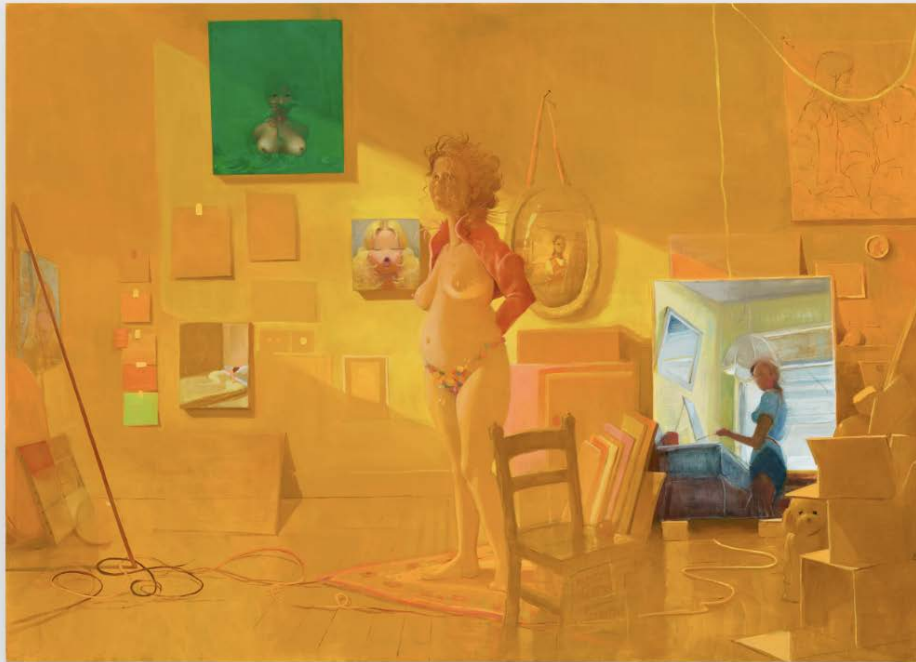


“Lisa Yuskavage, Ron Mueck: Stars of the Nineties.” *La République de l’Art* (June 14, 2023) [ill.] [online]

LA RÉPUBLIQUE { de l’art }



Lisa Yuskavage, Ron Mueck: Stars of the Nineties

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Contemporary American art has often been the source of many misunderstandings. We Europeans, heirs to a whole cultural tradition, took a long time to accept this mixture of *low* and *high culture*., popular and scholarly, coming from comics or advertising and referring to classic works. One could only regard with a certain condescension the allusions to Mickey or to McDonalds. This is how artists like Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons were often decried, sometimes with good reason, because we only saw the commercial aspect, the way of catching the barge, but sometimes also wrongly, because 'we were sensitive to only one aspect of the work, the most salient, the one with which we immediately identified it and that we did not seek to see what depth or subtlety the work could hide.

David Zwirner

Lisa Yuskavage, whom we know very little in France where she has never exhibited, while she is very famous in the United States, could be one of the artists we could easily miss. When you look at his large canvases in flashy colors, populated by bare nymphets with opulent breasts and engaged in activities that are suggestive to say the least, one could cry kitsch, soft porn, absolute vulgarity. And, in fact, there is a lot of bad taste in his paintings, a desire to provoke, to not conform to decency and political correctness. But these choices are totally assumed, they are part of the creative process and constitute the tree that hides the forest (the great culture, the many references to the history of art) that the spectator can try to see, or before which he remains permanently blind. And humor, of course, very present there.



