

Conversations with Artists II

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Zuckerman

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I'm an Interested Viewer of My Work

Heidi Zuckerman
in Conversation with

Date: May 20, 2019
Location: New York
Occasion: In advance of Solo
AAM Exhibition

Lisa Yuskavage

HZ This morning, I listened to a meditation that was talking about the three temperatures to feeling in Buddhism: positive, negative, and neutral. Most people spend their time feeling the first two. This meditation was about bringing yourself back to neutral.

LY I used to think that insomnia was a disease that happens because you're middle-aged. I didn't know that negative thoughts were the reason for insomnia. Everything that happens during the day tends to come up at night. When parents help their kids get back to sleep after a nightmare, they comfort them and tell them it's all going to be OK. We need to do that for ourselves. There is a meditation where you're supposed to imagine what you fear most, clench everything in your body, picture it happening, and just let go. You have to be able to imagine it just being OK.

I enjoy YouTube stand-up from the seventies. George Carlin's late work is really interesting. He has one bit about "Save the Earth"—about how the Earth is not going to be destroyed by us; it's just going to shake us off. We're always talking about saving the Earth, but we are really trying to save ourselves.

HZ One of my favorite quotes is, "Everything will be OK in the end, and if it's not OK, it's not the end." When it comes to the trajectory of climate change, we're not actually trying to save the planet; we're trying to save humanity. Most people can't face death. They can't face their own death let alone the death of pretty much everyone that they know, their children know, and their children's children could ever know.

LY We have to try and enjoy life and keep to our own conscience.

HZ Right. If we're honest about how much time we have and what we can do, then we have to think about how we want to spend the time while we're here. I want to spend it with people that I love.

LY When I'm swimming in the ocean, I think I am already in heaven.

HZ At this party on Saturday night, one of my college roommates, who is one of my best friends, turned to me and said, "This is how I imagine heaven to be: dancing at a castle party with all of our friends, whenever we want." You have both thought about what heaven might be like. I don't know if that's nomenclature, but it's an interesting notion.

LY I think we're saying slightly different things. If I was already dead, and this is where I was, then I did OK. And if I'm alive, then I'm already ahead. I don't know what I imagine the afterlife to be like. I assume it's the highest or most positive imagining of what life on Earth is.

HZ Through ritual and ceremony, we have an opportunity to take stock of our lives, for example, through a house-warming party or reunion. I've been thinking a lot about knowing where we are and then figuring out what our next trajectory is. I spent the last few years intentionally downsizing, getting rid of lots of things, including commitments and things that I had worked hard to get. I wanted less of everything. I recently realized that I don't actually want less for the rest of my life, and decided to up-size again. It's not about the pure number of things; it's about the quality of fewer things. Throughout all of this, however, art has been a consistent part of my life.

LY I don't feel like I'm at home unless I have my art. I don't exist well without it. On one level, the experience of it is an addiction. I don't expect my viewers to participate in it as an addiction. Time alone with it is my meditation. I like to work alone, which surprises most people when they come to my studio because though I have an assistant, she's almost never there. I'm addicted to entering a zone of checking out and checking in to myself. I peel away layers and layers and achieve a self that I can't be anywhere else. It requires going into a particular kind of room that I create, which is physical as well as mental.

If someone asks me whether I love painting, I'll say yes. But if the question is, "Do you always love what you get?," the answer is no. I'm obsessed and in love with the process. I often hate what I get and eliminate it. It's so challenging and complex.

HZ You describe the process of painting as going into this space and peeling away layers, but you get there by how you feel, what you remember, or what is evoked by being with the works you live with. That's pretty great because in between those things are terror, self-judgment, elation, and success. That's the messy part and the struggle, but you're so clear on both the start and the end.

LY I'm as good as my next painting, and I'm always anxious to make the next one. That's why I can't retire. It's a good problem—I'll never get to retire because I'll always want to see what's next.

HZ Are you anxious about making the next painting because you feel like it will be better than the last one or because you want to see if you still have the skills?

LY I'm curious about what will unfold. I'm an interested and curious viewer of my work. In some ways, I'm helpless, and I wish I wasn't. Sometimes I try to pull back; it's important to not always have my nose smashed up in my work. I take time to step back and look at it critically. That critical thinking was where the couples came from in the last show I had. Over the years, people would ask me when I'm going to paint men. I knew they would appear when they wanted to appear.

I don't paint subjects because it's the right thing to do; I hold to a narrative that makes sense for the narrative of the work. That game of men getting to paint naked ladies so I should get them back never made sense to me. It's about a bigger picture. This is an art-historical conversation, a popular-culture conversation, and a conversation about the self. Why would I have any other conversation?

