

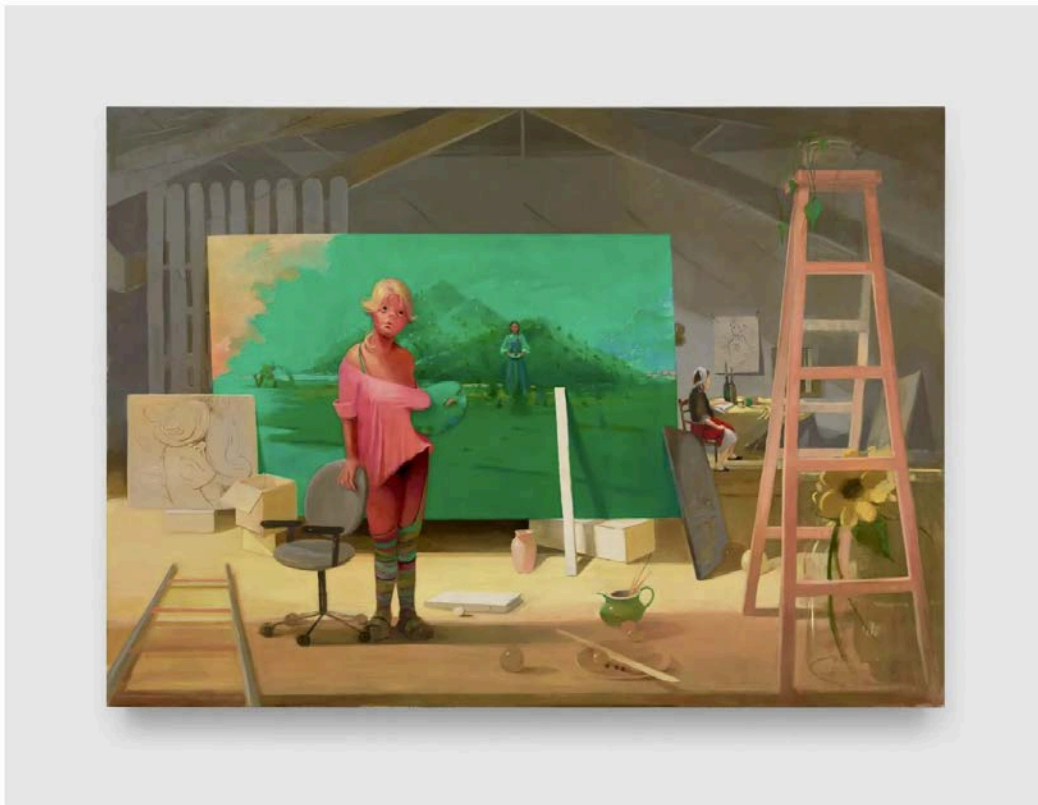
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Forbes

Looking At The Paintings Of Lisa Yuskavage, And Seeing

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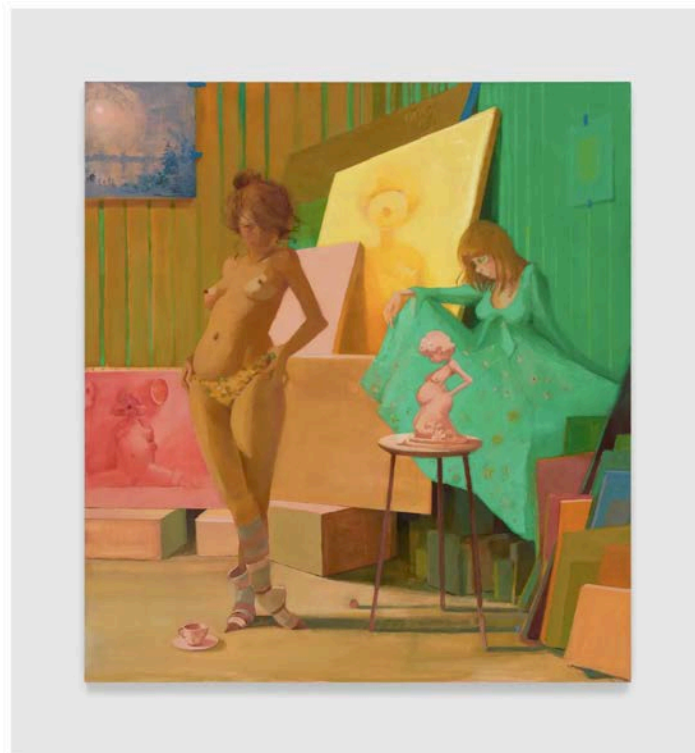
Lisa Yuskavage, *The Artist's Studio*, 2022
© LISA YUSKAVAGE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER

Lisa Yuskavage's exhibition at David Zwirner LA, her first in Los Angeles in 29 years (which just closed on April 12), was a revelation.

