

Beth Park
Diane Zeeuw
Ethics and Visual Representation
April 1, 2012

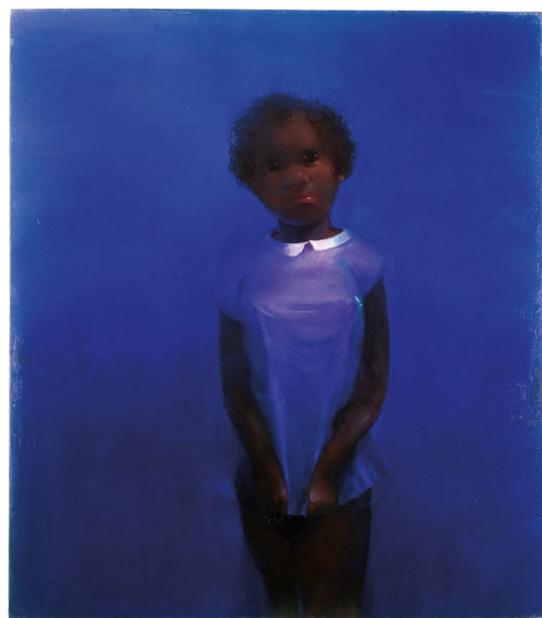
Lisa Yuskavage

When I first decided to use the topic of Lisa Yuskavage's work as the theme for my visual ethics research, I was convinced I would be able to write a solid paper wrapped up with a concrete conclusion. I felt the concepts in her work were obvious in a decidedly offensive manner. Any conclusion I came to would settle on the idea of Lisa Yuskavage being some kind of anti-feminist pervert who simply enjoyed painting pornographic images of women. Since then I have come to further understand that most things, especially those within the contemporary art world, are not precisely what they seem. I went from feeling I had a thorough understanding of this assignment to realizing I had once again severely underestimated something. I no longer feel there is a definitive conclusion concerning the ethics of Lisa Yuskavage's work. Therefore, I have decided to approach it as a self-exploratory project. Yuskavage's work touches on feminist ideas that I have previously had very little understanding of. This was the perfect opportunity to research some prominent feminist theories by relating them to Yuskavage's paintings. This assignment has also forced me to take a closer look at my method of making judgments and how much my upbringing affects them. Looking into these subjects has led me to believe there really is no concise ethical inference to be made about Yuskavage's work. There are many ways to critique it resulting in numerous opinions, but it cannot be wrapped up into a tidy answer. Yuskavage's work remains ambiguous and mysterious to me, but also a lot less offensive than my first impression directed me towards.

The first time I came across Lisa Yuskavage's paintings in a contemporary art history course. My very first reaction was to marvel at the extreme technical proficiency. She sometimes paints in the style of Bonnard, but there is also a Rembrandt quality in her mark making. Yuskavage's paintings almost seem to glow with the luminosity she is able to infuse them with. The paintings are breathtakingly beautiful, until you fully digest the content. The first two paintings shown in the class were titled *The Ones Who Don't Want To*. These especially disturbed me. Both paintings depicted what looks in the face to be a small child, but the body seems to be developed to that of a young woman. The figures wear only a shirt that is not quite long enough to conceal their privates. One of the figures tries to pull her shirt down, but the other has her hands full with a teacup and saucer. Both of the figures have disturbed expressions on their faces. The name of these paintings, combined with the juxtaposition of childish and adult features on the figures creates an uncanny experience.



The Ones Who Don't Want to: Kelly Maria



The Ones Who Don't Want to: Black Baby

The next images shown in the contemporary art history class were chosen from a larger series of Yuskavage's paintings. They were perfect examples of typical Yuskavage paintings. *Changing* shows the artist's tendency to create women with oversized breasts and butts. *Still Life II* is an example of how she affectively objectifies the female. *Still Life II* depicts a woman sitting behind a table of fruits and flowers. On closer inspection you realize the woman is pregnant, but she is so well integrated into the still life she has become a part of it. She is simply another object displayed on this table. Her eyes are downcast and her pose is submissive. She has no legs and therefore no mobility. Her arms are not shown creating the feeling she is bound and helpless. My first impression of Lisa Yuskavage was not a favorable one.



Changing



Still Life II

The first step in my exploration was to find out what Lisa Yuskavage has to say about her work. I quickly discovered Yuskavage does not feel the need to extensively elaborate on her work. She is very vague about the concept and chooses to leave it ambiguous. The lengthiest dialogue I could find was an interview she had with Robert

Enright. The following quote enlightened me to some of the reasoning behind why she is so equivocal about her work.

There's no such thing as a yes or a no, especially when it comes to art. That's why at times I say I don't really know what my work is about. I'm not trying to avoid the issue; I just don't know. I know why I do it and I can tell you the things I was thinking about, but I can't tell you what it's about. I would take it one step further and would say that anything you think it's about, consider that it's also about the opposite. I would like to allow for that. I try to take anything out that leads me to an obvious end too quickly. I like to have contradictions. (Yuskavage 48)

Lisa Yuskavage admits that her work is self-referential. She is sensitive to class distinctions and she hints at insecurities related to the content she provides in her work. She explains her work can be about the gaze, in particular that of the straight male, but at the same time it can be an intimate moment we get to look in on. She then will go on to say it could also be simply about the act of painting itself. When addressed with the feminist message in her work and her lack of a manifesto concerning this, her reply is equally unclear.

