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FT Weekend

Her art defies good taste. Is that enough?

Lisa Yuskavage | A New York show spanning three decades of the artist's work argues that she is more than mere provocateur. By Ariella Budick

Lisa Yuskavage's art made me squirm when I first saw it, and three decades later, the heebie-jeebies remain. That's an achievement, of sorts. Her doll-like figures with fuchsia faces and pneumatic breasts, swimming in bright bordelero hues, haven't lost their ability to provoke a bourgeois "eww". But time hasn't given her works stature, either, or softened their vulgarity. The context has changed, though. A generation ago, her heady fantasies seemed to have spilled out of dirty magazines. Now, they look like they bobbed up from an online sea of hentai and AI porn.

The Morgan Library has gathered three decades' worth of her works on paper — no glistening oils, here, only slick sketches, monoprints and unctuous pastels. The timing is peculiar. Yuskavage's fame topped out in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the show does little to suggest that she's earned her way to a new peak. Back then, she and John Currin spearheaded a distinctively sexualised return to figuration, a movement you might call Mammary Realism. Yuskavage's art was ironic, of course; to see it properly, you had to see through it. And yet the recent surge of

macho politics and lip-smacking appreciations of "beauty" make her top-heavy inflatables seem more like official branding than countercultural critique.

Some of the earliest works on view at the Morgan belong to the series *Tit Heaven*, which has an impeccably virtuous back-story. In the early 1990s, Yuskavage took a job teaching watercolour technique in the continuing education programme at Cooper Union, which forced her to bone up on a medium she'd barely dabbled in. Fortified by the classic primer, Charles Le Clair's *The Art of Watercolour*, she began cranking out instructional examples. The results came out as candy-hued combinations of landscape and nude. In "Tit Heaven #8", a pair of globular mountains, topped by little pink peaks, emerges from flowered foothills.

If I'd been her student, I'd have been mildly impressed by her brushwork and compositional control. The Morgan informs viewers that she's a student of Renaissance colour theory. There's a touch of the rococo in the softness of the hues and a surrealist undercurrent in the dreamily eroticised topography.

But put all that together, and you get a mash of rainbow-tinted baby food.

"Yuskavage challenges notions of propriety and good taste," the introductory wall text asserts, "but she is no mere provocateur. Rather, she is deeply invested in the history of painting and its traditional genres."

Oh, please. Squishing together the conventions of canonical art history with the stuff of raunchy cartoons doesn't ruffle the one or elevate the other. Her work isn't raw or refined, or a combination of both. It's mannered.

In the 1999 watercolour "Still Life Wearing a Wig", a legless, faceless anorexic female torso (a mannequin, maybe?) with a single pert breast rises from a cornucopia of fake-looking flowers and sports a white Marie Antoinette hair-do of piled white curls. There's something grimly apocalyptic about this plastic concoction, against a background of irradiated violet. I loathe it.

But why? My revulsion is instantaneous, almost reflexive, which suggests that's the point. Disgust has a long art historical pedigree, ranging from the ulcerated wounds on Jesus's body in Grünewald's "Isenheim Altarpiece" to Francis Bacon's suppurating portraits. But Yuskavage delivers it in slick, saccharine packaging.

Her theory is that what disturbs viewers like me is the work's "frank trafficking in shame" — specifically, the embarrassment of watching (fictional) working-class girls dress up and undress. The formulation elides the question of just who is trafficking in whose mortification. My sense is that Yuskavage is looking around on both viewer and viewed. The big-haired woman with lavender eyelids in "Nude #4 (Sick Clown)" pulls up her ruffled nightie and extends a

pinky to stroke her erect nipple. Such a scene might feel intrusive and exploitative if it were painted by a man; here, we are meant to accept it as empowering.

This is a recurring and perpetually irksome twist on feminism. In the video for "Express Yourself", released in 1989, Madonna wears shackles and slithers around the floor. "OK, I have chained myself," she said at the time. "I crawled under my own table, y'know." Apparently, possessing the means of oppres-

sion makes it all right. (The debate over self-abasement has recently returned with the album cover for Sabrina Carpenter's *Man's Best Friend*, which shows the star provocatively on all fours.)

This shame game is a winner because it's so easy to write off objectors as humorless literalists who are tone-deaf to irony and unwilling to cope with discomfort. In 1998, the critic Peter Schjeldahl gloried in Yuskavage's deadpan defiance. "The repulsive element then becomes the precise hint that, hardest to take, must be taken. It becomes a warranty of urgency and sympathy, calling our own anxieties out to play." The only permissible conclusion, by this logic, is that I'm repelled because it's great.

Except it isn't. Yuskavage isn't a provocateur ("mere" or any other kind), an heir to the great tradition, a technical virtuoso, a prophet of collective libido, or an analyst of social injustice. She's a grown woman still channelling the doodled daydreams of a heterosexual teenage boy and fashioning a cold world populated by vinyl amazons, a place in which even lust has lost its charms.

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'Still Life Wearing a Wig' (1999) by Lisa Yuskavage