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ARTSY

How Jenny Saville Changed the Way We View the Female Form in Painting

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Jenny Saville, Vis and Ramin I, 2018. Gagosian

British artist Jenny Saville became famous for paintings that render female flesh on a monumental scale. Her canvases, often larger than 6 by 6 feet, magnify the raw details of embodied experience: large, drooping breasts; pregnant bellies and flab; faces smashed against plexiglass, a figure sitting on the toilet. Painters throughout history—Peter Paul Rubens, Titian, Willem de Kooning, Pablo Picasso—have long objectified the body; the subject matter becomes newly shocking and potent under Saville’s brush. If her oeuvre doesn’t offer a pretty picture of humanity, she believes it’s an honest one. It’s been an interesting journey from her early days as part of the so-called Young British Artist cohort to the record-breaking news of 2018, when she was anointed the “most expensive living female artist” after her 1992 painting *Propped* sold at auction for \$12.4 million.

As the story goes, obese women in American shopping malls inspired Saville’s career-making body of work. The artist (born in Cambridge in 1970) spent a term at the University of Cincinnati in 1991, a brief stateside sojourn during her attendance at the Glasgow School of Art (from 1988 to 1992). She once told *The Guardian* that even as a child, a piano teacher’s body had entranced her: “I was fascinated by the way her two breasts would become one, the way her fat moved, the way it hung on the back of her arms,” she said. In Ohio, her thinking likely became influenced by the French feminist theory she was studying, as well.

Throughout university, Saville painted large-scale female nudes. Her graduate show included the aforementioned 7-by-6-foot painting *Propped*, a self-portrait in which the artist sits naked (albeit wearing pointy white flats on her feet) atop a phallic black post. Her nails dig into her legs, pushing her ample breasts together. Saville paraphrased and inscribed into the paint, in mirror image, text from Belgian-born feminist writer Luce Irigaray (“If we continue to speak in this sameness—speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other. Again, words will pass through our bodies, above our heads—disappear, make us disappear”). Scrawled across both the background and the figure’s skin, the message appears more intended for the subject than for the viewer, who is forced to read it backwards.

Popular acclaim came quickly. *The Times Saturday Review* published an image of *Propped* on its cover. British collector Charles Saatchi took note and bought the painting (and nearly her entire student output)—and commissioned more of Saville’s work, which he showed in a 1994 exhibition of Young British Artists. His 1997 blockbuster show “Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Gallery” (which also traveled to the Brooklyn Museum) grouped her work with that of Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Chris Ofili, Rachel Whiteread, and other major British talents.

Throughout the 1990s, Saville would continue exploring her fascinations with the unairbrushed female form. She painted a body marked in black, as though about to undergo major plastic surgery (*Plan*, 1993); a triptych featuring a large woman in her underwear, from three different angles (*Strategy (South Face/Front Face/North Face)*, 1993–94); women lying side by side, toe-to-head (*Shift*, 1996–97); and a patchwork body with breasts askew (*Hybrid*, 1997). Saville proclaimed herself “anti-beauty” and focused, instead, on exaggerating bodily elements that society generally deemed unsightly.

Throughout the next decade, the work became downright morbid. Saville made paintings of crime scenes and the morgue. In *Red Stare Head IV* (2006–11), she rendered a child’s bloodied head. Red brushstrokes ooze around his nose, echoing the scarlet of his parted, off-center lips. His whole face looks slightly contorted—distorted, perhaps, to echo the the child’s post-trauma reality. None of this is necessarily grotesque, argues Ealan Wingate, the New York director of Gagosian (where Saville has been on the roster since the late 1990s). “It’s the fascination of flesh, of the body and how it moves,” he said. Saville, he claimed, doesn’t intend to upset her viewer, but merely to convey her awe at how the body performs and reacts.

Norton Museum of Art curator Cheryl Brutvan, who organized a 2012 solo presentation of Saville’s work, describes the painter’s major interest as the “vulnerability of the body and the invention of the figure in a contemporary manner.” Watching plastic surgeons cut up a body—and then dealing with the subject matter artistically—offered her a very modern way to think about anatomy.

Yet Saville’s practice took a turn after she gave birth to her two children, in 2007 and 2008. The experiences altered her relationship to her favorite subject matter. “I realized I spent my life painting flesh, and I could produce flesh in my body,” she recently told *New York* magazine. Paintings of mothers and children ensued. Staying true to form, Saville portrayed her figures not as idealized Madonnas and Christs, but as harried contemporary humans; in *The Mothers* (2011), a wailing infant nearly slips from his mother’s arms.

Throughout Saville's practice, she's maintained a certain fraught fealty to her artistic forebears. Her images of mothers and children reference works by Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo—albeit from the perspective of a person who's actually experienced childbirth. She often garners comparisons to fellow Brits Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud for her unglorified depictions of flesh. Like Bacon, she's also delved into painting carcasses.



Jenny Saville, Odalisque, 2012-2014. Gagosian

In her most recent body of work, Saville makes her art history references more prominent. Entitled “Ancestors,” her summer exhibition at Gagosian New York included canvases depicting humans and creatures atop plinths—suggesting a metanarrative in which Saville was painting a series of sculptural artworks that already existed. One composition, of a man holding a child, took a contemporary spin on Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1499). A series of “Fates” paintings featured mash-ups of human and non-Western sculptural body parts, calling to mind Picasso's fractured picture planes.

Still, a certain violence continues to tinge Saville's canvases. Bodies appear spliced and hacked; angry red brushstrokes slash across their surfaces. These gestures discomfort the viewer as they enhance the work's vitality: It's hard to look at a Saville canvas without feeling something. If Saville's work can be difficult to look at, it's proven eminently sellable. The status of being “the most expensive living female artist” seems both an honor and a complex burden. Saville never set out to achieve this distinction, noted Wingate, but rather to explore “an exultation in paint.”

“It's still a shame that we say ‘the living female painter,’” said the Norton Museum's Brutvan, critiquing the way the media has characterized the sale. “It's so appalling today. She's a great painter. She's really in her own path.”