Lisa Yuskavage: **Motherfucking Foodeating,** *1997, oil on linen, 72 by 84 inches.*
Photo courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

Picturehood is Powerful

Three young figurative painters—John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage and Catherine Howe—focus almost exclusively on female subjects. Here, the author suggests how this trio's provocative manipulation of kitsch and of exaggerated sexual characteristics can be read in formal and allegorical terms.

BY BARRY SCHWABSKY

John Currin: **The Bra Shop**, *1997, oil on canvas, 48 by 38 inches. Photo courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.*

Catherine Howe: **Untitled (the artist)**, *1997, oil on canvas, 66 by 52 inches. Photo courtesy Bill Maynes Gallery, New York.*

If you're looking for signs of a rupture in art, it's always worth looking for what people hate, or what they love in ways that are curiously akin to hate. Certainly the work of three young figurative painters, John Currin, Catherine Howe and Lisa Yuskavage, has been a lightning rod for extreme though sometimes deeply conflicted feelings. Any gallery-goer is liable to run across scores of dreadful paintings, but only a special irritant could incite a charge, as Yuskavage has, of having manufactured ones that are "knowingly dreadful."[1] I still haven't figured out whether one review of her 1994 show in Los Angeles is meant to be positive or negative; though its author also finds her "tr[ying] hard . . . to make a travesty of the medium," his tone leaves it unclear whether that prospect is exciting or awful.[2] In Howe's case, one early response was to see the paintings as wantonly seductive, like "a woman you know you should definitely *not* get involved with"; the severe advice concluding the review: "resist."[3] As for Currin, even his critical supporters project notably ambivalent attitudes that materialize in titles like "A Can of Worms" and "The Weirdest of the Weird."[4]

What kind of paintings are they, that elicit these sometimes horrified, sometimes queasily enthusiastic responses? From Currin, there have been eerily bland "portraits" of ghostly, dead-eyed, somehow nerveless blonde girls; pairs of mismatched lovers (he, often a sort of effete scarecrow with a pipe and a seemingly pasted-on beard; she, jailbait, gazing at him in inexplicable admiration) painted with the fluttery brushstrokes and airy palette of the French Rococo; and most recently, as overwrought as the first paintings were willfully anemic, exaggeratedly blowsy babes who seem lifted out of smutty comic books from the 1960s. Howe has given us fantasy portraits of a different kind in which women painted with dashing brushwork and strong contrasts à la Robert Henri vie with equally bravura backgrounds that imitate the styles of de Kooning, Clyfford Still and other Abstract Expressionists. As time goes on, she's welcomed an ever-increasing kitsch content. Lately, she's taken on the hoary subject of the painter's-model-as-sexually-available-female. Appropriately, Howe poses her models in studio settings redolent of long-obsolete fantasies of the artistic *vie de bohème* like those in Anaïs Nin's soft-core tales of the 1930s. As a stylistic equivalent, she indulges in lots of palette-knife effects evocative of everything bad, from Bernard Buffet to paintings for '50s ballet posters. Yuskavage, who first painted preadolescent girls bathed in sticky-sweet candy-colored monochrome fields, has since inflated and mutated them into outrageous quasi-pornographic sirens—garishly lit nudes whose anatomies are as distorted as their erotic appetites would seem to be.

