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Shift to the Sensual: Jenny Saville's Gagosian Exhibition

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*Jenny Saville's "Intertwine," 2011-14.
(© Jenny Saville/Photo Mike Bruce/Courtesy Gagosian Gallery)*

LONDON — Flesh, Willem de Kooning famously remarked, “was the reason oil paint was invented.” It is an opinion with which the British painter Jenny Saville would heartily agree. Her entire artistic output to date has been concerned with translating flesh into pigment. Her latest exhibition, “Oxyrhynchus” at Gagosian (Britannia Street, London; through July 26), shows her triumphantly continuing with that quest.

The new work is, as the title suggests, all about layers. In several ways this marks a departure in Saville’s work. Oxyrhynchus was an ancient Egyptian rubbish dump, a place where precious papyri survived for millennia in the sand. These pictures, though, are more about layers of bodies: different people, different poses, different moments and movements all piled on top of each other.

Unexpectedly, de Kooning himself seems to be part of the mix. Indeed, some of these pictures could be summed up as de Kooning plus Leonardo. In the late ’40s, the former evolved a type of abstract expressionism that was based — at some remove — on human anatomy. Looking closely at a classic apparently abstract de Kooning such as “Excavation,” 1950, you begin to find here an elbow, there a foot.

Saville’s “In the realm of the Mothers III,” 2014, is like that, except that protruding from the *melée*, in addition to a buttock and leg, you find a couple of beautifully, naturalistically drawn feet. This detail also recalls Balzac’s celebrated story “The Unknown Masterpiece,” which describes how a painter, working over and over a painting of a woman, finally reduced it to an indecipherable blur — out of which one exquisite foot emerged.

An earlier work in the same series, “In the realm of the Mothers I,” 2012-14, reveals more about what is being blurred; it is an image of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman: not at all pornographic, but close to explicit. (The distinction between painting and drawing is also a little smudged in Saville’s art — several of these pieces are charcoal on canvas, sometimes with pastel and oil as well.)

Balzac’s tale was a classic text of modernism, at once a warning and a prediction. Modernists of the 20th century, from Picasso to de Kooning, did indeed deconstruct the body; Saville now seems to be reconstituting it. In some of these new pictures whole bodies are seen, depicted with a painterly relish that brings Manet to mind. A number depict naked mixed-race couples (including, a novelty in Saville’s oeuvre, male nudes).

“Odalisque,” 2012-14, and “Intertwine,” 2011-14, both quote Manet’s Olympia — though the original has been scrambled into constituent parts so that the nude man in the first echoes the pose of Manet’s servant, and the couple in the second collectively — their limbs intermeshed — have something of Olympia’s pose.

In the past, Saville has painted the effects on the body of surgery and accidents — as if to replicate the distortions of 20th-century art, but in bleeding skin and muscle rather than fractured cubist planes. These recently completed pictures show a shift from trauma to sensuality.

Her reclining couples belong to a long, long line in European art, going back to Mars and Venus, Titian and Rembrandt. The nude, the body, and sex are all perennial themes. Saville’s brilliance, right from the start, has been an ability to recast those subjects in a manner that seems completely fresh and contemporary. Still only in her mid 40s, she’s been an important artist for two decades, and she’s getting steadily better.