The New York artist doesn’t just paint the female body. She charts all of the fantasies, anxieties, taboos, and hang-ups we have about the nude. In time for a mid-career survey, Lisa Yuskavage talks about growing up, almost giving up and embracing the enemy within.

By Todd Solondz

Portrait Sebastian Kim

Painting might be the most susceptible genre to trend in the visual arts. The usual arc goes something like this: A painter hits on an idea that seems relatively new or interesting, and soon endless iterations of that technique or practice are popping up on every gallery wall. This is not a bad phenomenon, but it can often have the unintended consequence of fixing that initial painter’s work to a certain fad-hopping period in contemporary art. All of this is the long way of saying that 53-year-old painter Lisa Yuskavage is so damned original, so provocative and epic and intimate and off-putting and exacting in her style, tone, and subject matter, that she has managed to avoid a million copycats (it would be nearly impossible to copy her), and a glimpse of her work past to present still feels as if it exists in its own eternal present.

Yuskavage rose to notice in the mid-90s, during a particularly formidable period for figurative painting and women painters. But even then, she charted her own dark path, notoriously centered on young, zaftig female bodies with curves like guitars and, more often than not, enacting some mysterious rite that might be described as “Lolita witchcraft” or a Grimms’ fairy tale mixed with someone’s father’s vintage basement collection of Penthouse. And this is precisely what is so mesmerizing and fascinating about Yuskavage’s work: its seriousness and its play.

No question, the New York–based painter has spent a lifetime studying European masters, from Rembrandt and Bellini to Vuillard and probably a number of altarpieces in Venetian chapels. But it also seems like she’s tapped psychoanalysis, American porn, and a number of slightly hallucinogenic film directors (Was Fellini’s Satyricon [1969] an inspiration, I wonder? Or Gus Van Sant’s Gerry [1996]?). A Yuskavage painting is a hard, cruel, end-of-the-world or birth-of-the-world environment, and the relationships between subjects can often suggest homosexuality, masturbation, birth, abandonment, voyeurism, rape, or love. Beginning this month, Yuskavage will present a retrospective-style survey of 25 years of her work—25 pieces—fittingly called “The Brood” at the Rose Art Museum in Massachusetts. In honor of the occasion, and just after her solo show at David Zwirner Gallery this past spring where men, or “dudes,” finally made an appearance on her canvases, Yuskavage had breakfast in downtown Manhattan with her friend, the director Todd Solondz. If there are two bigger taboo-tacklers in the visual arts, I can’t think of them. —CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

Lisa Yuskavage

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October 2015

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Todd Solondz: Art has a smaller audience than, say, movies or other forms of mass consumption. But that doesn’t mean the work doesn’t have an impact in a way that transcends just a few cultural arbiters. Artwork can be a portal, a kind of rethinking and reseeing of the world as we live it. Lisa Yuskavage: I talk kind of ad infinitum about the example of Philip Guston. I was aware of his work as a very young artist. My first take was repulsion. I saw a retrospective of his at the Whitney in 1981, and I didn’t know what I was looking at. I didn’t like it, but I continued to investigate it. Something drew me to investigate it, and I eventually became addicted to the energies in his work. Then you want so badly to paint in that style. But I knew that would be a really bad idea. It’s like the call of the Sirens: You will crash. Guston’s style is so powerful. And yet what is just as powerful are the things he said about the work and the battles he personally fought to make it. That was an incredibly important guide for me as an artist.
SOLONDZ: Can you talk about those battles, and how they affect your relationship with your own struggles?