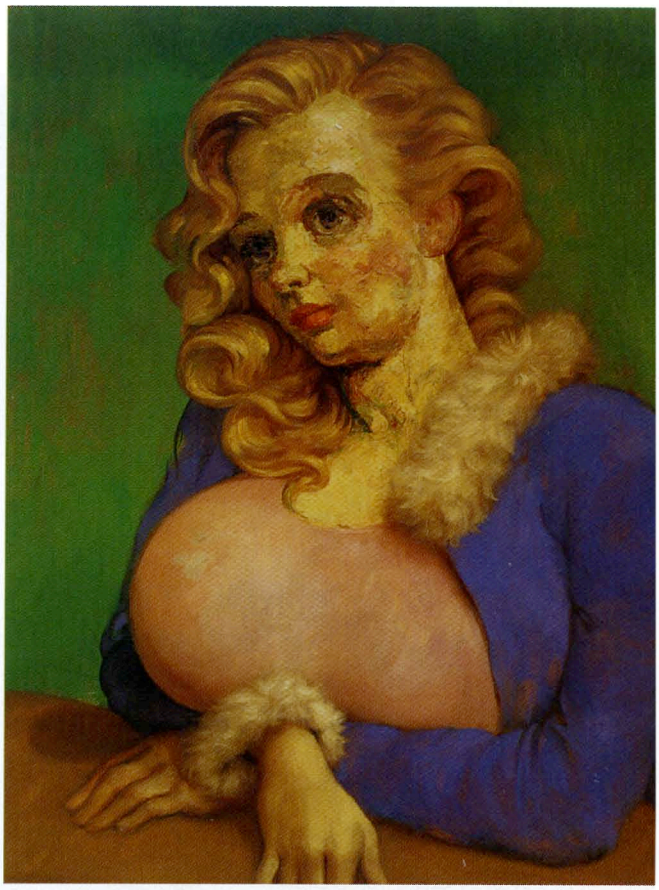
For all their commerce with kitsch, however, what Howe, Currin and Yuskavage are up to is not simply exploiting kitsch as a Pop element, nor are they out to make "Bad Painting" in the '70s sense. Instead, they seem fascinated by what they perceive as painting's fundamental affinity with kitsch.[5] Their combination of outré subject matter and an underlying intentness on the act of painting serve to remind us that Good Painting and Bad Painting have more in common than we like to

Currin puts the viewer in an overtly voyeuristic peephole position that is implictly subservient; Yuskavage's figures are weirdly customized, like machines which have been designed to astonish.

think, that a Courbet can be close to a barroom nude, or an early Picasso akin to anybody else's sad clown.

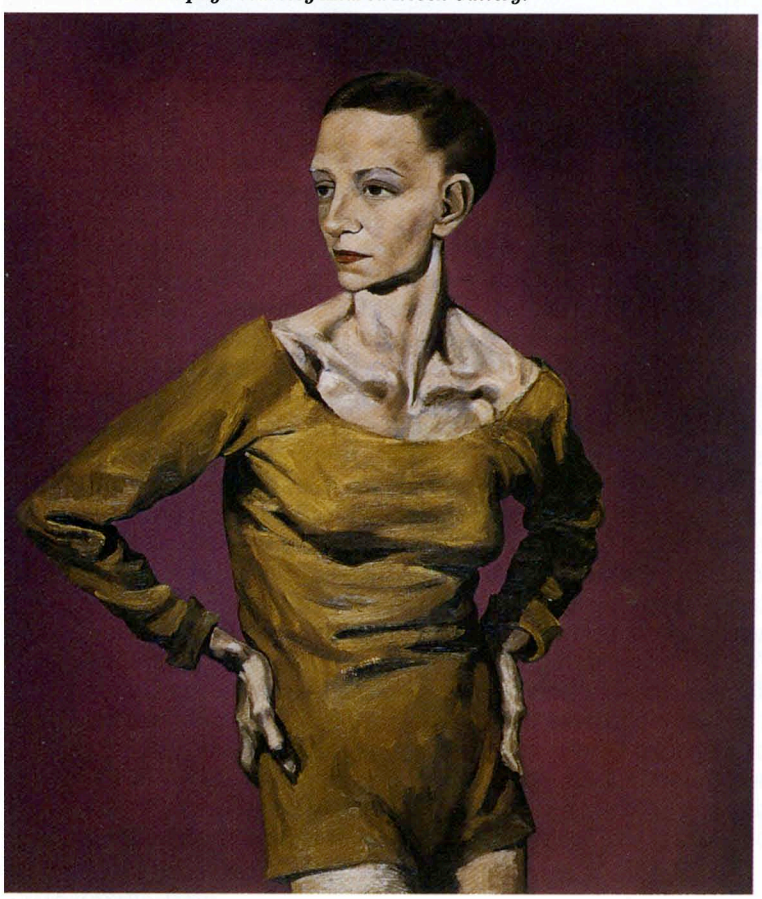
But, make no mistake, it is emphatically Good Painting that these three pursue. When Currin overtly refers to van Gogh (right down to the absinthe-green background) in a painting with a title as embarrassing as *The Magnificent Bosom* (1997)—or even more shockingly, to Botticelli in *Pelletiere* (1996), whose pose has been lifted from the Florentine's Venus; when Howe takes on a whole series of model-in-the-studio pictures that evoke both Baroque allegories of the art of painting and the last gasps of that tradition of allegory in the late studio series of Corot; when Yuskavage takes over a practice of the Renaissance studios by making figures of Hydrocal (in the old days it would have been plaster), to work out the composition and lighting of her paintings; then we are hardly surprised that Currin says—though any of them could have said it—that he finds himself "looking at old art . . . because those are the best pictures."[6] If the results are ugly or vulgar, overwrought or sentimentally prurient, it's thanks to a peculiar kind of obsessive love of painting, one so single-minded that even the flaws of the beloved, that is, of painting and its history, are cherished—even more, perhaps, than its beauties. At its most extreme, this becomes something like the attitude of medieval saints who proved their love of God's creation by drinking the pus from the suppurating sores of plague victims.

