

Pam Rosenblatt

**On being bold:
the “Lisa Yuskavage: The Brood”
exhibition at Brandeis University’s the Rose Art Museum**

Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis once said, “If we would guide by the light of reason we must let our minds be bold.”¹ Such are wise and vital words from a man who had a prestigious university named after him and whose legal philosophy guides that university to even today in the year 2016.

In fact, in 1961, when Brandeis University founded the Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Massachusetts, the museum was known as a bold institution, a champion of innovative and courageous art exhibitions. Even today The Rose Art Museum’s daring philosophy works well with internationally renowned painters like Lisa Yuskavage.

The “Lisa Yuskavage: The Brood” exhibit began at the Rose Art Museum on September 13, 2015 and concluded on December 13, 2015. The exhibition will re-open in St. Louis at the Contemporary Art Museum from January 15, 2016 through April 10, 2016.

“The Rose Art Museum is a good platform for the work of an artist like Lisa Yuskavage,” Dr. Christopher Bedford, the curator of “Lisa Yuskavage: The Brood” exhibition, said in an October 7, 2015 phone interview with Wilderness House Literary Review.

Like the Rose Art Museum, Yuskavage’s work is also bold and pioneering, explained Bedford, who is also the Henry and Lois Foster director of the Rose Art Museum.

“It’s great to see work brought together that was in many cases separate at birth,” Lisa Yuskavage commented in an October 13, 2015 email interview with Wilderness House Literary Review.

“This [exhibit] is a wonderful opportunity for the public to see [my paintings] as they were meant to be seen.”

Born in Philadelphia in 1962, Yuskavage studied at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University where she received her B.F.A. and at Yale University School of Art where she graduated with a M.F.A.

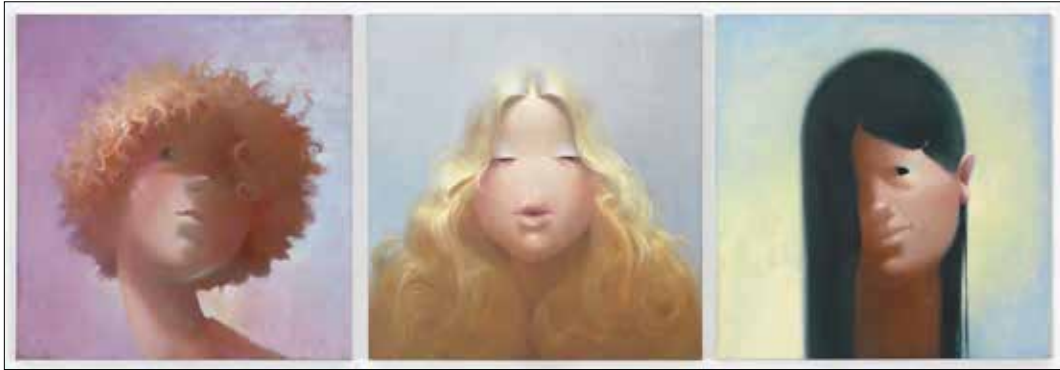
She is affiliated with David Zwirner Gallery of New York and London.



Lisa Yuskavage, The Ones That Don't Want To: Buttons, 1991. Private Collection, London. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/ London.

1 The Brandeis University Louis D. Brandeis Legacy Fund for Social Justice Website, October 7, 2015

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1



Lisa Yuskavage, Blonde, Brunette, Redhead, 1995. Collection of Yvonne & Leo Villareal. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London

“Lisa Yuskavage: The Brood” is not an ordinary show that is filled with paintings of flowers, pastoral landscapes, regal portraits, or modern buildings. It is an exhibit of imaginative young girls – or nymphs as Yuskavage calls them – who live in a fantasy world made out of the depths of the artist’s psyche and tooled technically by Yuskavage’s art history background.

Many of the “nymphs” are nude or they are scantily attired or they are fully dressed often in strong but muted hues of red or green oil paint, etc. Her series called “The Ones That Don’t Want To: ...” display the each of the lone nymphs in each separate painting in an innocent yet thick toned light.

Some people may be offended by the nudity or the overly large sized thighs, deformed ears, the only one visible eye on a nymph’s face as her hair covers a few of the nymphs’ faces, the lacking of a nose, and the unusually grand breasts that are sometimes depicted in Yuskavage’s paintings.

A few of the paintings that reflect such unusual physical traits include: “Big Agnes” (1994); “Blonde, Brunette, Redhead” (1995); and “Wilderness” (2009).

He explained that Lisa is a true student of art history. Female nudes in the art world are generally painted by men. But Yuskavage paints her own gender – very high class and low class on the female gender pole. The low ends of the pole are low sources and pornography. That’s where impulsiveness lies. And sometimes she paints images of men, too.

“Ultimately, Lisa Yuskavage’s paintings are about the experience of the world we know through the prism of a studio known only to the artist. Hers are paintings of the mind that emerge as raw, public propositions from the most private of spaces,” he continued.

