

Jenny Saville: The Body Recovered

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Ever since the introduction of feminist ideologies into the realm of art, several women artists have instigated the deconstruction of the female “nature,” as fabricated by the patriarchal discourses of Western society. In addition to the liberation of women’s freedom of thought, artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Orlan, and Jenny Saville have participated in the rescue of the female body from its suffocating historical baggage. Although slightly less antagonistic than that of her colleagues, the work of painter Jenny Saville stands out by way of its contemporary investigation of the body and through its painterly exuberance of the flesh.

Born in 1970, the Scottish painter attended the Glasgow School of Art where, early in her apprenticeship, she demonstrated an obsession with the body that would later become emblematic of her work.¹ Like many of the Young British Artists, the art collector Charles Saatchi helped to propel Saville’s career, purchased every one of her paintings from her graduate exhibition in 1992.² Since then, Saville has participated in prestigious group shows such as the 1997 exhibition *Sensation*, and in four important solo exhibitions at the Gagosian Gallery in New York. All of Saville’s exhibits were characterized by her strong interest in the monumental female nude and by the artist’s expressive control of the painted surface.³ Sadly, a number of critics – mostly men – repeatedly seek to undermine the obvious feminist commentary issued in Jenny Saville’s work in favor of her masterful paint application, much like Barry Schwabsky suggests when he states, “[h]er paint dissolves the imagery it conveys.”⁴ Although, it is clear that Saville thinks of herself more as a painter of the flesh than as a femi-

nist activist, her exploration of the female figure goes beyond aesthetics in order to address deeper issues related to the “social construction of the body.”⁵ As one can observe in many of the artist’s paintings, such as *Propped* (1992), *Plan* (1993) and *Reflective Flesh* (2003), the art of Jenny Saville operates as a means to re-appropriate the female figure. By shifting the female body’s position as an object of male delectation, and thus deconstructing the male fantasy projected for centuries on it, Saville is able to question the female body’s representation throughout art history.

Surprisingly, one of Saville’s earliest paintings, *Propped* (1992) (fig. 1), is perhaps the most literally embedded into gender issues, and thus truly establishes Saville’s work into the feminist discourse. The piece reveals a grotesquely magnified Saville, perched in equilibrium atop a tall but narrow stool. A feeling of tension inhabits this excessively full figure as she clutches her voluminous thighs – enlarged through perspective – and pulls her head backwards, though still glancing slightly at the viewer. Across the painted surface, Saville has carved directly into the material a quote by the feminist writer Luce Irigaray, which reveals her concerns: “If we continue to speak in this sameness, speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other again.”⁶ Irigaray’s message clearly stresses a need to re-appropriate the female body, which has been conquered over time by the language of patriarchy. The quote is inscribed backwards and physically separates the viewers’ space (our “real” social space) from that of the figure, as if we, the spectators, were looking into a mirror at the subject.⁷ Saville confessed to writer Pernilla Holmes that she created this painting out of a need “to try – visually – to find a female language and a feminine space.”⁸ Indeed, as so many feminist scholars, such as Helen Cixous, have stated before, in our phallogentric society there lies the necessity to *produce* the meaning of woman.⁹ For that reason, the painting *Propped* acts as the artist’s attempt, at the dawn of her career, to create this “feminine space” for the meaning of woman to reside in.

Furthermore, Jenny Saville uses a variety of references to construct her paintings, such as pictures of models and medical textbook imagery. However, on more than one occasion the artist has insisted on including images of her own body in her work.¹⁰ In the present case, the nude figure is generally accepted as an integral self-portrait of the painter. By doing so, Saville rejects the traditional patriarchal female representation and challenges the “active artist/passive model” dichotomy by playing both parts simultaneously.¹¹ Still, Jenny Saville’s

female nudes are unanimously acknowledged as possessing a monumental quality. Indeed, the scale on which these images are constructed – in the instance of *Propped*, the canvas dimensions run around seven feet by six feet – is truly overwhelming, especially for a kind of artwork that was traditionally assigned to lesser proportions. As writer Charles Darwent points out, historically “[o]ne genre of painting that has not by and large lent itself to large-scale treatment, though, has been the female nude [...] Given the need of male viewers to reinforce their masterly role by looking at things smaller than themselves, oversized pictures of women were clearly a bad idea.”¹² Consequently, by selecting these colossal dimensions, Saville is countering expectations related to the tradition of the female nude, and therefore, achieves a poignant critique of this time-honored art practice. By lending an impressive scale to the subject, the painter is empowering the figure and changing perceptions about the female body, traditionally seen as the passive object of male desire. Additionally, this bulky and slightly grotesque figure certainly does not conform to society’s phallogentric ideals of beauty.¹³ Indeed, by deconstructing the male fantasy of what the body of women should be, Saville re-appropriates this body in order to translate her own perception of woman: an ambiguous, unfixed combination of “the obscenity of the human with a strong hint of transcendent beauty.”¹⁴

