



BLOUIN modernpainters

ART / ARCHITECTURE / DESIGN / PERFORMANCE / FILM

AUGUST 2018

TOP 10 GALLERIES

TO WATCH FOR EMERGING ARTISTS

**SHILPA
GUPTA**

A RISING STAR OF
THE GLOBAL ART
WORLD

**THE CHANGING BODY
ARCHITECTURE**

JENNY SAVILLE REMAINS A PIONEER



BOOK REVIEW: 'MODERNISTS AND
MAVERICKS' BY MARTIN GAYFORD



THE CHANGING ARCHITECTURE OF THE BODY

A show at the George Economou Collection in Athens shows how Jenny Saville remains a pioneer in depicting contemporary bodies that transcend rigid shapes and identities

BY SARAH MOROZ

Jenny Saville,
"Stare (drawing)," 2006-10,
charcoal, pastel, and gouache on
watercolour, 181 x 154 cm,
private collection, Torino (Italy).



JENNY SAVILLE AND GARCIA

How bodies can be changed, naturally and unnaturally, is an endless source of fascination to Jenny Saville. The British painter has featured models mostly exempt from the art canon: female nudes in monumental proportions, bodies altered by surgery, proudly gender-fluid identities. It's a pantheon without fixed boundaries, where biology is non-prescriptive, where corporeality transmutes into vivacious textural brushstrokes and healthy, fleshy tones.

The complex yet instinctive figurative painter has always been driven by the visual: "My parents, if they sat long enough, I would start drawing them," she recalled in a conversation in Athens, at the opening of her latest show. She forged her signature style through rigorous academic training at the Glasgow School of Art, from which she graduated in 1992. The businessman and art collector Charles Saatchi bought up canvases at her degree show and commissioned her to spend two years working on pieces for his gallery dedicated to Young British Artists. The magnetism of Saville's work

from that and later periods wields intense power in its unflinching intimacy: something unbridled, protean. Simon Schama wrote in the *Financial Times* in 2011: "I sometimes think that if Lucian Freud had had a heart, as well as the eye of a hawk, he might have become as great a painter of the human body as Jenny Saville already is."

An eponymous show of her work is running until April 2019 in Athens at the George Economou Collection, located in an innocuous building behind a Pet City. The exhibition showcases a sampling of Saville's canvases from 1993 to 2015. Athens is an especially resonant location for Saville; Greece represents a heady concentration of "civilizations, hybridity, pluralism," as she put it. She is fascinated by Greek sculpture, Hellenistic metamorphic myths, successive waves of civilization, ancient fertility goddesses. The British Museum in London and the Archaeological Museum in Athens are totemic for her, as they're "museums with fragments of bodies that have this beautiful purity," she said. Saville in fact lived in the region, in Palermo, between 2003 and 2009. She easily rattles off references to Mycenaean culture, but is invested in contemporary Greece too, where she loves the constant coating of urban graffiti, echoing the "layers of civilizations, one atop the other." As she points out, "You can excavate from the destruction."

The exhibition commences with an early work, "Cindy," 1993, which depicts a woman who

The exhibition commences with an early work, "Cindy," 1993, which depicts a woman who underwent plastic surgery to mirror the British equivalent of a Barbie: a Sindy doll



ARTURO SAVILLE

Portrait of Jenny Saville



© SYDNEY ESTAY / ARTS & CO. COURTESY CHAC - THE ARTS CENTER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
MAYALE ORAGIAR / ARTS & CO. COURTESY CHAC - THE ARTS CENTER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

COURTESY GASCIAN GALLERY

Jenny Saville,
"Ebb and Flow,"
2015.
oil stain, pastel, and
charcoal on canvas.
160 x 260 cm,
private collection.

underwent plastic surgery to mirror the British equivalent of a Barbie: a Sindy doll. The painting foreshadowed Saville's ongoing exploration of physical manipulation. Simon Groom, director of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and curator of the show, said of the opener: "You have that sense of confrontation. It's a small painting but it's very physical, very powerful. It's a state of someone revealed and hidden — and I think a lot of her work does that. It both promises and hides; it creates and obliterates at the same time. There's always an ambiguity."

