



Lisa Yuskavage, *Golden Couple*, 2018, oil on linen, 77 1/8 × 70".

## Lisa Yuskavage

DAVID ZWIRNER | 519 WEST 19TH STREET

The baby-faced blonde with big pink breasts spreading her legs in Lisa Yuskavage's *Split*, 1995, wears nothing but a tiny tangerine shrug and a "come hither, Humbert" look. The invitation might be erotic, but the scene is not: Her legs taper into tentacles, her nipples point in opposite directions, and a mouth is not her only missing orifice. Even the pubescent cutie-pies with intact anatomy who populate Yuskavage's paintings are made repellent by their saccharine trappings. More than thirty years of underage popies rendered in Jordan-almond pastels and smoldering shades of red, gold, and acid green were on parade in "Babie Brood: Small Paintings 1985–2018," a survey of nearly one hundred studies and small works in David Zwirner's Chelsea space.

When Yuskavage first unveiled her harems of button-nosed jailbait in the early 1990s, writers

responded with prose fit for the Book of Revelation. These paintings were straight-up “soft porn,” pronounced the prominent feminist art historian Amelia Jones in the *Washington Post*. Yuskavage was not only making “a travesty of the medium,” the scholar and critic Lane Relyea wrote in the pages of this magazine, she was “caricaturing women in an ideological shorthand and raping them.” The ’90s were a tricky time to be a woman painting sexualized female bodies. To be a good feminist, it seems one had to either explicitly rail against misogyny (Sue Williams), assert female sexuality (Nicole Eisenman), or be far more obviously ironic than Yuskavage was when channeling the gaze of the oppressor (Lutz Bacher, with her tongue-in-cheek *Playboy* pinups).

The sight of Yuskavage’s infantilized women remains unpleasant even today, likely because the artist’s position regarding her subjects remains ambiguous. The power of the paintings is largely due to the opacity of her intention. If the work is about objectification, Yuskavage does not exempt herself from a mass culture that puts pouting, half-naked teenagers on billboards at the same time that it censures pedophilia. Although critics have compared her to Paul McCarthy, usually to condemn both artists for exploiting shock value, what the pair actually have in common is the impulse to probe what they themselves might find disgusting.

Along with studies for well-known works, “Babie Brood” presented more obscure experiments. These included *KK*, 1998, a raw and tender portrait of the artist’s childhood friend Kathy, who modeled for many of the *Penthouse*-inspired paintings of that contentious period. Half in shadow, she looks out from under one downy eyebrow with a commanding blend of vulnerability and pathos. Paintings like this, hung amid the Cabbage Patch coquettes, added facets to one’s sense of the artist’s interest in femininity and role-playing.

The eight large linen canvases comprising “Lisa Yuskavage: New Paintings,” on display at Zwirner’s uptown gallery, did not depict the usual doe-eyed naïfs in knee socks, but they did not stake out especially bold new territory, either. All vaguely set in the 1970s, seven portrayed heterosexual couples, many of them ostensibly happy. The subjects of *Couple in Bed*, 2017, for instance, appear wholly at peace. The way the sleeping man with a mustache nuzzles into his partner’s arm and presses her hand to his heart suggests sincere affection without being overly sentimental. A young man and a pneumatic waif testing the limits of her bikini amid the greenery in *The Tongue Tondo*, 2018, star in a lighthearted Rococo romance for the present

day. *Bedheads*, 2018, pointedly features two candles, two glasses of wine, and two lovers, making coupledness its very subject matter. *Golden God*, 2018, is more complex. A shirtless, middle-aged man, awash in yellow light, confronts us dead-on with a tense smile and close-set blue eyes. He wears thin chains, bauble necklaces, bracelets, and rings, but his most striking accessory is the lithe young woman behind him, whose slender arms hang over his chest. Her head lolls above his right shoulder, eyes rolled upward—Saint Teresa in ecstasy, or in a roofie swoon? One gets the sense that she would collapse backward if he were not gripping her limp hands. This sinister guru, a cult leader in the mold of Charles Manson (or any number of #MeToo aggressors), spiked the otherwise anodyne show with welcome hints of weirdness and depravity. Most of the other scenes, however, felt like virgin daiquiris compared to the potent cocktails of which Yuskavage is capable.

—Zoë Lescaze