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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# London Evening Standard

## For the love of Rubens

Painter Jenny Saville has curated a room of modern works – including her own – in response to the RA's blockbuster show devoted to the legacy of her Old Master hero. She talks flesh, Freud and fried eggs with **Ben Luke**



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**E**VER since she burst on the art scene in Charles Saatchi's Young British Artists III exhibition in 1994, Jenny Saville has found her work described as "Rubenesque". Not only did her gargantuan paintings of bulky female bodies immediately prompt comparisons with the copious flesh depicted by Rubens, the prince of Baroque painting, but Saville was immediately seen as the upholder of the great painting tradition leading back to him, in the face of the punkish pop and conceptual art of the earlier YBAs such as Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas.

Fast forward 20 years and there's a chance to see Saville's and Rubens's work close together. She was a natural choice to create a room as part of the Royal Academy's blockbuster show, Rubens and his Legacy: Van Dyck to Cézanne, opening next week.

Initially she was asked to show her own paintings, but as her works take months to complete, there wasn't time. "So I said, 'What about if I curated a little bit of the work, or brought some people together'." What she has come up with is a series of modern riffs on Rubens by 20th- and 21st-century artists who've adopted his extravagant, luscious paint or his conceptual chutzpah and daring. Saville has one huge work in the room – a sort of show-within-a-show to which she has given the title *La Peregrina* – and she's surrounded by pieces by contemporaries such as Cecily Brown and Sarah Lucas, as well as work by several of her heroes, including Willem De Kooning, Pablo Picasso and Francis Bacon.

We talk as she's hanging the pictures. It's odd meeting her because I'm used to seeing her face uncompromisingly described in her paintings: at the top of a bulky mass of flesh in *Propped* (1992), for instance, and sideways-on in a two-and-a-half-metre-square canvas with a crimson, almost bloodied mouth in *Reverse* (2002-03). But Saville's paintings of herself were never self-portraits as such – she just used her own face because it was to hand, as it were.

In person, she's nowhere near as big, either in height and weight, as the pictures might lead you to expect. She also looks much younger than her 44 years. And she's great company, filled with passion for the art around us,

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■ Jenny Saville's room, *La Peregrina*, is part of *Rubens and his Legacy: Van Dyck to Cézanne at the Royal Academy*, W1 (020 7300 8000, [royalacademy.org.uk](http://royalacademy.org.uk)) Jan 24-April 10

relishing the opportunity the RA has given her.

Perhaps surprisingly, she says that De Kooning, the American abstract expressionist, "is the closest person I think of to do with Rubens, because of the fleshy vulgarity, the freedom that De Kooning has in his work".

"He wasn't afraid of making that icky, pinky flesh that's artificial, in the same way that Rubens would, too."

Talking to her about these artists is exhilarating. She enthuses about Bacon's bravery, "in that he took on big subjects and found an incredibly original language to do it"; about how Sarah Lucas's *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992) is "the great nude of the end of the 20th century"; and how Frank Auerbach is "the most Rembrandt-type figure that we've got in this country".

And then there's Lucian Freud. Even before his death in 2011 she was touted as the heir to Britain's greatest figurative painter. "I don't sit around in my studio worrying whether I am or not, to be honest," she says. "And there are lots of artists to be the heir to."

But she admits that Freud was a crucial influence. "He was a textbook of painting when I was growing up," she says. "In Glasgow [at the School of Art, where she studied in the late Eighties and Nineties], sitting on the floor in the life room, you wanted to know how to paint a nipple? Look to Freud. So, a bit of lemon yellow, put that round the aureole and you're off."

Given the luxuriousness of paint elsewhere in the room, Saville's own work on show here, *The Voice of the*

*Shuttle*, is surprisingly pared down – a vast drawing featuring two severed heads at the top ("I've got lots of images of decapitated heads," she laughs), above an ambiguous pile of bodies. The only colour in the work's a bloody red amid the charcoal mist.

It's inspired by *Philomela*, the Roman poet Ovid's story of rape, mutilation, cannibalism and revenge, painted by

Rubens. "Rape scenes are all over art history and I've always been interested in that – it's one of those subjects that you can't possibly confront. And so I thought, 'I've got to do it then'." Saville brings the myth into the contemporary world. "There are lots of references to war," she says, pointing to the background. "This is from a road in Rwanda, there's actually



**In the flesh:** Jenny Saville, below, and her drawing, *The Voice of the Shuttle*, left; above, *Fulcrum* (1998) the kind of Rubenesque painting for which she became famous

a bicycle underneath here, different massacres – I read quite a bit about what causes mass killings, and the idea that rape is used as a weapon in war.”

**W**E WANDER into the mid-hang Rubens show proper (it’s already looking magnificent) and Saville leads me to another rape scene, Rubens’s tiny oil sketch for *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*. “The movement’s really lovely, isn’t it?” she smiles. It’s a strikingly modest work compared to the grand Baroque canvases elsewhere. “When I see that,” she says, “I feel like that’s the real Rubens.”

Her love of the Old Masters began early. “By the age of eight I was a committed artist,” she explains. “Already I had decided that was what I was going to do with my life.” She would draw relentlessly and her aptitude for art was picked up by her art historian uncle – in her teens she became his “dogbody” on art historical tours of great cities.

“I learned to draw in the Rialto fish market [in Venice]. I got up every morning at six and drew,” she remembers. “And I used to drink red wine and Coca-Cola with them, because that’s what they would drink, and by 9.30 I’d be so pissed.”

Perhaps inevitably, Saville was a precocious talent. She was only 21 when she was “discovered”. “I had Charles Saatchi phone me up, and put me on a plane to London and make a show,” she recalls. “I had just left college, so that was a little bit of a lottery ticket, I have to say.”

Funded by Saatchi, she finished several paintings for the 1994 show that created an immediate storm. But while she featured in *Sensation*, that defining exhibition in the Nineties, she chose to retreat from the UK scene, “because it was such a big deal, the YBA thing, and my instinct is always to go against what’s fashionable. So I went to America.”

Since then she’s moved between New York, Palermo – where she struck up a friendship with another hero, painter Cy Twombly, before his death in 2011 – and now Oxford. She has had surprisingly few solo exhibitions in the UK; her first dedicated London show was last year and reflected a more open, abstract style. “People had quite typecast me from the show that I did with Saatchi, and that’s a different artist from me now,” she says.

She believes that having children – she has two with her partner, a former painter who now manages her studio – as well as travelling, allowed her to become “more worldly” and this “opened out my work, I wasn’t just this ‘British figurative painter’”.

She jealously guards the “preciousness of that universe, my studio”, cut off from the machinery and business of the art world, working night and day, engaging with the masters she’s showing in her RA room, as well as Rembrandt, Titian and, of course, Rubens.

“It’s that debate with history,” she says. “I don’t feel the need to think, ‘I’ve got to show in the next six months otherwise my name will be forgotten’. I don’t have that energy, what I think is a wasted energy. Because you’re better off just making the work.”