It is this intersection of vulgarity and earnestness, of kitsch and the great tradition, of disgust and desire, that distinguishes Yuskavage's, Currin's and Howe's work from some other current reappearances of figurative painting. For instance, artists such as Richard Phillips, Matvey Levenstein or the late Peter Cain show a similar earnestness about painting technique, but their work (in the tradition of Gerhard Richter) is mediated in the first place through its relation to photography and only tacitly to the tradition of painting that produced modernism, so they downplay the unruliness of the painterly mark. (Currin, Howe and Yuskavage depend on photography, too—it is, after all, our era's primary mediator of images, whether in art reproductions or stroke books—but that has not been a focus of meaning in their work.) On the other hand, while painters such as Karen Kilimnik and Elizabeth Peyton also eschew seamlessly photographic surface effects in favor of the evidence of the painter's hand, as Currin, Howe and Yuskavage do, their styles are looser, indeed insouciantly slapdash to the point where they become self-consciously amateurish. Kilimnik's and Peyton's paintings recall the reveries of a teenage pop fan inspired by such forms of commercial art as fashion or record-cover illustration more than by painting as a high art.



Currin: **The Magnificent Bosom**, *1997, oil on canvas, 36 by 28 inches.*

Currin: **Ramona**, *1992, oil on canvas, 44 by 38 inches.*
Photos this page courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.



To cultivate the look of photography or of illustration is to sidestep a confrontation with what it means to paint figuratively in the wake of modernism. Undoubtably, sidestepping this issue is wiser than naively believing one can just rejoin the grand tradition—as if modernism, abstraction, conceptual art and the rest had never happened. But better still (or at least more nuanced) is to approach the figure as if modernism and its consequences were, as Clement Greenberg pointed out, the upshot of a longer tradition. It's not in order to restore some lost continuity that Howe, Yuskavage and Currin reintroduce the figure and the volumetric space in which it moves and breathes; their rupture is *within* rather than *with* the modern tradition.

