

CULTURE

A painting of a nude woman with white paint on her face and chest, holding a bouquet of flowers, standing in front of a green curtain. The woman has long, wavy hair and is looking directly at the viewer. The background is a textured green curtain with a scalloped edge at the bottom. The overall style is expressive and somewhat abstract.

Lisa

Yuskavage

The
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LISA YUSKAVAGE TAKES THE MORGAN LIBRARY

By Johanna Fateman

“I will pull out of a show if it’s not right. I’m a 63-year-old honey badger: I don’t give a shit.”

Lisa Yuskavage, *All's I Got Are Big Boobs*, 1996.



All photography courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner

When I catch Lisa Yuskavage by phone a month before the opening of her show at the Morgan Library, she’s having a pinch-me moment. It’s a little hard for me to believe it’s happening myself: Through January, the illustrious New York institution, renowned for its old master drawing collection, will host dozens of the 63-year-old artist’s works on paper, spanning more than three decades. It’s a perfect—maybe perfectly perverse—context for the figurative painter, famous and infamous for her virtuosic rendering of a queasily beautiful, self-consciously vulgar, and often funny world of desire and desolation. With absinthe or Kool-Aid skies, cadmium sunlight, pastel poly-satin, neon in deep shadow, and girls, girls, girls, Yuskavage tells the story of the nude in Western art like a dream excavation of haunted smut and the interior lives of model-muses—what better foil to her art than the holdings of Pierpont Morgan? (And what better way to cement her place in this centuries-long conversation?) We talked for nearly two hours about her journey from ’90s bad-feminist underdog to the honey-badger hotshot she is today; about the trove of drawings she inadvertently kept hidden all the while; and about *PieFace*, 2008, the remarkable image that adorns this magazine’s cover.

I’m looking at the other shows at the Morgan that yours will overlap with. There’s “Jane Austen at 250” and later, “Renoir Drawings.” You live in New York; you know how special this is. What’s it like?

Whatever you’re thinking, that’s what it’s like. I’m pinching myself. Not just because of the Morgan, but because being seen—realizing, *Wow, they really get me*—is one of the greatest gifts. I’ll try to tell the story of how this came about, which will maybe answer your question. I’ve been a little overly humble about my drawings, apparently. I didn’t know what I had. Anyway, the summer before last, my amazing registrar, who has been helping digitally archive my work, asked me what was in my flat files. I said, “They’re a mess, I don’t know. I make things and put them in there.” She said, “I’ll take a look and report back.” It turned out there were hundreds of drawings dating back over 30 years. She borrowed maybe 10 or 12 long folding tables and spread the drawings everywhere, in piles...

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—Lisa Yuskavage

Wait, these are things no one has seen before? You’re saying they’ve never been shown?

Yes. The show is more than that, but generally, that’s right. The work was never photographed. It’s 30 years of experimentation. The first thing in the show is a watercolor that I made in the

very early ’90s. It’s called *Love Scene*, and it’s a cropped view of a woman licking a woman’s nipple, cribbed from some porn magazine’s ad for a 1-800 number. It’s a delightful image, I think. It opens up a world of polymorphous delight that watercolor expresses perfectly.

Anyway, the curator Claire Gilman, who’s a drawing expert, got a call from someone at the gallery saying that she might want to come over to see what was laid out on the tables. I asked her later about her visit, and she said she was excited—and shocked. She didn’t know I made works on paper, and here was an insane amount of stuff. In the art world now, it sometimes feels like everybody’s eking out the last of the toothpaste from the tube. So, the idea that there’s something still to be discovered is fun. But as gratifying as having a show at the Morgan is—and it is *so* gratifying—at the same time, it was crucial that they never censored me. I will pull out of a show if it’s not right. I’m a 63-year-old honey badger: I don’t give a shit. Luckily, no one at the museum clipped my wings. Claire, when she was presenting my work to her colleagues at the Morgan, showed them one of the drawings called *All’s I Got Are Big Boobs*. And everyone just fell on the floor laughing. No one had a problem. That lingo is Philly speak. My mom would always say, “All’s I got are [fill-in-the-blank].” That may be the crudest title in the show.

I was reading the wall text for the exhibition. For years, the story of Lisa Yuskavage has begun with the early reception of your work, the way it was scrutinized politically as objectifying, antifeminist; how people found it disturbing—not in a good way. That’s not here this time. Why? New audience? New era?

