

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Pregnancy Expands a Vision

BY KELLY CROW | September 10, 2011

In 1992, the British painter Jenny Saville first captured the art world's attention with her series of towering nude portraits of obese women, their ruddy bodies marked by fat folds, blemishes and bra-strap indentations.



Copyright Jenny Saville, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Mike Bruce

'The Mothers,' by Jenny Saville and inspired by her own motherhood, at her new show. Critics hailed her as Lucian Freud's heir apparent, and advertising executive Charles Saatchi bought out her entire senior show at the Glasgow School of Art. Earlier this spring, Christie's resold one of those early works, "Branded," for \$2.4 million, a record for the artist.

On Thursday, Ms. Saville will open a show at New York's Gagosian Gallery that explores the female form in a different, delicate condition: pregnancy. Ms. Saville, who lives with artist Paul McPhail in Oxford, had their first child, a son, in 2007, followed by a daughter the next year.

Doctors forbade her from painting with bluish-white cadmium or other potentially toxic paints. As her belly grew, she had to climb the ladder in her studio more slowly; she also had to use longer paintbrushes that offered greater reach. And the moment her son was born, she had to begin painting between his naps rather than round-the-clock.

Yet for a painter obsessed with the terrain of the human body, pregnancy also kindled ideas about how a woman looks when she is "at human capacity," she said.

Within art history, the classic image of the Madonna and Christ child looms large. Ms. Saville said she grew up looking at her parents' poster print of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and John the Baptist."

But rather than aim for the idyllic, many of the works in her "Jenny Saville: Continuum" portray the intimacy of new motherhood without added sentiment. In "The Mothers," she depicts herself heavily pregnant and clutching a pair of wriggling infants. A vortex of charcoal lines encircles the trio's rosy bodies.

Another work, "Isis," depicts a pregnant blonde sitting in the blue glow of a computer whose screen contains a copy of ancient pyramid texts about Isis, the Egyptian goddess whose potency to Mesopotamian cultures predated the iconography of the Christian Madonna.

Ms. Saville sketched and painted herself throughout her two pregnancies, but she also asked at least 10 pregnant friends to model for her as she worked on the series. She said the women were more willing to pose nude pregnant than they would be before or afterward. The reason, she said, was that pregnancy is the one time in a woman's life when it's socially acceptable to be rotund. She added, "Within that space, they don't need to look like anyone else."

One thing that hasn't changed about Ms. Saville's paintings is their monumental scale. "Red Stare Head IV," an image of a teenage girl with a large birthmark, is painted 8 feet high.