

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

PORTER

In the flesh

Jenny Saville's monumental paintings of women in all their naked glory have earned her global acclaim. Her latest exhibition, which sees her work shown alongside 20th-century master Egon Schiele, will truly secure her place among the greats.

Rachel Campbell-Johnston meets the new master of British portraiture





Photography
by Ralph Mecke

Jenny Saville in her
studio in Oxford,
England, wearing shirt
by The Row, £730;
pants, Saville's own;
shoes by Common
Projects, £300

Jenny Saville made her name painting pictures of mountainous blubbernauts: massive images of women who seem almost to burst from the picture frame. She delights in the sprawling of thighs and the over-spilling of bellies, in the drooping of breasts and the sagging of chins. She revels in fat rolls and bulges and bodily blemishes, in spare tires and saddlebags and bingo wings. She celebrates flesh: the very stuff of human life. "And why not?" she says. "We are human beings. It is what we are made of. Flesh has always fascinated me."

Saville was born in Cambridge in 1970 and brought up in rural Suffolk, the second of four children. Her parents, busy caring for her two much younger siblings, left her to her own devices, and she soon discovered an obsession with both painting and bodies. She remembers gazing up the skirts of her piano teacher. "She had thick brown tights and I would watch the way her thighs rubbed together when she moved her feet on the pedals. The buzz of the class would be going on all around me but I would just be looking. And it didn't seem like something revolting – it was just visually interesting. I had this real curiosity and it stayed with me."

An uncle who was an art historian and painter fostered the fascination. He introduced her not only to Titian, Velázquez, Rubens and Rembrandt, but to the painter's way of life. "We would follow the paths that Titian took through Venice, or go to the places where Rembrandt drank," says Saville. "It made the life of a painter seem real and possible to me. My mother gave me a broom cupboard to use as a studio. I knew by the age of eight that I wanted to be an artist. It was an ambition I never questioned. I never thought, I'm a girl, I can't do this. It was only much later, at art school, that I suddenly realized there were no female artists in the books. But it only made me wonder, why not?"

Studying at Glasgow School of Art – a college that took the life room seriously, requiring students to spend two hours daily working from the model – she won a six-month scholarship to the University of Cincinnati in Ohio, where, struck by the sight of the obese women who waddled through local malls, she decided to make them her subject.

Her paintings of these corpulent women, displayed in her 1992 degree show, caught the eye of Charles Saatchi, who bought them all. Her reputation rose rapidly thanks in large part to his patronage and, in 1997, she contributed to his landmark show *Sensation* at the Royal Academy.

The contours of one of the monumental nudes she exhibited there were inscribed with feminist texts. "I wanted to find a way to paint the female body from a female point of view," she explains. But she soon gave up the scripts. "Words were so fixed. And painting finds its strength in ambiguity and contradiction. I didn't want people to stand there and literally read the canvases. I don't want a narrative in my paintings. I've never wanted to put a body in a situation. I want the narrative to be in the body itself. That's why I look at forensic and surgical books. I can find all those lovely luscious reds and deep purples and dark blues in the bodies in those photographs."

Saville often uses herself as a model. "You can be more brutal with yourself. And models don't care as much about

my work as I do. They are not prepared to undergo extreme pain. So I push a knee forward and bend a leg under to get the most out of my musculature. For me, the pain is nothing compared with the images I want." In 2002, having fattened herself up especially, she collaborated with the filmmaker and fashion photographer Glen Luchford to make a series of images of herself, her naked body, clutched by hands that sink deep into pulpy fat, pressed up against a Perspex screen and shot from below so that it oozed and distorted. "I didn't feel exposed or shamed," Saville says. "My work always feels like an extension of my body anyway. I feel as if I've just loaned my body to myself." Artist and film director Sam Taylor-Johnson respects Saville's "approach to sexuality and the body, which is fearless, unabashed and proud." Adding, "I've always admired her mastery of painting, but equally, her ability to paint on that scale and with such poetic finesse is a testament to her force."

