

Lisa Yuskavage *New Paintings*

September 9–October 23, 2021
533 West 19th Street, New York



Lisa Yuskavage, *Night Classes at the Department of Painting Drawing and Sculpture*, 2018-2020. © Lisa Yuskavage. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of new works by Lisa Yuskavage. On view at 533 West 19th Street in New York, this will be the artist's seventh solo show with the gallery.

For more than thirty years, Yuskavage's highly original approach to figurative painting has challenged conventional understandings of the genre. Her simultaneously bold, eccentric, exhibitionist, and introspective characters assume dual roles of subject and object, complicating the position of viewership. At times playful and harmonious, and at other times rueful and conflicted, these characters are cast within fantastical compositions in which realistic and abstract elements coexist and color determines meaning. While the artist's painterly techniques evoke art-historical precedents, her motifs are often inspired by popular culture, creating an underlying dichotomy between high and low and, by implication, sacred and profane, harmony and dissonance. Yet her oeuvre compellingly resists categorization, insisting instead on its own kind of emotional formalism in which characters and pictorial inventions assume equal importance.

In this exhibition, Yuskavage continues her long-standing exploration of what constitutes a model, exceptionally summoning the history of her own work as part of that process. Its two rooms are defined by contrasting moods that the artist has often intertwined within individual paintings, and which both engage with aspects of art making. The first includes a group of works that confront the viewer on varied levels, recalling the tension between seer and seen. Addressing issues of vulnerability, power, and rage, they reference an art-historical sub-tradition "in which rudeness fortifies erudition and corrosive humor strips humanism of all sentimentality," exemplified by artists such as Francisco Goya and Philip Guston.¹

The exhibition proceeds to four large-scale color-field compositions saturated in jewel-like pigments of red, green, yellow, and pink; they each depict a studio or art-school classroom with canvases and other traditional and nontraditional still-life objects scattered throughout. Taking their point of departure in Henri Matisse's *The Red Studio* (1911) and *The Pink Studio* (1911), they convey a strong sense of the

¹ Robert Storr, *Guston* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), p. 54.

interiority of art making, yet Yuskavage's theatrical lighting adds a sense of drama, whereby the subjects appear summoned from color and the settings emerge like prosceniums or shallow stages. While her methodical investigation of her medium has predominantly taken place within distinct series, these works layer a variety of processes, techniques, characters, and references, formal as well as personal. They also revisit specific paintings from the past three decades, notably from the singularly colored *Bad Baby* series of models in explicit poses from the early 1990s, seamlessly integrating these as works in progress within the new narratives. Epitomizing painting's inherent ability to compress time, real and imaginary references come together as per an inspirational poem by Wallace Stevens, highlighted by the artist for this show: "The world imagined is the ultimate good. / This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous."²

In the more than three-meter-long *Night Classes at the Department of Painting Drawing and Sculpture* (2018–2020), faintly visible subjects were pulled out from the pentimenti of a deep cadmium red, yielding a dramatic yet lighthearted scene with a model and two nude students examining each other in a dreamlike state after hours. The palette and a configuration of artworks within the room specifically recall Matisse's aforementioned studio interiors, yet also juxtapose the modernist's desire for flatness and abstraction with deep shadows and minute attention to realistic detail—treating color as round and three-dimensional. One of her earliest works, *The Ones That Don't Want To: Bad Baby* (1992), is displayed on the back wall—the almost monochromatic painting with its angry-looking model layered into a new, fictive whole.

In *Master Class* (2021), a similarly crowded studio space is steeped in cadmium green. Common for Yuskavage's depiction of couples, the relationship between the male and female figure appears psychologically charged and open-ended, just as it remains unclear who is the master and who is the student. A fire depicted in a small painting on the central easel (Yuskavage's *Beach Fire* [2012]) stands in contrast both to the generic abstract work behind it and to the green palette, adding a subtly unsettling element to the composition. In *Yellow Studio* (2021), a sense of danger is invoked by the hammer and nails and two-by-fours in front of a seated young woman, whose pose recalls a Hellenistic sculpture of a boy pulling a thorn from his foot. Scattered around her are color-aid papers used as a teaching device by Josef Albers in his famous class at Yale School of Art, "The Interaction of Color," while other elements in the room subtly draw attention to the model's solitary presence. The intense yet soft color scheme oscillates between real and otherworldly, as if capturing memory and imagination within a single moment.

This idea is further epitomized in *Pink Studio (Rendezvous)* (2021). Seemingly devoid of human presence, the large, luminous composition features multiple works all in progress by the artist, including *Home* (2018), *Dude of Sorrows* (2015), and a selection of the early *Babies* from the 1990s. Loosely based on a photo of her studio, the painting also includes an arrangement of other objects, each adding their own symbolism. Framed by a round theatrical spotlight, they create an imaginary setting in which themes from throughout Yuskavage's oeuvre meet in impossible ways that could only occur in a painted world. A ruler and measuring tape near the back wall can thus be seen in dialogue with the explicit subject matter of many of the depicted paintings, evoking the vital tension between rationality and irrationality—and, by extension, between Apollonian and Dionysian principles and the id and the super-ego—which characterizes not only the artist's work, but also the artistic impulse more broadly. As Stevens's poem continues, "Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves. / We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous."³

² Wallace Stevens, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (1951), from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), p. 555.

³ Stevens, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," p. 555.

The anger and latent violence of the *Bad Babies* summoned in the backgrounds of the four studios appear to have been transferred to the group of paintings in the exhibition's first room, while their vibrant color fields have expanded out of the canvases and into the new compositions. Replicated as works in progress, it is an open question whether their confrontational nature is merely on hold—the only sign of the artist who arranged the conversation is a burning cigarette in the foreground of *Pink Studio (Rendezvous)*. Yet their intricate play of vulnerability and manipulation takes on new significance within the context of the studio, a space that shapes both painter and painted and thus remains central to the question of what constitutes a model.

Born in 1962 in Philadelphia, Lisa Yuskavage received her BFA from the Tyler School of Art in 1984 and her MFA from the Yale School of Art in 1986. Since 2005, the artist's work has been represented by David Zwirner. In 2006, two solo exhibitions were concurrently presented at David Zwirner and Zwirner & Wirth, New York, followed by presentations at the gallery in 2009, 2011, 2015, and 2017. *Babie Brood, Small Paintings 1985–2018* and *New Paintings*, the two-part exhibition on view in 2018, marked her sixth gallery solo show.

Yuskavage's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at institutions worldwide, including the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (2000); Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva (2001); Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City (2006); and The Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin (2011; organized as part of *Dublin Contemporary 2011*).

In 2015, The Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, presented *Lisa Yuskavage: The Brood*, a major solo exhibition spanning twenty-five years of the artist's work. The show traveled to the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis in 2016. A large-scale, comprehensive publication by Skira Rizzoli, published on occasion of the exhibition, created in close collaboration with Yuskavage, includes texts by renowned art historians, curators, and writers, including Christopher Bedford, Suzanne Hudson, Catherine Lord, and Siddhartha Mukherjee as well as an interview with the artist by Katy Siegel.

Lisa Yuskavage: Wilderness is currently on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art through September 19, 2021. It was previously on view at the Aspen Art Museum in 2019 to 2020.

Museum collections that hold works by the artist include the Art Institute of Chicago; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Long Museum, Shanghai; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Rubell Museum, Miami; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Seattle Art Museum; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Yuskavage lives and works in New York.

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