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Jenny Saville's Nudes Bring Renaissance Masters Down to Earth

In a huge show across five museums in Florence, Italy, the artist's fleshy paintings and drawings hang next to idealized female forms of created by Botticelli, Michelangelo and others.

Laura Rysman

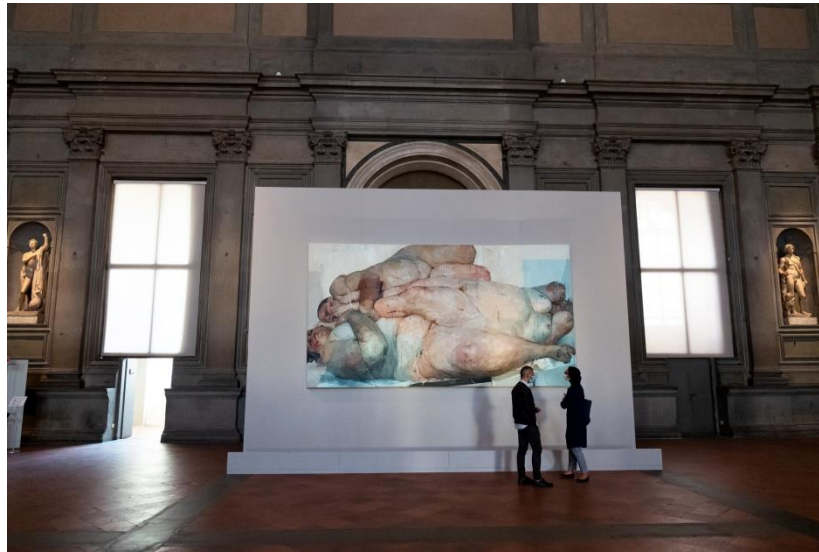


Jenny Saville in front of her drawing "Pietà I," in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, in Florence. Credit...Jenny Saville/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Clara Vannucci for The New York Times.

FLORENCE, Italy — When Botticelli and Luca della Robbia created masterpieces about motherhood, they honored Renaissance idealism with reverential depictions of a serene Madonna and child. When the painter Jenny Saville created “The Mothers,” in 2011, her Leonardo-inspired composition countered that 500-year-old sanctity with a firsthand reflection of her own experience: Two unwieldy babies exhaust the forlorn-looking artist, in a self-portrait that is also an every-mother story.

Those divergent representations are now facing each other on display at the Museo degli Innocenti here, as part of Saville’s biggest solo exhibition to date. Running through Feb. 20 and

spread across five Florence museums, the show pits 100 paintings and drawings by the 51-year-old British artist against works by Renaissance masters, on their home turf.



"Fulcrum" (1999), on display in the Palazzo Vecchio. Credit...Jenny Saville/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Clara Vannucci for The New York Times.

Hanging beside Michelangelo's marble Pietà in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, a larger-than-life drawing by Saville called "Pietà 1" depicts her own family in the same entwined pose. In Palazzo Vecchio, amid Giorgio Vasari's grandiose 16th-century murals of men in battle, Saville's immense painting "Fulcrum" introduces a mountain of naked women.

Saville's work embraces techniques from across the centuries, blending the realism of traditional painting styles with expressionist abstraction, as she casts her own gaze on subjects long portrayed by male painters: the nude, the fertile mother, the female face.

Her work reflects the grand ambitions of Renaissance masters, yet against their sensual, divine nudes, Saville presents images of fleshy, earthly women, sometimes with bruised or ruptured skin — not the body beautiful, but the suffering, anxious and impermanent body.



Saville's "Byzantium" (2018) Credit...Jenny Saville/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Clara Vannucci for The New York Times.



“Byzantium” on display in the Museo degli Innocenti, among works from the museum’s collection. Credit...Jenny Saville/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Clara Vannucci for The New York Times.

Those fearless canvases ignited her career in the 1990s and established her place as a trailblazer of figurative painting’s renewed relevance. By 2018, when “Propped,” a seething, distorted naked self-portrait, came up for sale at Sotheby’s, it fetched \$12.4 million, an auction high for a work by a living female artist.

Sergio Risaliti, the curator of the Florence exhibition and the director of the Museo Novecento, one of the museums taking part, said the city was “the cradle of Renaissance culture,” but that was “a culture dominated by men.” Now, he added, Florence was “receiving a major female artist on equal footing.”

“The Renaissance represented the avant-garde, and with Jenny, we’re sending a message of the importance of the avant-garde today,” he said.

In a break from overseeing the exhibition’s installation in late September, Saville spoke in a wide-ranging interview about her influences and aspirations, and her life as a painter and mother. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How does it feel to see your own works side-by-side with Renaissance masterpieces?

Italy is a country of figuration, so I feel very at home here — but it was intimidating. I got through by really looking at Michelangelo: I was doing Pietà setups for my own piece, but I couldn’t work out why mine lacked his level of potency. Then I started to do direct studies of the sculpture, and I saw how the internal torque of the bodies worked.

Right through the spine of the work, there’s this incredible twist, which he has in everything he does. Then he uses all the possible elements of a body, whether it’s the tilt of a head, the way a hand rests on somebody else’s flesh, the way material folds — all of them are used to heighten emotion, without sentimentality.



“Pieta 1” features members of Saville’s own family posed like the Michelangelo sculpture. “Right through the spine of the work, there’s this incredible twist, which he has in everything he does,” she said. Credit...Jenny Saville/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Clara Vannucci for The New York Times.

But as well as old masters like Michelangelo, you have modern influences, too.