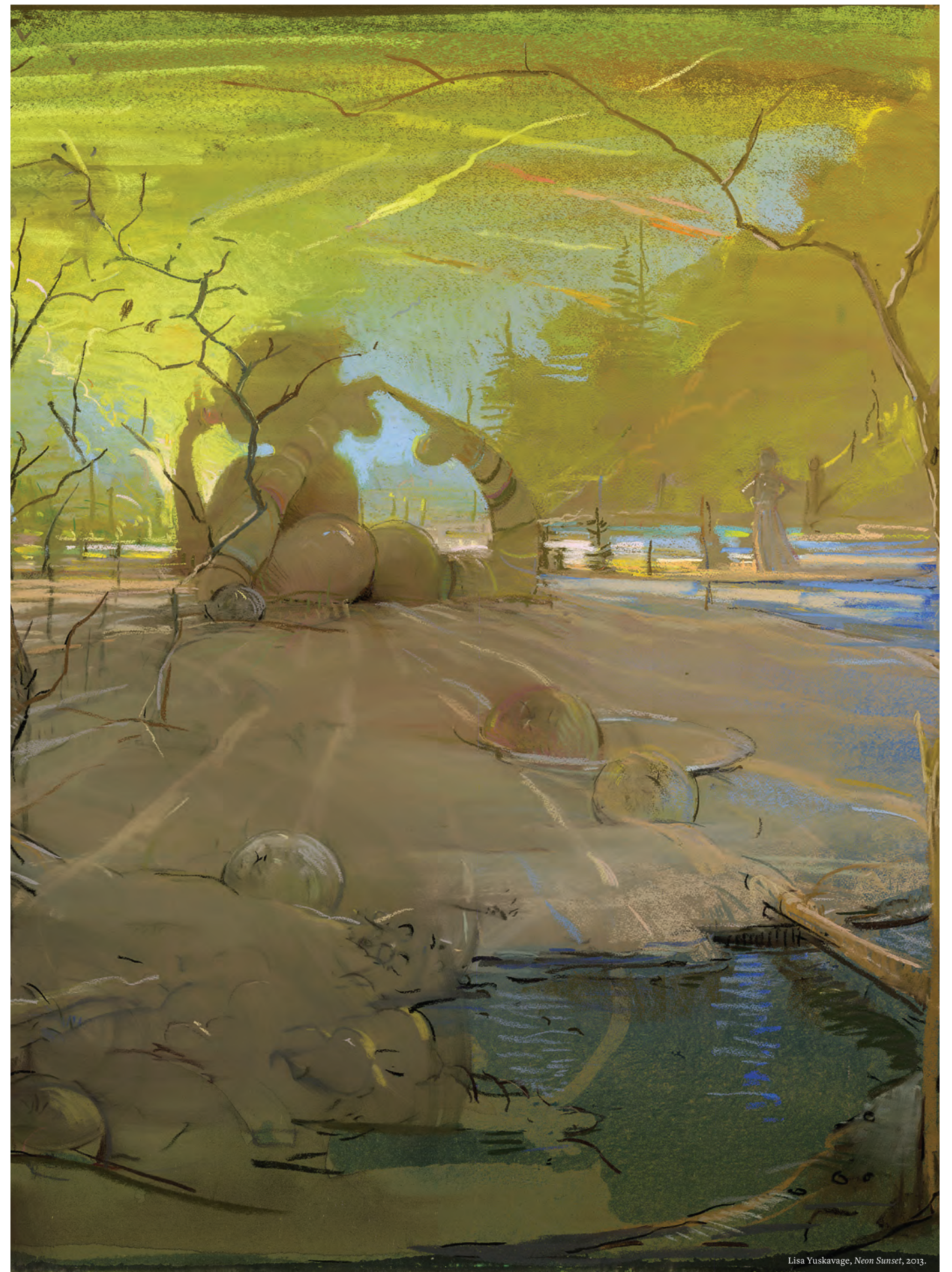
I think you know how it was. I was a hot potato for a while—nobody wanted to touch what I was doing. But it’s refreshing not to lead with that part of my story. In the opening of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, he trips over the ottoman. Every time. It’s like, people don’t need to watch me trip over the ottoman forever. I’m proud of myself for not letting all that turn me into a bitter asshole. You have to remain joyful and believe it’s going to happen for you someday. And then in the meantime, ideally, you go back to your studio and make even more ferocious cuckoo-for-Cocoa-Puffs work that maybe you couldn’t make if you were in the limelight. Whenever I was upset about not being accepted in the art world, my husband would say to me, “Lis, at least you’re not Muzak.”

Can we talk about *PieFace*? That’s one of the issue’s covers.

It’s a long story, how I got into the “Pieface” paintings. I was asked to make an art-porn film in 2003. I was living in Rome at the time and watching *commedia erotica all’Italiana* films on TV. I wanted to have a static shot, like Warhol, with a woman in the foreground, touching herself, trying to distract you from all kinds of zany, slapstick stuff happening behind her. It was going to end with a pie in the face. But the producers said that the point of porn is to allow

someone to climax—how can they if you end with a pratfall? I said, “Look, you asked Lisa Yuskavage to make a film! What did you expect?” I did not end up making it, but that research became the basis of my “Pieface” series of works. I found that marrying slapstick with painting was *obviously* more interesting. My work hopefully suggests a range of readings or emotions, from being titillated or freaked out to feeling joy, sadness, and so on. You laugh, and then you’re mad, and... ideally, there’s no one place to land. And that’s what I bring. To everything, actually.

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Lisa Yuskavage, *Neon Sunset*, 2013.