Saville's children, a boy and girl aged six and seven, have also appeared in her pictures and become an integral part of her creative life. "When I was pregnant, everyone, or men at least, kept telling me that having children would change everything, that I wouldn't have time to paint any more. But it was the opposite. I felt the most creative I had ever felt in my life. I was painting flesh and then making flesh. I kept thinking, 'Picasso didn't know what this felt like.' It was such a powerful experience. So instead of trying to hide the fact that I had children, I tackled it head on. I put the experience into my work. But not in a Mary Cassatt baby-in-a-crib way. Raising children is the least sentimental thing I have ever done. My paintings of my children are about multiplying flesh."

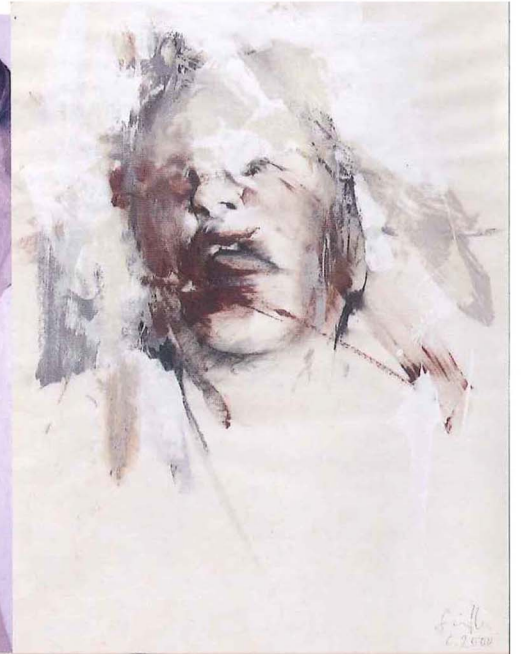
In her upcoming exhibition at the Kunsthaus in Zurich, a selection of works from across her career will be hung alongside images by the fiercely expressionistic Egon Schiele. Two artists, both intensely engaged with the physical, meet across the space of a century. Can Saville stand up to the challenge? For her, it may prove less formidable than her long entwinement with the work of Lucian Freud. "After he died, I was haunted by him," she says. People kept trying to hand her his mantle, although it could have been Freud who was influenced by Saville. Certainly he only began painting his voluminous Sue, her flesh bursting outwards like stuffing from a torn sofa, after Saville had done her original giantesses.

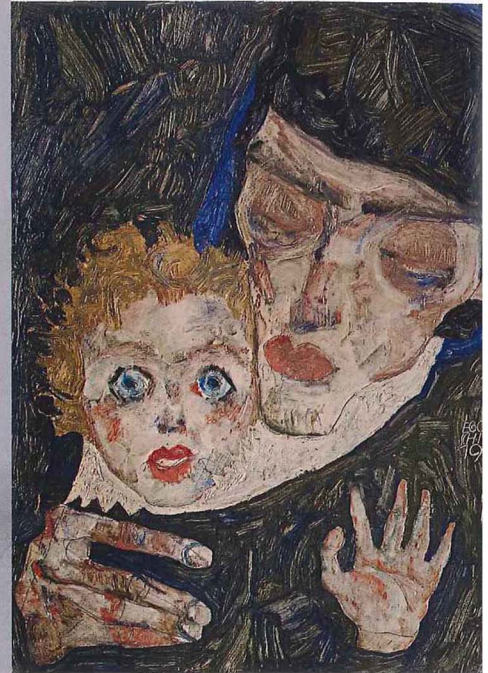
As to whether, in a fast-paced contemporary world dominated by conceptual art and sprawling installations, painting has become outmoded, she is no longer interested in the discussion. "I don't think about that any more," she says. "I'm not worried about being fashionable. I'm bored of the debate about whether painting is relevant. Look at a three-year-old with a brush. He or she is just doing something that feels totally vital. And that's the freedom I want. So I'm going to do whatever I want. The only prize is the making of the work. And I have been enjoying my work over the last two years more than ever before."

