

GAGOSIAN



Jenny Saville: portrait of a feminist

The artist on her ongoing fascination with the body, her new show at the Gagosian and being in dialogue with Michelangelo

Jan Dalley



© Courtesy Jenny Saville and the Gagosian

“All this has made my work much more intense. I feel a greater responsibility to making art than I did before. I don’t know why.”

The British artist Jenny Saville is talking to me about her experience of lockdown from her home in Oxford. It’s the eve of the opening of her latest show. But that’s in New York, at Gagosian’s Madison Avenue gallery, and for once she won’t be there for a glamorous opening. She could only oversee the hanging of the works via Zoom. It is, though, “one of my favourite places to show”, she says. The uptown Manhattan space has displayed the likes of Picasso, Giacometti, Twombly and other greats, so “there’s a history to tread on”.

The new paintings in the exhibition — entitled *Elpis* (the spirit of hope in Greek mythology) — were all made this year. All are portraits, heads and faces, many times life-size, some abstracted into a layering of eyes, mouths, random features. They are something of a departure for Saville, I suggest: she is most famous for her supersized, lush and often startlingly original depictions of bodies, her investigations of the whole human form.

“I’ve been resistant to calling them portraits,” she replies. “This new work evolved slowly, out of a whole lot of things.”



Saville's 'Volta' (2020) © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagosian

“My previous show, *Ancestors*, was very much about bodies, collaged bodies, building up bodies. Then last year, I went to Moscow and I kept seeing these fascinating faces, from all over Russia and from outside — one is an African student studying in Moscow. So it’s a body of work based on people from all different regions of Russia.”

In a very short time, she booked studio space in Moscow and started working with a range of people. “There were several a day — I always work from photographs, I don’t like live models in the studio. Moscow itself was amazing, I found myself going to parties in underground stations at night, unusual book fairs that artists had put on. The arts movement there is very grassroots, it reminded me of when I was younger and there was no money anywhere.”

Back at home in lockdown, life suddenly changed as the whirlwind of international exhibitions and travel came to an abrupt stop. Saville’s career has been stellar: now 50, she is one of the most successful of the Young British Artists generation. When she graduated from Glasgow School of Art in 1992, the prominent collector Charles Saatchi purchased the whole of her degree show and sponsored Saville to produce work for a powerful 1994 exhibition: she found herself at the forefront of a dynamic new British art scene. All the more surprisingly, perhaps, as she has always worked in a then less-than-fashionable genre, representational painting, focused on the body, usually the female body.

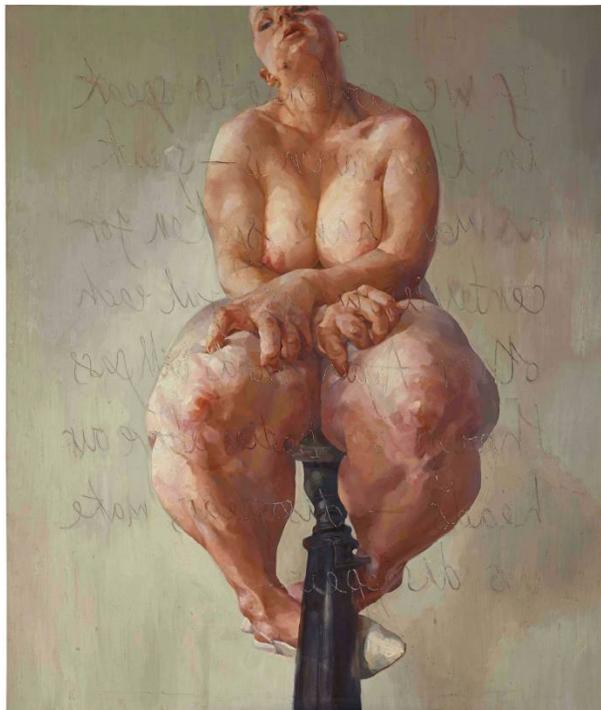


'Virtual' (2020) © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagosian

“Yes, it was hard sometimes. I was a staunch feminist; I still am. So in those days to paint a female nude was — well, what are you doing? But early on I learnt that I’m most effective when I address something directly. I want to trespass on every area that is a no-go for women, because that’ll open it up and make it free, even having children. People used to say: you can’t make paintings about children, it’ll destroy your career, it’ll be chocolate-box, saccharine. But it’s profound thing to give birth; I didn’t want to ignore it, I wanted to navigate it, address it straight on.”

One early work, “Propped” (1992), a giant, shockingly distorted, lusciously painted nude self-portrait, sold in 2018 for £9.5m, a record auction price for a living female artist. It was described by a Sotheby’s contemporary art expert as “one of the undisputed masterpieces” from the YBA school.

After many years of such glittering international success, of continuous movement, has the enforced pause of lockdown been a shock — or a precious gift of time?

