



**LAURA ASHLEY COLORS AND GUMBALL
NIPPLES: CONSUMPTION AND DESIRE
IN THE WORK OF LISA YUSKAVAGE**
AMBER WHITESIDE

How an artist depicts the human body says a lot about his or her sense of identity and cultural outlook. When that body is nude and female, the stakes can get higher. After centuries of portraits of nude women as objects of male desire, many contemporary female artists have tried to wrest control over the way women's bodies are pictured. The paintings of Lisa Yuskavage and Jenny Saville fall within this feminist critique. Attentive to artistic and scientific as well as popular imagery, Yuskavage and Saville turn the tables on the nude gaze, staring back at us through the provocative colors, shapes, and surfaces by which they paint themselves unclothed.

The following excerpt looks at Lisa Yuskavage's tasty yet tricky series of nudes.



Blonde Brunette Redhead (1995)
Triptych: Oil on linen, 36" x 108" overall
Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery

Laura Ashley Colors and Gumball Nipples: Consumption and Desire in the Work of Lisa Yuskavage

With her synthetic color concoctions and relentless protuberances of flesh, Lisa Yuskavage makes the female nude into something at once gorgeous and horrific, both mouth-watering and hard to swallow. This is because she creates female subjects that are amalgamations of her own experience of being both viewed *and* viewer in a culture in which the flatly imaged female body is ever more exhausted within mainstream cultural production. Yuskavage understands that her own desire, like other women's, like mine, cannot exist outside of this proliferation of images that are overwhelmingly produced by (and presumably for) a heterosexual male desire; for we are not only reflected by but also consumers of representations of women. We are fed our own image not only to identify with but also to desire. Theorists Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley state:

Sexual desire and desirability is predominately signaled in terms of the female nude, imagery that is understood to function for both men and women. Thus women have long been tutored in consuming women's bodies, in assessing and responding to the desirability of women.¹

The experience of being both consumed as women and consumer of women is fraught with contradiction. We both suffer and savor the contemplation of our own and other women's bodies.

Born in 1962 and having obtained her MFA from Yale in 1986, Yuskavage couldn't have avoided the sentiment of 1980s feminist art practice, which aimed to detach entirely from the body, to make art without imaging or performing the female form, in reaction to what was deemed a "naïve and putatively essentialist 1970s feminist art."² And yet this was exactly the moment at which Yuskavage embraced the female form as her subject. Yuskavage continues to image the woman's body—sometimes appropriating exactly the conventions of the "male gaze," without, as she jokes, the disclaimer: "Lisa Yuskavage does not approve of this work and neither should you."³ She won't deny her own pleasure in painting the female body—for she desires it, as her own and other. She says:

Making a painting is being alone in a room with a very sensuous object . . . and [it's] a very sensuous experience in terms of putting the paint down . . . it can be very uplifting or it can be grueling, but I think that experience is reflected in the subject of reverie.⁴

Conjuring these beings in isolation (in the studio) is what allows my work to become a kaleidoscope of who I am or who I fantasize that I am.⁵

Yuskavage is not attempting to reconcile her desire with mainstream images of women; rather, she is harnessing this intersection. Her work draws equally from the esteemed tradition of the oil-painted nude and the silicone seduction of girlie magazines. She openly references Edgar Degas and 1970s-era *Penthouse* magazines in the same breath, both of which epitomize the "male gaze," and yet both of which she appreciates for their play of color and light on the female figure. She has the audacity also to credit among her source

materials Laura Ashley and her own psychoanalyst. And she recognizes rap music for helping her come up with her hilarious titles.⁶

Critics of Yuskavage often discuss the paradox of her work as being horrific subject matter rendered gorgeously.⁷ But that's not it. Rather the subject matter, the female body, is itself at once and always both horrific and gorgeous. The paradox lies in the conflict of being consumed as the image and at the same time consuming the image.