There are certain things these three artists immediately have in common. They are of the same generation (around 35 years old) and all had their first solo shows in 1989 or 1990. There is some social overlap among them; for instance, Yuskavage and Currin were students at Yale at the same time (both MFA 1986); Currin's first show was at the New York

alternative space White Columns, when Howe was part of its curatorial staff. More to the point, however, are the similarities of subject and approach their work has shared. All three began by painting single isolated figures—always female—against essentially abstract, spatially indefinite grounds. So far they've only departed from this formula to a moderate degree: Currin by doing some paintings of men and couples in addition to women; Yuskavage with multifigure compositions without overt interaction among the figures (though she's still only made one painting with a male subject); Howe by gradually making her settings somewhat more specific, adding props to turn the scene into a generic studio environment. (Yuskavage and Howe have also tried their hands at still life.) For all that, the subject of "woman in painting" remains central to the work of all three.

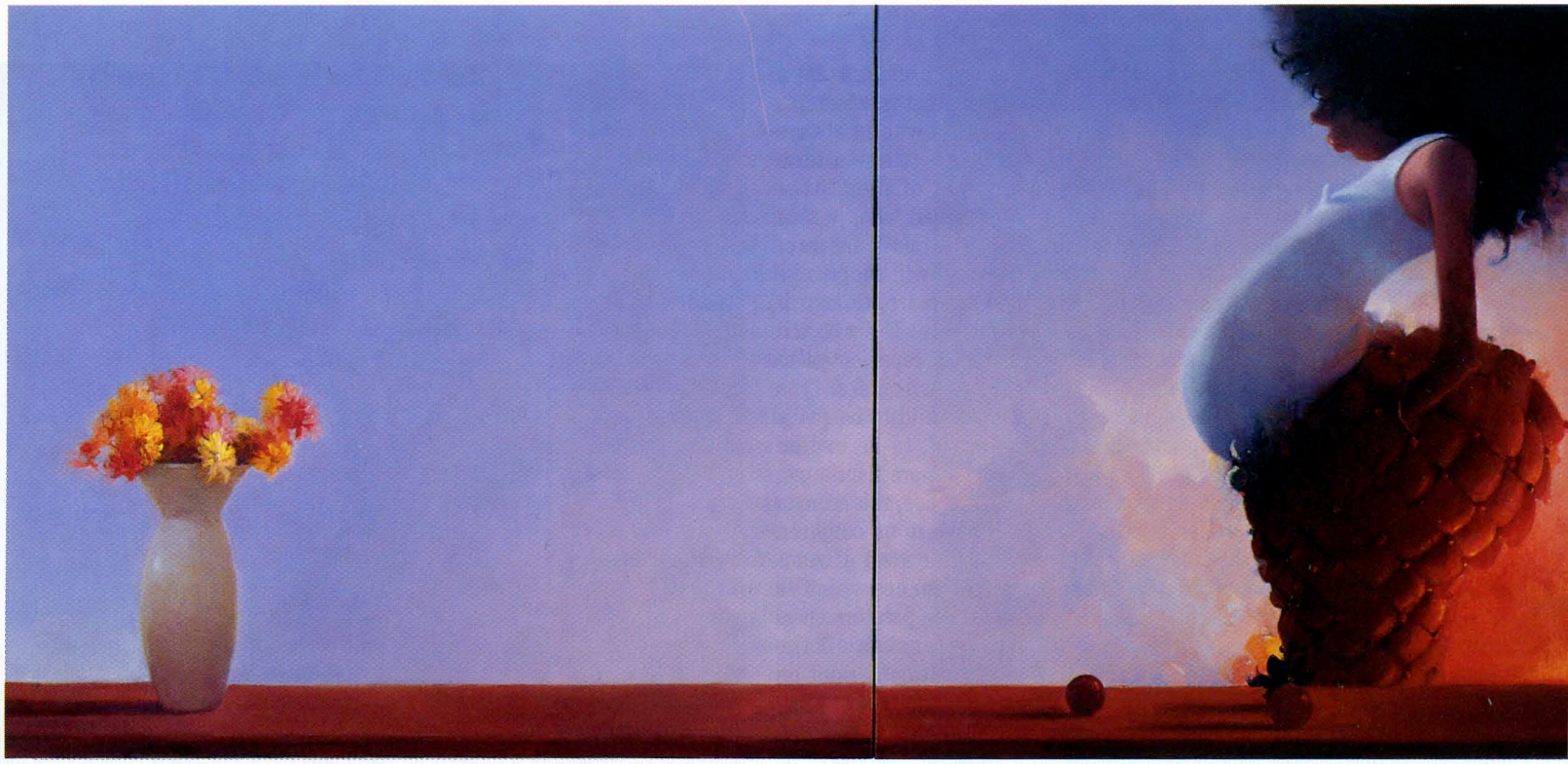
In a sense, this is their way of submitting to a "minimal" notion of art inherited from modernism—starting the work from what is most basic. For many artists in the '60s and '70s, this notion was applied to the idea of the *painting*, which they saw as reducible to the material components of color and support. But for Currin, Howe and Yuskavage, the focus is on the *picture*. Reduced to an ideological minimum, a picture must be a picture *of* something, and most saliently of *someone*; and if the sense of "picturehood" is strongest when the picture is of a person, it is all the more so when the person pictured is a woman, that is, when it is a person who is always already—to use a term redolent of the '70s—"objectified." So, just as the "minimal" abstract painting will tend to be (of) a square, though it obviously need not be, the "minimal" representational one will be (of) a woman. And to be really powerful, to be bodied forth as more than a pictorial device, this woman will have to be conjured into some kind of volumetric space, which is why these painters seem to have shaken off the modernist constraint on illusionistic space: without deep space, to put it bluntly, there would be no big breasts.