The cultural notions of beauty and normality are themes at the heart of Jenny Saville’s practice, concepts that she constantly challenges in her paintings like *Plan* (1993) (fig.2). The piece in question displays a gigantic female nude, dominating a nine feet by seven feet canvas. The highly foreshortened subject is depicted from a low-angle, looking down at the viewer. Once again, the artist is presenting an unconventional representation of beauty that does not fit into the patriarchal mould of perfection. Indeed, as the viewer approaches this piece, he or she is confronted by the subject’s colossal thighs and hairy pubic area, which fill the bottom portion of the canvas.¹⁵ Moving up, the spectator is hypnotized by the mounts and valleys of the fleshy human landscape, whose voluminous legs and abdomen are defined by circular contour lines in the fashion of a topographical map.¹⁶ Once the viewer’s eye reaches the top portion of the painting, a feeling of discomfort is created when, after looking extensively at the subject’s body, he or she is confronted with a woman’s gaze.¹⁷ The psychological juncture that is created by the subject’s stare reminds the spectator of how the male-dominated discourse of art history has accustomed us to look at the painted female body: as an object of entertainment deprived of a thinking mind. This painting, once again, challenges the male fantasy by emphasiz-

ing unappealing bodily components such as fat or pubic hair; while at the same time empowering the subject through the use of an impressive scale and a dominating perspective.

As Jenny Saville stated in an interview with David Sylvester, the contour lines on the subject's body refer to the markings traced onto plastic surgery patients prior to liposuction.¹⁸ Indeed, Saville is extremely interested in the phenomenon of plastic surgery, a practice that is intended to “beautify” or “normalize” people according to a socially constructed myth of how a person should look.¹⁹ In addition to medical photography, to which she constantly refers in the development of her work, the artist attended a number of cosmetic surgeries in order to enrich her artistic process and to better understand the underlying implications of such practices.²⁰ By investigating the restricted territories of plastic surgery, Saville calls attention to a culturally constructed mould of perfection, one that essentially reflects masculine desires that are continually projected onto the female body.²¹ As in many of her paintings, Saville is presenting her own perception and reclaiming the right to a female conception of beauty:

*There is a thing about beauty. Beauty is always associated with the male fantasy of what the female body is. I don't think there is anything wrong with beauty. It's just what women think is beautiful can be different. And there can be a beauty in individualism. If there is a wart or a scar, this can be beautiful, in a sense, when you paint it.*²²

Once again, the artist deliberately incorporated her face on top of the model's body because, as she stated herself, “women have been so involved in being the subject-object, it's quite important to take that on board and not be just the person looking and examining. You're the artist but you're also the model. I want it to be a constant exchange all the time.”²³ Saville is well aware of the accumulation of meaning linked to the female nude, and therefore questions the roles of power implied in this historical art tradition. The artist re-appropriates the female body from the discourse of patriarchy and, to borrow the words of writer Donald Kuspit, “[she] reclaims female subjectivity by emphasizing woman's potent flesh...but it makes all the emotional difference that it is a woman who is rendering her own body and desire.”²⁴

It is perhaps in the painting entitled *Reflective Flesh* (2003) (fig.3) that the desire Donald Kuspit speaks of is put forth with the most enthusiasm. This significant

piece portrays a large nude woman squatting in a corner of mirrors, unashamedly presenting her open vagina to the viewer. Saville continues to physically work in ambitious dimensions, painting *Reflective Flesh* on a eight feet wide by ten feet high canvas. Like *Plan*, the initial focus of the painting is not the subject's face, but rather her carefully depicted genitalia. Not only is the genitalia in question duplicated by the mirrors on the floor but, additionally, the angles of the subject's torso and thighs direct our gaze towards the figure's vagina, making this area the center of our attention.²⁵ Many scholars, such as Carol Kino, have argued the similarities between this work and Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World* (1866).²⁶ Although the prominence of the female genitalia does recall Courbet's painting, several aspects of Saville's *Reflective Flesh* clearly depart from it. Most significant is the fact that Saville included the model's head in her composition, which compels the viewer to encounter the subject's challenging gaze.²⁷ Like in the previous work *Plan*, this dominating stare creates a juncture between the objectified body and the rational human face, increasingly in this case since this particular gaze is exceptionally confrontational.²⁸ By referencing Courbet's masterwork and at the same time departing from it, Saville is re-appropriating the female body from the tradition of art historical discourse. Furthermore, the small scale of Courbet's *Origin of the World* (twenty one inches wide by eighteen inches high), as well as the subject's "unawareness" of the presumably male viewer have little in common with the impressive scale and deliberate exhibitionism that characterize Saville's work. In *Reflective Flesh*, the model is in control of the situation and seems to purposefully flaunt her bushy, imperfect genitalia at the viewer, not in an effort to seduce him, but as if to say, "here I am. This is what I look like!" By placing her female subjects in a position of control, the artist is countering the underlying purpose of the traditional nude: to project masculine desires onto the female figure in an effort of seduction.