In Yuskavage's repertoire as a whole, it is first the candy-color fields that dominate—the images together become a rainbow of intense hues evoking a suspiciously friendly Strawberry Shortcake world, a world of flavored toy dolls. Yuskavage's palette is made up of unnatural colors—colors that are invented, engineered, extreme, even tropical. They exaggerate and trick our senses. The potent periwinkle, peach, turquoise, yellow, and red would in fact be better described as flavors than colors. Like the Barbie, My Little Pony, Power Puff Girls and countless other make-believe worlds of female characters that proceed and succeed it, Strawberry Shortcake figured prominently in my girlhood (the way similar dolls no doubt figured in Yuskavage's). Marketed to preadolescent girls in the 1980s (when Yuskavage attended Yale), the Strawberry Shortcake doll was a peer of mine, a girl herself, who dressed all in red, flanked by friends Lemon Meringue, in yellow; Apricot, in dull orange; and Blueberry Muffin, in blue. The plastic dolls' selling point was that they smelled like the sweet desserts for which they were named. Syrupy scents secreted from their soft plastic skin. Little girls look to their dolls for one indication (among many others) of how female bodies are supposed to appear and function. Strawberry Shortcake and her friends were flavors, and it was how they were colored that indicated how they might smell, feel, and taste.

A substantial number of Yuskavage's paintings are, in essence, color fields, with a female figure overlaid. Rarely are the female subjects situated in any recognizable or determined place—they are offset only by a surreally tinged background haze. What might explain them, flavor them, then, is their color. In fact, in many, such as *Faucet* (1995), *Wrist Corsage* (1996), *True Blonde Draped* (1999), and *Day* (1999–2000), the female figure absorbs the monochromatic background color—her skin takes on the red, turquoise, yellow, and peach—or is it she that emanates this color and casts it outward? With her use of color, Yuskavage is confronting the way representations of women are packaged and sold. As a wholly visual stimulus, color is the first and foremost cue in commodity culture; color can be pixilated and flat on a billboard or glossy magazine page and still convey to us the feel, smell, taste, and overall performance of a product. And because it is always a woman that is being sold along with, or as, the product, she too is conveyed through color. In many instances Yuskavage effectively imitates the saturation and air-brush quality of color that proliferates in mainstream representations of women.

In *XLP* (1999), an arrangement of three women seated side by side at a table, the sole black woman amongst them is eclipsed by the dark midnight background—making more pronounced the bulbous, tan-lined breasts of her blonde neighbor. By painting such a dark background, Yuskavage makes unmistakable the visibility of the blonde woman at center and renders the black woman just a silhouette of elongated nipples and a big round afro. The women that Yuskavage features in her paintings are reflections, and distortions, of the women that feature in the broader culture: in magazines, on billboards, as well as in the Western art canon—that is: sexualized white women. As a white woman herself, these are the figures that she is intended to identify with, make herself into. Women "of color" are not normalized in the same way—they do not appear to the same degree. They are an excess of pigment—so much so that they become shadow, blending into the background, as is the case of the black woman in *XLP*, like the slave in Manet's *Olympia*, against which the white woman's beauty is set. The color white depends on the color black; it exists only in relation to it. By employing the technique of reducing the color gradation in the figure of the black woman, and thus reducing her presence to an almost indiscernible outline, Yuskavage critiques the ways in which whiteness (specifically white femininity) is given prominence in visual culture. As in the Brit-pop girl band the Spice Girls, the blonde is always at center. She is the lollipop-sucking "Baby Spice." She is refined white sugar. The black member of the band is the camouflage-oufitted "Scary Spice." She is dark speckled pepper. And there was not a chocolate dessert option in the world of Strawberry Shortcake.



Bad Habits (1996)
Oil on Linen, 84" x 72"
 Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery

In creating the triptych *Blonde Brunette and Redhead* (1995), Yuskavage let color technically determine her subjects. She constructed a palette of three primary shades borrowed from Laura Ashley's color chart and allotted the colors formulaically—70 percent yellow for the blonde, 70 percent blue for the brunette, 70 percent red for the redhead—in each, the remaining 30 percent composed of the other two colors.⁸ Branded by the English icon of femininity Laura Ashley, the colors carry the legacy of the design house that has for fifty years specialized in flower-patterned wall paper, bedding, and clothing for women and girls (and today one may also purchase Laura Ashley dolls and dollhouses on the Website). Laura Ashley's business is built on nostalgia for nineteenth-century aesthetics and values. It is a world of high-necked cotton nightgowns with lace trim and bed and breakfast coverlets. In choosing Laura Ashley colors, Yuskavage summons an ideal of upper middle-class women's decorum, a careful balance of frill and propriety. But Yuskavage doesn't *just* summon these ladylike Laura Ashley colors; she summons them to illuminate hair-color hierarchy in the portraits of *Blonde*, *Brunette*, and *Redhead*.