Yuskavage:* Blonde, *1995, oil on linen, 36 inches square.
Photos this page courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery.

At the same time, this focus on the single figure militates against the development of any kind of narrative interest within the painting. (The cautious developments away from single-figure paintings in Currin's and Yuskavage's recent work seem to be testing how complicated a composition can get before it begins to explicitly call upon narrative.) This doesn't shift the emphasis onto any typically modernist formal issues—the overt content of the images is too highly charged to allow for anything so convenient. Instead, the subject of the work becomes focused on the one-to-one encounter between the painting and its viewer—a narrative of sorts, it's true, and a formal relation as well, but from either point of view, one that takes place outside rather than within the painting.

***Yuskavage:* Free Association,**
1997, oil on linen, 84 by 72 inches.

In the paintings of all three, that relationship has changed as the work has developed. Currin's early "white girls"—pale, faint creatures out of some high-school yearbook, painted in a wan yet correct style that seemed to mimic their own fear of standing out—appeared almost to shrink from view, cocooned in a ghostly innocence in the face of which any spectatorial intention whatsoever had to seem somehow corrupt or brutal. The uncomfortable exchange between subject and viewer was also highlighted in a later group of pictures depicting older women, such as the neurotically gaunt *Mrs. Omni* (1993). All angles, lines and elbows, that middle-aged figure's razor-edginess emanates a peculiarly expensive form of tasteful grotesquerie that is weirdly seductive. By now, in a painting like *The Bra Shop* (1997), whose brushwork is as improbably robust as the physiques of its subjects, Currin puts the viewer in an overtly voyeuristic peephole position that is implicitly subservient even as its male adolescent fantasy is being fulfilled. As abject as female sexuality becomes in Currin's paintings, the supposedly dictatorial gaze is what is truly pathetic. If, as I have said, Currin (like Howe and Yuskavage) began with an effort to grasp a basic, minimal sense of the picture, it might be that the overdeveloped girls on whom his pictures have recently fixated imply the recognition that painting—at least when the painting is also a picture—can never really be minimal enough. Any picture will always be "too much," somehow placing both its subject and its viewer outside the boundaries of impeccable taste.



