

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Jenny Saville: 'I used to be anti-beauty'

Saville made her name with giant paintings of fleshy, flawed bodies. She talks about being bankrolled by Charles Saatchi, how having children is changing her art – and the joy of late-night vacuuming

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*'I feel like I've just started' ... Jenny Saville in her Oxford studio.
Photograph: Pal Hansen for the Observer*

It's funny to think of Jenny Saville in her studio at 1am, music blaring, with vacuum cleaner in hand as she approaches one of her canvases and starts sucking great lines through her work. That it should be a Henry vacuum, the shamelessly anthropomorphised device, makes it even better: as he approaches Saville's giant works, ready to wreak destruction, his expression will be one of eternal cheerfulness.

"I'm getting more sophisticated with working out how many suction techniques I can find," says Saville with a laugh, as we stand in front of Ebb and Flow. This great tangle of bodies is part of her new show at the Gagosian Gallery in London.

Saville is known as a painter, but this exhibition is of her drawings. It is a "massive" freedom, she says, to work in charcoal and pastel rather than oil paint. "Just because of the transparency of drawing, you've got the possibility of multiple bodies. It's an attempt to make multiple realities exist together rather than one sealed image." It means she can change direction quickly. "In two hours, you can put a leg in here, go right through a body, go right through genitals, one gender changes to another."

At her studio, a pile of eraser droppings built up beneath each canvas as she rubbed bits away, but nothing is ever really deleted – the canvas holds the memory of touch. “Some sort of human scribbling,” says Saville. She wore away the skin on her fingers doing it.

There is a gentleness to this work that may surprise those who loved the pieces – such as the brazenly meaty *Branded* – from Saville’s 20s when she was part of Charles Saatchi’s Young British Artists group. Her 2003 show in New York, *Migrants*, was comprised of highly charged, even violent images. (Visitors to her studio in past years have noted the graphic pictures she has collected, including those of burn victims and photographs from Abu Ghraib.) “I was almost aggressive [in my work] all the time, whereas now ...” She trails off.

“I can’t say I’m wiser; I’m probably more foolish. But I think I’ve accepted that making things that are beautiful is interesting, whereas before I was not interested in beauty at all. I was anti-beauty, I would say. I like that something reveals itself slowly, it doesn’t have to shout it. That’s shocked me.” It was having children that changed her work. “I find watching them so beautiful that I have accepted that sort of beauty into my life.”

Saville is at her studio in Oxford, where she lives, from shortly after 8am, and works until about 4pm, when she goes home to spend time with her two kids; once they are in bed, she’s back in the studio until 1am. “I love the nights,” she says. Cycling around the city, she likes to look up at students and researchers working in brightly lit science labs on her way to her own night shift.

She always knew she would be an artist, and assumed she would work as a waitress, as she did at college, to fund her activity. Instead, she was scooped up by Charles Saatchi, who bought her Glasgow School of Art degree collection and commissioned her to make work for his gallery for the next two years. “Who else was going to give a 23-year-old a huge gallery and say: ‘Yes, you can make a 21-foot triptych?’” she says. “I was lucky I was part of that generation and given a platform to try things out.” It was, she says, “really exciting that these young, state school-educated punky kids had taken over the art world. But it wasn’t this pally club.”

Has she always known she was good? “I don’t think I’m good, I just work,” she says. “I write myself improvement reports. Like this one,” she says, pointing at the canvas. “What was good about the stencil, what could I have done better, how could I have changed that? To say, this element worked well, but why did I not push it as far as I could? What was it in my character that stopped me doing that? Every time you start a new piece it’s like starting that whole journey all over. People say, ‘I love this piece,’ and I say, ‘It was so much better inside my head.’ You get used to failure.”

She was always interested in painting people and bodies. Nudes, she says, are “the art that I’ve liked – Rembrandt, Velázquez, Titian. I’ve never not found it an interesting thing to do. How can I depict a nipple, how can I get the twist of a thumb to go round with one mark? I still get a kick out of doing it.”

She became known for painting obese bodies, then bodies about to undergo plastic surgery – both mostly female. People have presumed her work is anti-plastic surgery, or a comment about the tyranny of thin, but she says she isn’t interested in passing judgment. It was the idea of how bodies can be changed, and the stories of why they had changed, that fascinated her. But her work is undoubtedly “female” - her women do not look like the idealised women, painted by men, who have dominated the nude for almost all of art history. When I ask if she thinks she

would be more celebrated if she were a man, she simply says: “I wouldn’t make this work if I was a guy.”

It’s “a bit annoying” to be described as a “female artist”, she says. “Only when that goes away will women truly be part of the culture. But I can’t really complain. I’ve had a lot of exposure, I’ve been able to make exactly the work I’ve wanted to make, and haven’t had to make any compromises. A hundred years ago, I wouldn’t be standing here, showing like this. I wouldn’t even have been able to hire my own studio because I couldn’t have had a contract.”

Next year, Saville is doing the biggest show she’s ever done, an exhibition of drawings and paintings in New York. “I’m determined I’m going to get this idea of multiple realities in oil,” she says. “That’s my big project.” Someone said to her recently that they considered Saville to be mid-career. Her eyes widen at the thought of it. “I definitely feel like I’ve just started.”

- Jenny Saville: Erola is at the Gagosian Gallery, London, until 28 May.