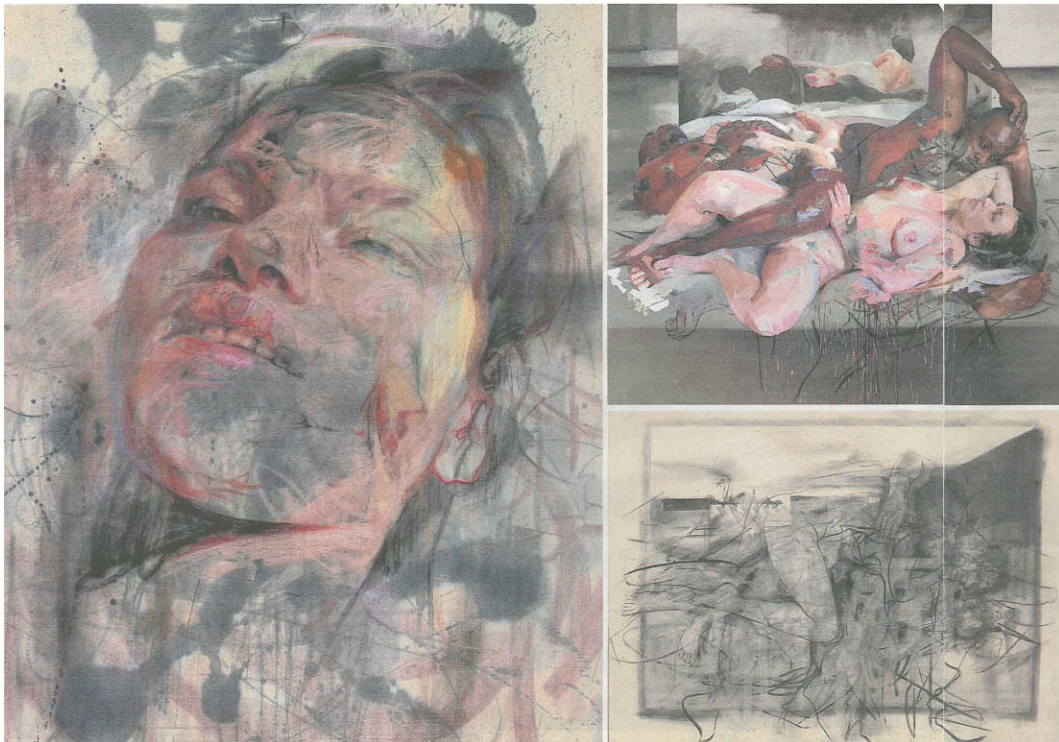


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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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'I like the down and dirty side of things'



*British artist Jenny Saville has cut her ties with the YBAs and dedicated her life to painting flesh. It's only natural, she tells **Mark Hudson***



Jenny Saville paints flesh: billowing folds of fatty tissue that can barely be contained by her canvases; sardine-tin wedgings of stomachs and thighs; corpulent figures that loom over the spectator, taking us to the raw animality of existence.

"I paint flesh because I'm human," says Saville, as though surprised anyone would consider painting anything else. "If you work in oil, as I do, it comes naturally. Flesh is just the most beautiful thing to paint."

Yet the bodies she paints are rarely conventionally beautiful.

"I like the down and dirty side of things," she says. "I don't like things to be too polished. We've got fashion magazines for that."

While Saville often includes her own body in her paintings, she is hardly notably fleshy herself. Standing in the vast white space of the Gagosian Gallery in King's Cross, where she is about to have what is, incredibly, her first solo London exhibition, she cuts a small and quietly determined figure.

Of all the artists who emerged in the Nineties through the YBA phenomenon, Saville was the one who was most obviously a painter. While Gary Hume's high-gloss semi-abstracts felt like the work of a conceptual artist who just happened to paint, Saville was figurative and skilled in a way that even the most conservative gallery goer could appreciate.

