

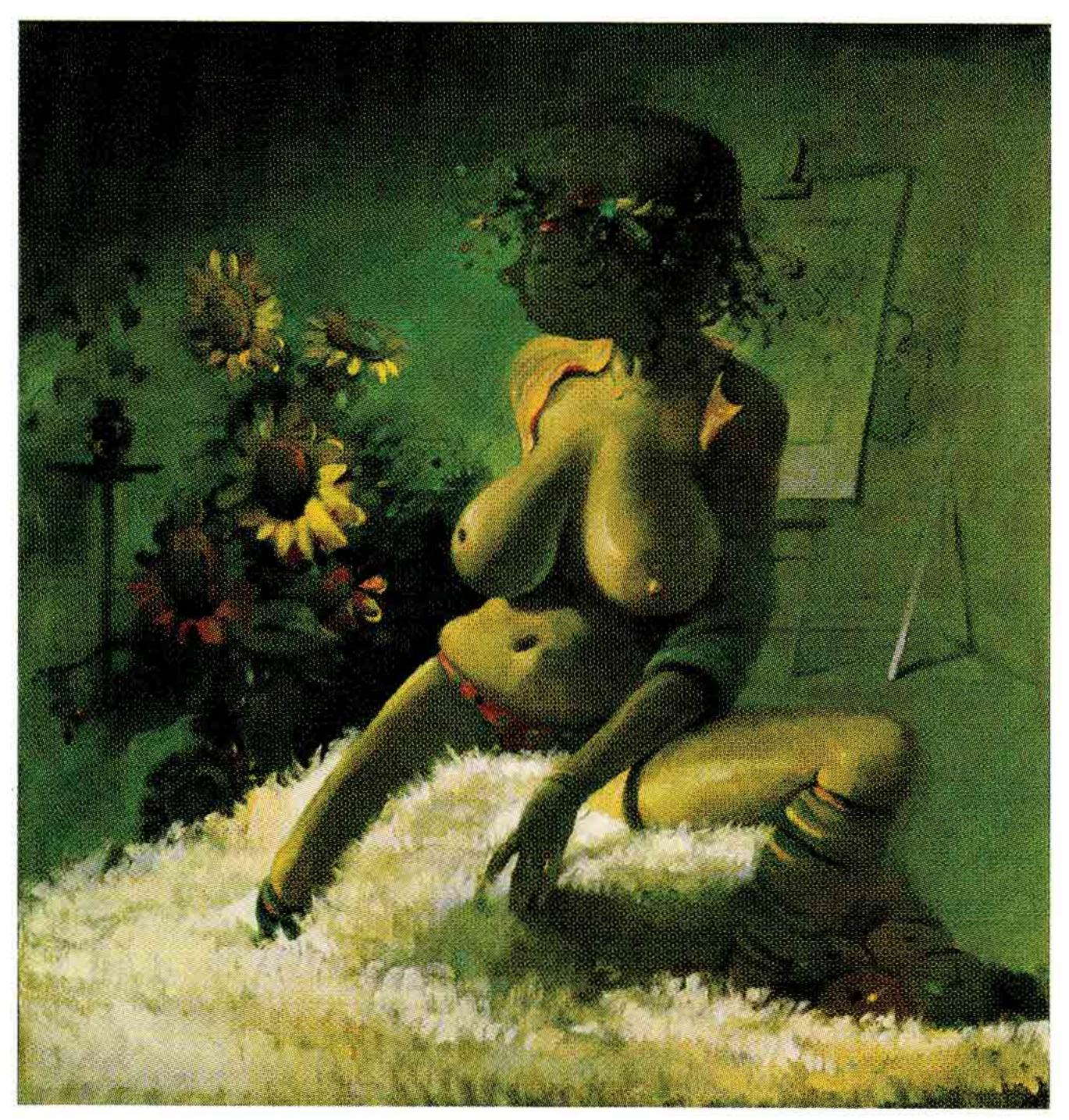
AFTER NIGHTFALL IN THE Gowan's section of Brooklyn, where the F subway line goes abovegnound for a few stops, sharp-eyed passengers might glimpse into a studio window an artist with long hair, holding a paint breast, who is having a voyeuristic moment of her own. It is Lisa Yuskavage, creator of female figures whose outrageous proportions evoke Edgar Degas nudes posed by Hans Bellmer. Her polarizing work has been variously described as "perversely pledged to vulgarity," "discomfitingly kitschy," and utterly sincere." Critics and curators have likened walking into a fuskavage show to "falling into a candy-colored fever dream" and Lof emerging with the sensation of having eaten too much cake. Painters have to create space for themselves," says Yuskavage, looks a decade younger than her 49 years in a summertime of tank top, shorts, and pink sandals. Charismatic and s staked out her territory with pictures that pack of titillating, often bizarre imagery and dazzling technical prowess. "I'm on the edges of a lot of things," she says, standing before a large window at the rear of the third-floor aerie that has been her workplace for the past three years and gesturing at the elevated tracks and industrial landscape outside. "It triggers feeling of the studio is that there's so much ing on, but I'm over here by myself."

Yuskavage recently completed two huge oils that will have starring roles in her next solo exhibition, opening September 27 at David Zwirner gallery, in New York, where she has shown since 2006. Whether blithely sucking on a lollipop or splayed on a table in a nod to the through-the-peephole tableau of Marcel Duchamp's Etant donnés, the compositions' figures also seem content to be "over here by myself." Like many of Yuskavage's scenes, one of the pictures contains wildflowers, in this case matching a bunch of artificial black-eyed Susans in a vase by a studio window. The painted bouquet springs from unusual fertile ground: the nether regions of a naked woman. "I was quoting Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights," she says. "It's one of my favorite paintings."