YUSKAVAGE: I think one important thing that happens on the studio is accepting yourself as your own enemy and painting from that point of view. So instead of painting the fingers as a symbol of power and power, judgment, instead, you start with yourself as your own worst enemy. I think that’s an incredibly honest place to begin. Guston himself became fascinated with imagining his work to be evil and to go to hell and I imagined what that would be like. I realized that misogyny is a pretty powerful force in the world. It’s talked about a lot but it’s not really depicted. So I took on that. People can ask, “Why are you trying to paint women in that way that is upsetting?” But it’s not about being right; it’s about opening something up that’s wrong. I’m not trying to be a finger-wagger at society. I want to start with myself. So I had to get it out there. I had to give it a sense of intensity. And this cyclical nature of the work, it can end up being a block to investigating certain areas of human nature or certain truths about sexuality. I think your work embodies a certain courage in exploring those elements of sexuality—particularly childhood sexuality. Some of the faces women in your paintings have this childlike quality to them. And, of course, that evokes a very controversial response. Once childhood and sexuality converge in any way, you’re dealing with the forbidding. But I’ve always felt that what you do is in earnest. And you’re exploring something that is very scary for many people. There’s so much hysteria that can accompany looking at paintings like yours. I think it takes time in the same way as when you first see Philip Guston, it took time to absorb the shock of what was really going on there. Would you say Guston was a turning point for you? YUSKAVAGE: I think the turning point was more in looking and thinking about it for a long time. It didn’t happen on a dime. Seeing it was the catalyst. But then was years of thinking about it and realizing how profound that was. And also another aspect was the amount of grief there is in his work. That might have something to do with his love of Christian Renaissance paintings—which are masterpieces, but they’re essentially pictures of grief. I find art that can accommodate human grief and pain in the same time extremely compelling. I also think it’s important to make art that is not that easily absorbable, that is a challenge to the audience. Guston’s career was fascinating because he was so successful over and over again. He changed styles a few times—from representational to critical abstraction and back again. And he was said to do it, and it’s fascinating to me that his work is still so difficult and challenging. We have to change in order to accommodate an artist’s vision as opposed to the artist changing to accommodate our vision. That’s really important. SOLONDZ: It’s a good example of someone who wasn’t enthralled with his success and was able to take risks and go elsewhere. And if you’re not taking risks and you’re not afraid of some sort of embarrassment or humiliation, it can make you wonder what you’re really doing and what value it has. I think that’s why Guston turns out to be a big inspiration in creating serious work.

YUSKAVAGE: What are those fears for you exactly?

SOLONDZ: There’s always the fear of failure. And the fear of embarrassment. I have said in the past only half in earnest—that my aim is to make films that are (a) to survive and (b) not to embarrass myself. You always feel very vulnerable when you put your work out there. You’ve got a kind of holding. And you expose something of the imperfections of life that you’re embraced or the low-hanging-fruit aspects of human nature. In a way, for artists, it’s almost a reversal of what other people would find embarrassing or not embarrassing. YUSKAVAGE: You say you don’t want to embarrass yourself, but that’s precisely what you do—or at least when you take on certain subjects: the imperfections of life that you’re embraced or the low-hanging-fruit aspects of human nature. In a way, for artists, it’s almost a reversal of what other people would find embarrassing or not embarrassing.

SOLONDZ: How early in your life did you have a sense of yourself as an artist? Maybe it wasn’t a conscious understanding, but looking back there must have been certain behaviors or experiences that made you think “I would love to do this.”

YUSKAVAGE: I think that or I just decided to make the best of it. One of the things that led me to be the kind of artist I am is that I wanted to be a figurative painter. I wanted to paint pictures of people. I thought, “Why bother doing anything else? Everything else is in a waste of time. I want to talk about people and their feelings and emotions. Why do it if you’re not going to be part of the big story?” So I have been up to now. I have only studied with figurative painters. But because of my mother’s forcing me to go to the other school, I was also studying with people who were abstract painters. They had a totally different understanding of painting. And, as artists, they weren’t afraid of the personal. I think that was really important. And I really liked that running—that not thinking slavishly about understanding the power of fiction in picture making. SOLONDZ: Did you go to an art institute, or a conservatory for college?

