

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Arts

Small and mighty

Simon Schama on a masterly painter of children

I sometimes think that if Lucian Freud had had a heart, as well as the eye of a hawk, he might have become as great a painter of the human body as Jenny Saville already is. I mean nothing outrageous by this. Both painters aim to do more than merely represent the nude. All of their technical power is devoted to delivering a naked truth through uncompromising observation, the reconstitution of flesh through paint. Yet which of the two actually nails it? Saville's bodies pulse while Freud's remain trapped in the pose. The respective results reflect Saville's preference for intimacy over inspection; spontaneity over control. Saville's nudes, even, or especially, when they are damaged or transgendered, seem sovereign of their own composition; Freud's in every sense remain subjects.

Consider, especially, the children, who play a starring role in Saville's current show at Gagosian in New York. Freud's are splayed and displayed as objects of anthropological and anatomical scrutiny. They are often pallid, joyless and inert. There is something faintly and distastefully Victorian about this visual embalming. Now take a look at what Saville has done with her astounding paintings and drawings of her naked self with her baby boys exploding every which way from arms and lap.

The first impression that anyone who has actually carried a load of babysquirm will register is the physical truth of the sheer muscular energy of the infants. They are not so much drawn as bodied forth; and in one of the most powerful of the series the animal action comes right at us from between the powerful thighs of the mother as if just pitched into lusty life. Not since Leonardo (whose own studies were a departure point for Saville) and Rembrandt has an artist got the peculiar body language of very small children exactly right. One of the baby boys arches his back in precisely that pre-tantrum power-moment no parent is likely to forget; others have the juicy-lipped, groggy fullness of the milkily sated.

The uncontrollable force-field of Saville's infants, with the mother-figure enthroned at their tumbling centre, makes one realise all over again how feeble the representation of infants has been in the traditions of western art. The fetishising of the Christ-child, the theological imperative to see the grown crucified Saviour immanent in his infant sweetness, sentimentalised the Baby Jesus at the same time that it made his representation ageless, like the Madonna herself, inhumanly pure. The alternative pagan tradition of cupids and putti – orgiastically overpopulating Rubens's "Feast of Venus", for example, does the opposite, ageing the infants with precocious erotic knowledge, the dimpled bums and winking smiles a ghastly denaturing.

Saville's holy terrors, on the other hand, are packed with their true nature, which is either a storm of uncoordinated energy or sudden sleep collapse. To convey the whirl of them in motion, the storm of fidget, Saville has done something so simple, so brilliant and yet so unprecedented that once you've seen it you can't believe no one arrived at the idea before. She has retained all the drawn *pentimenti* of possible positions for the infants into the eventual painting or drawing, so that the same image contains within it a baby boy asleep, another in tensed tantrum, another hanging loose, another in arms, another tumbling away. In one especially touching detail, the face of the small boy in repose fills the back of the mother-artist's creative hand.

We call this way of looking at multiple images within one frame something and that something is a movie. Saville has created movie animation for modern art and the effect is liberating, exhilarating, dumbfounding in the best possible way. How did the idea come to her? She just looked at her own children one day lost in happy crayoning; the unguided lines going all over the paper. And she thought that she might, somehow, make art as free as that. The result is anything but childish.

Babysquirm
Jenny Saville's
'The Mothers'



Until October 22, Gagosian Gallery, New York, www.gagosian.com