

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Jenny Saville/Heroic Nakedness, Oxford

Two exhibitions in Oxford shed light on our attitudes towards our flesh throughout the ages

By Rachel Spence



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'Ruben's Flap' and 'Hyphen' at the Jenny Saville exhibition in Oxford

We live in an age where the body has never mattered more nor counted less. If the record prices fetched by Lucian Freud's late paintings weren't sufficient, the runaway success of a posthumous exhibition of his work at the National Portrait Gallery this spring proved how much we long to look at images of human flesh at its most natural and flawed. Yet beyond the doors of art institutions the pact between technology, commerce and narcissism puts us at risk of becoming airbrushed, synthetic shadows of our real selves.

Two exhibitions being held in Oxford are a dazzling reminder that how we feel about our flesh depends on our time as much as on ourselves; and that great artists are of their moment but also push boundaries to revitalise our world.

Born in Cambridge in 1970, Jenny Saville grew up in a world where painting had never been less fashionable. (That Damien Hirst's vitrines currently occupy Tate Modern while this exhibition at Modern Art Oxford – a stunning, airy, light-filled space but provincial nonetheless – is Saville's first UK solo show is a telling indictment of contemporary taste.)

While her YBA contemporaries were flitting between media on the basis that what counted was the philosophy behind a work rather than its manual realisation, Saville stayed faithful to Willem de

Kooning's observation that: "Flesh was the reason oil paint was invented." Rather than the concept-factory Goldsmiths, she enrolled at Glasgow School of Art, an old-fashioned institution that demanded its students practise life drawing for two hours a day.

But Saville is a child of her time. While Freud, to whom she is frequently compared, eschewed conceptual tricksiness, she loves to show her subjects doubled, in mirrors or divided. In her early self-portrait "Ruben's Flap" (1999), for example, she trebles the image of her naked torso, allowing one face to blur into another, and segmenting her bellies and breasts into diaphanous panels. In doing so she gestures at the multiple images we have of ourselves, at the gap between our real body and our fantasies of its ideal.

Saville has specialised in subjects on the margins of society: the obese, the sick, the blind, the disfigured and transsexuals. Yet under her fluctuating light and painstaking hues and layers, her subjects transcend their strangeness to take on a universal quality.

The most inspired canvas here is the early work "Fulcrum" (1997-99), which shows three colossal women piled on a hospital trolley. It is a terrible, wonderful painting: limbs and bellies stacked into a pyramid of slab-like flesh, the transgressive thrill of five fat toes pressing into a cheek, the green, watery light of a mortuary. It simultaneously shocks us with the women's freaky otherness and tweaks at our own suppressed longing for such shameless, primordial merging.

Saville's decision to concentrate on paintings of women makes her both heir and heretic to a tradition that stretches back to Titian by way of Rubens, Ingres, Picasso and Freud. The women painted by those geniuses were essentially objects of the gaze – repositories of the spectator's desires, fears and fascination rather than animated by their own.

Little could announce Saville's bid for a more equal rapport than her paintings and drawings of butcher's carcasses. Placing her squarely in the lineage of Rembrandt, Soutine and Bacon, she reclaims the ground of existential angst – the horror at the natural shocks to which our flesh is heir – that has been the territory of male artists up to and including Hirst.

Nowhere is Saville's models' autonomy more striking than in her vast close-ups of female faces. "Atonement Studies: Central Panel (Rosetta)" (2005-06) shows a blind girl, her eyes an ice-blue glaze, her head tipped awkwardly to one side. Yet the energy and precision of Saville's mark-making – cold blue and black daubs countering a complexion keyed through biscuity tones to brilliant cream – lift Rosetta beyond pathos to make her a subject of pure presence.

Most recently, Saville has concentrated on large-scale drawings of mothers and children in pencil, charcoal and pastel on paper. Two of her drawings, including one that impeccably reproduces the figures of the Virgin and St Anne in Leonardo's National Gallery cartoon, are on show in the Old Masters room in the Ashmolean Museum. The others are hung together in a single gallery at Modern Art Oxford.

Although Saville often uses herself as a model, her habit of reaching back to the Renaissance lends her figures an archetypal majesty. Traced and retraced in ghostly doublings – Saville terms these, with a nod to the Old Masters, *pentimenti* – the females' naked bellies thrust into the foreground, the children's limbs

squirm with the boundless athleticism of babyhood. Often their sturdy monumentality is struggling to emerge from thickets of swooping scribbles that recall Leonardo's efforts to cull movement out of a still image.

At times, this dialogue with the past tips Saville into mannerism. Leonardo's frantic graphic force-fields were always anchored to the contour of his figures whereas Saville's err towards the free-floating and frantic.

But let's not quibble. By borrowing the essentialism of Renaissance sacred iconography, Saville interrogates what it means to be female and fertile in the 21st century yet evades her epoch's distorting mythologies. On display in the Ashmolean, "Study for Pentimenti III (sinopia)" (2011) shows her everywoman clasping a long-legged babe draped over her domed belly. The desperate lines and shadowy repetitions sew woman and child together in a wiry, eternal binding that is outside history, yet could only have been imagined by a woman of Saville's time.

Rewind 400 years and a different but equally compelling vision of the body prevailed. Winnowed from the collection of the Christ Church Picture Gallery, a small but sumptuous cache of Renaissance and Baroque Italian drawings maps an era when outer beauty was held up as a mirror of inner perfection.

Free of anxieties about gender politics and body fascism, this was a world in which heroism – male, muscular and immortal – was the height of aspiration. It took a while to catch on. The Christ Church show opens with a delightful early 15th-century sketch by an anonymous Verona artist, "A Naked Youth About to Throw a Ball": the skinny arms and flimsy torso testify to a culture in which the body had been concealed since the Dark Ages.

It was the rediscovery of classical sculpture by artists such as Donatello that sparked the Renaissance celebration of nudity. By the beginning of the 16th century, Lorenzo di Credi could draw David as a camp yet crisply contoured youth flaunting his six-pack as proudly as the head of Goliath in his hands. Once Michelangelo had painted his flawless Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, there was no doubt that male pulchritude was the cultural ideal. The soggy limbs and flabby bellies of the female deities present in a small selection of drawings here reveal that what men desired in women, even goddesses, was physical passivity.

Men, however, could be heroes. A clutch of 16th-century drawings by the likes of Agostino and Annibale Carracci, Baccio Bandinelli and Tintoretto show male nudes summoned out of pencil, charcoal, ink and chalk with grace and charisma. Bones and muscles are shaded with meticulous precision; limbs and torsos balanced in potent equilibrium. Monsters are vanquished; nymphs are seduced; enemies are slain. Highlights are hard to choose, although for a spiralling energy that defies its single dimension, Tintoretto's charcoal drawing of Samson slaying the Philistine is hard to rival. (It was inspired by a terracotta by Michelangelo that the Venetian possessed and, by all accounts, spent hours turning this way and that in his hands.)

Is there a difference between our present obsession with gym-sleek, Botoxed beauty and Christ Church's glorious celebration of neo-Platonic nakedness? Let's hope so. If not, Jenny Saville is our best chance of a more dignified future tense.