David Zwirner

But to better understand the artist's approach, we must go back to his formative years. She was born in 1962, in Philadelphia and trained at the Yale School of Art. From the outset, she devoted herself to figurative painting, but at the time, the 90s, painting was not the medium in which we were most interested (even if in the United States, it did not been as ostracized as in France). Moreover, when she arrived in New York, she discovered the work of artists like Mike Kelley or Paul McCarthy who made infantilization and bad taste the engines of critical thought. She therefore understands that there is in popular culture and in what are usually considered low-end, a potential that can challenge the viewer and challenge the notions of beautiful and ugly, good and unseemly, make him think beyond appearances. It's an irreverence that pleases her, stimulates her and her choice, no doubt because the female nude is one of the most common themes in the history of art, is found in erotic magazines such as *Playboy* , not for the subjects themselves, but for the atmospheres, the lights which they release and which seems to him suitable for painting, appear to him as pictorial pretexts. His first works, the *Bad Babies* , have the value of a manifesto: we see very scantily dressed young girls in a kind of blur (*sfumato*) which encompasses them and appears as a kind of monochrome aura (each painting has its own color) , which is reminiscent of Color Field painting.

Since then, water has passed under the bridge, Lisa Yuskavage has become famous and she has been honored by many American institutions (her work, like that of John Currin, her contemporary, with whom she shares many affinities, also having been often criticized by feminists who see in it an enslavement of the image of women, a reproach to which she has only ever opposed her independence and her freedom). The exhibition she presents at the Zwirner gallery in Paris, although made up of new canvases, constitutes a sort of retrospective. Because by choosing the theme of the workshop, a theme also often treated in the history of art, from Poussin to Courbet via many others, it is herself that she stages, but also some of her old works that she cites and puts into abyme in sophisticated compositions where several planes stand out, where time is abolished by making several periods collide and where color, once again, is the element which unifies everything. As in *Golden Studio* , for example, where we see in the center of the canvas a young woman dressed only in pearl panties (a recurring character in the artist's work) who is watched by another character, coming from a painting in the painting, and which is none other than Lisa Yuskavage herself. And we then realize how complex and cultivated his work is, ranging from pure quotation to the use of motifs which are classics of old painting and which all have symbolic meanings (that of the mirror, for example) . What's more, this exhibition, which is therefore her first in Paris, has a particular importance for her, since it is being held where many of the masterpieces to which she refers were born. It's called *Rendezvous*.and this is certainly not a coincidence.



Ron Mueck also made a name for himself in the 1990s, in particular in the still famous exhibition of publicist Charles Saatchi, *Sensation*, which introduced the Young British artists. He featured a miniature depiction of his dead, lying naked father, *Dead Dad*, which didn't belie the title of the protest. Death and relations of scale have always been at the heart of his concerns and this is still the case in the exhibition he is currently presenting at the Fondation Cartier, the third in this institution. The main part of it is *Mass*, a work commissioned by the National Gallery in Melbourne, Australia, the country from which the artist comes, and which consists of a pile of giant skulls in the middle of which the visitor wanders (this is one of the first times in his work that the human body is not reproduced in its entirety). Death, but also life, since as a counterpart to this immense vanity, is presented the XXL sculpture of a baby who has just been born, with the umbilical cord still uncut and traces of blood on the skin. And, in the basement, other older sculptures occupy the space and create a feeling of unease and strangeness: a group of gigantic and threatening dogs facing another baby, but tiny, him, and hung on the wall like a crucifix, a naked man in a boat that seems to be adrift, etc. Certainly, the hyperrealist work of Ron Mueck, which requires an extremely long time to manufacture (hence the few works produced in nearly thirty years of career), is impressive and disturbing. Admittedly, it confronts us with essential questions which are sometimes difficult to answer. But we can still wonder if this punchy art, in front of which the spectators will undoubtedly take countless selfies, is not a little dated today and if its excess does not end up making it vain.

David Zwirner

-Lisa Yuskavage, *Rendez-vous* , until July 29 at the David Zwirner gallery, 108, rue Vieille du Temple 75003 Paris (www.davidzwirner.com)

-Ron Mueck, until November 5 at the Fondation Cartier, 261 boulevard Raspail 75014 Paris (www.fondationcartier.com)

Images: Lisa Yuskavage, *Golden Studio* , 2023 © Lisa Yuskavage Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner; Lisa Yuskavage, *Big Flesh Studio* , 2022 © Lisa Yuskavage Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner; Ron Mueck, *Mass* (2017) View of the Ron Mueck exhibition at the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art Diverse Materials, Variable Dimensions, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 2018 Photo © Marc Damage