The exhibition consisted of some twenty new works that are original, clever, funny, and, in many cases, in conversation with her earlier works and influences. “The more you know my work,” Yuskavage said, the more you can spot the references and easter eggs she’s placed there.

The majority of these works take place in an imagined art studio (inspired by a photo of Braque’s studio, Bruce Nauman, and other studios in which she has been, either as a student, a painter, or an artist. Some of the figures in the paintings are models, some from previous Yuskavage paintings, or even herself. The paintings displayed in the studio can be her own, or references to painterly problems she is grappling with. They are all painted in a spectrum of colors that seem to have a special glow, perhaps because the base is cadmium yellow.

Yuskavage was in LA for the press preview and spoke at the opening in conversation with David Zwirner.



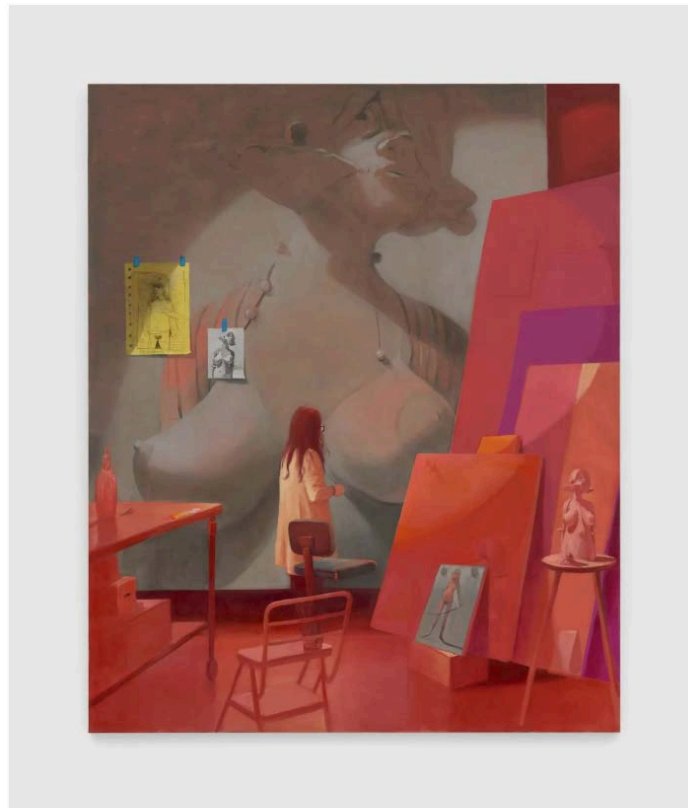
Lisa Yuskavage, In the Company of Models, 2024
© LISA YUSKAVAGE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER

I can still recall the sensation Yuskavage’s early canvases caused in New York, with her depiction of females who might appear more at home in a Russ Meyer film or a Zap Comix than a canvas in an art gallery or museum. At the time, although I appreciated

her artistry and the sense of humor in her work, her subject matter didn't engage me. But, the truth is, I didn't know what I was looking at.

Yuskavage spoke at the LA press preview, in conversation with David Zwirner himself. It was a conversation of familiars, and Yuskavage was candid about her work, herself, and the drive that fills her canvases.

Yuskavage recounted that she was raised in a blue collar community in Pennsylvania, where there was little to no art on display, no contact with galleries and museums, and even less appreciation of art, or the possibility of being an artist. Nonetheless, because of her intelligence, her artistic talent, and her drive, Yuskavage won scholarships to the Tyler School of Art and Architecture at Temple University in Philadelphia and then to Yale University's School of Art.



