

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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A Contemporary Twist on Rubens's Legacy

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*Jenny Saville with her work "Voice of the Shuttle" at the Royal Academy in London.
Chris Jackson/Getty Images, for the Royal Academy of Arts*

LONDON — The British artist Jenny Saville is best known for painting monumental close-ups of large nude women exposing things that are usually left unshown: flab, fat, bulge. Her works are sometimes likened to those of Peter Paul Rubens.

It made sense, then, for the Royal Academy of Arts in London to ask her to curate a room of modern and contemporary works as part of its blockbuster exhibition “Rubens and his Legacy,” which runs through April 10 and features 135 works by the Flemish master. Ms. Saville has filled one of the exhibition’s 11 large galleries with 21 works by such personal favorites as Willem de Kooning, Pablo Picasso, Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, Cy Twombly and Sarah Lucas, and has tacked on a new painting of her own. As a result, the room says as much about her as it does about Rubens.

“I can see why I was approached to do the show,” said Ms. Saville, 44, as she finished installing the display this month. “I’ve done a lot of work with bigger women earlier on in my career, and people have often referred to my work as Rubenesque.” She titled a 1999 painting “Ruben’s Flap” — in reference to a plastic-surgery technique where thigh fat is transplanted to make a breast.

Among artists of her generation, Ms. Saville is unusual in her devotion to figurative painting. The advertising executive and art collector Charles Saatchi exhibited her unflattering depictions of her naked self in 1994, and the Gagosian Gallery signed her on in 1997. That same year, she appeared in the Royal Academy's landmark "Sensation" exhibition of young British artists in Saatchi's collection. At Christie's last year, one of her nudes from that period ("Plan," 1993) sold for 2.1 million pounds, or \$3.48 million at the time. She went on to paint bruised faces inspired by visits to plastic-surgery clinics and morgues. For her most recent art she has abandoned flesh tones and uses a charcoal palette.

Ms. Saville said she admired Rubens's output and range, and his orchestration of figures. If he is not as popular as Rembrandt or Velázquez, it is because he "shows everything," she said: "It's like having ice cream and fruit and too many toppings all at the same time."

The works in her display — gathered over four months — are mainly from private collections because museums rarely lend at short notice. Tim Marlow, the Royal Academy's director of artistic programs, said he approached Ms. Saville last summer because "she understands and knows Rubens incredibly well, and it's evident in her work."

Ms. Saville said her intention with the display was to show both abstract and figurative art, and convey "a feeling of freedom and painterliness." The first artist that came to mind when she took on the project was de Kooning — an admirer of Rubens — because, she said, his "twisting of the brush and color" recalled "the looping of cloth and bodies from Old Master paintings."

On the main wall of Ms. Saville's gallery is de Kooning's large abstract "Untitled IX" (1977), a web of undulating brushstrokes that evoke Rubens's writhing figures and pink flesh tones. His nearby "Untitled" (1970) is a female figure painted expressionistically on newsprint; all you see are her bright-red lips and shapely breasts.

"In Rubens, women have curves, and that's what artists always wanted," said David Jaffe, a former senior curator at the National Gallery in London who staged the Rubens exhibition there in 2005-6. "De Kooning goes for big women, Cézanne went for big women. Stick figures are rather unproductive from an artistic point of view."

Picasso is the other dominant presence in Ms. Saville's selection, with four works. The largest is "The Painter and his Model" (1963), a bearded figure at his easel facing a sultry, cross-legged nude. Nico Van Hout, curator of the Royal Academy's Rubens show, said he would have chosen other Picassos more suggestive of Rubens, though loans were hard to get.

Of the selected works, the two that relate most noticeably to Rubens are a pair of napping nudes by Freud that are visible upon entering the gallery. One is half-finished; the other, "Naked Portrait II" (1980-81), is a frank, frontal depiction of a fleshy woman. Hanging across from them is Francis Bacon's "Sleeping Figure" (1959), a man snoozing languidly on a sofa, his skin a deep pink.

Another highlight is Ms. Lucas's humorous installation "Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab" (1992). Owned by the artist Damien Hirst, the piece consists of those foods laid out on a table to depict the female form. The ingredients are replaced every other day by a local kebab caterer and by the Academy's kitchen according to the artist's instructions.

A few of Ms. Saville's picks have a more tenuous visual connection to Rubens. One is Twombly's "Bacchus" (2004), a thick, red, looping line with the word "Psilax" at the top. Another is "Jacqueline" (1964), Andy Warhol's painting of the mourning Jacqueline Kennedy. Ms. Saville said she had actually sought a portrait of Elizabeth Taylor, who once owned a baroque pearl called La Peregrina that was worn centuries earlier in a Rubens painting of royalty, and later featured in courtly pictures by Velázquez. To Ms. Saville, who has called her entire display "La Peregrina," the jewel represents the link between art and money: "Where the art has moved, where the power has moved, this pearl has moved with it," she said.

Deliberately absent from the selection are Ms. Saville's own early nudes. Instead, she presents "Voice of the Shuttle (Philomela)" (2014-15), her previously unshown version of a myth depicted by Rubens in "The Banquet of Tereus" (1636-37).

The protagonist of the myth — Tereus, the king of Thrace — rapes his sister-in-law and tears her tongue out; the victim's sister later serves the king his own son's flesh at a banquet. Ms. Saville's extra-large treatment, in charcoal-black and gray with threads of red, has mugshot-like images of two men at the top, a jumble of indistinguishable bodies in the middle, and a boy's small severed head in the bottom corner.

Rubens's use of myths, and especially his depictions of nudes, would ensure his lasting influence on artists. "The nude has become such a river in Western art: From Giorgione to Titian, it's paint made flesh," she said, citing the famous de Kooning phrase: "Flesh was the reason oil paint was invented."