As a kid, I saw Duchamp's work at a particularly influential time in my life at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A number of male artists seem so tragic, heroic, and anti-heroic at the same time. Men are, in a weird way, more vulnerable than women because they have balls—if you know where to kick them. Van Gogh seems the most vulnerable because of his life story. Can we really feel sorry for him though? I remember seeing a great Arles show at the Metropolitan Museum in 1984. I was an obnoxious student at the time and walked against the flow of the crowd. I remember looking at every painting and thinking that he wasn't crazy at all. He was sharp, present, and genius.

Yale pushed me to the limit of my own mind and vulnerability and made me realize how difficult painting is, how impossible it is, and how out of reach it is. I came to have great respect for it. I was changed by Yale for many reasons that have been worked out over the years.

HZ I'm interested in that vulnerability and the evolution of your paintings. What do you think about the heroic in your painting?

LY I have never been asked that question before. I've thought about it but never actually talked about it. It's definitely mediated, in the sense that the female is a different version of the heroic. The heroic is an obvious cliché or category of what we understand in culture—not just broadly, but culture with a lowercase “c” and an uppercase “C” (as in painting).

When I was in school, my male colleagues would talk about killing the art father because there were so many in art history. There weren't really any mothers to kill. They had to slay the father in order to move on. I decided I would kill the father and wouldn't even think about being a woman. I guess it was a form of my imagination being gender neutral.

HZ The idea of killing the father in the Oedipal way is so that you could have the mother.

LY That was part of my solution. I was going to do it as a woman, but with a naiveté, without questioning whether I could do it or not.

HZ I think your paintings are totally heroic. The super presence of the female figure in your work is so frontal.

LY I believe in the multiplicity, and I don't want to be apologetic for my work. Part of how I've done what I've done is to never yield any ground in terms of what's going on in my studio.

The figures in my works are the actors, and when I pull the camera way, way back, I can see what else is happening. Philip Guston did something similar; I learned it from him. He had actors and landscapes, and there were things happening. All of a sudden in my work, there are sunsets, sunrises, mountains, farmlands, and farmers. I was just playing all these things out and letting them run amok. All these characters started popping up with other plotlines, and then men started wandering in. The landscape was more about the inclusion of other things; it was opening up the frame.

The heroic is something that I think about, but in a more oblique way, and I didn't want to yield any ground to it. I wanted to have my own battering ram against the art-historical and have my own place within it. Art history was always described as a march, and I had to find my place within it. I didn't want to be part of a minor march; I wanted to be part of the major one. My issue is that I felt more out of step and more awkward because of my class, which I ended up feeling grateful for. I didn't notice the gender thing as much.

HZ When we did an exhibition with Rodney McMillian, I brought up how everyone talks about him as a black male painter. He said that people in this country are so focused on race that they miss the main thing, which is actually class—no one ever talks about it. Class is usually the main thing that goes silent.

Class is messy in the US. You can move through classes through education; it's much more porous, and I'm grateful for that. I always feel between things. My husband won the Rome prize, so we lived at the American Academy in Rome; we were the academicians. I related to the workers who worked there though. In Europe, it's impossible to ascend class; that's why people left.

Once I recognized how unsophisticated I was, and how sophisticated you needed to be to paint, I used it to my advantage. We can turn our mistakes and problems into things that have never been seen before. That's my way forward. What is often beloved and promoted in contemporary art now is already known, and it's comfortable, which troubles and confuses me. I thought we were supposed to be doing something that made people uncomfortable, and I took that quite seriously. Maybe that's the working-class kid in me. That's the job of the avant-garde artist: you're supposed to push the envelope, push hard, and marry things that don't belong together that create a third object that hasn't been made yet.

HZ

Do you consider painting a job?