Lisa Yuskavage, Painter Painting, 2024
© LISA YUSKAVAGE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER

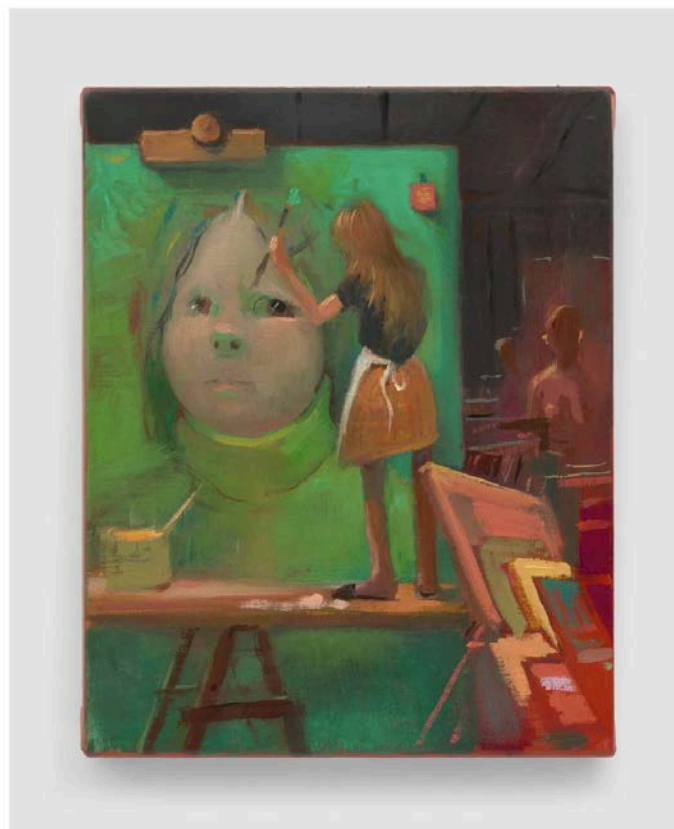
When Yuskavage began to paint her own canvases, she had all these art-historical references at her command. They were part of her, but not fully her. Yuskavage wanted her work to also reflect the images or standards of beauty which predominated her blue collar background such as the photos of Playboy playmates.

Yuskavage also sees her work as following those of the Pictures generation. As Yuskavage recounted, they were among the first group of artists to really use pictures and media as the subject matter and visual reference for their work. Similarly, Yuskavage sees her own work as about images and depictions of women and artists in art history and popular culture.

The paintings on exhibit at Zwirner were filled with references to her earlier works and to herself. The studio in which the paintings take place are often filled with canvases stacked against each other as well as sculptures. This too, has art historical precedent, be it the 19th Century French salon painters, or Picasso's own paintings of his studios.

Zwirner also teased out the adversarial fires that inflame Yuskavage and how she thrives on conflict. She is always seeking, in her own words, "to turn up the volume" on her work. Receiving bad or negative reviews to Yuskavage only affirmed that she was doing something right. She preferred, she said, a full-throated negative review to a simplistic positive one.

Moreover, she said that at times she has thought of her work, "I'm just going to offend everyone." And been very pleased about it. One of her north stars is clearly the drive to be oppositional. "I'm not going to give them what they want," she said at Zwirner. There is something quite admirable about her contrariness.



Lisa Yuskavage, Painter (Kelly Marie), 2024
© LISA YUSKAVAGE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER

Yuskavage also explained that she is mad for color theory, any and all of them, from Josef Albers to Laura Ashley. Color appears in her paintings almost as a subjective guide to the emotional content of the work. How she arrives at the colors is as complex as how she uses them to define her compositions.

Finally, on a technical level, Yuskavage's work begins with problems that she creates and then needs to solve. Her use of negative space is one of the challenges she sets for herself in her work. For example, Yuskavage pointed to a yellow square in one of her new works, and explained that many painters have as their base a neutral color so that the colors layered upon them stand out.

Instead, Yuskavage used cadmium yellow that is somewhat shocking and not necessarily attractive, as her base. That created a problem in that she had "fight my way out of," she said. In the painting, the remaining yellow square was one of the few places not painted over.

Perhaps it's not surprising that when I first arrived at the Zwirner gallery and gave the works a once over, I saw it as a mid-career or late period celebration of her past work. However, a mere 45 minutes later, after hearing Yuskavage discuss her work, seeing it was a totally different experience which I enjoyed at such a deeper level, and appreciated all that much more.

The challenge posed by any artwork is to really see it. To engage with it. Yuskavage's works want to pick a fight with the viewer, to force them to look away or even feel guilty about looking. But, once you know what to look for, what you are seeing, it completely changes how you see her work. And that is very much an art experience worth having.