I'm riding in on a feminist horse. And that must have a manifesto, which is about righting the wrongs of the past. And either I'm a self-hating woman and I'm aping to the rich fat cats, I'm sure you've come across the stroke material for the patriarchy comment. So I'm just aping, I'm almost like the painter as stripper. Or, on the other hand, I'm taking that all down, I'm dismantling that. The truth is I wouldn't be interested in what I do if either extreme were true. (Yuskavage 40)

Lisa Yuskavage frequently uses old *Penthouse* magazine or 1950s and 60s *Playboy* imagery to model her figures. This is yet another aspect to her work that seems to push some ethical boundaries, but she has an answer for this as well.

The struggle with grace in my work is a struggle between good and evil. Why do I insist on allowing elements of pornography into my work? I think it's because I'm aware that it's the benign presence of

the devil. Whether I believe in the devil is really not the point. I'm talking about the idea. I think this idea of the sacred and the profane has always existed in art. It's a constant theme for me: the struggle between the desire to be right and the desire to be wrong. I think it's all just wanting to be true. And what is true and correct and right in art is often wrong in the world. I'm not advocating women going around showing off their boobies. I'm aware this is art and it isn't real life. I'm not a libertine. I'm actually more prudish than people would think I am. (Yuskavage 48)

Investigating Yuskavage's comments on her own work was helpful to me, but she leaves so much up to the viewer. I felt less than qualified to critique her work, so my next step was to see what art critics had to say. Ostrander's essay *Taste* was very enlightening. He opens with a statement about how Yuskavage's paintings at first seem to take pleasure in offending middle-class taste. Yuskavage uses objects that are linked with domestic stability, sophistication, and manners, which she then contrasts with sexualized, naked females. The way she portrays these woman is also viewed as insulting. The breasts and buttocks are over accentuated, the noses are turned up perfectly, and the figure almost looks like a sexualized caricature. Ostrander brings up Yuskavages label as a "bad girl" artist because of her propensity to create an unnerving atmosphere for the viewer by bombarding him or her with openly sexualized paintings. There is also the frustration created by being unable to decide what Yuskavage's intentions are, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions of your own. (Ostrander 15)

Ostrander is looking at a group of paintings by Yuskavage that range from 1992-2005 when he links them in a single sentence.

"Looking at this group of paintings one recognizes that while the figures are consistently confrontational, much of their complexity lies not only within the cultural play of their overt sexuality, but additionally in how their character draws us toward addressing older questions regarding the representation of the female figure in art, its ties to definitions of the beautiful and to aesthetic pleasure". (Ostrander 15)

Ostrander then suggests that what we might find particularly uncomfortable about Yuskavage's work is how it goes against the grain of older aesthetic values and philosophies that have frowned on artwork that is sexually stimulating. Artwork of this kind risks being seen as pornography and not as art. From a contemporary viewpoint this is unlikely due to the remoteness of the medium. Photography has much more immediacy and is more readily recognized as the medium for pornography. Ostrander says, "Yuskavage's paintings address these questions, seeking to reestablish the sexual agency of painting. Her use of paint specifically strives to enhance the sensual reception of her figures" (16).

Emmanuel Kant's theories on beauty in his "third critique" require the suppression of sexual drive. The judgment of what is beautiful must be unbiased. At first, Ostrander implies Yuskavage's females could not be considered beautiful in Kantian terms since they seem so overtly sexual. Yet the way her work draws question the definition of beauty in her work. Yuskavage's women seem to be asking to be aesthetically judged. This is shown through the different gazes in her paintings. That of the figure confronting the viewer, looked down on the viewer, and of the figure examining herself. (Ostrander 16)

In an effort to obtain a better understanding of the female nude throughout art history, I read Lynda Nead's essays from *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*. Throughout her essays she mainly focuses on three writers. Kenneth Clark, Mary Douglas, and Jacques Derrida. They each represent three distinct fields; art history, anthropology, and philosophy. Clark views the perfect nude is a very traditional and classical one. He sees the nude as being contained and simple. She has her limbs tucked close to the body resembling a sheath. The nude becomes a phallic symbol. He uses very masculine terms when speaking of the nude. This is also how he defines a nude versus a naked. The nude is

clothed, or sheathed in art covering the nakedness. The naked becomes the nude when it transitions from the actual to the ideal. The risk of the nude to art is that it could prompt a sexual response. Containing this risk while using the nude in art constitutes a triumph.

(Nead 7-10) Yuskavage defies much of Clark's aesthetics by having completely uncontained females in her work. She does not pose her females in the traditional stance of a Clark nude with the weight being supported along a shaft of containment. She deliberately sexualizes her figures making it impossible to view them independent of all sexual drive. John Berger challenges Clark's assumptions by saying the nude is inferior to the naked. The naked is free of disguise, free of cultural convention while the nude is subject to the voyeuristic gaze.