Yet her paintings aren't as straightforward as they appear. There's always some element that undermines the idea that you're looking simply at a figurative painting. Vertical lines cut through the images; blemishes that disfigure faces prove on closer inspection to be clumps of paint. Saville's approach has been described as "post-painterly", which means, I suppose, that her paintings project a sense of self-consciousness about how they were created, an awareness of the other ways the image could have been brought into being if it hadn't been painted.

"It's become really difficult to do figurative painting that isn't naff or cheesy and which feels relevant," says Saville. "I've found a way of doing it by looking at abstract painters like Willem de Kooning and Cy Twombly. I like looking at very old figurative painting, at the old masters. But when it comes to the art of our time, I prefer to look at abstract painting. It's taught me a lot about the physical act of painting, about pace and tempo, using drips and marks in ways that aren't just decorative."

Saville's current exhibition pushes her merging of abstract and figurative to its furthest point yet. It takes its title, *Oxyrhynchus*, from an ancient Egyptian rubbish dump discovered in the late 19th century, the contents of which are preserved in 800 biscuit tins in Oxford, where Saville lives.

"It's the life of a city, preserved in the sand," says Saville. "Not monuments, but documents, poetry, mathematicians' drawings and everyday things like people's tax returns. I like this idea of a culture in fragments. It feels similar to the way we experience information today. This idea of strata, of layers of images seen through time, of images within images, it's like the way we see the world through computers: not as a single reality, but many realities at the same time."

In the resulting paintings, smoothly executed, almost photorealistic body parts give way to explosive abstract painting and limbs left half painted so we can see earlier versions of the painting - "like a window into time," says Saville. In a series of paintings of a couple it's hard to tell if they've been joined by others in a melee of limbs or if we're seeing the same couple at different moments in time.

"I deliberately worked on these paintings at different times," says Saville, "leaving them and coming back to them. Looking at photographs of earlier paintings taken as I was doing them, I realised I'd missed possibilities because I was so focused on working to an end. With these paintings I wanted to keep all the possibilities alive. Rather than constantly interrogating what I was doing, I decided I'd ask questions after I'd finished. I took a much more flippant attitude, and that's really helped the work."



Looking at a head on which work appears to have stopped mid-brush stroke, I wonder if she wasn't tempted to finish it off. "I like it like that. It's much easier to finish something than to leave it incomplete. Knowing where to stop is the most difficult thing."

Born in Cambridge in 1970, the daughter of an educationist whose work kept the family moving to different parts of the country, Saville first became interested in painting at the age of eight. Her mother gave her the broom cupboard to use as a studio. But her most important influence was her uncle, Paul Saville, an art historian and painter.

"He was the one who convinced me I could be an artist. He took me to Holland to look at Rembrandt and Venice to look at Titian when I was a teenager. I stood in front of Titian's enormous painting *Assumption of the Virgin* in the Frari church, and I thought, 'one day I'll do a painting as big as that'. He taught me that great paintings weren't just there to be looked at in an admiring way. If you wanted to be a painter, these were the people you had to be dealing with."

While Saville claims to have crises of doubt on an almost daily basis, you get the impression that her career has been a disciplined trajectory from the age of eight till now, with study at Glasgow School of Art an important step along the way, but her association with the YBAs something of a red herring.

"It came about because Charles Saatchi bought my work. I didn't know Damien or Tracey at the time. I met them later. The Sensation exhibition (of Saatchi's collection, at the Royal Academy in 1997) was portrayed by the media as the dawn of the YBAs, but for me it was really all over by then."

Saville now lives in Oxford with her partner and their two children. Home, school and studio are within minutes of each other, something she reckons she could never have in London. Indeed, her children have been the most important influence on her current exhibition.

"They've shown me my creativity again. I was in danger of becoming a sort of genre painter in the tradition of Freud, Bacon and Auerbach. But when you're four, you don't know genres exist. So to follow their lead and take away the rules and say paint any way you like has been very thrilling. It's opened up a lot of possibilities: ways to draw, ways to paint, and what kind of bodies I want to paint."