To many critics, like Kino, this work is particularly interesting because of Saville's use of environmental space, which she neglects at times in favor of the human subject.²⁹ The representation of several body angles through the guise of the mirror is certainly a technical feat, yet it is also possible to consider the conceptual implications of the specific illustrated environment. The artist also exploited the symbol of mirrors in *Propped*, as a means to create a "feminine space."³⁰ Looking at *Reflective Flesh*, one can interpret the use of mirrors as a renewal of the female space, as well as an attempt on the artist's part to break down the phallographic definitions of woman by offering different perspectives

regarding the female subject. Once again, Jenny Saville aims to re-appropriate the female body from a fixed patriarchal characterization in order to communicate her own understanding of womanhood.

After a careful study of the paintings *Propped*, *Plan*, and *Reflective Flesh*, it becomes evident that the art of Jenny Saville aims for a renewal of the representation of the female body. Saville works to re-appropriate conventional notions and ideals of the body, deconstruct the patriarchal hold on the body, and question the body's characterization throughout art history. Although many critics, such as Schwabsky, praise Saville exclusively for her masterful handling of paint, her dominant re-appropriation of the female figure in her work – greatly supported by her expressive control of the painted surface – is too strong to ignore.³¹ Other works by Saville, like the transsexual bodies exhibited in the paintings *Matrix* (1999) and *Passage* (2004), also draw on formal features such as extreme foreshortening and energetic brushwork to translate ideas of oddity, power and gender ambiguity.³² As the writer and artist Linda Nochlin points out, these two figures inhabit a “postmodern realm of gender nirvana, brilliantly theorized by Judith Butler as a zone of shifting sexual identities and the rejection of essential difference between male and female.”³³ Consequently, it would be interesting to explore how these ambiguous figures fit into Saville's project of re-appropriation and redefinition.

Endnotes

¹Pernilla Holmes, “Report Card: Jenny Saville,” *Art Review* 53 (2002): 87; Barry Schwabsky, “Jenny Saville: sans concession / Jenny Saville: Unapologetic.”

² Holmes, “Report,” 87.

³ Carol Kino, “Jenny Saville at Gagosian,” *Art in America* 92, no.1 (2004): 103.

⁴ Schwabsky, “Unapologetic,” 27.

⁵ Linda Nochlin, “Floating in Gender Nirvana,” *Art in America* 88, no.3 (2000): 96.

⁶ Pernilla Holmes, “The Body Unbeautiful,” *ARTnews* 102, no.10 (2003): 146.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 97.

¹⁰ Nochlin, “Floating,” 96.

¹¹ Holmes, “Unbeautiful,” 146.

- ¹² Charles Darwent, "Jenny Saville," *Modern Painters* 13, no. 2 (2000): 108.
- ¹³ Holmes, "Unbeautiful," 146.
- ¹⁴ Donald Kuspit, "Jenny Saville: Gagosian Gallery," *Artforum International* 38, no. 4 (1999): 147.
- ¹⁵ Holmes, "Unbeautiful," 145.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ David Sylvester, "Areas of Flesh," in *Jenny Saville* (New York: Rizzoli International Publication, 2005) 14.
- ¹⁹ Holmes, "Unbeautiful," 146.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Michelle Hirschhorn, "Orlan: Artist in the Post-Huma Age of Mechanical Reincarnation: Body as Ready (to be re-) Made," in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 112.
- ²² Quoted in Sylvester, "Areas of Flesh," 15.
- ²³ Ibid., 14.
- ²⁴ Kuspit, "Jenny Saville: Gagosian Gallery," 147.
- ²⁵ Kino, "Jenny Saville at Gagosian," 104.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Holmes, "Unbeautiful," 146.
- ³¹ Schwabsky, "Unapologetic," 27.
- ³² Nochlin, "Floating," 96.
- ³³ Ibid.

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