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BLONDE BRUNETTE AND REDHEAD, 1995, OIL ON LINEN, TRIPTYCH, 36 X 36 IN. EA. PHOTO D. JAMES DEE. COURTESY CHRISTOPHER GRIMES GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

LISA YUSKAVAGE

SOME GIRLS DO

ROSETTA BROOKS

Clothes to be raped in, shoes to be found dead in, a scarf to be strangled with: in the seventies and early eighties, the apparent innocence of fashion's advertising imagery was suddenly tainted by the introduction of sexual proclivity and transgressive behavior. Thanks to fashion photographers like Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin, flicking through the pages of glossy magazines like *Vogue* became an unforgettable experience. Their photos seemed to suggest that if advertising's promises were clearly fake, then why not emphasize the falsity of the image and challenge the threshold of our imaginary world?

All at once, conventional models of feminine mystique were stretched to the limit. In one 1978 photo by Newton, for example, a woman exposes her voluptuous breast to another woman who is lying beneath her, promiscuously prone and seductively posed. In the same year, Newton introduced copulation into advertising as a male and female mannequin straddle one another on a couch. The man has his hand up the elegant couture dress the woman is wearing; he appears to be getting ready to penetrate her. A year earlier, Bourdin had toyed with a mix of voyeurism, lesbianism, and masturbation in a photo consisting of two females lounging on

separate beds with a third sitting in an armchair, dressed only in underwear, facing the beds, her legs carelessly flung open. She is positioned in the middle of the magazine's center spread. To open or close the centerfold is to open and close her legs. Is she playing with herself? Or are we, the viewers, playing with her?

Newton's and Bourdin's passive women were straight off an assembly line, yet they were completely malleable. Dummies made of flesh, objects of gratuitous sexual violence and violation, they offered no resistance. In fact, throughout the seventies, these fashion plates hinted strongly at bondage, flagellation, troilism, pedophilia, les-

bianism, masturbation, voyeurism, and a number of other sexual practices not usually condoned in fashion's fantasy worlds.

Were these photographs erotic? Absolutely—well, sort of. The sexually provocative poses were both shocking and thrilling within the context of a fashion magazine. But equally provocative was the fact that elements which had always remained repressed in the act of looking at any fashion photo were suddenly out in the open for all to see: women's narcissism; women's fascination with looking at other women; accentuated sexual availability; sexual attraction; and seduction embodied in the act of dressing up to lure a man. All the constraints on female sexuality were suddenly unveiled and up for grabs. The photographs introduced a threat of dystopia into the venerated utopia of the fashion spread and, in so doing, threatened the established order of both consumerism and female sexuality.

What undermined the eroticism of the photos, however, was the photographers' emphasis on the alien and artificial qualities of their pictures. Eroticism was attached to the process of mediation. Newton's use of harsh, bright primary colors served to heighten the alien artificiality of the images. The models were presented with cold distance, as fleshy automatons, extensions of the technology that had manipulated them, and converted them into objects. Such images were presented as unnatural: a threat rather than an invitation to a cozy otherworld of the imagination.