At center, as usual, is the blonde, her hair soft and feathered like Farrah Fawcett. Her lips pucker and her eyes squint exaggeratedly. She doesn't have a nose (she doesn't need to smell—she's the one to be smelled); she's all languid eyes, moistened lips, and perfectly primed hair. To the right is the brunette—her hair lays straight and pinned back with a barrette. She looks directly at the viewer. The tilt of her head and slight curl of her lip intimates that she is the smart one, the only one aware of the role she's been cast in. She's knows she's the smart one, but might, sometimes, secretly, rather be the first one looked at. The redhead on the left is childish and mischievous, distractedly looking up through her mop of careless red curls. She's a fireball—she can't sit still; she's the sporty tomboy. The three girls are purebred Laura Ashley shades and also cartoonish incarnations of hair-color like *Charlie's Angels*. Yuskavage uses color to collapse the nostalgic nineteenth-century femininity of Laura Ashley with the brash femininity of American

pop culture. The image is conflicted for this reason—if not for their colors, these women would not signify Laura Ashley. Laura Ashley cultivates women and girls that are naturally pretty, that don't dye their hair—that ride horses and hold onto their virginity. The *Blonde*, *Brunette*, and *Redhead* are not "natural," they are too deliberate in their posing, too provocative. These are women looking for attention, and Laura Ashley would not endorse them. But really, the two conceptions of femininity are not so disparate. They both present absolute notions of how women should appear, how women should allow themselves to be consumed.

While it is her use of color that initially lures us in (with flavors and smells), it is Yuskavage's articulation of bodies that holds us there. In Yuskavage's early work, the female figures possess bodily aberrations that are at once sexy and sick—but too unreal to elicit conviction. We are completely seduced and simultaneously repulsed. This is because Yuskavage, in some compositions, copies exactly the conventions of the nude (both of painting and girlie magazines), and then, in others, completely inverts them. A number of the women Yuskavage creates are entirely torso, with truncated legs, stick figure necks, and stick figure arms. Their noses and hands are often omitted in favor of the principal protrusions—tits and ass. They are allegories, like so many painted nude women throughout history. Like Mucha's *Seasons*, Matisse's *La Nuit*, or Fuseli's *Sin Pursued by Death*, the female form becomes the container into which a larger meaning is forced, a meaning far too heavy for the woman's body to hold—she comes to equate



Rorschach Blot (1995)
Oil on Linen, 213.4 x 183 cm
Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery

Spring, Night, and, certainly, Sin. In this way she is held responsible, blamed, punished, for more than she should be. Yuskavage plays with this notion of just how much responsibility the female body can hold. She manipulates and contorts the female form to test these boundaries.

In conjunction with a series of paintings, Yuskavage created a group of small, ten-inch high, cast hydrocal figurines (about the height of Strawberry Shortcake dolls) to which she assigned the names *Asspicking*, *Foodeating*, *Headshrinking*, *Socialclimbing*, and *Motherfucking* and grouped together as *Bad Habits* (1995). Four of the white, unpainted figurines, *Asspicking*, *Foodeating*, *Socialclimbing*, and *Motherfucking*, are of the same bizarrely deformed breed—their butts are raised high and stuck out behind them while their lopsided breasts and bloated bellies are pushed forward—their

posture thus a precarious balancing act. They look torturously uncomfortable, but we don't know how they feel—they don't look back at us, or at each other, or even reflect down on their own bodies. It doesn't matter, though, we mustn't feel sorry for them; they are little sinners, little "bad habits." *Asspicking's* lips remain resolutely puckered while she reaches back to pick the presumed panties out of her ass, but she is naked—there aren't any panties to pick! *Foodeating* holds her especially swollen stomach with one hand while tightly closing her eyes, as if she may purge. If it weren't for the title, we might infer that she is with child; that she is experiencing morning sickness or contractions. We might worship her as a fertility goddess, a *Venus of Willendorf*. But, no, she is a naughty food-eater who has binged. All of them are without legs—their disproportionate torsos are supported by hip stumps; they cannot move of their own volition. Their bodies are heinously awry and their names unflattering, but still they pucker and pose and almost convince us of their sex-appeal. They are horrible hyperbolizations, made cute by their small doll stature.