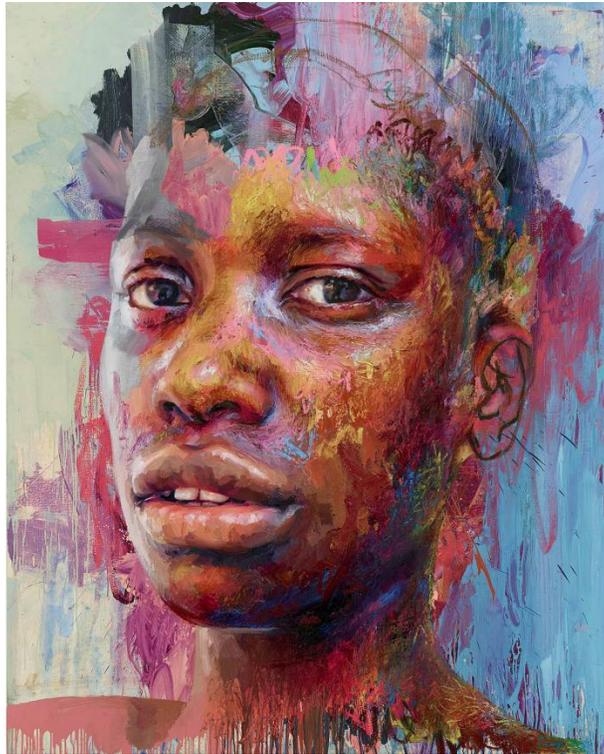


'Propped' (1992) sold for a record £9.5m in 2018 © Gagosian

“I’d travelled a lot in the year before — Australia, China, Oslo, Russia, other places,” she says. “Much more than I usually do. I saw a lot of art in the flesh — native Australian painters, Bacon, Picasso. I had roundtable discussions in China with other painters about representation, that was fascinating . . .

“After all that visual input, suddenly life became very stable, I stayed still. Working patterns became very intense . . . I felt a freedom, a great freedom of form, so a few things came together and there is more intensity in the work too.”

And beyond the intensity, the sense of responsibility that she’d already mentioned?



'Chasah' (2020) © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagolian

“We’ve had a lot of really shitty politics recently — Brexit, Trump — and artistic freedoms seem more important than ever. “My whole life has been about the opening out of possibility: artistic possibilities, women being able to be in different positions, people of different gender, racial freedoms. Then, all of a sudden, there seems to be a closing down of those ideas. There was censorship of my work in China, that was a shock.”

She has a romance with Russian culture, she says, and she discovered the work of some of the important radical poets — Anna Akhmatova and others — which had a profound impact.

“It was a perfect storm for me. It’s not just about having artistic freedoms, it’s about exercising them.”



'The Mothers' (2011) © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagolian

Exercising and extending freedoms, in the realm of body imagery, has always been Saville's artistic project. And her interest in the body has been anything but conventional. Her female nudes, always in oil paint or charcoal, can be grossly large, disturbingly meaty, deliberately transgressing every norm of beauty. And she explored early on the more contested spaces of body image: in the 1990s she was working with intergender models; in "Passage" (2004) she made a striking painting of a mixed-gender body in her signature rich, layered, full-frontal style.

Everywhere she delves into a sense of sheer carnality — it's no surprise to discover that as a student she watched surgeons at work, studied cadavers, visited abattoirs. While the early work was often almost gory in its upfront fleshiness, over time more tenderness has entered her paintings — a gentleness towards her subjects, and in her depictions of mothers and children (she has two, now aged 11 and 13), couples, close groups with their limbs intertwined. The change, she says, has been to do with motherhood.

And next?

"With no meetings, no openings, no travel, I'm looking forward to going straight from one body of work to the next, I haven't done that before.



'Byzantium' (2018) © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagolian

“I’m working towards an amazing project with Michelangelo in Florence in June. Work will be placed in five places around the city — Casa Buonarroti, next to the Pietà. I decided it would follow the form of the Decameron, which is 100 tales told by 10 people who were locked down to escape the plague in a villa outside Florence.”

“I’ve been thinking about it all summer, how to structure it.” With 100 drawings, 10 portraits (six women and four men, echoing the characters in the 14th-century Decameron story), as well as images of herself with her son, pregnancy pictures, Pietà images and more, Saville hopes that this will be for the city of Florence a signature reopening project — “about life, about being alive”, as she puts it. “It’s an incredible honour. Michelangelo has been a great figure for me all my life. To have that dialogue, so directly, with someone like that, it’s amazing.”

The great names of art history, Titian, Velázquez but especially Rembrandt, recur in all Saville’s references and their echoes appear through her work. She is resolutely unapologetic about her style. “Because I’m figurative — staunchly figurative, I’d like to say — in the shadow of Bacon and Picasso, and late Rembrandt, I’m interested in the space between figurative and abstract. It’s the space for so much intellectual and imaginative interplay. If you let go of the figurative image, you give up that space.

“Anyway, I feel like human history is on my side.”