The work, titled Outskirts, draws on other inspirations as well. Cavorting under its hazy, chlorine-colored sky, for instance, are figures that echo the storm-conjuring witches of the German Renaissance artist Hans Baldung Grien. Yuskavage holds up a small color Xerox of Caravaggio's Rest on the Flight into Egypt that had been taped to her easel and mentions Bellini's Saint Francis in the Desert as examples of scenes that take place on the outskirts and that have influenced her painting. "I've noticed that both saints and

Lisa Yuskavage with recent paintings in her Brooklyn studio. "I'm on the edges of a lot of things," she says.





From top: The artist's worktable, with Lauren with a Traveller, 2011; and In Braque's Studio, 2010.

she puts it, were displayed in her New York solo debut at Pamela Auchincloss Gallery in 1990, shortly after graduation. The small paintings depicted the partially veiled upper backs of women. "They were abstracted and painted beautifully, very tasteful," she says. "I knew that was not what I wanted my work to be about." Devastated and confused, she took a break from painting that lasted more

than a year. It was during this period that she resolved to abandon the demure approach embodied in the early pictures that she now loathed and unleash her bold personality. Yuskavage turned her women around to face the viewer, mined her subconscious for disturbing scenarios, and began experimenting with what she describes as "kinky sfumatos," redeploying her arsenal of representational painting techniques in the service of subversion. "I felt like I had been drowning and came back to life," she says of the 1991 painting *The Gifts*, showing a dark green fog from which emerges a woman gagged with a corsage, her eyes pleading, breasts naked, arms bound. "I remember thinking, 'How do I do it again?""

"My initial reaction was to crack up," the New Yorkbased curator and writer Christian Viveros-Fauné says of his first encounter with Yuskavage's work, in the late 1990s at Marianne Boesky Gallery, in SoHo. "I was made so significantly uncomfortable that I found it hilarious. That meant a lot to me in terms of a reaction." At Dublin Contemporary 2011, the eight-week, 90-artist exhibition opening September 6 that Viveros-Fauné is co-curating with the artist Jota Castro, Yuskavage will have her own show of eight paintings in the Royal Hibernian Academy as well as a large pastel at the main exhibition site.

In the two decades since Yuskavage's artistic epiphany, dissatisfaction has remained an important source of innovation for her. "I'm easily bored," she says, "and I have to stay extremely interested. Every painting has to really do something new for me." The same is true for >>>

## INTHE STUDIO



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Yuskavage, pictured
with Triptych, 2011,
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her methods. After several years of relying solely on her imagination, Yuskavage started working from small clay sculptures she crafted (a technique borrowed from Tintoretto) before moving to found photographs, including 1970s *Penthouse* pinups, and, later, live models. "You're always pillaging something in making art. If you're painting a model, you're pillaging the model's features," she says. "If you're making up the works, you're pillaging your internal life. Ideally, you're doing a little of both."

No matter how sublimely painted, Yuskavage's risqué subject matter continues to perplex and even repel some viewers and critics. She deflects comparisons to soft-core pornography by pointing to the vulgar high jinks depicted in the masterpieces of Bosch and Pieter Bruegel. And if people are made uneasy by her pictures—such as the 2008–09 "PieFace" series, in which the faces of balloon-breasted women are covered in custard—that's all to the good. "The only things we tend to feel really comfortable with are the things that we already know," says Yuskavage. "I remember seeing Philip Guston's late paintings and having that wonderful feeling of hatred toward them and then becoming a maniac fan." It's a reaction she learned to trust. "If something is so offensive or makes you feel like there's something off, maybe there's something to it."

Her latest works, most of them created on a grand scale, are the result of snowballing associations. "I would begin with something random that I found or had in mind, or a piece of a painting I had made a long time ago—some small thing—and then build on that, associate from that, and just keep adding to it," she says as we examine the largest of her new paintings, *Triptych*. It began with the lollipop-sucking pixie on the far left, naked except for rainbow-striped socks, whom Yuskavage had used in a previous painting. Initially intended to be a single large

canvas, it soon became three to hold the Duchampian lounger in the center, rolling hills in the background, and, finally, a chorus of stern-looking peasant women who tower above the landscape's scrubby trees. Yuskavage's husband, the painter Matvey Levenstein, calls them the *nel'zias*, after the word, meaning "don't," uttered—for reasons known only to themselves—by the elderly Russian women who frequently accosted Yuskavage on their Eastern European honeymoon in 1992, when she was beginning to embrace "wrongness" in her painting.

She still finds delight in this embrace. "I love that this painting was essentially created through a form of chaos, but allowing for the chaos, order just fell in," she says. "It was like a Surrealist parlor game that I played by myself. I'm kind of in awe of how this painting worked out."

"Lisa's work is getting more radical," says Hanna Schouwink, a director at David Zwirner. "There is always some new technique or idea that she's exploring, such as combining genres." Her balancing of landscape, still life, and portraiture has become increasingly assured in the recent paintings, in which female figures and apples harvested from Cézanne coexist in fantastical scenes.

Having firmly claimed and held her ground in the male-dominated world of painting, Yuskavage continues to push the boundaries of taste and style. "Lisa really is odd woman out in a lot of interesting ways," says the critic Robert Storr. "She's one of those painters that you just don't know what they're going to do. You do know, however, that the basic contrariness allied to a very high standard for picture making is going to be the constant. She's one of those people permanently to watch." Having spent a fascinating afternoon in her studio, I walk to the subway, wait for the Manhattan-bound F train, and keep a sharp lookout for her window on the ride home.  $\boxplus$