

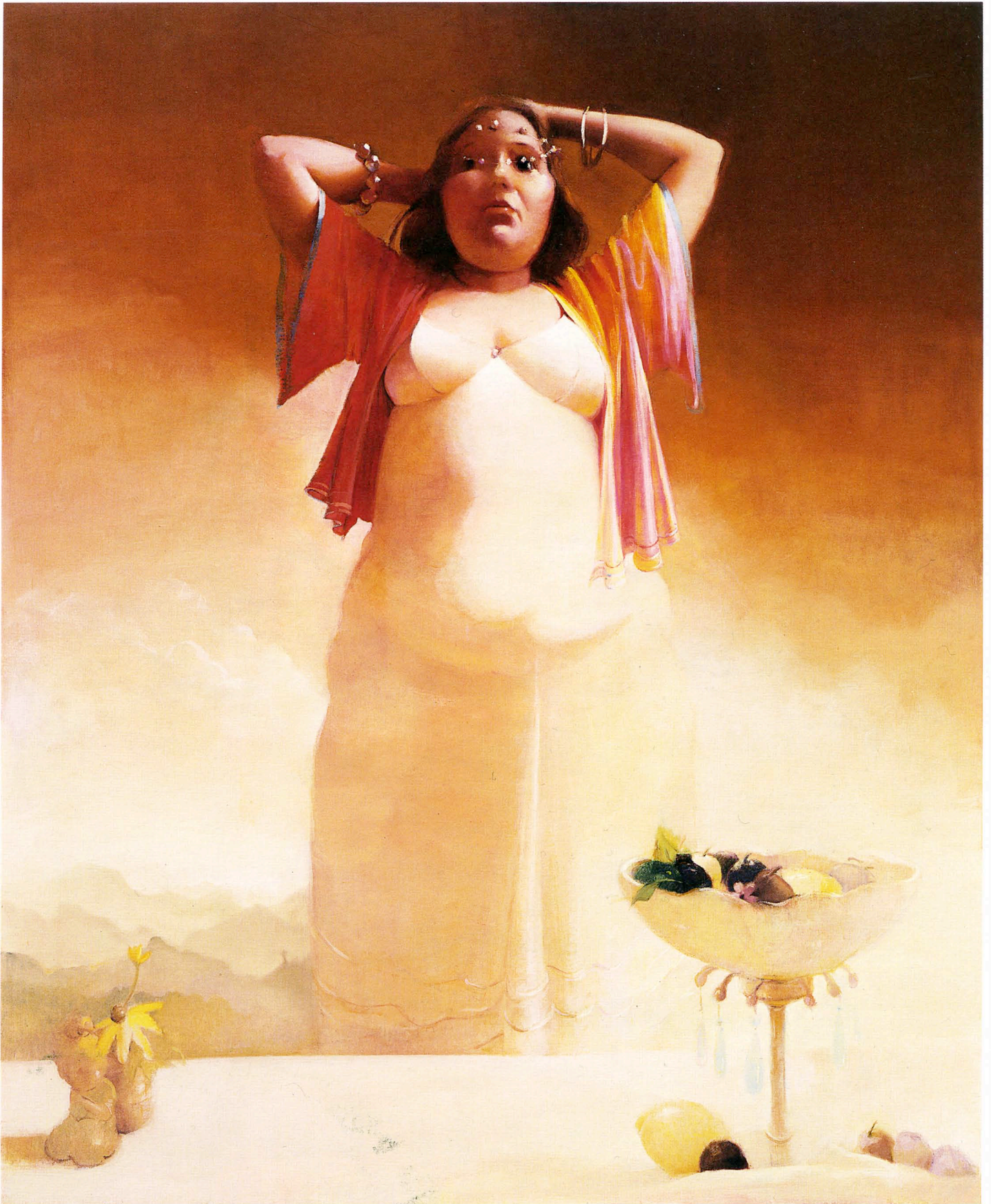
frieze

A painting of a woman with curly hair, wearing a white dress, sitting at a table. She is surrounded by various flowers and a green teapot. The background is a deep blue color.



