

Jenny Saville: Un-Beauty

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ART 545

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No subject has been rendered as many times or in as many ways as the human figure. From ancient Greek ideals to fragmented cubist interpretations, the human body has inspired artistic expression for thousands of years. Painting the figure is an integral part in the development of an artist's skill and many representations of the female form, in particular, are romanticized and praised. There is one artist, however, who ignores the framework of the body and focuses on its fleshy exterior, challenging media-enforced ideals of beauty. Well known British painter, Jenny Saville, blazes a trail with her awe-inspiring and often controversial representations of the modern female body. This paper will discuss Saville's acclaim in the subject of figure painting and address her role in defining the modern landscape of the human body.

Jenny Saville was born in Cambridge, England in 1970. She attended the Lilley and Stone School (now The Grove School Specialist Science College) in Newark, Nottinghamshire for her secondary education and later received her Bachelor's degree at Glasgow School of Art, where she studied from 1988 to 1992. In 1990, while still working on her Bachelor of Arts Degree, Jenny Saville exhibited in Contemporary '90 at the Royal College of Art. She also received the Craig award and the Newberry medal. Upon graduation in 1992, Saville showed her work in the Edinburgh and in Critics Choice at the Cooling Gallery in London. Barely into her twenties, Saville was already gaining notoriety for her representations of fleshy female nudes. It was upon acceptance of a six-month scholarship to the University of Cincinnati in the United States, however, that Saville found tangible satisfaction for her preoccupation with flesh. There, Saville saw "Lots of big women. Big white flesh in shorts and T-shirts." It was good

to see, Saville says, "because they had the physicality that I was interested in." <sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the romanticized female nude of her figure-painting counterparts, Saville offered an almost grotesquely clear-eyed view of the body. Her 1993 painting, *Plan* (Figure 1) for example, shows the large body of a woman whose flesh is marked like a relief map, ready for plastic surgery. In fact, 1994, while living in New York City, Saville was granted access to the operating room of plastic surgeon Dr. Barry Martin Weintraub where she watched candid moments of patients on the operating table. Saville took photographs to use as reference for her paintings and she learned the inner workings of the flesh, particularly the excess of fat under the skin, and soon after was describing her palette selections as "pots of liquid flesh." <sup>1</sup> Saville's already feminist ideals about the body were heightened upon her discovery of the various manipulations that can be made through surgery and modern medicine. Saville realized the modern landscape of the human body through her voyeuristic encounters of live surgeries and defined this discovery through her fleshy and biologically-informed paintings.

Jenny Saville attributes much of the physicality of her paintings to the work of Pablo Picasso because he painted the figure as if it was solid and tangible, not fleeting, as opposed to many figurative artists who seek to capture a form's gesture and movement. Saville describes her biggest influences as Francis Bacon and Willem de Kooning and if their styles were married, she says "they would create the best painter who ever lived." Saville gives credit to Bacon for his understanding of the human form and credits de Kooning for his painting skills. Aside from her self-proclaimed influences, however, Saville is most compared to Lucien Freud because of

his shared unromantic depiction of the unideal female body. She brings a feminist viewpoint to her rendering of the woman's body and challenges media-enforced perfectibility. Her paintings deliberately defy the traditional roles of the female nude. Instead of attracting the sexual or romantic gaze, her paintings overwhelm, both in scale and through ghastly depiction of the woman's body.

Saville's interpretations of the female body strip away the veils of sexual desire and idealized femininity, leaving behind impersonal images of skin and fat. The flesh isn't beautified in any way, it is exposed and ashamed, as if viewed under a microscope where every imperfection is magnified. Saville credits a fascination with exposure as her driving force to create art. She is interested in severing the connections between mind and body and between life and death. Saville's paintings break down common perceptions about what the human body is and what it's capable of. "Our bodies, that seem to be so much a part of our existence and spirituality, seem grotesque when they're stripped bare and denuded of personality and context. We spend so much of our lives caring for our bodies and concerning ourselves with their appearance, only to be betrayed by them when we die." <sup>2</sup> Saville tells the blatant truth about our physicality through her richly painted figures. Her painting, *Reverse*, from 1994 (Figure 2) for example, is vital in Saville's repertoire because it walks a dangerous line between the physicality of life and the reality of death. In *Reverse*, the subject appears as dead flesh, with open eyes that vacantly return the viewer's confused stare. Saville, using her own likeness, disregards the importance of individuality and reduces the subject to biological matter that is scraped and abused. As the eyes return the viewer's gaze with chilling vacancy, the plump

mouth droops open to reveal the teeth. The subject's head is tilted back so that the viewer can see inside the nostrils. Saville practically degrades her subject, which rests in a contorted and uncomfortable position with her head lying on the ground. It's as if the subject was photographed in a crime scene, without dignity or grace. The painting offers no answers and leaves only the desire to know the woman's identity and how she arrived at her lowly state. *Reverse* is rendered on an overwhelming scale, at 7 feet tall and 8 feet wide, with passionate and vulgar application of paint that demands attention.