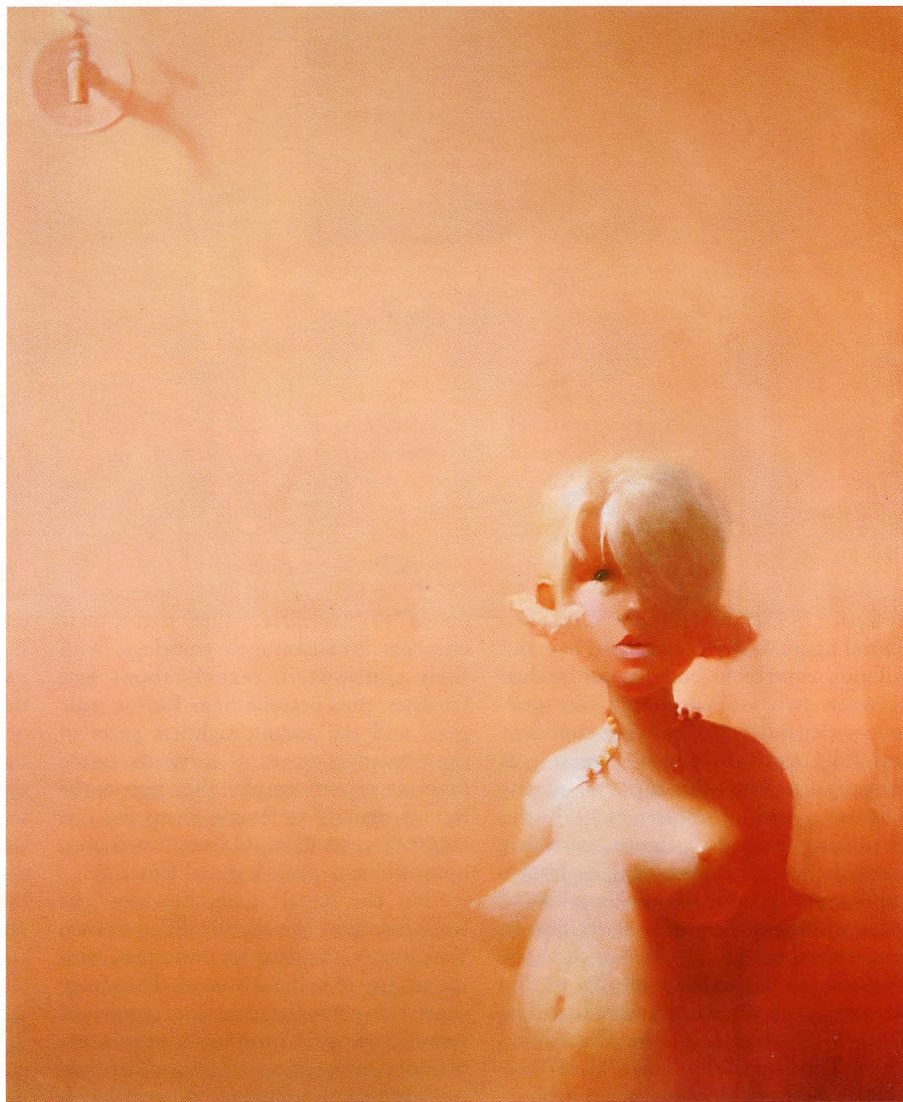
When a woman pictures other women, is the message essentially different? At first sight, Lisa Yuskavage's paintings hanging on the pristine, white walls of an art gallery elicit the same sensation of shock and disbelief experienced twenty years ago, when browsing through *Vogue*. Yuskavage's women, though, are poles apart from the perfect bodies of the fashion models; they are like Barbie dolls who have been in a terrible car accident, and perhaps compounded the disaster with botched reconstructive surgery.

Nor do their features exhibit the contemptuous, aloof gazes that Newton's fashion models wore like armor; Yuskavage's women have the blank stares of blown-up sex dolls—all orifice and passive nonresistance.

In *Rorschach Blot* (1995), a female is posed stiffly, like a piece of Victorian furniture, a chair waiting to be sat upon, her hairless vaginal slit lining up perfectly with the depression of her belly button, which itself echoes the wide-open hole that is her mouth. Her small, irregularly formed breasts are like ornamental handles, curious appendages that beg to

be stared at. The childlike face is emphasized by wispy blonde baby hair which resonates with the style of baby shoes she is wearing. A jaundiced yellow painterly background threatens to engulf the entire figure. Or conversely, the background seems to have somehow disgorged the figure. Yuskavage's *Rorschach Blot* seems to be a distant cousin to the knock-kneed, pigeon-toed *Sweet Thing* (1994), whose pear-shaped outline looks like a classical flower vase, an empty vessel waiting to be filled up.