Overleaf, Jenny Saville writes exclusively for PORTER about the influence of Egon Schiele on her work >

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Clockwise from top left: *Hyphen*, 1999; *Head Study*, 2000-01; *Untitled*, 2014

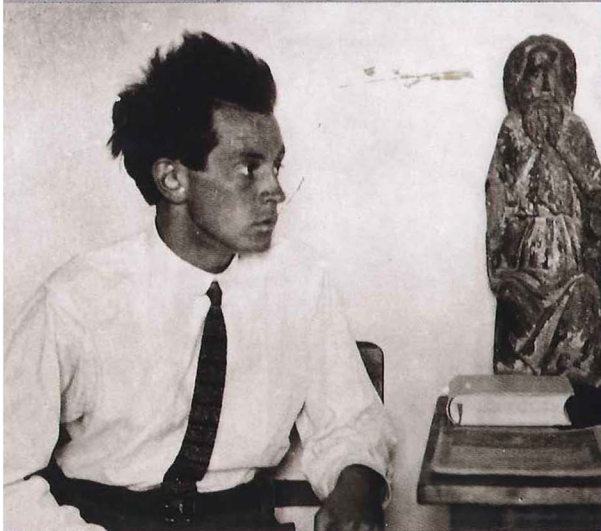




MATERNAL INSTINCTS

Taking inspiration from her own experience of motherhood, Saville's art portrays an intimacy without added sentiment, influenced by the work of Egon Schiele and his brutal and honest depiction of women. *Clockwise from left:* *The Mothers*, 2011, by Jenny Saville; *Mother and Child*, 1912, by Egon Schiele; Saville photographed by Ralph Mecke; *In the Realm of the Mothers III*, 2014, by Jenny Saville; *Rosetta II*, 2005-06, by Jenny Saville; *Blind Mother*, 1914, by Egon Schiele; Schiele in his studio in Vienna's 13th District, 1915

As told to Jo Craven. *The Mothers*, *In the Realm of the Mothers III* and *Rosetta II* courtesy of Gagosian Gallery and Jenny Saville. *In the Realm of the Mothers III* photographed by Mike Bruce. *Rosetta II* © 2014 ProLitteris, Zurich. *Mother and Child* and *Blind Mother* courtesy of Leopold Museum, Vienna. Getty Images





“He was my companion growing up”

A century may separate their work, but, as *Jenny Saville* reveals, her artistic affinity with Egon Schiele runs deep

As a teenager I had books of both Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele drawings, but I instantly preferred Schiele. His drawings really spoke to me, for their simplicity as well as their brutality. I felt he depicted women in such an honest way. Schiele's work is shocking, but in a good way. I don't mind shocking when it's the real deal. I find it engaging that his pictures are not prettied up, maybe because it echoes the way I feel about my own body. He was a good companion to have when I was growing up.

At college, I was really into Willem de Kooning and other artists from the '50s onwards. I didn't look at Schiele for some time, but now I realize how much he informed my work.

There is nearly a century between the two of us, but something I must have picked up from him is the way he shows the strong link to our animal nature, reminding us that humans are, after all, just animals. I am instinctively drawn to the way he emphasizes the thigh muscle and has lots of angles going upwards from the knee to the rest of the body, giving tension to an image. We have also both approached our subjects from a low angle, which makes the human subject appear more animalistic.

In this show there will be my mother and child images, and he did some, too. And one of his paintings is titled *Blind Mother*, while *Rossetta II* is of a blind woman who sat for me [both pictured left]. There's also a technique he used to scratch off paint, while I layer mine on thickly, but the effect is very similar if you put the paintings side by side.

Schiele's life story is always a presence – knowing that his father died when he was only 14; that he died young, aged 28; that he had a court case where his paintings were burned in front of him. Just like with Caravaggio, whose paintings you can't look at without thinking about how he was a murderer, always on the run, and there's that look of panic in every painting.

Schiele wasn't fashionable, not like Picasso and Matisse, which is probably similar to the way I've been seen. I haven't been very trendy, as there are not that many figurative painters around.

Art is really about freedom, in the end – the freedom to explore what's happening in your life, which for Schiele was most powerful when he had his pencil in his hand. For me, my most powerful time was being pregnant and in my studio, painting bodies and growing a body at the same time, wondering, what does it take to make a body? To mix the paint, to lay the tones down and try to get this substance called oil paint to behave like flesh, while at the same time I was literally growing this substance in my own body. That was pretty powerful.

Egon Schiele - Jenny Saville is at Kunsthaus Zurich, from October 10 to January 25, 2015, kunsthaus.ch ■



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