Adjacent to "Cindy" hangs "Ruben's Flap," 1998-99, which belongs to the Georges Economu collection. The astonishing canvas was informed by Saville's experience of watching cosmetic surgery being performed in 1994, which was a niche procedure 24 years ago. The medical term "Ruben's flap" refers to the transfer of flesh from the thigh to the breast: "I just fell on this title... this goes together so well with what I do," she said, readily equating the "movement of flesh from one place to another like moving paint from one place to another." The experience of watching hands reaching inside the human body had a profound influence upon her, but in an unexpected way: "I went thinking I'd learn about flesh, but actually I went out knowing about painting." Her own technique can be deemed near-surgical as well. She uses a vacuum cleaner to take away charcoal and edit layers she applies and removes: "When you

Her own technique can be deemed near-surgical as well. She uses a vacuum cleaner to take away charcoal and edit layers she applies and removes

vacuum through it, it's like cutting through history," she said. "It takes months to get that believable sense of mass."

Her figuration repurposes concepts she loves from Abstract painting. Willem De Kooning is a hero of hers, and she feels indebted to his "succulent" colors: "He has this sensuality with paint," she said. But his approach is something she has translated into her own terms: "de Kooning would take two tones, mix them together, the act of the mix creating multiple tones. I thought: how can I do that with figuration? How can I do that with form?"

In fact, she accomplished that by layering multiple figures, conveying a sense of frenetic temporality that brings to mind double exposure if not time-lapse photography, as in her 2015 work "Ebb and Flow." "It has a pace to it," she said of her work. "I like to draw a thought, and then put another layer on top, and that thought gets buried through history — but when you're looking, you pick up the thought, your perception shifts." This layering mixes male and female



Jenny Saville,
"Ruben's Flap,"
1998-99,
oil on canvas,
304.4 x 243.8 cm,
private collection.

© JENNY SAVILLE AND GARGESIAN

body parts, so that gender — and, indeed, any sense of an individual self — dissolves. The suggestive silhouettes are such that one is “not sure which bit belongs to which person.” What might seem orgasmic is more about deconstruction, an absence of edges, she said: “It’s not necessarily about sexuality; it’s to do with people as borders.” The porous parameters between self and other, between male and female, is such that “the piece itself becomes like a hermaphrodite: many genders, many types of bodies,” she added. “These bodies merge, and it becomes more about humanity. Everything I’ve done is trying to access something more universal through the particular.” The result evokes the primal, the restless, the immediate, the substantial.

The hermaphrodite is also a literal figure in her portfolio: Saville’s 1999 “Matrix,” is an especially compelling piece in the show. It features Del LaGrace, a self-proclaimed “polymorphous perverse queer” who is intersex by design, whom Saville happened to bump into in cafe in London and asked to model. The pose Saville used as a reference was that of a marble statue of Iris in the British Museum she loved so much she named her daughter after it. Saville turned the jutting silhouette on its side so that, on the canvas, the composition is especially frontal. (She first had herself photographed in the pose she wanted Del to do, with open genitals, as a gesture of solidarity.) The canvas,

The hermaphrodite is also a literal figure in her portfolio: Saville’s 1999 “Matrix,” is an especially compelling piece in the show

like the model, rejects the idea of body realignment and spotlights people playing with gender norms. She noted: “At the time, people didn’t think you could be transgender.” (The exhibition notes that comparatively, today, Facebook offers 71 gender-identity options, and Tinder offers 37.) It is not just a depiction of hermaphrodite identity but “what that psychologically feels like, and what that looks like physically,” Groom noted of her visceral work.

Saville was, and remains, a pioneer in depicting contemporary bodies that transcend rigid “types.” The contemporary cultural conversation about gender politics and fluid identities is only starting to catch up to her longstanding vocabulary of versatile bodies and form. Her attraction to these identities is further reflected in her technique and radical visual language. Groom praises her ability to evoke “something the intellect couldn’t have thought of,” the intangibility of a sensation that “escalates something more real than what you can see.” ^{MP}

Jenny Saville,
"Untitled
(Stare Slurdy),"
2004-5,
oil on
watercolor,
paper,
190 x 155 cm,
private collection.

© JENNY SAVILLE AND GAGOSIAN

