses at the Clark are Robert and Martha Berman Lipp. Acquavella Galleries, and the Robert Lehman Foundation, with additional funding from two anonymous donors.
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Produced by the Publications Department of the Clark Art Institute, 225 South Street, Williamstown. Massachusetts 01267

Anne Roecklein, Managing Editor
Kevin Bicknell, Editor
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Copyedited by Pickman Editorial Bibliography edited by Amelia Kutschbach Designed and typeset by Roy Brooks, Fold Four, Inc. Proofread and indexed by Jane Friedman
Printed by Conti Tipocolor, Florence, Italy
Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 302 Temple Street, P.O. Box 209040, New Haven, Connecticut 06520-9040 yalebooks.com/art

Printed and bound in Florence, Italy
10987654321

Lubrary of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Nämes: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, organizer, host institution. I Kimbell Art Museum. organizer, host institution.
Title: Renoir : the body, the senses.
Other titles: Renoir (Sterling and Francine Clark Art institute)
Description: Williamstown, Massachusetts: Clark Art Institute, 2019. 1 "Published by the Clark Art Institute on the occasion of the exhibition Renoir: The Body, The 5enses, presented at the Clark Art Institute from June 8 to September 22, 2019. Renoir: The Body, The Senses is organized by the Clark Art Institute, Williarnstown, Mássachusetts, and the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas." I Includes bibliographical references and index. Identifiers: LCCN 2019007208 I ISBN 9781935998389 (hardcoyer ; alk. paper)ISBN 9780300243314 (Yale University Press) Subjects: LCSH: Renoir. Auguste, 1841-1919Exhibitions. I Nude in Art-Exhibitions. Classification: LCC N6853,R39 A4 2019 I DDC 704.9/421-dc23 LC record available at https://icen .loc.gov/2019007208

Full-page details: p. 3: Pierre-Auguste Renoir (French), 1841-1919), Bather Arranging Her Hair (detail of cat. 33), 1885. Clark Art institute, 1955.589; p. 4: Seated Bather (detail of cat. 22), c. 1883-84. Harvard Art Museums/ Fogg Museum, Cambridge, 1951.59; p. 6: Woman Crocheting (detail of cat. 12), C. 1875. Clark Art Institute. 1955.603; pp. 10-11: Study for "Scene from Wagner's Tannhäuser, Third Act" (detail of cat. 17), 1879. Clark Art Institute, 1955.608; p. 22: Blonde Bather (detail of cat, 19), 1881. Clark Art Institute, 1955.609; p. 50: Little Blue Nude (detail of cat. 15), c. 1878-79. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, 1941:2; p. 68: Bather with a Griffon (detail of cat. 7), 1870. Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, Sāo Paulo, MASP.00095; p. 82: Study. Torso of a Woman in the Sunlight (detail of cat. 14), 1875-76. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, RF 2740; p. 100: Young Girl Bathing (detail of cat. 40), 1892. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1975.1.199; p.114: The Bathers (detail of cat, 69), 1918-19. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, RF 2795: p. 136: Boy with a Cat (detail of cat. 3), 1868. Musee d'Orsay, Paris, RF 1992 409; pp. 144-145: Bathers Playing with a Crab (detail of cat. 45), c. 1897. Cleveland Museum of Art. 1939.269



[^0]:    * Denis Rouart, Renoir (Geneva: Skira, 1954), 70.