Yuskavage: **Good Evening, Hamass,** ***1997, oil on linen, 42 by 90 inches. Photo courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery.***

Yuskavage's work has followed a similar line of development. Not that the adolescent girls in her early paintings sloughed off the gaze the way Currin's did. Their problem was that they might have wanted to withdraw from it, but couldn't. Their presumably newly sprouted breasts betrayed them to visibility. By now, though, Yuskavage's flustered schoolgirls seem to have grown up and into their own opposites, dominatrixes projecting the invulnerability of the blank stare, their absurdly upturned nipples pointing skyward like little spires on gothic buttresses. Their bodies have been weirdly customized, like machines whose exterior packaging has been designed less to express any vital function than, quite simply, to astonish.

One gradually realizes that Currin's and Yuskavage's paintings often center on a sort of contest between the face and breast. (In some recent paintings, Currin has even executed the two features with completely distinct and, I would say, incompatible styles of paint application.) The face offers a communicative visibility (one that can return the gaze), while the breast, which is seen but unseeing, presents an objective visibility. The difference is between an encounter with explicit ethical claims and one in which such claims might possibly be elided. In front of Currin's and Yuskavage's paintings the serious possibility is raised that, despite our humanist denials, the second kind of encounter may exert a more powerful attraction.

Here, we are presented with a stark choice. If we see Currin and Yuskavage's paintings as being about women, we have to see them as taking a position of cynicism. But if we see them as being about painting, that is, see the women in them as being figures of painting, then we find in them, instead, an ironic affirmation of the power inherent in painting's mobilization of vision. Their subject is not simply sex or stylistics but, more subtly, painting's ability to dominate and direct the sense of sight in a way fundamentally different from that available through a real-life encounter with another person.

Catherine Howe's paintings operate, and have developed, somewhat differently. In her early work there was a clear dichotomy between passages executed in the style of modernist abstraction and other passages, those depicting the figure, based on the retardataire model of Ashcan painterly realism. Despite these old-fashioned figurative elements, Howe never contradicted modernist flatness quite as flagrantly as Currin and Yuskavage. (If nothing else, her proclivity for the self-sufficient bravura brushstroke would have made sure of that.) Another way to put it might be to say that her work never made quite as much of an issue of the breast as Currin's or Yuskavage's. Even in the contest between the revealed breast and the hidden face in Howe's recent clown paintings, it's the face that always holds the viewer's eye longer. And yet, with those paintings, in part because the models are no longer completely nude, the breast does emerge, so to speak, as a problem. There was rarely any sense of abjection or obscenity about Howe's women until their bodies and faces were disguised and then teasingly half-exposed. It was then, when their breasts began to peek out through strategically unbuttoned shirts as the only overt signs of the figures' sex, that something deeply unsettling began to happen. In 1997 canvases such as *Untitled (the artist)*, there emerges from behind the exaggerated vizard of the clown, the real gaze of a person—the artist, as the title explicitly tells us—which the viewer cannot help but recognize. For Currin and Yuskavage, the power of the picture lies in its impersonality, but Howe begs to differ.

