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# BOOKFORUM

**LISA YUSKAVAGE: THE BROOD, PAINTINGS 1991–2015** ESSAYS BY CHRISTOPHER BEDFORD, SUZANNE HUDSON, CATHERINE LORD, AND SIDDARTHA MUKHERJEE; INTERVIEW BY KATY SIEGEL NEW YORK: SKIRA RIZZOLI. 242 PAGES. \$65.



Lisa Yuskavage, *Blonde Brunette and Redhead*, 1995, triptych, oil on linen, overall 36 × 108".

**IT'S HARD TO** alight on a response to Lisa Yuskavage's paintings. The topless models and cute, lollipop-sucking young girls can look frosted, almost airbrushed, our culture's detritus incongruously rendered with virtuosic technique. When paint is handled like this, both old masters and trashy magazines seem to regain their vivid alienness. It's as if Yuskavage has managed to put her brush precisely in the place where we can still be unsettled.

She taught herself to do it that way, getting a traveling education in European painting while at art school in the early 1980s. As she recalled in an interview, after Yale and a phase of making timid, muted works that attempted to please "the unpleasable people," Yuskavage was thrilled to discover the possibilities of "an abject low-class sensibility that I didn't realize was allowed in art." It helped her turn the tables. *Lisa Yuskavage: The Brood, Paintings 1991–2015*, named for the 1979 David Cronenberg movie in which female rage spawns a crowd of miniature killers, is a determinedly selective survey, focusing on thematic and visual juxtapositions.

In her first mature works, button-nosed child-women (including one whose face is based on that of a baby seal in a PETA campaign ad) are trapped in fields of intense color, seeming both to manipulate and confront the viewer. Not long after comes the triptych above, its cartoonish girl prototypes made eerie (the central blonde most of all, her face half-erased to leave mainly the glossed, swollen mouth) by the painterliness

of their conjuring. From there, the book moves through the series "Bad Habits," works painted from maquettes—figures, again female, with arched backs and distended bellies—to paintings of models from old *Penthouses* she'd pored over as a child, and on to large, enigmatic, peopled landscapes. Here a rump is crisscrossed like a trussed pig or an elaborate cushion, there a finely rendered nipple picks up the same gleam as a still-life fruit; a woman might lift her shirt, via Degas, or solidify, legs splayed, into a Bellmer-like sex doll.

As Suzanne Hudson points out in her essay, one of five texts here, Yuskavage has often risked being "claimed for either soft porn or for the capital-h history of art, but not both simultaneously." But her typologies of formal painting conventions and of the consumerized female body are inseparable from one another, and their interactions produce an ever-increasing complexity: Trapped between the familiar and the newly estranged, you keep looping from admiration to irritation, innocent pleasure to revulsion. Hudson approvingly quotes a violent 1994 review by Lane Relyea that argues against defusing or reclaiming Yuskavage's fleshpots: "They're scandals, visual stink bombs launched for the sole purpose of watching the rationalizations fly." Yuskavage's paintings are mysterious—with their sarcastic wit, their contradictions between style and subject, they keep the viewer off-balance—but they also insist that they are just what they look like. —LIDIJA HAAS