The *Headshrinking* maquette is clearly differentiated from the other "bad habits." She stands much taller, clothed in a nightgown; her chin is raised, proud. In the painting titled *Bad Habits* (1996), two of the fleshy anomalies, *Asspicking* and *Foodeating*—lip-pursed and ass-raised—are met by the nightgown-clad *Headshrinking*—appearing here as a pale white-haired woman, looming with a ghost-like presence. The supple bellies, butts, and boobs of the two foregrounded "bad habits" contrast abruptly with the nightgown's sharp starched pleats, which cover the white-haired woman totally, without a wrinkle. Even painted, she retains

her hard plaster constitution. Her body has been choked out by the unrelenting nightgown—only her pale expressionless face emerges from the top of the high-necked collar. She has no arms at all. The nightgown forms two peaks where her chest might be and from these peaks fall two empty arm sleeves. The two peaks culminate in pin-points which suggest nipples, but severe nipples that would prick if touched.

The same nightgown, presumably Laura Ashley brand, recurs in Yuskavage's work as the standard of conduct against which the naked female body is made more flagrant. The nightgown first appeared before the "bad habits" in *Transference Portrait of My Shrink in her Starched Nightgown with My Face and Her Hair* (1995), worn by a solemn-faced brunette, whom, from the title, we're to understand as Yuskavage, transferring her emotions and fears onto her psychoanalyst. Though Yuskavage talks about all of her paintings as being in some way self-reflections, this is one of the very few in which she names it as such. She is the most human-looking nightgown wearer standing alone against a hospital-blue wall, in a nightgown of the same hue, but she stares out blankly, devoid of emotion. She seeks her companion piece, *Rorschach Blot* (1995). Decidedly the most brazen of Yuskavage's entire repertoire, this inkblot test has no need for interpretation; it has already been read. This character appears against a dirty yellow tone, splayed open like a frog, but standing upright. She wears only deep-pink knee-high stockings, which blend into the orange of her skin, and orthopedic shoes, which she needs in order to sustain her awkward plié. Between her symmetrical squatted legs the crevice of her hairless genitalia forms an exclamation point. Her mouth is a wide-open circle overwhelming her flat noseless face—she is a blow-up sex-doll. The image is shocking, obscene, especially paired with the understated *Transference Portrait*. It seems blatant—woman reduced to orifices. But, *Rorschach Blot* is actually the liberated body—this body experiences

pleasure, unlike the *Transference Portrait* figure. Yuskavage understands her *Rorschach Blot* as totally opened, released, “in a state of perpetual orgasm,” whereas the nightgown figure in *Transference Portrait* is constipated and frigid, completely closed off.⁹ *Rorschach Blot* is ready and willing, wanting to be consumed—she has no shame. The shame is on our part in viewing. We don’t want to consume her—we can hardly even look at her. A woman’s body this open and liberated is ugly and scary. If we must choose between the two, it feels much safer taking in and being reflected by the chaste nightgown figure.

In *Manifest Destiny* (1998), the nightgown realizes its full symbolic weight—it towers as an enormous monument, a stark marble column dominating the sky, high above the naked sexpot that nuzzles up to its base. Here the nightgown figure possesses a God-given right to expand and possess, making herself available to repentant nude girls everywhere. Repeatedly contrasted against naked, highly sexualized women, the significance of the starched nightgown lies in its relationship to bodies. It is as if what was one woman (the mergence of the human Yuskavage and her shrink) has been split in two. The puritanical, straight-laced shrink inhabiting the nightgown might be read as Yuskavage’s conscience or superego, reining in her lascivious ways. Set against the other “bad habits” and their respective manifestations of the id, the nightgown figure is unsexed, she is a nun (with her own “habit”). But might that be part of the suggested fantasy? Like a librarian dressed in a turtleneck with her hair pulled back in a tight retentive bun, the nightgown figure might be a turn-on, too. She might take out a leash and whip them for being “bad”, for exposing themselves and inciting lust. After all, the figurine incarnation Headshrinking is herself deemed a “bad habit”—meaning that going to a shrink, being psychoanalyzed, is in some way a perverse pleasure, an indulgence, not so unlike food eating and ass picking. It is the indulgence of having someone to stand against, to rebel against—a controlling force, a constraint. In *Alls I got are Big Boobs*, the nightgown figure, this time wearing red lipstick, stands solidly supporting the naked woman who leans on her shoulder, bemoaning (and maybe also boasting about) her big boobs. The nightgown interchangeably comforts and haunts the sexy slithery nude girls who seem contradictorily to be embarrassed by and to exalt in their unstoppable sexuality.

