



Jenny Saville

Personal study

Confronting beauty standards through art

**“Oil paint, applied
in heavy layers,**

Jenny Saville is a contemporary woman artist who has been making art since her debut in 1992. As an artist who debuted in the 90s when the majority of the art movement was focused on the Brit-art scene and taking various political stances by using completely non-traditional materials and muses, it's interesting that she uses oil paints, such a traditional medium, as a partaker of that movement. She does this because, as she says herself,



**becomes
as visceral as flesh
itself”**

Her work is an important commentary on the influence of modern beauty standards within the art world, how over decades and longer art has only depicted women how the artists think women should look, rather than how they actually look. As a plus size person who's body type is not typically depicted in "beautiful" art, she decided to focus on creating art of nude, 'overweight/obese' women -which includes her piece 'Propped'- as a rebellion against those artists that only believe painting 'perfect' women without flaws or ugliness or fat is the only way to paint someone beautiful.



I am going to look further into the impact of her work on the art world. How her creation of her later pieces creatively and forcefully showcases non-standard aspects of human experience and beauty standards; a meaningful statement against too high expectations that're pushed onto women, even in the art world. The pieces I'm analysing show this particularly well: 'Volta', a depiction of a model chosen by Saville herself, a face of hope and strength, beautiful in their own way even if the world would disagree, then 'Drift', a comment on the undoing and experience of a person, a progression of Saville's style in building and destroying, and finally her earliest piece 'propped', a beautiful and unapologetic depiction of herself, her own experience, and forcing that into the art world to confront the community as a whole.

“Jenny
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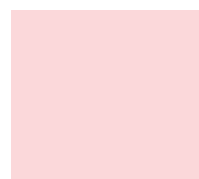
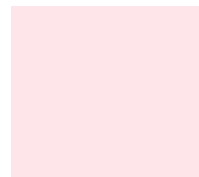
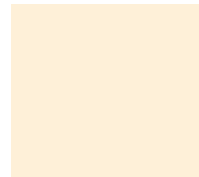
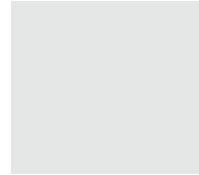
Volta, by Jenny Saville in 2020, is a portrait crafted on linen using oil paints. Similar to previous pieces, it's a large painting at 200 x 160cm so they take up a lot of space in the gallery. This makes them easily noticeable and hard to miss.



Volta is predominantly painted in bright yellows and reds; a warm and saturated colour palette that contrasts the greyscale layer that is left peeking out wherever the colour hasn't quite "reached". "Studying the reconstruction of the human flesh was formative in the perception of the body, its resilience as well as its fragility" which truly and thoroughly comes across in her work, especially in this piece.

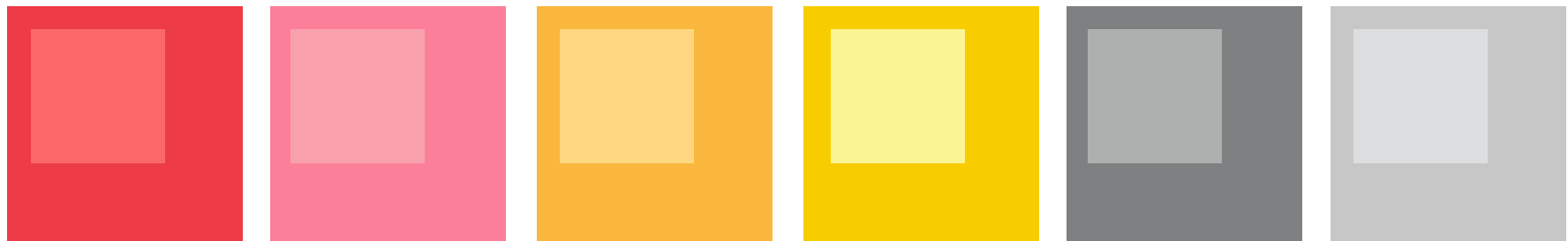


The whole piece forms an extraordinary visual that mixes traditional portraiture techniques with this sense of being unfinished or coming undone, a chaotic mess of paint drips and seemingly random strokes compared to refined skin texture. When painting she liked to find models that she felt had a sense to them. One that indicated they had spent their life being watched, or judged, that clung to their every move and influenced how they carried themselves. She stated that the awareness and insecurity that followed them made them more interesting to depict because as she paints them. Saville can bring out those insecurities, emphasise them, and through that can show the inner strength built from that experience. Elena Cue stated in their article is that she



