

GAGOSIAN

HONG KONG TATLER

Artist Jenny Saville Takes Us Inside Her Studio And Reveals Insights Into Gender Equality

Artist Jenny Saville opens the doors to her studio, where she has painted a new series for an exhibition this month at Gagosian in New York

Anny Shaw



Artist Jenny Saville shows Tatler her studio and talks about her journey as an female artist (Photo: Amanda Fordyce for Tatler Hong Kong)

Two years ago, a painting by Jenny Saville set a record at auction for the highest price paid for a work by a living female artist, but the British painter doesn't like to think about that too much. "I try to keep my eye firmly on the art; the painting is the same painting as it was before the auction," she says matter-of-factly, when we meet in her drawing studio in Oxford.

The painting in question is the gargantuan, corpulent self-portrait, *Propped*, created in 1992 and one of five works by Saville to have been exhibited in the *Sensation* show of Young British

Artists (YBAs) that caused such a stir at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1997. The 2.1-metre-tall canvas sold for £9.5 million.

“That’s crazy money, but at the same time, compared to Jeff Koons’ bunny, it’s not crazy,” Saville says, referring to the US artist’s stainless-steel leporine sculpture, *Rabbit*, which fetched an eye-watering US\$91.1 million at auction in 2019, making Koons the most expensive living male artist. By any standard it represents a painfully pronounced gap between the value of art made by men and women, but, as Saville notes, “The good thing is the bar has been set that bit higher for other women artists coming through.”

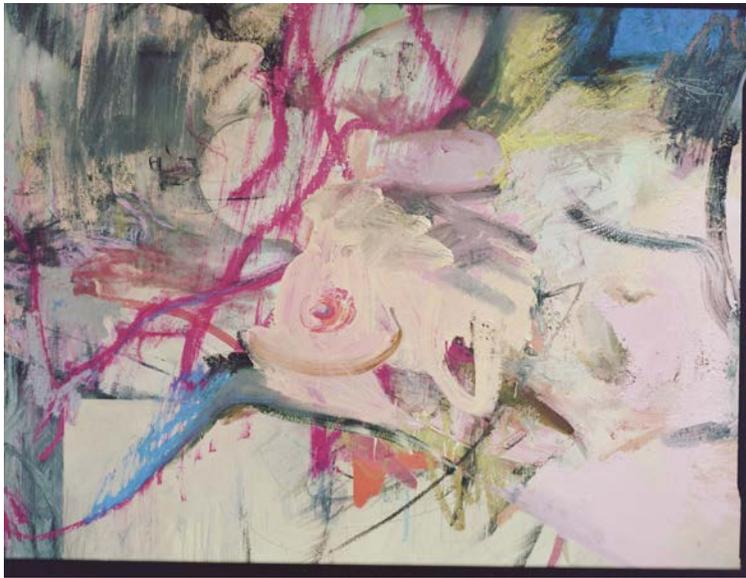


Photo: Amanda Fordyce for Tatler Hong Kong

BEYOND GENDER

Setting the bar high has been a constant for Saville, who has made a 30-year career out of her love for “the sensuality of flesh”. She started out painting women’s bodies, chiefly her own, but has also turned her gaze on men (Pablo Picasso’s late biographer John Richardson often sat for her). More recently, in works such as *Vis* and *Ramin II* (2018) or *Out of one, two (symposium)* (2016), fluid tangles of male and female body parts merge to create non-binary figures.

“I like the idea of a transgender painting where the work itself doesn’t have a fixed gender,” she says.



Details of an unfinished painting (Photo: Amanda Fordyce for Tatler Hong Kong)

THE IMPACT OF MOTHERHOOD

Saville's own gender has been a rich source of inspiration. She was born in Cambridge in 1970, at a time when feminism was far from mainstream. She tells me emphatically how becoming a mother had a profound effect on her practice, in particular honing her drawing (Saville's children are now 12 and 13). "When you paint, there's a lot of clearing up and I just didn't have that time. Drawing became something I could do very quickly," she says. "My body and their bodies also changed so quickly that making one image of a solid painting just didn't satisfy. Multiple lines and the ability to change became more suitable to the experience I was having in life."

Motherhood has been cast as career suicide by some artists, including Tracey Emin and Marina Abramović, but Saville is vehemently opposed to that point of view.

She recalls that lots of people — men and women — warned her that having children would be "the death" of her creativity. In fact, it had the opposite effect. "I became more creative. I've made more work since I had children," she says. "The experience of actually making flesh, making a body inside you, was so profound I wanted to use that advantage. And that gave me an extra energy to work."

I ask if she has ever encountered sexism in other areas of her career. After a pause, Saville responds: "Museum shows, maybe, or collecting in museums." Astonishingly, her first public solo show in the UK didn't come until 2012, at Modern Art Oxford. There is now a second in the works: the National Portrait Gallery in London is planning a retrospective of Saville's work for when it reopens in 2023.



