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Dutchmen's Successor: Jenny Saville at Gagosian

by David Cohen

Jenny Saville: Continuum at Gagosian Gallery

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This and cover: Installation shot of the exhibition under review, © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever

Jenny Saville's "Continuum," her first show in New York since 2003, will delight her many fans with a bold new theme (her art newly energized by the experience of motherhood) and an invigorated interest in drawing. Those fans sure do include people in high places.

Word has it, for instance, that John Elderfield entered the collectors' evening of his MoMA de Kooning exhibit with Jenny on his arm, as if to say: the belle of the ball is the Dutchman's successor. Elderfield is author of the catalog essay for Bob Dylan's show of paintings, sandwiched by Saville's, on Gagosian's Fourth Floor. (A drawing in her *Pentimenti* series acknowledges de Kooning in its title, alongside Velazquez and Picasso.) Simon Schama is another devotee. Writing in the Financial Times of

September 24, his opening salvo diminishes Lucian Freud in comparison with Saville and insists that her only peers in the depiction of babies are Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt.

Now, a confession: I'm beginning to have a Dr. Frankenstein moment. Years ago, a cub reporter on the Times of London, I was sent around Britain to investigate the state of art education. They told me to assemble a roster of talented students to feature in a side bar to my article in their Saturday magazine.



Jenny Saville, *Propped*, 1992. Oil on Canvas, 213.5 x 183cm. The Saatchi Collection, London

At the Glasgow School of Art I was seduced by Saville's work. Who wouldn't have been? Deploying an assured, preternaturally effortless painterly realism, her oversized paintings of oversized women were not just visually arresting, but smart. Into the surface of one of her obese sitters she has inscribed defiant words by Luce Irigaray, the French feminist theorist much in vogue at that time—except in mirror writing. Saville then erected an actual mirror some distance from the canvas. To get the text the right way around you had to see the image reflected, with an attendant loss of painterly luxuriance. This literalized a tension between texture and text, form and content.

The Times picture editor loved the painting, bought it from the degree show, and ran it on the cover. Charles Saatchi must have flipped over his breakfast reading. He wasted no time in prizing the painting into his own collection. Evidently the advertising mogul felt no compulsion to read Irigaray, however, as he ditched the mirror. The rest, as they say, is art history.

This is not to insinuate that when she acquiesced to her powerful new patron's structural change to her intended installation (progressing, so to speak, beyond the mirror stage) she lost her subject but found her form. That would be churlish as there was no descent from theoretical or political high ground in her work. On the contrary, her fascination with the strengths and vulnerabilities of modern women grew as she explored self-image through such themes as liposuction and transgender. She rapidly became immensely and understandably popular. She found a way to niche gender studies within a late flowering of the grand tradition of the swagger portrait.

Tracing antecedents to Frans Hals and Anthony Van Dyck, this genre reached its zenith in the belle époque with John Singer Sargent. Modern exponents included Augustus John. The sitter is surrounded by trappings of worldly success matched in sheer opulence by the artist's masterfully dashed off brushstrokes. Saville's provocative twist was to extend the bravura technique and monumental scale of such painting to naked and isolated (or in some cases sardined) young women.

Like Sargent and John, part of Saville's problem is that she has always been too good for her own good. This is what causes Schama's crass comparison with Freud to backfire. It is precisely the crabbed, cramped, awkward-to-the-point-of-absurdity knottiness of Freud's obsessive gaze and tortuous touch that elevates his peculiar work to old master status.



Jenny Saville, Red Stare Head II, 2011. Oil on canvas, 106-1/2 x 85-5/8 inches. © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Mike Bruce

David Sylvester, writing in the 1950s about Freud's School of London peer Michael Andrews in terms that apply equally to Freud himself, detected "the awkwardness of almost every modern painter who has not been content to solve his problems by simplifying them... The modern artist who aims at the inclusiveness of traditional European art runs up against the difficulty of recovering that inclusiveness without embracing what have become the clichés of the tradition, and the awkwardness arises from trying to have one without the other.

There is no awkwardness in Saville, but there are many historic trappings of it, precisely indeed the clichés to which Sylvester refers. An extended drawing series, examples of which are included here, is titled *Pentimenti*. In these, ostensibly provisional and retained charcoal lines are not merely expressive but axiomatic. True *pentimenti* arise in the struggle to find position, to define form; they are retained either because the artist has no interest in disguising what led to the discovery; or else, sometimes, because they add texture, and thus heft, to an image (think Matisse, whose *pentimenti* somehow never undermine the illusion of single shot miracle in his charcoal drawings). Or else, a tolerable mannerism, *pentimenti* can signal the effort and time that were necessary to fix the image and thus are part of that image (Larry Rivers, Frank Auerbach, Eugene Leroy.)

But in Saville there is simply no resistance to her Midas-touch genius. Her *pentimenti* have nothing to do with process, everything to do with look. Appropriated from tradition but recalibrated in purpose, they now become an animation device. As in Futurist painting, not to mention comic strips, they denote the swish across the picture plane of bodies in motion.

The effortless repetition of near identical figures from canvas to canvas, or page, incidentally, points to the use of an overhead projector. The same head from 2006 of a girl with a birthmark – the image used on the cover of The Manic Street Preachers album *Journal For Plague Lovers* that proved too disturbing for British supermarkets who covered it up – recurs in several canvases on Gagosian's sixth floor. Nothing wrong with projectors: artists should use whatever works. And Saville's girl provides a powerful, compelling, evocative head. But the brush marks that differentiate iterations of this head one from another, like the charcoal pentimenti in other images, bear no relationship to the discovery of form. The latter is almost a form in the bureaucratic sense, something to be filled out. This in turn renders the brushstrokes meretricious. In *real* painting, the quasi-abstraction of manipulated material, its pleasure-inducing stresses and strains, the improbable juxtapositions of hatches of color, the alternations of meticulous construction and desperate dash, all arise from the struggle to achieve plastic equivalence to perceived or imagined reality. Saville, on the other hand, merely deploys a battery of special effects to achieve an appropriated *look* of painterliness. That's why she is impeccably slick where Freud is self-questioning to the point of being cack-handed.

(If you want to gain an art historically accurate context for Saville's technique, by the way, forget Rembrandt, da Vinci and even Freud and direct your attention to her British contemporary, Tai-Shan Schierenberg, and his handsome, serviceable depictions of Seamus Heaney and John Mortimer in London's National Portrait Gallery.)

That Saville disintegrates in comparison with Freud is as sad for Freud himself because, as Alex Katz surely understood when he decamped recently to Gavin Brown to keep company with the likes of Silke Otto-Knapp and Elizabeth Peyton, nothing galvanizes attention for a senior male artist quite like hot female acolytes. The School of London suffers deeply in reputation from its near-overwhelming (thank god for Paula Rego) maleness. Nothing could better boost a blockbuster museum survey or book on expressive figuration in Britain than the chronological and alliterative sweep implied by the subtitle "From Walter Sickert to Jenny Saville". Luckily, "From Francis Bacon to Cecily Brown" remains plausible.