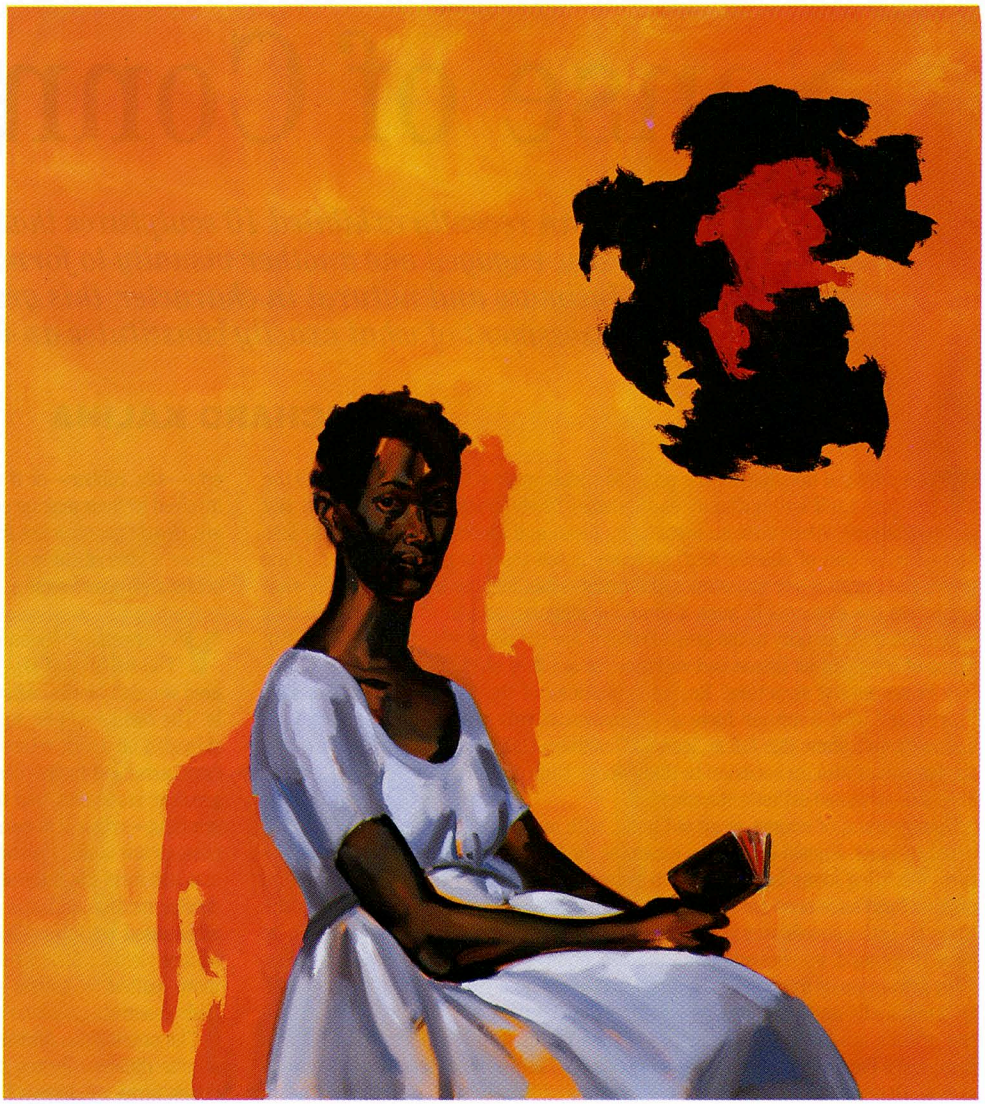
Is the point simply that these artists have found their way to the latest and most involuted form of the attention-getting "far-out," of offering nothing more than a calculatingly regressive rejoinder to "political correctness"? Now that we've had a few years to digest their work and, more importantly, to see a certain degree of development within it, it should be clear that the answer is no. This isn't to deny their genuinely discomfiting, even at times obscene, handling of the female body, the figurative tradition, even the paint itself. But to focus exclusively on their manipulation of what Howe sometimes calls the "degraded" heritage of painting is to miss a deeper point. Namely, that these painters are grasping for emotional revelation by means of a radically twisted self-referentiality.

In a figurative painting, sometimes, it's not so much that the painting exists in order to

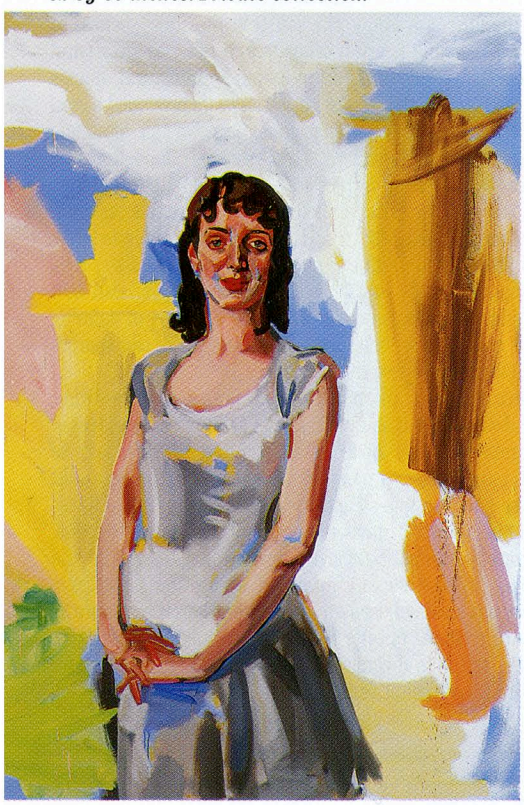
To focus solely on their use of what Howe calls the "degraded" heritage of painting is to miss a deeper point: these artists grasp for emotional revelation via a twisted self-referentiality.