Photo: Amanda Fordyce for Tatler Hong Kong

This happy news is reflective of a broader push within the art world to redress the gender imbalance, although Saville is not convinced of certain strategies. “I’m not a fan of female-only exhibitions, but I can see why they have been necessary to showcase women who may not otherwise have been shown, especially in commercial galleries where the name of the game is to sell the work. That’s why public spaces are hugely important for women artists,” she says.

So, are we on the cusp of major change? Not quite, Saville concludes. “The National Gallery [in the UK] and the Prado [in Madrid] are doing those exhibitions of female Old Masters, which is pretty amazing. But we’ll just have to see how it manifests itself. It’s still very, very difficult for most women artists. We have to go step by step.”



Oil bars (Photo: Amanda Fordyce for Tatler Hong Kong)

EARLY SUCCESS

Nonetheless, commercial success came early for Saville. Charles Saatchi, the advertising executive and YBA champion, became an early supporter after he saw *Propped* on the cover of *The Times Saturday Review* in 1992, galvanising him to buy every work he could get his hands on. Saatchi tracked down Saville at the Glasgow School of Art, from which she had just graduated; weeks later she was en route to London. “Charles offered me the gallery at Boundary Road [in St John’s Wood, London] and just said, ‘Make whatever you want’,” she recalls.

For almost two years, Saatchi paid Saville a stipend, allowing her to paint freely in exchange for the works. “It was a lottery ticket,” she says. “And it gave me a model of how to make work and shows and be serious and ambitious.”

And yet Saville has never really seen herself as a YBA. Peers such as Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas favoured conceptual installations, whereas Saville was a more conventional painter. “Plus, I didn’t go to Goldsmiths [a college of the University of London that specialises in art]; I wasn’t based in London,” she points out. “But, looking back, I’m glad that I was part of a group of people—it was an exciting moment. We were these young state-schooled kids from the UK suddenly in the international eye.”



Saville's tools and materials (Photo: Amanda Fordyce for Tatler Hong Kong)

Around the same time, Saville came to the attention of the New York dealer Larry Gagosian, with whom she first exhibited in 1999. When we met in January, Saville was preparing for her show that was originally planned at Gagosian’s Hong Kong gallery during Art Basel — her “most painterly yet”, she says. The show was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and is now being hosted at Gagosian’s space at 980 Madison Avenue in New York, where it is opening this month.

PICTURING INSPIRATION

Several oil bar and pastel sketches on primed canvas surrounded us in the studio; Saville likes to have multiple paintings on the go at once, working on them here before transporting them to her painting studio, where they are stretched. In one, a woman stares down at the viewer, her arms folded nonchalantly behind her head. In another, two or three bodies are so entwined it is impossible to make out where one ends and another begins. The colours are punchier than one might expect from Saville: peony-pink flesh offset by clashing patches of yellow and royal blue, inspired by the graffiti she has photographed around the world.

The exhibition features about ten new works, chiefly portraits of models Saville met on recent trips to Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and China. “In Russia, it began with a girl on a bridge,” she says. “I started to see faces I’d never seen before, types of structures of heads that just had this beautiful tragedy to them.”

Photographing her subjects in different climates has also coloured the new work. “I started every painting thinking about weather conditions and the time of day as a way of setting emotions for the paintings,” she says. In that sense, they are as much about “the way nature and aesthetics shift around the world” as they are the sitters’ distinctive physical traits.



Saville's studio (Photo: Amanda Fordyce for Tatler Hong Kong)

Working from photographs rather than life models has always been Saville’s preferred method. Life models, she says, “behave in a way that no human actually behaves in. When people sit for you, they really pose, and so it becomes a veil away from life rather than towards life.” Francis Bacon also shunned life models. “That felt very liberating to me,” says Saville.

She also draws inspiration from found images — whether they be medical photographs, pictures from the infamous Abu Ghraib detention centre in Iraq or other people’s art. “I am a scavenger

of images. I take photographs on my iPhone of everything: stains, shadows, beautiful light, tyre marks on the road, chewing gum stuck to the pavement, all sorts of things.”



Photo: Amanda Fordyce for Tatler Hong Kong

In her studio, such images, and many others besides, are pinned to the walls and scattered across the floor. There are printouts of portraits by Velázquez, Schiele, Rembrandt, Bacon and Picasso, as well as pictures of sexually graphic Japanese prints, Roman busts and family photographs from the Victorian era. “I have always worked in that Bacon-esque kind of environment, with stuff everywhere,” Saville says.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In particular, Andy Warhol’s silver Elizabeth Taylor portraits, as well as “the painterliness of Willem de Kooning and Cy Twombly and the staining of Helen Frankenthaler and Mark Rothko”, have informed the pieces that were originally planned for the Hong Kong show.

In a way, that location might have added another level of meaning to her work. Saville says the exhibition was a show of support for Hong Kong, which had been rocked by anti-government protests that have since abated, not entirely to anyone’s satisfaction. “My freedom of expression is so important to me,” she says. “To be able to show a naked body or a body that’s in some sort of sexual pose: that could be censored in another culture.”