LY

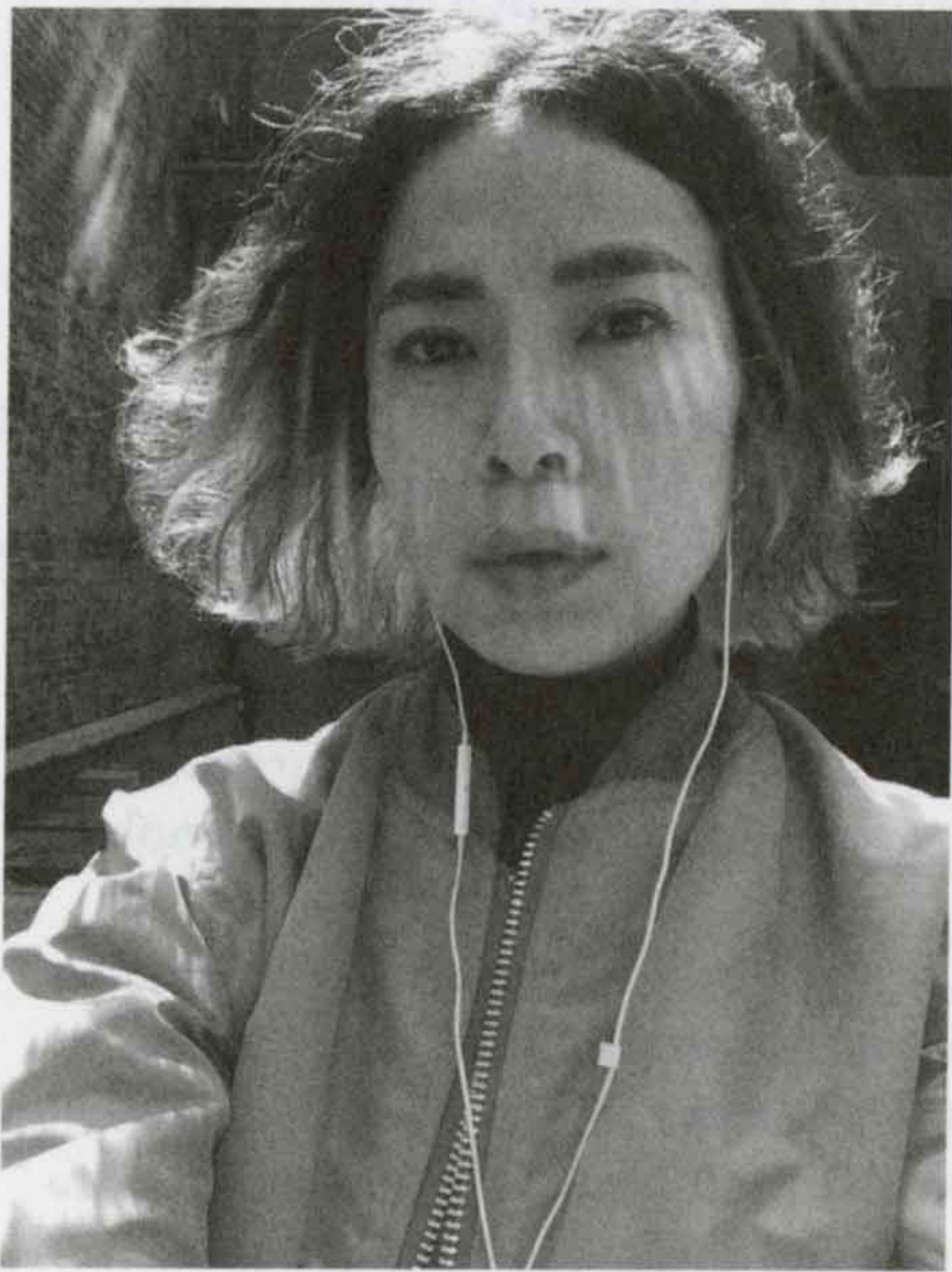
I don't. And broadly, I don't think that my job as an artist is to save the world. If I go to my studio thinking I'm saving the world, the little mouse that runs the power to my brain will stop spinning on his wheel and go to sleep. If I go to my studio and decide that I'm going to be open and free—a provocation—it starts scrambling like crazy. My brain suffers from stupidity when I try to be a “do-gooder”; I can't fix that.

I would like to see the best of all of my work together someday. People are not going to be prepared for the range. The range is what I hope to continue to grow. We all want a range, but we aren't given it, so we have to develop it. In my own development, it was important to recognize this idea of multiplicity; we have so many selves. My tough self, who made the plucky full-frontal paintings, is still vital and required.

Amelie von Wulffen (b. 1966, Breitenbrunn, Germany) lives and works in Berlin. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich. Recent exhibitions have taken place at: Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland (2019); Studio Voltaire, London, Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva (all 2017); Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Centre Pompidou, Paris, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (all 2015); and Kunstraum Innsbruck, Austria (2009).

Anicka Yi (b. 1971, Seoul, South Korea) lives and works in New York. Recent exhibitions have taken place at: 57th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (all 2019); Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, The Kitchen, New York (all 2018); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, New Museum, New York, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Australia (all 2017); Fridericianum, Kassel (2016); and Cleveland Museum of Art (2014).