YUSKAVAGE: We only had the money to go to state school. And, of course, I felt very sorry for myself because I wanted to go to a conservatory. I always thought that learning to play an instrument because of my failed experiences with dancing. I knew there was no right area for me. But I want to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and saw a van Gogh painting for the first time and thought that was the most incredible thing I’d ever seen. I just felt inspired. SOLONDZ: How old were you?

YUSKAVAGE: Probably 11. I felt so strongly—kind of like a friend wanting me. And I wanted to test him for the rest of my life.

SOLONDZ: Did you go to an art institute, or a conservatory for college?

YUSKAVAGE: I don’t think my mother was interested. I think my aims in making a film are (a) to survive and (b) not to embarrass myself. You always feel very vulnerable when you put your work out there. You’ve got a kind of holding. And you expose something of the imperfections of life that you’re embraced or the low-hanging-fruit aspects of human nature. In a way, for artists, it’s almost a reversal of what other people would find embarrassing or not embarrassing.

SOLONDZ: In my mind I was, I felt so intense doing it. [laughs] But it was like Miss Piggy in toe shoes. I remember seeing a photograph of myself as a dancer. I wanted to show pictures of me in the studio and the other people this was unlookable humiliated by the sight of myself. I still have this picture. I had big bobby-legs. I was like a straight line, and then this lump of a breast. It was so horrifying to me. But mostly I had in my mind an image of greatness, of profound expression, that was squashed by looking at that picture, which did not match the image in my head. I ended up studying the picture. I remember the stick-in-my-toe and going home and never looking back. And then I went to a public high school for girls in Philadelphia. It was a magnet school, not unlike Stuyvesant. They had a boys school and a girls school. We were separated. You had to go to get in, and when you got in, they furthered you to pay you in those programs where you were given extra-special goodies if you were smart. Which is really weird. You would think the kids who were not as smart could use the extra goodies. But this is how society works. So since, anyway, I was given some private privileges, where I was brought to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and allowed to draw nudes as a young person. It was so prevalent in all the arts. I was so pre-
YUSKAVAGE: I was afraid to take time off, because I realized I didn’t really know enough. I probably would have benefited emotionally from having a little time off because Yale’s graduate school in art is a bit like boot camp, and I was a very willing participant, and I was building back up my kind of mastery. I got there doing big, beautiful, brave, crazy paintings that were actually quite confident. I mean, they had a long way to go. And within one month I was making the most wonderful little paintings. You do two critiques a year, and I remember at my first critique, someone googling “Shit, tossed my thesis Mel Bochner, ‘What did you do to this artist?’ Is this girl who painted the swimming pools? What happened?’ And I was totally like, ‘Oh shit.’ I had no idea what they said I was good. They did this bullshit thing with me that was like, ‘You suck. How do you get into this school?’ And I totally bought it. Not knowing that, apparently, I had been the first person they picked. And I now try to look at things that way sometimes. Like, maybe there’s a possibility that everyone’s just fucking with me.

SOLONDZ: When did you gather that your paintings were touching upon something controversial?

YUSKAVAGE: When I first made the Bad Baby paintings. It was actually a painting called The Gift in 1991. I had already had my first exhibition (at Pamela Schoenlin Gallery in SoHo in 1990), and I had this bizarre experience where I walked into the show on opening night and was appalled at my own work. It was so shocking. Have you ever had that experience? Where you knew everybody else is celebrating something, and you know it’s dumb, and you know it’s terrible. I’m sure you have.

SOLONDZ: No, I haven’t had that experience so much. I certainly had the experience of doing terrible work and people reinforcing that, yes, my judgment is right, it is terrible. But sometimes I could say that people may have celebrated or appreciated my work in ways that I didn’t intend, just as much as they may have disregarded it in ways that I think missed a point. But I can’t say I’ve had the experience you’re describing. Were you appalled at the celebration?