The woman in *Wrist Corsage* (1996) is also comforted and haunted by an ideal that hangs over her. She stands with her back to us, her enormous ass upturned like a fin or a tail. She is alone, naked, with a corsage of pretty pink flowers around her wrist—her body cast in the same turquoise tone as the wall she turns toward. She looks at a tiny portrait of a plain-faced, starch-collared schoolgirl that hangs high in the upper corner of the wall. The prim girl in the portrait is small, subtle, clothed, controlled—she is, in appearance, the exact opposite of this fantastic woman whose bare bottom just won’t quit. Her ass extends hugely, like a bustle from her small arched back—like the ass of the “Hottentot Venus,” Sara Baartman, which was so powerful it had to be confiscated, locked up in a European research lab—to be “scientifically” explored.¹⁰ An ass that is at once coveted and castigated, desired and deplored. It’s a fetish, a perversion. It’s too womanly and thus too unwieldy—it must be contained.



Manifest Destiny (1998)
Oil on Linen, 110" x 55"
Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery

In *Good Evening Hamass* (1997) a tied candied ham forms the backside of a woman, her flesh bulging through the tightly crisscrossed string, which is knotted with glistening Maraschino cherries. The same tied-ham motif provides for an expansive wall behind *Wee Allergin* (1997) and *Big Little Laura* (1997–98)—in this scale resembling more a mattress than a ham. And really, it’s only the title *Good Evening Hamass* that determines her ass to be that of a ham. A “hamass” brings to mind something disgusting—dead, packaged meat—something not at all pleasant to look at; and yet the image is alluring, tasty. “Hamass” sounds like a mean name called out on the schoolyard, but in fact the fiery sunset combined with the woman’s dramatic posture and dark voluminous Cher-hair makes for a very seductive image. The woman appears deliberately ignorant of her strange ass, and apathetic to the fact that, like the majority of the “bad habits,” she must carefully position her ballooned belly and, in this case, hamass, on hip stumps. It might be read that the woman is wearing some sort of eccentric costume—the crisscrossed ties might be fishnet stockings. But no, she is—at least in part—a fatty piece of meat, bound by string. Hers is a body prepared to be consumed, or—and—a body that has consumed too much. She is food, and not just any food—she is sweet meat. She is a combination of ham and human. It is a gross concept, but the painting is so honeyed and beautiful, we do want to eat it. We want to eat her. She encompasses both what is desired and feared.

Teetering above these disconcertingly desirable derrieres are, of course, tits. The aforementioned tan-lined boobs belonging to the blonde in *XLP* are not only cruelly large, dropping heavily onto the table, but are parodied by the other globular objects, like Christmas ornaments and marbles, that



Wrist Corsage (1996)
Oil on Linen, 72" x 84"
 Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery

roll around alongside like a pinball machine—like planets in orbit. The woman looks up and to the side, as if to avert what she expects to be a ridiculing gaze—as if aware of the silly spectacle she makes. This is a woman for which the statement “Alls I got are big boobs” is true. These are not functional boobs; they are the boobs of Pamela Anderson or Anna Nicole Smith. It wouldn’t matter if she wore a shirt (though she’d be hard up to find one that fits)—she conveys sex all the time, regardless if she intends to. The nymphet with the blonde bob in *Faucet* (1995) possesses ill-formed, lopsided breasts (just like those of the *Motherfucking* bad habit)—one

swelling up and to the left, the other down and to the right. Maybe they are knobs, running hot and cold, turning on and off, filled with fluid, like that of the water faucet in the far corner of the canvas.

In *The Early Years* (1995), the woman is reduced from an already truncated body to just breasts. Like in the movie *Boxing Helena* (Jennifer Chambers Lynch, 1993), in which the woman’s body is pared down limb by limb by a fetishist plastic surgeon, until, finally, she fits into a box. Like the legless, armless, headless woman in Bill Brandt’s photograph *Nude: London* (1977).

