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THE WORK OF ART

Lisa Yuskavage Becomes the Protagonist

After 35 years of painting her signature girls, the artist has decided to turn to a new subject: herself.

By Adam Moss

WHEN THE ARTIST Lisa Yuskavage was 27 and trying to figure out why her work was making her so miserable, she realized the women in her paintings were all facing the wrong way.

"Those paintings were mostly about backs," she said to me. "And I thought, *Why are they turned away? What are you hiding? Maybe you're hiding their big tits.* I decided to do the opposite of everything I'd ever done."

She would get to those tits, but she began with the eyes: "The first thing I did was paint her eyes so that she was looking at you, locking eyes with you."

After Yuskavage turned her figures around to face the viewer, the "recipe" (her word) started to emerge. It integrated her love of light with themes she had been circling all her life without quite registering it. Central was the theme of sexual vulnerability. She had a childhood friend who had been molested. This friend became the archetype of the girls who appear ubiquitously in Yuskavage's work—the helium-titted, animelike figures that are, she says, "my children." Yuskavage's children have grown-up bodies and little-girl faces. In a sense, they are all set in a pubescent world. "In puberty, you're becoming sexual but you're not ready to get fucked," she says. "My paintings were like pubescent girls. They wanted to hide, but they couldn't hide."

From this idea came a torrent of work—a series called "Bad Babies"; then another, called "Bad Habits," paintings made from Sculpey sculptures she had made; then paintings drawn from images in *Penthouse* and live models. "I was really cooking with gas in the early '90s," Yuskavage says. "I was connecting, figuring shit out. I would just not be stopped." Since then, Yuskavage has become one of the most successful figure

painters in the world. Her large work sells for more than \$2 million a painting.

Now Yuskavage is 62, and she's enthralled by another productive rush—her peak, she thinks, of making paintings that "put it all together." On February 18, she debuted a new solo exhibition at the David Zwirner gallery in Los Angeles. This show, like her previous one, is made up of what are known as "studio paintings"—that is, paintings set in an artist's space, often with the artist in them. There is a long tradition of studio painting in art (Courbet, Matisse), but most painters make one in this genre and then tack in another direction. Not Yuskavage. This isn't a phase; it's her work now.

I had come to her studio to discuss the evolution of a single work in the exhibit, *Painter Painting*. The studio, in Gowanus, is airplane-hangar huge. On the wall are several "small paintings," which Yuskavage is famous for. She goes from the small paintings to supsize paintings (and sometimes the other way around). Some are final works in themselves; many are studies for larger paintings. "The small paintings spark an idea—doesn't matter how dumb or seemingly insignificant," she says. "I don't question it and know that I can throw it out without a blink if it's a false start. When I go to the big ones, it's with some sort of conceptual clarity of what I want to see and I approach it in a different way."

She used to have two assistants; now she has none because the silence is crucial to her: "Here, there's a lot of summoning. I see something and then I decide to pull it out." It's in the studio where "these little messages will pop into my head. It's almost like a sexual urge, to do something in a painting." She told the story of making a picture called *Night Classes at the Department of Painting Drawing and Sculpture*,

looking at it, thinking something was wrong, and feeling nauseous. That urge told her to cover the painting in a red-purple scumble. She did. Then it told her to create a path of light in the painting. She followed the order. Suddenly, the painting worked. Her nausea disappeared.

So you can understand why she thinks of the studio as sacred and perhaps why it's the subject she won't let go of. But there are other reasons, too, that have to do with being in her 60s, this stage she is in. "You can't fake a life," Yuskavage says. "I mean, yeah, my tits are sagging and my back is out and I've got to do physical therapy, but this—this is fire. You've got to take advantage of what you've got. This is the accumulation of a life of exploration and study."

That's why in *Painter Painting*, she would bring in *Motherfucker*, an early picture of one of the "Bad Habits" sculptures, and another important work she calls her "origin painting," titled *Faucet*. What makes this new painting so singular is that *Painter Painting* is finally, truly, a portrait of the artist. She is the protagonist. It's probably true what they say—that all work is self-portrait. But here, it's the literal truth.

A few weeks after leaving her studio, I went to look at *Painter Painting* at the David Zwirner gallery in Manhattan, where it was sitting en route to the Los Angeles show. It was huge—94 inches tall—awesome in every sense of the word. "Somebody might say, 'How long does it take you to make a painting?'" Yuskavage says. "I say, 'Well, where are we starting?'" It took her over four months—and a lifetime in a sense—but with most of that time just waiting.