'Women on the Verge', p.143: Lisa Yuskavage *Balls* 2004 Oil on linen 97x153cm
Courtesy: greengrassi, London





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Angel 2004 Oil on linen 213x190cm
Courtesy: greengrassi, London

Women on the Verge

by Jennifer Higgin

In Lisa Yuskavage's paintings an ever-present edge of uncertainty articulates a near hallucinogenic vision of femininity.

Small, strange coloured balls can be found in some of Lisa Yuskavage's new paintings. In one they are balanced impossibly on a woman's swollen belly and crotch; in another they glow softly on her broad shoulders. They are not logical, but then nothing here is real and a painting is not an explanation. Look closely and they can be found in earlier paintings too, among flowers or on a quilted wall or a collarbone, a column, a nipple or a floor. These unstrung jewels could cling only to the stillest of flesh; you could not breathe without disturbing them – quiet, glittering fictions hovering on the flesh of equally fictitious women.

These balls are no less enigmatic than the women themselves, who are often pictured alone in a twilight zone of vague longing, rendered in tones of deep blues and tart yellows, golds and clammy, warm, flesh-like pinks (the colours of memory and melancholy). The mood of reverie is as blunt as the nakedness; yet, as with nakedness, the revelations on offer are superficial and possibly misleading: sexual availability, for example, is implied with a languid acquiescence, yet what comes across is an eroticized, inviolable solitude. Many of Yuskavage's earlier paintings feature women examining their bodies with a kind of detached wonder, as if they have suddenly realized that a thought or a feeling is inseparable from the body that inhabits it. More recently the paintings seem to posit the idea of permission – of the self, of others,

of the picture (to do what it will) – as a kind of fecund gestation, while something faintly troubled hovers in the wings.

Her hair may blow across her face; her arms may be raised above her head; her eyes often appear blank to what is immediately before her, focused on something only she can see. For example, in *Still Life* (2003), beneath an idyllic sky and in front of a still life of stout fruit, a beautiful, large-breasted, pregnant woman with a pursed mouth glares through her wind-whipped hair with a stare like a searchlight – but what she is searching for is anyone's guess. Yet despite their other-worldliness and at times their sheer weirdness, Yuskavage's women are profoundly, cornily *women*: lush, long-legged, voluptuous, honeyed-skinned women, simultaneously slender and plump, occasionally goddess-like to a point of a hot luxuriance, as if something just beneath their skin is about to boil over. Bejewelled fingers droop or probe; sad, angelic faces hide behind deluxe hair; behinds are never hidden; and breasts revel in their pendulous exposure. A delight in a kind of amplified nakedness – and not just of the flesh – is palpable (Yuskavage once said, 'I hate stingy art'); the air is thick with the implication of murmured confidences, and mouths are sensual to the point of comical exaggeration. These are women whose spiritual home is a dim boudoir or an overscented hothouse – homes they occupy as quietly as fruit about to turn.

In earlier paintings the women inhabited rooms you would be more inclined to run away from than recline in: cold modern environments rendered with a palette of acidic fog. In these works Yuskavage distorted and exaggerated parts of their bodies to an almost repellent degree of absurdity (lips about to explode, bottoms distended like perverse orang-utans, breasts inflated to bursting point). More recently her images have acquired a level of lush, if still idiosyncratic, realism, modelled no longer on maquettes of invented characters but on the bodies of actual women, rendered in intuitive reaction to an aspect of herself she wants to explore but cannot quite articulate. One of her subjects, for example, bears a resemblance to a girl she was at school with, who was the pretty counter to her own funniness; another she saw in a café, looking, she thought, like the idea of herself at a similar age; another model is the artist's high school friend Kathy.