Saville's preoccupation with breaking down the body is personified by physical breaks in the flesh. Genitals, noses and mouths, to Saville, are like entry points into human vulnerability. "I am not interested in portraits as such. I am not interested in the outward personality. I don't use the anatomy of my face because I like it, not at all. I use it because it brings out something from inside, a neurosis," says Saville.<sup>3</sup> Her work represents the duality of being alive and the anxiety of impending death.

Not only does Saville's work address visceral truths about life and biology, it also defines the modern landscape of the body. Being born in 1970, her coming-of-age years were the 1980s, when fitness was fashionable and everyone was a gym-goer, chasing the ideal body. Pornography and the traditional male gaze in female figurative art also drive Saville to redefine the female nude. As a child and teenager, Saville flipped through male-dominated art books and asked "Could I make a painting of a nude in my own voice? It's such a male-laden art, so historically weighted. The way women were depicted didn't feel like mine, too cute. I wasn't

interested in admired or idealized beauty." <sup>3</sup> Her work is social commentary on the state of the modern female body and it reveals the risky lengths women are often willing to take in their aspirations to be beautiful. *Knead* (Figure 3), for example, is a large, oil on canvas painting that features a woman waking up after plastic surgery. This 54.1 inch by 62 inch painting is telling of Saville's concerns with the modern landscape of the human body and the demands placed upon it. *Knead* shows the tightly stretched skin of a woman's face as she awakens from anesthesia. With a purple oxygen tube still in her mouth, visible incision marks and saggy, red eye sockets, the woman is obviously in a state of pain and confusion as her eyes begin to open. Saville asserts her distrust of plastic surgery through her aesthetic decision to juxtapose the geometric lines in the form of the oxygen tube to contrast the clinical equipment with the three dimensional, vulnerable form of the woman. Saville seems to ask, "Is it worth it?" *Knead* suggests that plastic surgery is an offensive practice that disrespects the human face and body, and Saville captures the truth of the moment through her befitting aesthetic choices. Her use of bold color and rich application of paint offer a tactile, tangible experience to the viewer about the process of undergoing plastic surgery. The body, as Saville reveals, is no longer viewed as a temple, but as malleable matter that can be cut and pasted to achieve society's ideal of attractiveness. The cuts and openings in the face speak of the neurosis attached to being alive and the degradation of the body.

Jenny Saville is a key member of the Young British Artists movement and has made important strides in dissolving dated ideals about the female nude, and her paintings have forced a change in perception about the human body. Saville's work removes context and

personality and displays the actuality of the form. Her multi-pronged investigation of the human body addresses several key issues about being alive. Ironically, her truthful presentation of the physicality of the body opens eyes about the ephemerality of life. The human body is the subject of judgment and social demand and is perceived as the key component of identity, however, Saville negates this and offers up grotesque renderings of flesh to prove that *we* are not our *bodies*. Knowing this, the viewer is left with his or her search for self, and continues on his path, better-informed of his own mortality.

Notes

1. "She states that she saw *"Lots of big women. Big white flesh in shorts and T-shirts. It was good to see because they had the physicality that I was interested in."* Art Bank, retrieved November 5, 2013, <http://artbank.com/DisplayArtist.aspx?id=63>.
2. *"Our bodies, that seem to be so much a part of our existence and spirituality, seem grotesque when they're stripped bare and denuded of personality and context. We spend so much of our lives caring for our bodies and concerning ourselves with their appearance, only to be betrayed by them when we die."* Gagosian Gallery, retrieved November 5, 2013, <http://www.gagosian.com/artists/jenny-saville>.
3. *"Could I make a painting of a nude in my own voice? It's such a male-laden art, so historically weighted. The way women were depicted didn't feel like mine, too cute. I wasn't interested in admired or idealized beauty."* Jenny Saville, interview by Suzie Mackenzie, The Guardian, October 21, 2005.

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Figure 1. Plan (1993)



Figure 2. Reverse (1994)



Figure 3. Knead (1994)