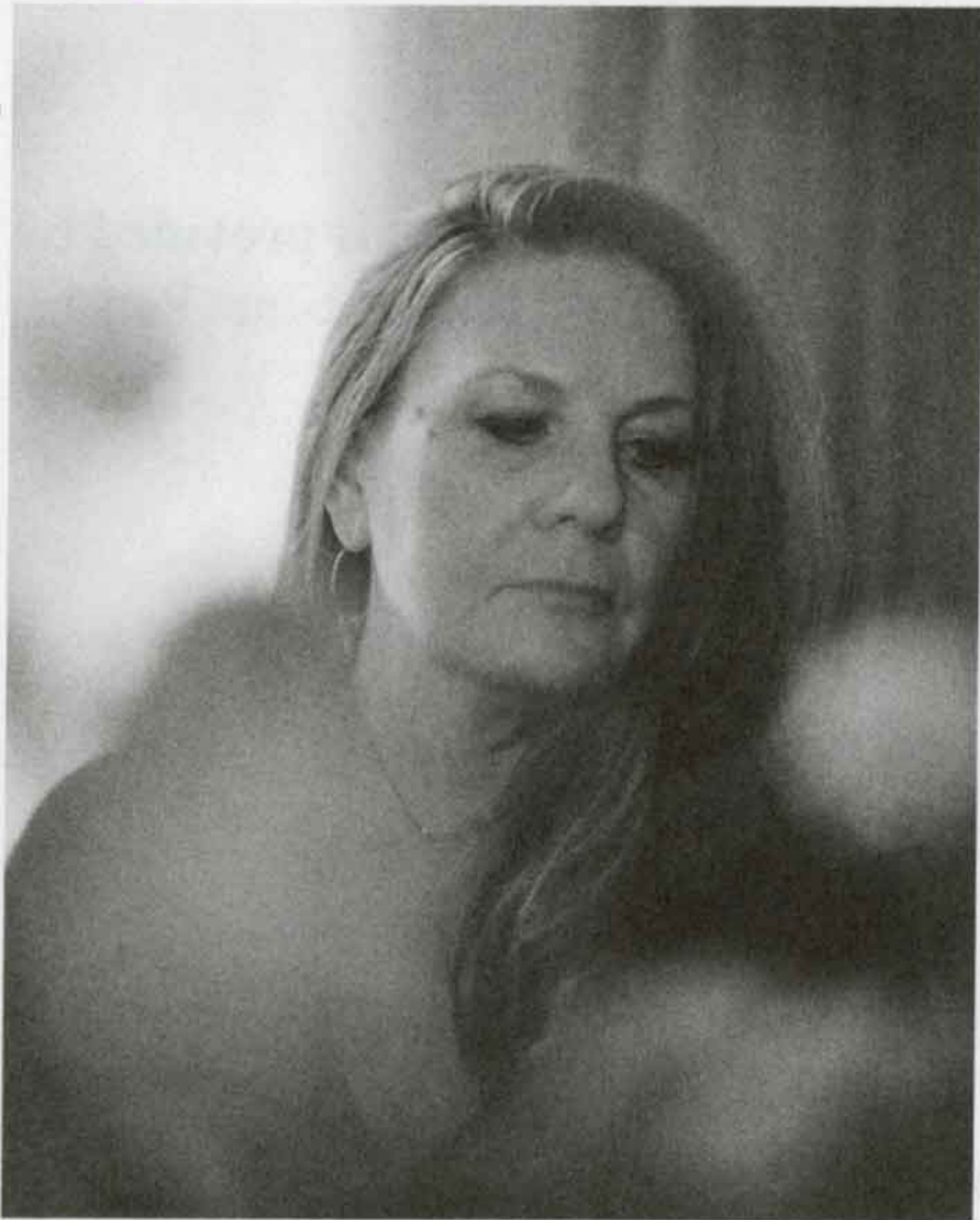
Lisa Yuskavage (b. 1962, Philadelphia, PA) lives and works in New York. Yuskavage studied at Tyler School of Art, Temple University, and Yale University School of Art. Recent exhibitions have taken place at: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2016); Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, MA (2015); and Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin (2011). She will have solo presentations at Aspen Art Museum and Baltimore Museum of Art in 2020.



Anicka Yi



Heidi Zuckerman. Photo: Karl Wolfgang



Lisa Yuskavage. Photo: © Amanda Webster.
Courtesy David Zwirner

In Volume II of *Conversations with Artists*, Heidi Zuckerman continues to explore the critical practices, daily lives, and philosophical interests of artists working today. Her insightful questions reveal equally thoughtful responses, providing illuminating perspectives not only on each artist's process but also on the subjects that underline contemporary society.

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