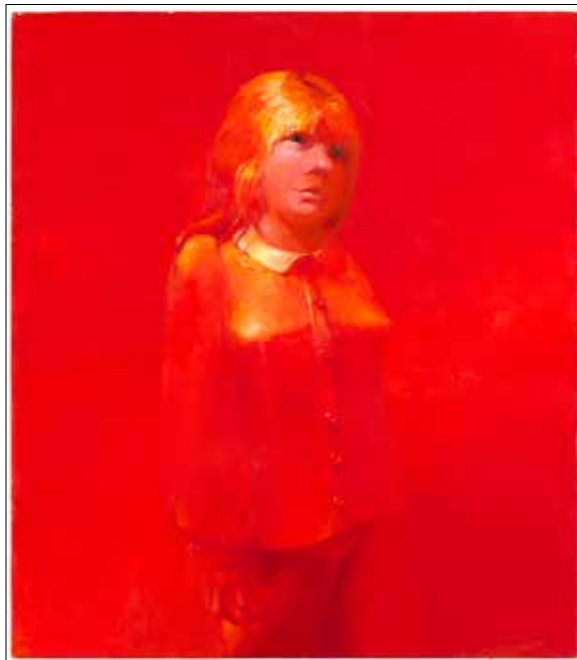
There does not seem to be one specific answer to the why that Yuskavage creates women in such vicarious situations. Her figures are not really real. They are paintings. So they are an idea about creating an image of an idea. She paints a red or a green person. It’s fantasy. The audience has to look at a painting as a painting and realize it’s not about what the audi-

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

ence thinks it is. They have to know that it's a presence of an idea instead of a likeness to reality.²

Bedford also suggested, "All is revealed, and yet meaning, both implied and direct, remains elusive. Absent a clear narrative, the questions of color and meaning become central."

How, when, and why did the "Lisa Yuskavage: The Brood" develop and become an exhibition? Bedford had been intrigued by Lisa Yuskavage's work since the 1990s when he attended Oberlin College as an art history major. At Oberlin, he took a course in women's gender roles with Professor Patricia Matthews. During the time frame of the course, Bedford was playing college football. It was an interesting combination of events. "Kind of a symbiotic relationship," he said.



*Lisa Yuskavage, Big Agnes, 1994.
Collection of Steven T. Mnuchin.
Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner,
New York/London.*

And then he became more familiar with her work fifteen years before he had the opportunity to actually know and work with Yuskavage, something that happened during the past three years.

Over the years he has seen how Yuskavage processes techniques that render rubs against society's conservative views. The technical aspects in her artwork are radically successful in portraying gender and high and low class body images, he mentioned.

"Details are present and clearly stated in accessible and conventional language, but this apparent clarity belies a deep well of dark and unsettling suggestion, unquestionable present, uncanny and unfamiliar, with meaning just slightly out of reach, and thick with implication," commented Bedford. "There is a clarity of presenta-

tion and elusiveness of meaning."

Technically, Yuskavage is astute. For over 25 years she has been steadily creating good art. But, as mentioned earlier, some people may be offended by her content. One reviewer recently suggested that Yuskavage's work is technically good but the subject matter is rather pornographic.³

² Pam Rosenblatt, Phone Interview: Dr. Christopher Bedford and Wilderness House Literary Review, October 6, 2015.

³ Sebastian Smee. "Porn-inspired art that pulses with intelligence", The Boston Globe, September 17, 2015, pages 1 – 8.

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

When asked about this comment, Bedford replied, “No, I don’t see Lisa Yuskavage’s work as pornographic. Yes, she is a great artist and makes great art. When one door opens, then another one opens. Then another door opens, etc. The worlds depicted are just that – worlds— and they are fundamentally distant from our own.”

“[Yuskavage’s] work is a continuation of ideas. Her figurative artwork is interchangeable. The figurative tradition is unimaginable without Lisa’s contribution [to the art world],” he said.

Bedford does not think that the term “pornographic” is appropriate in describing “Lisa Yuskavage: The Brood”. He finds that the works resist that. It’s about empowering women, especially women artists, to create equally as men do.

When asked what he thinks Supreme Court Justice Brandeis would comment about the “Lisa Yuskavage: The Brood” exhibition, Bedford acknowledged, “Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis very famously said that it’s very important to let our minds be bold,” as mentioned in the beginning of this article. But Brandeis would even go further. This Supreme Court Justice also would probably suggest that it’s important to be able to view art as long as people have the opportunity to comment positively and/or negatively about it - to be able to discuss things boldly.

Brandeis believed in being bold. He would have agreed to have the “Lisa Yuskavage: The Brood”

exhibition in the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts. Yuskavage is bold,

Bedford stated.



Lisa Yuskavage, Wilderness, 2009. Collection of Liz and Eric Lefkofsky. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York_London.jpg

Being bold in art does not frighten Yuskavage. She seems very comfortable using her right of freedom of speech and assembly. “I am lucky to

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

have been born outgoing," Yuskavage said. "It has its drawbacks sometimes. But mostly it is great, especially as a woman!"

As Brandeis once stated, "Fear of serious injury alone cannot justify oppression of free speech and assembly. Men feared witches and burnt women. It is the function of speech to free men from the bondage of irrational fears."⁴

Bibliography:

Brandeis University "The Rose" Press Release. "The Rose Art Museum Presents Lisa Yuskavage: The

Brood, A Major Solo Exhibition Spanning 25 Years of the Artist's Work September 13 – December 13, 2015".

The Brandeis University Louis D. Brandeis Legacy Fund for Social Justice Website, October 7, 2015

<http://www.brandeis.edu/legacyfund/bio.html>

Earnest, Jarrett. "Lisa Yuskavage: In the Studio". *Art in America*. October 2015. pages 142 – 151.

Rosenblatt, Pam. Email interview: Lisa Yuskavage and Wilderness House Literary Review. October 13, 2015.

Rosenblatt, Pam. Phone interview: Dr. Christopher Bedford and Wilderness House Literary Review. October 6, 2015.

Smee, Sebastian. "Porn-inspired art that pulses with intelligence". *The Boston Globe*. September 17, 2015. Pages 1 – 8.

Solondz, Todd. "Lisa Yuskavage". *Interview Magazine*. September 10, 2015. pages 155 – 159.

⁴ The Brandeis University Louis D. Brandeis Legacy Fund for Social Justice website, October 7, 2015 <http://www.brandeis.edu/legacyfund/bio.html>