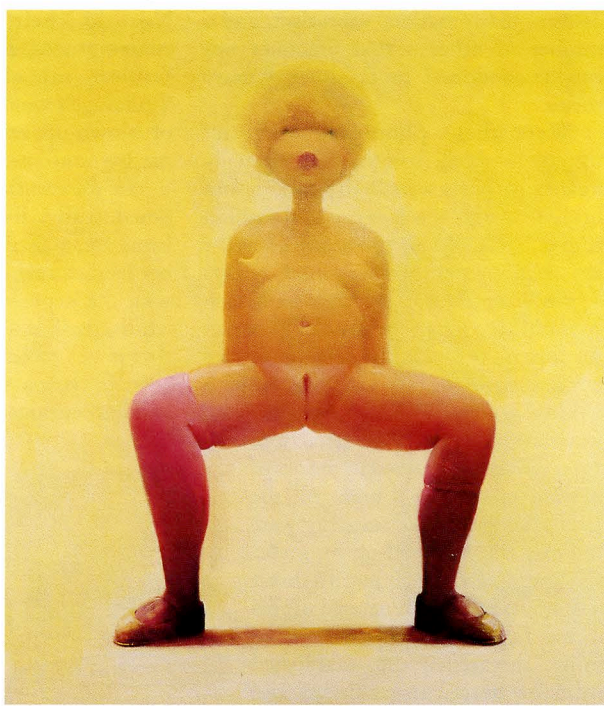
The inflatable doll/child-woman resurfaces again and again in these images.



FAUCET, 1995, OIL ON LINEN, 72 X 60 IN. PHOTO D. JAMES DEE. COURTESY CHRISTOPHER GRIMES GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.



TRANSCIENCE PORTRAIT OF MY SHRINK IN HER STARCHED NIGHTGOWN WITH MY FACE AND HER HAIR, 1995, OIL ON LINEN, PART ONE OF DIPTYCH, 84 X 72 IN. PHOTO D. JAMES DEE. COURTESY CHRISTOPHER GRIMES GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.



RORSCHACH BLOT, 1995, OIL ON LINEN, PART TWO OF DIPTYCH, 84 X 72 IN. PHOTO D. JAMES DEE. COURTESY CHRISTOPHER GRIMES GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

More often than not, the paintings consist simply of figure against ground, contextless creatures placed in an unlocatable space without clues or other visual references. But when objects are introduced into the spatial void, the symbolism is deliberately clumsy. In *Fleshpot* (1995), for example, the naked central figure, with her lacquered hair and bulbous, curvaceous body, is sandwiched between two Gainsborough-like portraits—elegantly clad females, confident and fully clothed—which suggest eyes peering out from the top half of the painting. And in *Faucet* (1995), the disturbing baby-doll figure, with her grotesquely adult breasts hanging from a fragile, waifish body, shares the pictorial space with a small, phallic water tap. In line with these crude visual metaphors, Yuskavage's titles also allude to the stereotypical whore/virgin paradox: *The Ones Who Shouldn't*, *The Ones Who Can't*, *The Ones Who Don't Want To*.

Are these paintings erotic? Probably—well, sort of. As pictures for the male gaze, their Lolita-like qualities may be as

exciting as they are transgressive. Yuskavage's subject matter, in its association with blasphemy, conforms easily to George Bataille's definition of eroticism. For Bataille, sexual enticement is based on the fact that the erotic is also sinful, that it breaks the conventional codes of morality. The pedophilic elements in Yuskavage's paintings, with their allusions to sexual taboos and fantasies, thus become traps for the male gaze, and the vacant, sightless gazes of these passive creatures serve the same function as pornography: they register the fact of flesh. The female forms are like empty screens, blank canvases, mere sites upon which to project sexual fantasies.

For the female gaze, however, the work functions in a slightly different way. Yuskavage's paintings are concerned with the anxiety of being a woman. Thus, they enact the perennial drama of good girl versus bad girl, innocence versus experience, appearance versus substance. And yet their exaggerated, mutilated, cartoonish configurations emanate a calculated misogyny. They are morbid

creatures who deserve our pity rather than our empathy.

It might be possible to discuss this work within the realm of the uncanny and the infantile repressed complexes first explored by Freud. It might even be possible to locate them historically in the context of Oskar Kokoschka or Hans Bellmer (though it's probably easier and more accurate to discuss them along with their cutie-pie counterparts on the shelves of WalMart and Pic'n'Save). Ultimately, though, the paintings are frightening in their vacuity. They are scarier still because they are painted by a woman. Do some women fear themselves that much? The discomfort engendered by Yuskavage's art may just be that some do, while others emphatically do not.

ROSETTA BROOKS is a writer who lives in Pioneertown, Southern California. Her recent catalogue contributions include Kienholz: A Retrospective (Whitney Museum, 1996) and the Lynn Foulkes retrospective, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (Laguna Beach Museum, 1995).

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