

GAGOSIAN



Jenny Saville at Gagosian

Jonathan Goodman



JENNY SAVILLE, Second Nature, 2020. Oil on linen, 90 9/16 x 82 11/16 x 2 inches, 230 x 210 x 5 cm. © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagosian

In the mid- to late 1990s, Jenny Saville became known for making paintings of big-bodied women, perhaps in defiance directed toward the long historical practice of painting less heavy, more beautiful girls. Saville's large canvases of large women have been taken as major contemporary art efforts from the start; their historical legacy, made new by the size of the painted figures, has made the artist an anomaly of note: a powerful artist of the moment, buttressed by support from the extended legacy of the female nude. Saville has spent time in America--while a student at the Glasgow School of Art, she received a six-month fellowship to study at the University of Cincinnati, where she came upon more than a few examples of outsized women--and this experience has been said to influence the way she painted. In addition, her regular use of a rough impasto gave the surface quality of the painting a raw, abstract surface, which might be legitimately separated from the experience of the figure itself. The

combination of an unusual theme with an unusual surface has made Saville an artist of accomplishment, already while in mid-career.

The addition of children in Saville's life is also part of her increasing freedom as a painter; she sees her children as emotionally and technically uninhibited in their art activities, influencing her in a similar direction. In the large painting *Second Nature* (2020), Saville paints a striking portrait of a young woman, mostly in red with some yellow and blue; a slate blue takes place as a background. The sitter's eyes, nostrils, and lips are wonderfully rendered, being expressive and full of feeling without taking on sentiment. At the same time, the artist includes throughout the painting fully free-hand brushwork, most forcefully at the top and bottom of the head. The forehead is characterized by brushiness that aligns with de Kooning, while drips underneath the chin and onto the neck can be likened to Pollock's effects.



JENNY SAVILLE, Rupture, 2020. Acrylic and oil on linen, 78 3/4 x 63 x 1 3/16 inches, 200 x 160 x 3 cm. © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagosian

It is said that Saville takes a cue from classical culture--the title of the show, "Elpis," means Hope and is taken from an anecdote told by the Greek poet Hesiod, in which Hope is unable to escape from the box Pandora closed after releasing all the horrors it contained. The allusion is marvelous, if a bit hard to align with the show--how do we connect the story to the artist's painting? It might be advanced that hope is a universal emotion, central to the act of art, but for Saville's New York audience, the major influence would be formal rather than thematic--seen as an approximation of the New York School's painterly freedom, which is evident throughout this excellent show. In *Rupture* (2020), the sitter's gaze feels slightly self-conscious. Her face is painted in pink, with the sides and part of the face done in red, and the left side of her neck covered by an inchoate expanse of green. As with all the works in the show, *Rupture* is characterized by a liberated brushwork, based on a conscious recognition that realism today must not lose itself to academic rigidities.



JENNY SAVILLE, Arcadia, 2020. Acrylic and oil on linen, 78 3/4 x 63 x 1 3/16 inches, 200 x 160 x 3 cm. © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagolian

Arcadia, a beautiful, lyric painting also done in 2020, comes to us as an exercise in poetic viewing. The young woman's outstretched neck is given prominence; her face a mass of mostly red splotches with a bit of purple, her hair gathered behind her, her neck and shoulders covered with thin, multicolored drips, the person becomes a colorful avatar of many generations of portraiture. In a number of ways, this work could not be more distant from the leanings of new American art. Instead it shows how the European tradition of the portrait can in fact be kept alive on the highest level, by someone unafraid to incorporate a sense of the past. In a way, though, the comment is slightly tangential because the artist is fully contemporary in her work, especially in her use of color. The treatment of the sitters, its emphasis on emotional reticence and technical expressiveness in the same moment, enables Saville to work out an idiom of both measure and, to some extent, abandon, at a time when we seem to be committed to one quality or the other.