All that is left of the woman in *The Early Years* are her enormous boobs, like rubber balls, buoyantly supporting her shoulders, neck and blonde head. Her shoulders are draped with a small beaded jacket and she wears a necklace around her neck. But she herself is really the garnish. She is like a pile of fruit atop a table—her nipples ripe to be plucked, just like the beads of her jacket.

In many a composition, it is the nipple alone that is lavished with dense globs of paint. The nipples of the black woman in *XLP* and the *Hamass* figure are like little fingers sticking straight up out of their chests, pointing towards the heavens. The gumball or grape that caps the tip of the woman’s breast in *Honeymoon* (1998), like that of the little blonde girl with the spiked collar in *Big Little Laura* (1997–98), though a screaming anatomical impossibility, is seductive in its shiny roundness. It forces us to ogle this woman, who,

in the case of *Honeymoon* is not at all receptive—in fact appears quite melancholic, albeit in a romance novel sort of way—staring out the window at the misty mountaintops. It’s impossible to look at anything other than the delectable maroon-toned morsel at the end of her already remarkable breast—that pokes out of her nightgown like the nose of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. And that’s exactly the point. Yuskavage says:

The whole world is obsessed by nipples . . . If a woman walks down the street and her nipples are erect—everybody’s gonna look. Everyone: men, women, children, and of course I look. I look out of the impulse that causes anybody to look; I look at it as an erotic thing. I think, “good for her!,” “I hate her guts,” “I wish I was her,” and “how come I’m not more like that?” I have about a zillion feelings, ranging between compassion and contempt.¹¹

These ludicrously misshapen women do emote, and as a viewer I worry that I must reconcile something human and raw with something very plastic and silly. But Yuskavage is not engaging such an aesthetic in order to test us—she’s not trying to lure us in with these substantial nipples and butts only to reprimand us. She herself reconciles, however futilely, an experience of being looked at and looking—that *is* raw and silly.



Good Evening Hamass (1997)
Diptych: Oil on Linen, 42" x 96-1/2" overall
 Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery

These women are fantasies, extreme nonrealities of the combined fascination and disgust we feel aimed at our own bodies. And as viewers too; we are implicated in the judgment. Like Yuskavage, I both love and hate these women, for what they are and for what I might be. In these images I feel what is at once a pleasure in exhibitionism, seduction and a horrible feeling of exposure, exploitation. None of her compositions can be read as entirely one or the other, because Yuskavage does not moralize or judge. She can't—because she's not a removed subject and she assures that neither am I. She is being looked at with these women and so am I. The women she paints—however outrageous—are us. She says, "I don't work from an elevated place looking down; if they are low, than I am in the ditch with them, and by painting them, I am trying to dig us out together."¹²

A different, less allegorical, less hyperbolized strain of women runs throughout Yuskavage's work but becomes most pronounced later, from 1999 to 2001. Still nude and hyper hued, these women are just that—they aren't horribly deformed, or detracted from by an authoritative, nightgown-clad shrink. They are alone with their own bodies, filling the canvas. They don't have a glazed, averted expression on their faces. They are more "real." But because there isn't anything immediately off-putting or calling itself out as "wrong," because they are more familiar, the meaning of these compositions is more ambiguous and thus contentious—they are too easily likened to girlie centerfolds. And indeed they should be. They are in many ways identical to the glossy, airbrushed photographs that feature in *Playboy* magazine, but also, just as much, in the images fed to a female gaze, e.g. *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, or *Elle* magazines. Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley theorize a homoerotic gaze inherent in women's fashion magazines:

Heterosexual women, or women constructed as heterosexual, do themselves desire the women in the magazines. They have been trained into it.

