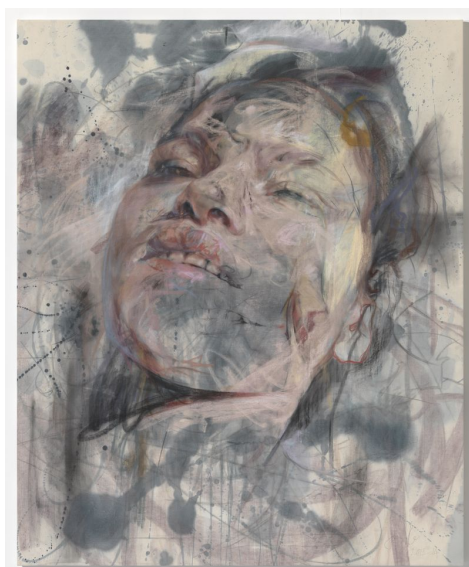


GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Two Women Painters: Jenny Saville at Gagosian and Celia Paul

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Dusk, 2014 Charcoal and pastel on canvas 74 13/16 x 61 x 1 inches 190 x 155 x 2.5 cm
© Jenny Saville. Photos: Mike Bruce. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery www.london@gagosian.com

Two current shows at major London galleries illustrate that painting is not only alive and well but a vibrant, intellectually and emotionally challenging force. Both these shows are figurative and both are by women. I first met Jenny Saville when she was 22. She'd just left Glasgow School of Art and Charles Saatchi had purchased her MA show and offered an 18-month contract to support her while she made new work to be exhibited in his London gallery. Interviewing her for Time Out, I found her idealistic and determined that Saatchi 'wouldn't change her'. Her work was aggressive, personal, raw and highly accomplished. Flesh and the female body were her subjects and graffiti-style texts that subverted traditional notions of feminine beauty were scored, like self-inflicted wounds, into the thick impasto of the body of her subjects. Although part of a generation for whom painting – in particular figure painting - was not considered fashionable, she was soon to be seen as the heir to Lucien Freud.

Now Gagosian Galley is presenting her first-ever solo show in London: Oxyrhynchus. A number of these new works are inspired by the rubbish dump found on this ancient Egyptian archaeological site where heaps of discarded documents were preserved in the area's dry climate, including Euclid's Elements and fragments of Sappho's poems. This historic palimpsest has given Saville an intellectual armature on which to hang much of her imagery that often involves the complex layering of bodies. Faces and limbs overlap and ghostly reflections create a series

doppelgangers or shadow selves. The viewer's eye slips between forms, uncertain which limb belongs to which figure, as in Leonardo's cartoon of The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and the Infant Saint John Baptist, circa 1499, where the ownership of individual arms and legs is ambiguous. In the exhibition's title work, (pastel and charcoal on canvas), bodies have been reduced to fragments. A foot sticks from a heap of marks as though broken from an ancient sculpture. Elsewhere there's a pile of breasts. This intermingling and cross-referencing runs through Saville's work; black bodies intertwine with white, genders are blurred. Modern life is not seen as fixed but as complex and fluid. Boundaries and borders dissolve. Saville pays a conscious debt to art history with her references to Degas' Olympia, and her nervy abstract marks that wrestle to find form and space in the manner of De Kooning.

Her paint is thinner than it used to be, so it appears to create a series of veils or alternative realities. Authenticity is deconstructed. Things are not what they seem. In Intertwine two ghost figures lurk behind those in the foreground implying not only hidden aspects of the self but movement and the passing of time. In Odalisque the pile of bodies gives Saville the chance to contrast the bluish tones of black flesh with the rosy tints of white, and to play, psychologically, with the dark and light, the masculine and feminine that lurks within all psyches. These are not only very physical paintings but they are extremely self-aware.

Prodigiously talented, Saville pits herself against Picasso, Rembrandt and Degas. She draws with great facility, yet manages, in these large works, to give a conceptual edge to essentially Freudian figure painting. If there's a criticism it is that, at times, she seems to strive too much for gravitas instead of letting the work simply speak for itself. These are ambitious and powerful paintings yet, nonetheless, they seem to have lost a little of that rawchutzpah of her early work.

Celia Paul is a very different sort of painter. She works from silence to find a still point in an ever turning world. She paints people and places that she knows intimately and cares about. This she does with the focused gaze of Gwen John. There's no brouhaha here, just the watchful mindfulness of a painter interacting with her sitter or subject in a very special form of intimacy. The fabric of her paintings is imbued with the very qualities that she brings to their making: intensity, stillness, a quiet meditative attention. Her subjects emerge and come into being through this mindful observation: the spire of St. George's Church in Bloomsbury painted in the early morning with the dreamy ambiguity a Monet study; the British Museum, as seen through her window, its dark silhouette set against a yellowing sky like some looming pagan temple. Celia Paul has lived and worked in the same part of Bloomsbury for 30 years. When she paints the familiar Post Office tower it is transformed from urban utilitarianism into a soaring beacon of gilded affirmation. A familiar tree in Russell Street transmogrifies into the Tree of Life; symbol of endless renewal. Bathed in slivers of yellow light, it is presented – as T.S. Eliot suggests – as if seen for the first time.

Paul's paintings of people rarely contain anything to indicate the environment in which they are set. There's no sense of a home or a studio. Her sitters inhabit a void, a space out of which they appear to materialize. It's as if through her watchful attention she slowly conjures them, lifting a veil onto their core. Although stylistically a very different painter to Frank Auerbach, a similar sense of questing is embedded within her mark making. What emerges is an essence rather than a likeness. A psychological truth rather than a physical one. Her paintings are translations of a sort. Bleakly existential, poetic, wistful and harshly compassionate.

Like Saville, Celia Paul makes implicit reference to the history of painting. Apart from the obvious influences of Gwen John and Monet she invokes both Sickert and the Italian quattrocento in her subdued palette that shares something of the tonal qualities of Fra Angelico's Annunciation. Her lone female figures display the sense of containment and expectant stillness found in Fra Angelico's seated Madonna. There are also five small self-portraits included in the show, painted in successive months between May and November 2013. Objective and unforgiving, the figure is as isolated as a Giacometti sculpture. More austere than the portraits of other sitters they show the painter's role as a state apart. They made me think of Gwen John's words: 'Ma religion et mon art, c'est toute ma vie'. I don't know about the role of religion in Celia Paul's life, but certainly, within these paintings, there's the feeling that this is a life laid bare.