

GAGOSIAN



Jenny Saville: *Ancestors*

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Jenny Saville, Byzantium, 2018. © Jenny Saville. Photo: by Mike Bruce. Courtesy Gagosian.

The athleticism of Jenny Saville's brushwork and draughtsmanship has been the hallmark of her work since her earliest exhibition in New York, at Gagosian's Wooster Street incarnation in 1999. She was then associated with Damien Hirst's band of Young British Artists, riding the Cool Britannia wave and establishing London as a prime destination for contemporary art for the first time since Victoria was queen. The elegance of Saville's facture, the swirling and energetic pace of her drawing, made her inheritor of a tradition of gestural, bravura painting going back to Titian, Rubens, and Velázquez, and as reworked by John Everett Millais and Édouard Manet, and finally perfected by John Singer Sargent in the late-nineteenth century. This was then reprised and critiqued in the abstracted figuration of de Kooning and the visceral reconstitution of form of Lucien Freud in the post-war era.

All those gesticulative men.

If you were open to being energized by the pleasure of agilely pushed paint in the service of a kind of post-academic, post-modern, post-minimal realism, then Saville delivered, and her edgy subject matter paralleled a wave of artistic interest in the body, the self, the gaze, and the abject. By a woman. On a huge scale. In her second New York show, *Migrants*, the sight of *Suspension* (2002 – 03), featuring a headless pig sprawled on its side across almost fifteen feet of canvas and hung just off the ground in Gagosian's Chelsea digs at 24th Street in the spring of 2003 was memorable and remarkable. As were her various gargantuan and unsparing self-portraits. *Continuum*, in 2011, moved things uptown to Madison Avenue, and up into the rarefied realm of

the Old Masters, with nude mothers corralling squirming infants in direct emulation of Holy Family pictures by Leonardo and Raphael. It included impressively large drawings, where her overlapping and fervent arcs of form and line communicated the restless stirrings of her human subjects, and her own intimate experience of motherhood. In the seven years since she has had two solo shows at Gagosian in London.(1) The present *Ancestors* features more resolved imagery than in those shows, and new themes that expand Saville's weighty subject matter. In the meantime, gestural figuration has kept pace: recent works by Cecily Brown, Jennifer Packer, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and Henry Taylor consistently draw on tradition and topicality, with beautiful and enticing mark-making. *Ancestors* is ambitious, and seems right for our parlous times. It is a looking back: to ancient cultures, to the secure distance of the past, to Saville's prior work, but the results are hardly stable. Call it a return to disorder.

Nine large paintings and three drawings hang in three spaces.(2) In the large first room *Fate 3*, *Fate 2*, and *Fate 1* on the far wall form a kind of detached triptych. On the left wall is *Red Fates*, and on the entry wall at right is *Delos* (2017 – 18), a drawing. We are in the realm of the Moirai of Greek mythology (as suggested, also, by the Cycladic island Delos), but the imagery is not comprehensively Hellenic. In *Red Fates* three naked women sit casually and frontally with knees drawn up and arms interlocking atop a wide rectangular shelf. Their integrated poses recall the Three Graces and the pedimental sculptures from the Parthenon in the British Museum. The work is painted broadly, in colors similar to the more strident of de Kooning's 1960s women series: predominantly pinks and reds with touches of butter yellow and sky blue on a monochromatic ground. Saville rendered the faces with a remarkable economy of gesture—thin, dry, brushed lines over washy underpainting. There are splatters and streams of dripped pigment at the bottom—as ever, her surface is frenetic. The women, however, are in absorbed contemplation. The relatively comprehensive naturalism of this work is in contrast to the three canvases adjacent, which split the Fates apart, tone down the hot colors, and provide them more comfortable seats—plush swivel chairs on poles on blocky plinths. The backgrounds are walls with simple baseboards. Monumentally Picassoid in the way they are crammed into the nearly eight-foot square frames, they are discomfiting mash-ups of the bodies and heads of models and “primitive” sculpture and perhaps ethnographic photography. *Fate 1* clearly refers to Francis Bacon: the bent right leg doubles as one of his screaming attenuated mouths, and colors erupt across the figure's midriff. Here, as in *Fate 3*, the woman appears to be pregnant, with swollen belly and pendulous breast, but the centrally hung *Fate 2* has a middle that has exploded into cartoonish bodily forms and rough wide strokes. Her multiple legs, right arm draped over the chair back, and direct gaze communicate an impressive swagger, but she bears a sense of serenity belied by the careening brushwork. The feet, as elsewhere in this show, amaze. The Fates are new to Saville's *oeuvre* and loosely channel Classical art, but they also thematically seem to allude to the recent assertiveness and self-determinism of women globally.