I look at artists like Twombly, Pollock, Rothko and de Kooning — all the New York School that used paint as a poetic language in itself — and try to channel some of those things into figurative work. I love to start by dripping a lot of acrylic, and you see through the drips, so you get this kind of inner light. I think all the time about how to use this language of paint to get as much emotion as I can.

The vulnerability of the body is a theme you returned to again and again.

Yeah, I’m not afraid of that — I was never really afraid of it. I find that very powerful. We’re always aware of death. That’s our only certainty in life — we don’t know which twists and turns our journeys will take us on, but the certainty is that we will die. So I always work with that in mind.

Yet then when the pandemic was making all of us face up to how vulnerable we are to death, you were making really colorful paintings, some of which are included in this show here in Florence.

Yeah, I was using color like never before. I think it was a sort of resistance to the disease. I just thought, “My gosh, people I love could die.” I just worked harder and faster, like a kind of mania almost. I was making marks with this sort of urgency because I thought, “What’s going to happen to the art world? What’s going to happen to everybody?”

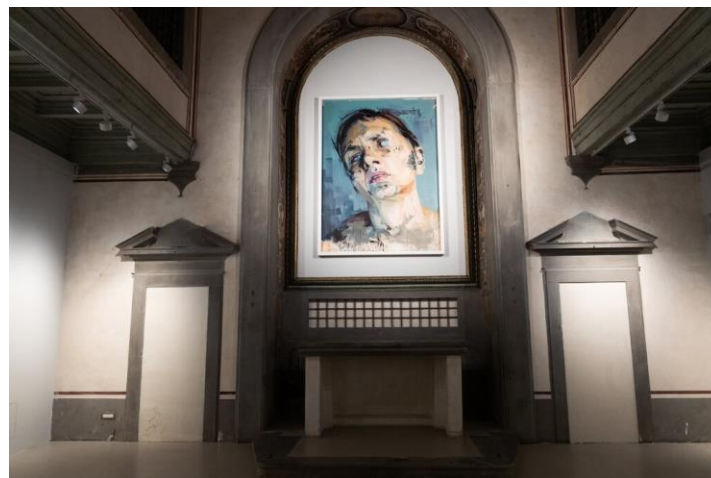


“The moment I put eyes on something, it’s just seems that the world coalesces in the painting,” said Saville of her recent portraits, “because humans are just drawn to eyes. Credit...Jenny Saville/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Clara Vannucci for The New York Times.

Earlier in your career, you were painting a lot of these massive, obese bodies, which in many ways were reminiscent of meat. But your recent work is full of these enormous and surprisingly beautiful portraits of faces.

I’ve always done that, actually. People always think I paint these very fat bodies — they were the ones that collectors pursued more than others, and got more platform in the media — but if you actually look at my work, it’s not as apparent. Even when I graduated and I had “Propped” in my degree show, I had a painting of the huge head of a bride, too.

I love making the big heads because it’s a chance to be very abstract. The moment I put eyes on something, it seems that the world coalesces in the painting, because humans are just drawn to eyes. Most artists start with a figurative structure and then abstract from there, but I start by creating abstract areas of paint as the foundation, and then build figuration on top and let the abstraction show through in places — the same way Michelangelo would build a form from rough marble.



“Rosetta II,” a 2005-6 portrait of a blind woman in Naples, Italy, in the Museo Novocento. Credit...Jenny Saville/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Clara Vannucci for The New York Times

The eyes are remarkably powerful in your paintings, even in “Rosetta II,” the 2005-6 painting of a blind young woman from Naples. Her sightless eyes have so much expression to them.

I had to work even more at those eyes, because they had to really speak. Rosetta had this incredible inner beauty I’d never seen before, and I wanted to try to honor that in the work. She had this strength, because she knew everybody stared at her, so I wanted to get in that space.

You investigated the female nude through your own eyes, and then, with the birth of your two children, you explored another theme of classical painting: motherhood, but depicted by an artist who’s actually experienced it.

I spent my life painting flesh, and then suddenly I was making flesh in my body. That’s very profound. And giving birth was like a Francis Bacon painting, you know.

All of these really poignant things were happening to me, and at the same time, I took on the social categorization of “mother,” when I had spent my life trying to be taken seriously as a painter. I had a debate with myself about whether I should reveal motherhood as a subject in my work. And then I thought, “Why wouldn’t I do that? I do that about every other subject. Why would I feel hesitant? Is it because I think it could affect my career?”



Second from left, Saville’s “The Mothers” (2011) at the Museo degli Innocenti. Credit...Jenny Saville/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Clara Vannucci for The New York Times

What were those fears then?

I think people see you less seriously. I felt like that towards other women who’d had children, if I was honest. I thought that if you’re having a family, you haven’t put your work at the center — which was wrong. You’re not less of an artist because you’ve become a parent. You would never put that on a male artist. So I just did the work, put it out and grew from there. It was a great lesson for me at that time.

Your children are now young teens living in a world shaped by social media. What do you think about the kind of bodies they’re surrounded by these days?

Everyone worries about social media, but actually, my kids are way smarter than I was at that age. My son reads The New York Times every day, where I never even saw a copy until I was in my late teens.

It's quite difficult to keep the innocence of your children going for as long as you'd like, but social media's pluses are phenomenal. I worked with a transgender model called Del LaGrace Volcano to make a painting called "Matrix," and when I showed it in New York in 1999, people thought that kind of body didn't exist or couldn't exist. Now I hear my kids talking about gender fluidity. There's so much more tolerance today, and that's really a wonderful thing that we must preserve.