render the figure, as that the figure is present in order to depict the painting or its effects. Through the figure, that is, the painting *allegorizes itself*. Sometimes, as in my favorite painting, Correggio's *Jupiter and Io* in the Kunsthistorischesmuseum in Vienna, the figure stands in for the viewer, or as some writers say, the beholder. Thus, in Correggio's mythological scene, the power of painting is represented by the cloud that envelops Io, by that fluid interfusion of tone with tone, infinitely mobile yet animated by a lordly will and somehow more definite in its effects than in its form. And, of course, the beholder (represented by the voluptuous Io) is not really beholding this thing at all but being taken over, overwhelmed within and without, though not passively, but with an active abandonment, an *amor fati*.

Like Correggio in *Jupiter and Io*, kitsch art always has designs not only on the eye and mind but also on the body of the viewer; it aims at an almost biological immediacy of response, the way sugar has no need of contemplation to make us experience its sweetness. It is this by-passing of reason, I think, that has always made the problem of kitsch, in the eyes of its most astute critics, more of an ethical than a purely esthetic one. It's also what Currin, Yuskavage and Howe envy about kitsch, even as they keep inserting its stigmata into works too artistically and emotionally complex—too emphatically *painted*, if nothing else—to qualify for the peculiar simplicity of affect proper to kitsch. □



Howe:* Gothic, *1994, oil on canvas, 78 by 72 inches. Private collection.
Photos this page courtesy Bill Maynes Gallery.



Howe:* Dubious Confection, *1995, oil on canvas, 82 by 60 inches. Private collection.

1. Richard Vine, "Lisa Yuskavage," *Art in America*, February 1997, pp. 103-04.
2. Lane Relyea, "Lisa Yuskavage," *Artforum*, November 1994, p. 92
3. Robert Mahoney, "New York in Review," *Arts Magazine*, May 1991, p. 100.
4. Keith Seward, "John Currin: The Weirdest of the Weird," *Flash Art*, November/December 1995, pp. 78-80; Stuart Morgan, "A Can of Worms," *Frieze*, April/May 1996, pp. 48-51.
5. It has recently been pointed out by a theorist of kitsch that the term was "originally [in the mid-19th century] applied exclusively to painting; only later was its use extended to other artistic disciplines." See Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, University Park, Penn State Press, 1997, p. 41.
6. Seward, p. 79.

John Currin's work was on view at Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York [Oct. 17-Nov. 22] and as part of a three-person show in the Projects series at the Museum of Modern Art, New York [June 24-Sept. 8]. Lisa Yuskavage will be included in "Presumed Innocence" at the Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond [Jan. 17-Mar. 1, 1998] and the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati [Apr. 5-June 8, 1998] and "Young Americans 2" at the Saatchi Gallery, London [opening spring 1998]. Currin and Yuskavage were in "Project Painting," a two-gallery show at Lehmann Maupin and Basilico Fine Arts, New York [Sept. 11-Oct. 11]. Catherine Howe's most recent solo show was at Bill Maynes Gallery, New York [May 14-June 15].

Author: *Barry Schwabsky is the author of* The Widening Circle: Consequences of Modernism in Contemporary Art *(Cambridge University Press).*