So what is set up is what we might call a paradigmatically lesbian viewing position in which women are induced to exercise a gaze that desires the represented woman, not just one that identifies with them.¹³

Lewis and Rolley make an important addition to the discourse surrounding female spectatorship. What have previously been understood as the two potential positionalities of a woman looking at an image of a sexualized woman—either (1) looking through a distanced male gaze (transvestic) and consequently disconnecting from their own experience as a woman, or (2) narcissistically overidentifying with the image and thus being unable to gain enough distance to "look" at all—do not allow for the possibility of desiring as a woman.¹⁴ Because the readership of fashion magazines is decidedly female, the sexualized women that proliferate on the pages appear for women. So it follows that the gaze is not male. And Lewis and Rolley attest that neither is it only an experience of identification. The (female) viewer of fashion magazines "wants both to be and to have the object."¹⁵

This is especially interesting in relation to a common criticism of Yuskavage: "Years after Feminism's lessons, we know we're not supposed to respond erotically to such imagery, that it is degrading. . ."¹⁶ But, desire is not always (or even usually) politically correct. What women desire is not always in a way so different from the images in *Playboy* or *Penthouse* or *Vogue*. Because these are the ways that we are taught to consume our own bodies, this becomes not only what we want to be desired as, but also what we desire.

In *70s Nude* (1997), a brunette woman kneels on the floor and stretches her arms behind her head, showing off her bikini-tan-lined body and the long



Asschecker (1999)
Oil on Linen, 20" x 14"
Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery

strand of hippy beads around her neck. This soft-focus image is a direct reference to the 1970s-era *Penthouse* magazines Yuskavage cites as source material and is the same figure that appears cozying up to the nightgown column in *Manifest Destiny*. Another from the same time is *Screwing Her Pussy on Straight* (1997), in which a blonde woman stands, looking down at her hands, which together form a triangle atop her crotch—evidently screwing it on straight. She appears again with an expanded bosom in *Interior: Big Blonde with Beaded Jacket*, also from 1997.

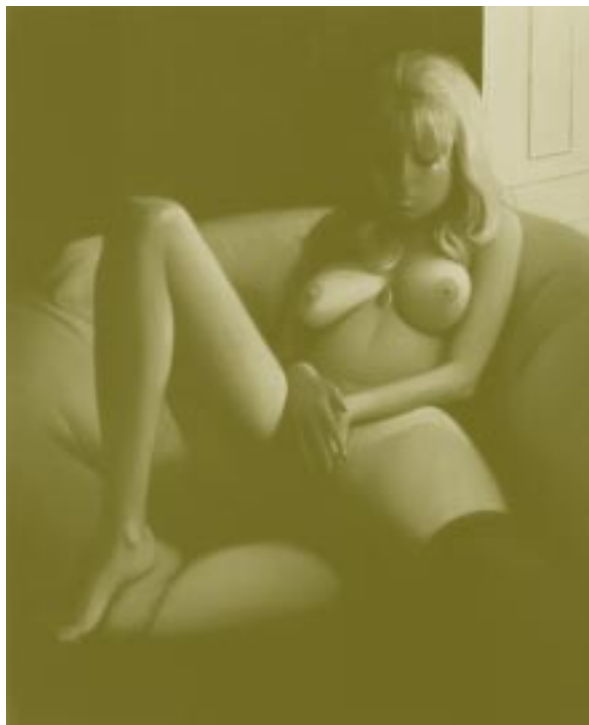
The idealized bodies and postures continue with *Beads* (1999), *Day* (1999–2000), *Asschecker* (1999), and *True Blonde* (1999), to name a few. In *Beads* a blonde woman against a pink- and

purple-striped wall fingers at the beads around her neck with one hand while her other hand is stuck down her panties, intermingled with her pubic hair. Her cheeks are deeply flushed, mimicking the shiny red of her panties. Her body is in motion, in mid-shimmy. This image is one of Yuskavage's most actively sexual, but the candy-colored beads combined with the pink and purple stripes on the wall make it feel oddly welcoming, comfortable to look at. The woman is openly masturbating but we do not sense shame on her part. She looks down at herself, wanting to view herself. And we want to view her. In *Day*, a blonde woman stands coated in sunshine. Her back is to the window from which streams in the sunbeams—casting the whole canvas in gold. She pulls her camisole up above her breasts and looks down lingeringly. It's a wonderful expression on her face—a subtle smile, as if she's a little bit surprised, pleasantly, by the appearance of her breasts—a momentary recognition and appreciation of her body. In *Asschecker* a dark brunette woman stands against a dark background, with her back to us. She twists around to lift up the back of her silky dress and swings her hip to the side, placing her hand on her tan-lined ass. She's sexy and she knows it. She knows that she is being looked at. In *True Blonde*, the woman takes the perfect *Playboy* posture—she's totally nude in a dim-lit room, lying back on a plush cushion with her legs spread, both hands resting on her "venus pudica." Her blue-tinted eyelids are cast down, gazing across the smooth expanses of her outstretched body.