YUSKAVAGE: Not so much the celebration—the work was not wildly celebrated. I’m saying, you have an opening and there’s a dinner. I was sitting at the dinner wishing I didn’t have to go through the evening. I just thought the work was bad.

SOLONDZ: And it was only at the opening that it hit you? Up until then you were oblivious to that?

YUSKAVAGE: Yes.

SOLONDZ: But what did that lead to the point where your work actually shook of that controversial response?

YUSKAVAGE: Well, I was thinking about the whole body of work. I was just sort of realizing what I was doing and how much I wasn’t in the work. The work was alien to me. I didn’t know how to paint in a way that would get me out of this funk. I didn’t know how to redirect, so I wasn’t just stopping painting. I spent a lot of time at the New York Public Library, the main branch. I was one of those people. If you ever spend a good amount of time there, you realize there are people who spend the entire day there. They’re bookish homeless people. I looked at every book you could say that people may have celebrated or appreciated my work in ways that I didn’t intend, just as much as they may have disregarded it in ways that I think missed a point. But I can’t say I’ve had the experience you’re describing. Were you appalled at the celebration?

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but she had to embrace it. It's those kinds of examples that gave me a path. SOLONDZ. You pick up so much about a person before you even meet them. In your artworks, there is a lot of control in what exactly you are revealing and how you want your work to be experienced. But I think great art goes beyond the control of the artist. In some ways, art often makes itself and reveals things about that artist that maybe the artist is not fully conscious of. If you don’t have your unconscious working for you, you’re really out of luck as an artist.

YUSKAVAGE. I agree. And when I finally went back to painting, I decided to do the opposite in terms of my attitude, to create a persona for myself in the studio that was not me and that I would work through. Because I was a loser when I painted. I was fresher and more original as a human being than as a painter. So I wanted to access that. And I remember Blue Velvet [1986] had recently come out, and I liked the character of Frank [played by Dennis Hopper] and how he’s sucking that weird gas and says something weird like “Show me your pussy.” He’s just such a fucking nightmare of sorts. And I just tried to make something talking to the paintings from the voice of Frank. And when I was successful, the painting totally clicked, it’s like being Dr. Frankenstein and you scream, “It’s alive! It’s alive!” Every thing I did before that was a corpse. And when the damn thing stood up and actually started running around causing trouble, it became its own troublemaker. I was so delighted that I had created life.

SOLONDZ. It stands up independent of the creator.

YUSKAVAGE. Yeah, and the first person to come to my studio was Matvey. He looked at it and said, “But, Lee, is this even a painting?” which was apparently what Jackson Pollock said to Lee Krasner tellingly for him to keep his work. But I was so happy—arousing, yes. But shock only to the extent of what Jackson Pollock said to Lee Krasner in and out of the hospital. He said unfortunately, at that time, was suffering with an onset of AIDS and was in out of the hospital. He said something like, “Holy shit, you really have to have your pussy screwed on straight to make this work. And you are going to have to buckle your seat belt.”

YUSKAVAGE. I was supposed to have that show last solo show at Zwirner this past spring.

SOLONDZ. We’ll flip. Because we're versatile here.

YUSKAVAGE. I know the quote. It’s about being a perfect bourgeoisie gentleman in your life, but a bohemian in your art. Okay, now I want to ask questions.

SOLONDZ. Let me do this part, and then we can let you run with it. But let me keep directing this part.

YUSKAVAGE. You want to be top to my bottom? You’re such an awesome top. [laughs]

SOLONDZ. Well, let me do this part, and then we can let you run with it. But let me keep directing this part.

YUSKAVAGE. I know the people who are lovers are really out of luck as an artist. In some ways, art often makes itself and reveals things about that artist that maybe the artist is not associated it. Otherwise, you may as well be looking at wallpaper, you know? I love wallpaper, but it’s just pretty.

YUSKAVAGE. It was just kind of crazy to me at how upsetting it was to a lot of people. But also appreciated it.