
If Jan Vermeer shopped at Kmart, or if Pierre Bonnard were interested in what it might feel like to be pregnant, then their paintings might resemble Lisa Yuskavage’s new work. As it is, no one makes pictures like hers. Showing in New York for the first time since 2003, Yuskavage proved several things. First, that she is her generation’s best colorist, and that her toxic-sunset palette serves to highlight rather than obscure her expertise with heaving, tendril-like line. Second, that the narcissistic nymphets and tit-goddesses for which she has been both celebrated and reviled have matured into complex emotional dyads. In these canvases, even when a figure appears alone, she shares a dream space with iconic props that are her avatars.

A third achievement of these meditative, gorgeously weird paintings is that—dependent as they are on the old equation of luscious paint with female nudity—the metaphor of one kind of pretty matter standing in for another has been sublimed; that is, rendered both beautiful and frightening. These are portraits of thoughts if ever there were any. But the psyche, for Yuskavage, is a pulse in the flesh, and fleshliness is a continuum where human versus inanimate is not an important distinction. She blurs a ninth-month belly or grotesque breast into a nobbly pear, a fake pearl, or a hot sfumato that describes no tangible thing at all. All are envisioned as temporary clumps of the same shimmering, morphing stuff, in which even aggressive physicality evanesces.

The show was organized in two parts. Downtown at David Zwirner Gallery were ten full-scale paintings; uptown, Zwirner & Wirth presented twenty-eight smaller works on canvas, linen, panel, and paper. With a few exceptions, Yuskavage’s belle-laïde ladies appear in repeating roles. There’s the gravid contemplative standing beside—almost within—a not-quite-solid table strewn with plums or
pomegranates. In some versions, a tasseled curtain overhangs her; in others, she sucks an indeterminate red berry while butterflies flit about. Another trope suggests Demeter and Persephone, or what Yeats would call the “dialogue of self and soul.” A doughy, currant-eyed, rather haggard nude is comforted by a spring maiden with ribbons in her hair. A variation on this theme presents the half-merged couple as lover-twins, joined by matching necklaces, panties, or opera gloves. Clinging to a hillside or hidden amidst branches, the figures grow together like two blooms on a stalk. The pregnant women, similarly, commune with their ripe drupes as sisters.

Naturally, there is trouble in paradise. Notwithstanding the flowers and fruit that surround her, the thoughtful character in _Persimmons_, 2006, exhibited at David Zwirner, has apparently undergone a mastectomy of sorts. A long necklace crosses her asymmetrical chest, its highlighted beads expressing the same uncanny vitality as the berries that seem to migrate, of their own accord, toward the dark beneath her skirt. In _Biting the Red Thing_, 2004–2005, also on show at David Zwirner, the fruit bowl filled with translucent orbs is not grounded on the table but levitates in rusty shadow, the same blood-rich passage into which the woman’s arm deflates in a handless, trunklike appendage. The baby in _It’s a Boy_, 2006, seen at Zwirner & Wirth, looks genuinely happy. But where one eye should be there is only ominous smoothness.

The unit of measure for Yuskavage is the small sphere or dot—eye, nipple, berry, bud, bubble, bauble, melon, tumor, brushstroke. These compositional molecules show off her mutant old-master skill and speak about conception, fruition, rot, and dissolution as phases of a polymorphous, universal fact—“polymorphous and universal” meaning not only “painterly,” but “female.”