But despite their autobiographical components obviously these are not women: they cannot breathe – yet because of their overt narratives and descriptive elements it is impossible to read them from a non-psychological or purely formal angle. Yuskavage has said, 'I prefer to work from the point of view that what I am doing is wrong rather than right. And I also like to keep in mind that it isn't truly dangerous, it's just fiction. But I also know how powerful good fiction can be.'² This is where



Still Life 2003 Oil on linen 52x54cm
 Courtesy: greengrassi, London

the reading gets complicated. Because the women in Yuskavage's paintings often look like something spawned from a romp between a *Penthouse* Pet and Hans Bellmer, the artist has been suspected of being ironic – as if a serious artist and a woman would not create these images with empathy and nuance. However, Yuskavage is not ironic: she says of the women in her paintings: 'if they are low, then I am in the ditch with them, and by painting them, I am trying to dig us out together.'³ She tells of how, when she was at art school in the 1980s, she felt suffocated by 'the lack of different personalities'⁴ in painting; flatness was the dogma, and she wanted to make 'paintings that were super-round, highlighted and decadent'.⁵ Subject, narrative and psychology were, however, considered a no-no. Painting breasts – a shape that epitomizes the roundness and lushness she was looking for – was a way both of accessing 'the forbidden' in painting and of rebelling against a repressive creative system that was as much about

a rigid prescription as to what constituted serious, valid art as it was about gender politics – which in some ways, and despite its myriad manifestations, had become its own orthodoxy. In this environment seeing an early show by Jeff Koons was a revelation for Yuskavage and a reminder of what was possible. The late paintings of Philip Guston have also long been an inspiration: she identifies with the artist's position to create 'an ongoing battle between the form and the subject matter'.⁶

Yuskavage has said, 'I am interested in art, not politics. I am interested in giving myself the freedom to paint', and by paint and politics, I am guessing she means the freedom to express herself with pleasure and without censorship. No painting is ever about one thing, but Yuskavage's paintings highlight an aspect that is essential to the most interesting ones: the idea that permission – to do, or make or feel something – is something flexible and often difficult. In this case it has allowed complicated ideas

about the look of seduction (of the painter by her subject matter as well as the other way round), solipsism and Pop to co-exist as equals in an environment in which nothing is either raw or, perhaps surprisingly given their extreme figuration, explicit.

The rawness of real, public nakedness is rare. Our culture is cruel about physical difference and suspicious of a sexual openness unconnected to exploitation. The reductive images we see everyday of naked or semi-clothed women have created an abstract undertow of longing for a woman who does not exist. As a result it can take a moment to move beyond the upfront eroticism and sheer glowing beauty of many of Yuskavage's recent paintings to see how complicated she insists her women must be. Riffing on a distorted echo of an amalgam of this sad archetype – the pin-up girl and goddess – Yuskavage spins the idea of the feminine into near-hallucinogenic tangents (the kind of hallucination that is all the more acute because it is related



Little Northview 2001 Oil on linen 51x46 cm
 Courtesy: Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

so closely to something real). In *Angel* (2004) an enormous bejewelled woman like a Wagnerian earth mother with a stern lovely face and a distracted determination for something unspecified that would seem unassailable rises up in front of somewhat mystical-looking mountains. And in *Balls* (2004), perhaps one of the strangest new paintings, a pregnant woman, naked save for some pointed, striped socks, lies recumbent with an air of gloomy introspection,

as the aforementioned coloured balls glint softly in her pubic mound and lower belly. Flowers tumble down a brown blanket and droop from her shadowed hand. On the wall a small oval portrait is softly lit, its details obscured. The air and the couch are blue. Nothing is straightforward or reducible; distortion has become simply another element of realism. The result or, in other words, the meaning – which remains to be invented if it cannot be revealed – is, in the

most old-fashioned sense of the word, left to the imagination.

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1 Claudia Gold, 'Screwing it on Straight', *Lisa Yuskavage*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2000, p. 13.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

4 Lisa Yuskavage in conversation with the author, August 2004.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Op Cit.*, Gold, p. 12.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 13.