(Nead 10-12)

Mary Douglas contains the body even more than Clark. She feels all orifices must be completely sealed. Danger lays in the margins, in something that is neither one thing nor another. Something that refuses to be categorized is a danger. Yuskavage's paintings could easily be considered dangerous by Mary Douglas' standards. We have already heard from Ostrander how unsettling Yuskavage's work is because we cannot categorize it. Her work embodies exactly what Douglas defines as pollution. (Nead 5-6, 31)

Lynda Nead ends the third essay with this statement.

For feminists to reclaim the female body means to challenge the authority of patriarchal boundaries- boundaries of gender and identity, between art and obscenity, the permissible and the forbidden. The issues that this feminist project of reclamation involves go to the heart of patriarchal culture and its founding principles. That aim of such a project should not be once and for all to draw the lines, to establish once and for all the absolute nature and value of different kinds of representation of the female body, but instead to open up the constituency of those who are involved in drawing the lines and framing the definitions. It is an ongoing struggle, but the proliferation of the media in the 1990's and the emergence of new producers and of audiences for images suggest not only that the struggle will be a complex one but also that there will be

more spaces opening out for feminist voices to be heard and for feminist images to be seen. (Nead 141-142)

This leads right into a discussion of Lisa Yuskavage's work seen through the eyes of Ariel Levy, author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Woman and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. Levy's book takes a critical view of modern feminism and how it has been manipulated by raunch culture. She claims women are surrounded by sexual pressures and as a result, many have allowed themselves to become objectified. Due to role models such as *Playboy* or *Girls Gone Wild* women are more concerned with being as sexy as possible instead of independent and accomplished. Strippers are viewed as powerful women to be envied. Levy also criticizes the women who go too far in the other direction and try being just like the men. Levy says they simply begin to objectify other women and perform the same perversities that men are notorious for. It could be said that Lisa Yuskavage creates art that men would find very appealing. She does use old pin-up and porn imagery to model her figures after, and she makes no effort to classify her figures as the nude rather than the naked. The fact that she also refuses to speak clearly and extensively about her concept leaves it open to not only positive, but also critical judgments.

I decided to interview my father, who is also a pastor, to be an example of where I have developed my aesthetics and ethic concerning visual representation. After reading the essay by Ostrander and viewing much of Yuskavage's work, this was his opinion.

It was impossible to consider Lisa Yuskavage's work without thinking of raunchy line art drawn on locker room walls by junior high boys. Sure, the skills evidenced are worlds apart, but the in-your-face attitude and shock-the-grown-ups intent are very evident in both. The only thing missing is the juvenile giggling. Barely adolescent boys would love to be able to replicate her "Precious Moments"/Doe-Eyed/Anime faces with hyper-sexualized female forms.

The question we're left with is, why is her work celebrated? Is it just her technical skill? If it is, then the principle must be that great technical skill redeems debauched representations. But how far should that standard be applied? Should the most seductive, charming pedophiles be celebrated for their skill rather than imprisoned for their crime? You have to wonder where Yuskavage's work fits in our culture. On what walls could it be hung without a brown paper wrapper? My suspicion is that her celebrity is and always will be limited to the insular art world.

And of course all of these questions are just reminders that if your metaphysic provides no foundation for ethics, then ultimately all moral standards, as well as assertions concerning meaning and significance, are just personal opinions. An artist operating on that kind of philosophy is floating in an infinite ocean of meaningless experiences, creating little solipsistic fantasies of significance and morality. From that perspective, all discussion of ethics in art is just static. Ethics must be rooted in metaphysics. (Park)

This assignment really forced me to take a much closer look at my own ethics and how I have developed them. I believe it is something that is in a constant state of flux and must be continually examined. Although I have learned a great deal through this assignment about many subjects, I still do not have a completely formed opinion of Lisa Yuskavage's work. I think Yuskavage should be much more clear and vocal about what her paintings mean, especially since they can so easily be interpreted in a bad direction, but I am no longer simply offended when viewing her work.

Works Cited

de la Torre, Mónica. "Lisa Yuskavage" *Bomb* Fall 2011: 82-89.

Enright, Robert. "The Overwhelmer: The Art of Lisa Yuskavage." *Border Crossings* Aug. 2007: 36-48.

Landi, Ann. "Disturbing Beauty" *ARTnews* Jan. 2004: 118-121.

Levy, Ariel. *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York: Free Press, 2005.

Nead, Lynda. *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Ostrander, Tobias. "Taste" *Lisa Yuskavage*. Mexico: Primera, 2006. 15-17.

Park, Russell. Personal Interview. 15 April. 2012.

Prose, Francine. "Preemptive Strike." *Modern Painters* Mar. 2005: 72-75.

Viveros-Faune, Christian. "Cursed Beauty" *Lisa Yuskavage*. Mexico: Primera, 61-63.

Yuskavage, Lisa. Interview with Robert Enright. *Border Crossings* Aug. 2007: 36-48.

Lisa Yuskavage