Summoning. ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: © LISA YUSKAVAGE. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER



THE WORK OF ART

How Lisa Yuskavage Made *Painter Painting*, in Her Own Words

1



This is an outtake from a photo shoot for the *New York Times* that the photographer, Jason Schmidt, shared with me. I thought it was funny. I wasn't any kind of sexy woman painter. I looked dumpy, almost troll-like. **I just loved the picture, and I decided to paint myself from it.**

4



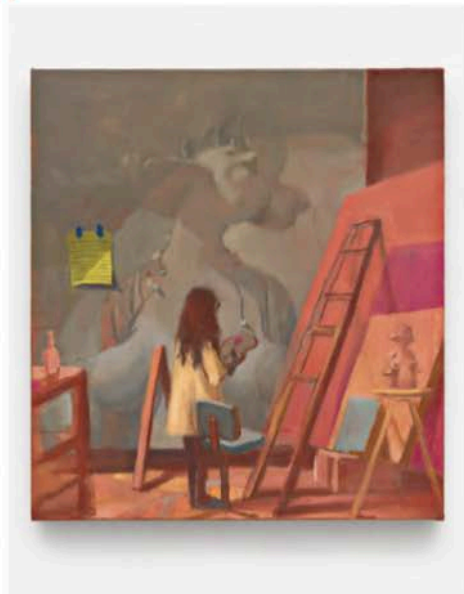
Here's the painting, same day, when she's more developed. **I brought in a layer of gray mixture**, and I started putting in the stuff around her, which I marked with tape because I wanted really, really sharp edges. I look like a lump, and I really liked that.

5



The point is these obnoxious breasts. **It's a scale contrast and a color contrast**, because while I'll be in color, the *Motherfucker* painting will be grisaille. It's also a contrast of ways of being a painted female. It speaks to my history. People say, "Who is Lisa? Does she have big tits?" But I'm saying, "No tits and ass here. It's all work." Then I let it dry, which probably took two weeks. Drying allows you time to look at it and think.

2



So I painted a small painting. In it, the artist is dwarfed by these big tits, which come from a picture I had made called *Motherfucker*. I had put myself in a picture once before, but I was timid about it. I was kind of hidden. So this painting was an experiment in pulling it forward.

3



I started with the ground. The ground is a mixture of colors. **Then I added the drawing of the artist on top of the ground.** Another big decision was what size canvas. I wanted it big—like the real scale of a room. These tits had to be really overwhelming in person.

6



When it was dry, I went back—it was a crazy moment—and **I painted over the whole picture.** There was too much contrast. I had to pull it back. I went in there and really worked it, wiped away certain areas. I could still see my drawing underneath. And it really looked like shit. But a painting has to go through some very doggy-dog stages.

7



Then I started putting more information in. The silhouette stopped being a silhouette. I started painting other things darker. Look how much lighter the ground now looks—it's the magic of color; it's all relative. See the step stool? It's like an Easter egg. I used to sit on a step stool in my grandmother's kitchen.

8



And you see at this point, it looks like this giant work in progress. When I look at this stage, I think it's fabulous. And I now see that, but I didn't see it then. **I could have stopped right there.** But of course I didn't, and I don't think it was a mistake not to have—but it's useful for another painting.

9



This is my favorite stage of the painting, **when I bring light in.** It's in an arc—notice this tiny bit of yellow on the canvas where the arc lands? It's a circle, an ellipse. When I do shit like that, I do a little dance.

10



I'd stuck a picture of *Motherfucker* to the side of the painting—I was using it as reference to paint the giant *Motherfucker*. And I thought, **What if I paint in the reference picture?** I decided it really needed to be sharp-edged. I dress-rehearsed it in my mind a thousand times, and I came in and did it. First try. I said to myself, *Good job. You didn't fuck it up.*

11



Then I wondered whether I should paint Post-its in there, too, on the canvas. But I thought, *Before I fuck this up, maybe I should paint it on plastic just to see.* I tried seeing if it worked, and I had the sense that, this moment, I almost took it too far. I was like, *Okay, no, I'm out.*

THE WORK OF ART

12



Here's the finished painting. One of my favorite documentaries of all time is called *Painters Painting*. It's from the '70s, and it's almost all men—Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, Willem de Kooning—with their pants up to here. And I know they wouldn't have taken me seriously, and I don't care. I just love the idea that I can be a little bit of an asshole and assert myself in my own playful way. There's not an ice cube's chance in hell that I could make that painting again—there's a whole gestalt where my head, my psyche, the world we're interacting with led to that.