The two *Vis and Ramin* oils in the second gallery signal a new overlaying of imagery on an earlier design. The poses of a reclining man at left and woman at right were used in earlier works such as *Intertwine* (2011 – 14).(3) In the superb *Vis and Ramin II*, named after lovers in an epic Persian poem, the combination of sketched and layered elements with more resolved flesh is further subject to Saville's customary destruction and obliteration of imagery in the form of windowpane cutaway sections, like unearthed sinopia outline drawings beneath a fresco. The plinth here is compressed, and the figures seem to teeter perilously on it, like the recumbent and hovering frame of Paul Manship's massive Art Deco *Prometheus* (1934) on its puny gilded mountaintop at Rockefeller Center. Saville painted over the the face of the man at left with the crisp features of the 5th century BCE bronze *Charioteer of Delphi*, and modified the formerly

sweet expression of the female model into a drowsy-eyed “sneer of cold command,” in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s phrase.(4) The background is a thicket of scratched and jolting lines, eliciting obvious but necessary comparisons to Cy Twombly, whose distinctive drawings filled this same gallery only a month ago. A thin line of red paint forms a ring around the woman’s head, as if tracing the transit of an orbiting body. Every inch of this picture is glorious to look at, but its multiplicity of references and resistance to consistency of form safely keep it from being merely dazzling.

The third room is the most trenchant in its themes of despondency and dependency. It features three works: two oils that present new color schemes, *Byzantium* and *Blue Pieta*, and an 8 1/2 foot high drawing titled *Chapter (for Linda Nochlin)* (2016 – 18). The former include figures cradling bodies, in homage to scenes of Mary with the deceased Christ on her lap. *Byzantium* resembles a late Gothic altarpiece or Byzantine icon with its reflective gold background that bleeds into and becomes the falling curls of hair of the male supportive figure—based on a chryselephantine cult statue of Apollo at Delphi (mid-6th century BCE). The despoiled body in his arms reads as a pointless sacrifice to a dated theology. *Blue Pieta* is an outlier—a man in contemporary clothing holds a dead youth. In the background a modern city lies in ruins. Likely related to Saville’s overtly political *Aleppo* (2017 – 18),(5) it appears to be a painful transposing of ancient tragedies into the present, while retaining the art historical gleanings that add to the weight of such works—the doubled right arm of the victim that recalls Michelangelo’s unfinished *Rondanini Pietà* (begun 1552), as well as the same slack appendage of Christ in Caravaggio’s *The Entombment of Christ* (1603 – 04) and of Marat in Jacques Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (1793). *Chapter (for Linda Nochlin)* reprises Saville’s series of mothers and children, but it increases the multiplication and doubling of digits and limbs and heads to a dizzying degree, while employing the windowpane rectangular cutaway sections that approximate collage and highlight important details. It is a powerful work both thematically as a paean to maternity and formally in its pyramidal build up of elements constructed with firm black charcoal marks, like the dark gouged outlines in early de Kooning works such as *Attic* (1949) or *Excavation* (1950). These are blended with passages of exquisitely realized tenderness, sensitively modeled and shaded heads such as a young boy at the right, a reprise of the ill-fated youths in the Hellenistic era *Laocoön and His Sons*. There are too many feet to count, but their incessant replication and fine drawing calls to mind one of Saville’s other heroes: Michelangelo, who, per Renaissance practice, sketched willy-nilly all over sheets of paper. The greatest is at the Metropolitan Museum, the studies for the Sistine Chapel’s *Libyan Sibyl* (ca. 1510 – 1511), featuring three designs for the oracle’s tensed left foot, and focussing on what Frederick Hartt memorably described as the “great toe by itself.” In this work, Jenny Saville, a great artist and the most naturally gifted painter working today, has produced, like Zoe Leonard’s *Homage* (2018) installed concurrently at the Whitney, a fitting tribute to Nochlin, the recently deceased pioneering feminist art historian. Yet another one of her formative ancestors.

Notes

1. *Oxyrhynchus*, June 13 – July 26, 2014, and *Erota*, April 14 – July 9, 2016, both at Gagosian, Britannia Street.
2. All works are dated 2018 unless noted.
3. The models are a Hungarian couple the artist has frequently worked with.
4. Saville also used the features of the chryselephantine statue of Artemis at Delphi (mid-6th century BC).
5. *Aleppo* is at present on view at the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, flanked by Titian’s two great pictures of Diana, and part of a group exhibition titled *Now* and featuring her work at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (until September 16).