

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Jenny Saville on learning from Leonardo da Vinci

As told to Nancy Durrant.

As a monumental exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci's paintings opens at the National Gallery, YBA Jenny Saville reflects on what contemporary artists can learn from the world's most revered artist

I have a quite a personal relationship with Leonardo da Vinci, because my parents had a very small reproduction, about 20cm by 25cm, of the *Burlington House Cartoon* [of the Virgin and Child with St Anne and John the Baptist].

I moved house quite a lot as a child and that used to reappear quickly, so that was my permanence — the drawings I made that I carried around, and this image. I used to go and see it before I went to school, so it became a powerful icon in my life.

What Leonardo is so brilliant at is the three-quarter-turned head. It's the most difficult thing you can do, to turn the far eye a three-quarter turn, anatomically and structurally. He always chooses these sorts of poses. For one thing they give you incredible form, because of the way the light hits — you'll get a shadow under a nose and light to the left of the mouth, so you get this beautiful flowing form. For another, because they're challenging; I guess it shows his mastery, that he could do any type of move and pose.

There's no one better to look at when you're learning how to draw than Leonardo. No one can draw an eye and an eyebrow like Leonardo. You can always tell a Leonardo by his eyebrows. He understands the ridge at the top of the eye, and that the hair sits on the top of the ridge. Usually he thins out the hair at the point of light. He always gets the sense of the skull underneath the skin. I think what I admire so greatly is this use of structure mixed with his ability to create movement. A single line might tell you about the structure of a frozen reality, but the movement of his lines with that solid line tells you about the nature of reality, in that things are not static, they're constantly in flux.

Leonardo's sketch for the *Burlington House Cartoon* — I call it the Black Mass drawing — is, I think, the greatest drawing ever made in the history of art. It really pre-empts everything that happens in art all the way up to abstraction. I never tire of looking at it. I have it around me all the time. You see it in Giacometti, you see it in Auerbach now, this sort of energetic mass of forms.

It shows you — to the most extreme level — what Leonardo could do, which was internal structure mixed with movement. I think that the intelligence of the artist is shown in the drawing. His lifelong curiosity has always been something I really loved: his desire to see something through drawing, to understand something himself rather than just relying on other sources.

I really started to understand what makes a human body and a human head by watching plastic surgery in New York, though I wasn't really thinking about Leonardo when I did so. I studied at the medical library, and when I came back to London I was even a member of the pathology group at the Royal College of Surgeons for a couple of years. It's a way of understanding. I don't just want a patina of flesh.

Of the paintings in the National Gallery show I'm quite blown away by the portrait of the *Lady with an Ermine*. I find it a really sexually-charged picture, the symbolism of the ermine [of purity]; the hand, which is a little bit too big anatomically, but perfectly big; the tonal movement, that goes underneath her hair, with the band around her forehead, is so perfectly observed — he achieves a sort of universal depth of beauty, represented through a female.

This idealised sort of beauty is from a different time in history. I suppose that we have fashion photography to take care of that now, but it is very temporal, it doesn't have the same sort of deep meaning.

If you look at Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, with the craggy interior rock face, there's always something a bit menacing about the work. It's not a saccharine beauty like a Renoir, for example, and I think that's what makes it so powerful. He accesses those ambiguities that, for me, only painting can operate in.