

PAINTERS ON PAINTINGS

Barbara Friedman on Lisa Yuskavage and “Harnessing Shame”

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Lisa Yuskavage, *Faucet*, 1995, Oil on linen. 72 x 60 inches

“Okay, go ahead and look all you want, but it’s going to be unpleasant for both of us.”

– Lisa Yuskavage in an interview with Mónica de la Torre in *Bomb* magazine[i]

I was reminded of the mutual discomfort of intense looking when I heard a friend talking about the movie *Tiny Furniture*. He resented having been “made to look” at the character that Lena Dunham played.

Maybe it's no coincidence that when Lena Dunham was eight years old her mother took her to visit Lisa Yuskavage's studio,^[ii] because Yuskavage's paintings subject their viewer to that same close and unbudging attention, so that you feel you're being made to look.

To me, that's what's wonderful about Yuskavage's paintings. I can't remember the first one I saw or how old I was, but I loved how ferociously it held my eyes. (Then again I like having salt rubbed in my wounds.) Here was an allegory of discontent with its own twisted beauty; a feminist Pontormo as funny and sad as it was smutty.

In her *Bomb* interview Yuskavage elaborates on the relationship between the paintings and her subject matter. "I saw them [the paintings themselves] as similar to a pubescent girl who does not like to be looked at, but can't help but being pert and vulnerable at the same time. The images are representations of what the paintings would look like if they were to become human." ^[iii]

Identification is a complex process where Yuskavage's paintings are concerned. She pictures the paintings identifying with their own subjects; at the same time Yuskavage looks like many of the figures she paints. For an invitation to one of her shows she even used a photograph of herself, backlit by a very red setting sun, and it could have passed for one of her paintings.

Many contemporary women artists have reclaimed the depiction of the female nude as Yuskavage does. And many of today's painters combine high and low sources: in her case, soft porn filtered through Baroque and Color Field painting. But few other artists allow the image that results to be as insistently human. Yuskavage has said that "for the purposes of working, harnessing the shame is about being vulnerable to the creative process"^[iv] – the painful content leading to a more unmediated presentation.

Then too there aren't many other artists who handle paint with the same dexterity. Yuskavage's reverence for her medium has been much remarked upon, and it should be. Her Bonnard-like palette with its lemon yellows, lavenders, magentas, and lime greens; with her sumptuous modernist painterliness; her old-master rendering techniques; her candied chiaroscuro and over-the-top highlights: In Yuskavage's paintings these make for a perfect marriage between form and content.

Consider the way that Yuskavage uses Rembrandt's disappearing edges to underscore her characters' pained exhibitionism. Her subjects put themselves on display, but parts of them always seem to fade away in the surrounding haze. The poignant coral-colored painting *Faucet* stages the fading-away lusciously, bathing the young woman it represents in a peachy *sfumato*. I wonder what Rothko would have thought of this candied monochrome. Would he recognize himself even a little in its near-heavenly luminosity? He might scorn the comparison, but I see the kinship between them.

Not only the disappearing edges problematize the *Faucet* girl's body. There is a disturbing tension between how delicately Yuskavage paints the girl's stomach and how distended it is. It's also disturbing that the



painting is cropped just above the girl's crotch, and the cropping is certainly deliberate. It's interesting to note, as a companion to *Faucet*, that in the much later *Triptych* a woman's crotch stands center-stage, while the rest of her body is barely visible. And speaking of missing parts: we only see one of the *Faucet* girl's eyes, and one ear. These are parts of her standing in for the girl not as formalized synecdoche but in a metaphorical reminder that we're not looking at all of her.

I found it very hard to choose which of Yuskavage's pieces to focus on in this essay. I'm captivated in one way by the early poisonously-sweet monochromes like *Faucet* – those paintings have a singular power – in another way by the ones that came slightly later, like *Good Evening*, *Hamass*, with the lurid glory of their flamboyant skies, their orgasmic sunsets, and the bouquets reminiscent of Odilon Redon's hallucinatory flower pastels. Then there are the more complex, multi-figured dramas of recent epics like *Triptych*, with its forbidding onlookers and to-die-for greens.

In fact a lot of what I love in Lisa Yuskavage's work is not contained in *Faucet*, but I chose *Faucet* because it's the one in which I see my teenage self. The young woman is wearing a shrug that covers her rounded shoulders, her barely visible arms, and not much more. Her breasts are heavy and lopsided and their nipples point in different directions. The faucet high above the girl points one way and its shadow points askew, in an echo of her breasts, as if the viewer needed to be reminded that nipples are faucets. Hard to see, hard to be seen: embarrassment all round.

I think of my 19-year-old boyfriend's ridiculous poem for English class, "Her Breasts were Larger when We Met," right after I'd had a breast reduction. Here I was, confused by my out-of-control body, and he got creative about how he felt looking at it.

But then Yuskavage describes embarrassment as a clarifying agent. Maybe Lena Dunham would agree. I know I do. And *Faucet* in all its peek-between-your-fingers awkwardness invites me to keep staring, however embarrassed I am.



Barbara Friedman, *Head below Collar (Big Collar 7)*, 2014, Oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches

[i] Mónica de la Torre, "Lisa Yuskavage," *Bomb* 117 (Fall 2011), p. 86.

[ii] Calvin Tomkins, "A Doll's House," *The New Yorker*, December 10, 2012, p. 34.

[iii] De la Torre, "Lisa Yuskavage," p. 86.

[iv] *Ibid.*