Unlike Yuskavage's previous pieces, in which the women's bodies were often missing arms or morphing into hams or

gumballs, here the female bodies are perfectly aligned with what our culture sells to us as sexy—the sort of women we see in *Playboy* and *Vogue*. They possess generous and symmetrical breasts, flat toned stomachs, long flowing hair, rosy cheeks, big eyes with long lashes, lips puffed in a pout. These women have put effort into making themselves beautiful and they admire the result. We look at them looking at themselves. They are “caught” in a moment of self-reflection, à la Degas’s *Bathers*. This self-reflexivity, “vanitas,” has long been a convention of the female nude. Subjects like “Susannah and the Elders” and the “Judgment of Paris” equip the nude woman with a mirror as a symbol of vanity, “thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness (the artist) had depicted for (his) own pleasure. The real function of the mirror . . . is to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.”¹⁷ In this way, the woman’s self-admiration becomes the means through which the distanced male artist/viewer may access her, without himself being implicated. To consider a painting of a female nude “Vanity” is to legitimize looking from a distanced perspective at this sexualized woman. It’s a way of chastising her, saying, “If she can’t even take her eyes off of herself, how are we expected to?”

But Lisa Yuskavage does not chastise her women for their vanity. How can she? It is she who is reflected in the proverbial mirror they hold. She cannot take a distanced, invisible position, nor does she want to. These women represent not only what she desires, but also what she is. Yuskavage’s images make us aware—both painfully and pleasurably—not only of the experience of the women imaged, but also her experience as artist and my experience as viewer. I too am reflected in the mirror.



True Blonde (1999)
Oil on Linen, 70" x 56"
Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery

Notes

- 1 Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley, “Ad(dressing) the Dyke: Lesbian Looks and Lesbians Looking,” in *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, ed. Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 179.
- 2 Amelia Jones, “Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies, Feminist Conflicts, Feminist Histories,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles: University of California Press and the Armand Hammer Museum, 1996), p. 24.
- 3 Chuck Close, “Interview with Lisa Yuskavage,” in *Lisa Yuskavage*, ed. Faye Hirsch (Smart Art Press, 1996), p. 25.
- 4 Katy Siegel, “Local Color,” in *Lisa Yuskavage: Institute of Contemporary Art*, ed. Claudia Gould (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2000), p. 21.
- 5 Chuck Close, p. 28.
- 6 Claudia Gould, “Interview” in *Lisa Yuskavage, Institute of Contemporary Art Exhibition Catalog* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2000), p. 12.
- 7 Among many others in the same vein, Marcia B. Hall states “Yuskavage treats low subjects in an ennobling format, as if they deserved to be elevated art.” In “Lisa Yuskavage’s Painterly Paradoxes” in *Lisa Yuskavage, Institute of Contemporary Art Exhibition Catalog* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2000), p. 23.
- 8 Katy Siegel, p. 16.
- 9 Chuck Close, p. 29.
- 10 Sara Baartman was only twenty years old when, in 1810, her voluptuous backside caught the attention of bespectacled British “researchers,” who subsequently stole her from South Africa to exhibit her as a racialized freak to the British public, who dubbed her “the Hottentot Venus.” She was later moved to France to undergo scientific and medical research, whereupon she died in 1815 at age twenty-five. Posthumously, her sexual organs and brain were taken from her body and put on display in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. Only last year, in 2002, were her remains returned to her homeland of South Africa. For more information, see Yvette Abrahams, “Images of Sara Baartman: Sexuality, Race, and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, ed. Ruth Roach Pierson, Nupur Chaudhuri (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 220–236.
11. Chuck Close, p. 27.
12. Claudia Gould, p. 10.
- 13 Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley, p. 181.
- 14 I am thinking here of the seminal contributions made by feminist film theorists Laura Mulvey and Mary Anne Doane, among many others.
- 15 Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley, pg. 181.
- 16 Katy Siegel, p. 19.
- 17 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 51.