**“deconstructs
the
stereotypes of
beauty and
eroticism of
the female
body”**

Saville's work is meant to depict bodily traits that aren't accepted in modern day beauty standards; things considered ugly or flaws. The art is intended to catch your eye, to make you look, to have you understand and confront it. You see this person: a non-traditional subject of a portrait that battled the beauty standards forced on them, and you are supposed to see the beauty and detail of the art and confront why that's still not an aesthetically attractive person, why those flaws that she loves to paint mean so much in your consideration of a person's beauty and value. She mentions in an interview about her piece requiem that she likes the idea of form and formlessness, the feeling of being built and yet undone all at once.





This idea also applies to this piece, as the styles and techniques she's used (Drip painting, abstract brush strokes, leaving some of the grey under-layer visible) I find it interesting how she uses the bright colours to get across the emotions of the piece, the explosion of colours overwhelming in conveying this almost confrontational and forceful idea of joy and celebration, and yet the subject themselves are completely void of emotion. It's incredibly expressive without using actual or visual expression. The mood this piece conveys is one of such hope, and such strength, and that comes through with every intentional placement of the paint.

The solidness of the expression, not showing any emotion, and the bursting and bright colours. It's a painting of facing every bad experience, all the 'tragedy' you've carried, and still looking forward and being brave and refusing to accept that you're anything less due to bodily flaws. The painting is a defiance against the king history of painting "perfect" women.

Exhibited in Saville's show "Latent", Drift is a canvas piece at 100 x 120cm; large but not quite as large as some of her other works. It's made using oil paints and oil sticks on a canvas, depicting a person who is lay down, not that you can clearly tell as there is no rendered background but rather just strokes and unblended layers of colour framing and laying beneath the piece. The portrait sits landscape, the palette predominantly reddish, with bright scarlet unmixed in some areas such as the chin and neck, where her rendering actually stops entirely to show the bright, saturated blue beneath. The piece makes great use of a contrasting palette, the blue stark against pink flesh and red shaded cheeks and ears.



The traditional realism of the portrait and excellent rendering makes for an incredibly interesting contrast to the uncontrolled strokes to the right of the piece that obscure the subjects brow, and the random splash of green doesn't make logical sense with the colour palette but manages to convey the idea of coming undone that Saville loves to depict in their portraits; a metaphorical depiction, or rather an artist's depiction, of skin and flesh and bones being undone on a canvas, being pulled apart and malleable and deteriorating into something unidentifiable and abstract. A concept rather than a visual. Similarly, to how she painted Volta and other works in the "Elpis" show, the chaos of the strokes beautifully contrast the soft, palpability of the flesh. The face is expressionless, a concealed emotion if any emotion, the stare unfocused and almost dazed, the lips parted and relaxed, no tension, no muscles taught, no contortion in the face to indicate any one feeling.



Its crafted perfectly for that effect.

Gagosian's commentary states,

“Saville fully articulates a process she has developed over recent years in which she allows an image to reveal itself”

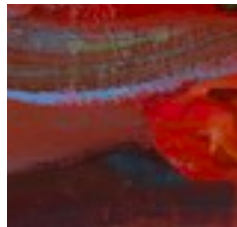
And

“she focuses on the creative function of instinct and possibility rather than the realization of predetermined outcome.”

Which is an incredibly insightful take on the show itself and her creative process

To me, it perfectly captures the feeling of experience, of coming undone, and being marked by that experience; the noisy textures are the chaos of thoughts, the bleary and undefined strokes are the mark of adversity, the expressionless face is the indicator of strength and resilience built due to that experience. A callus against years of anxiety and sorrow, something Saville knows all too well and has intimately experienced, and that seeps into every brushstroke. The exploration of the human body, and the emotions it withholds in every move.

She commented that she prefers to follow the piece, where her artistic instinct takes her, to experiment and be unintentional with the piece, which she states in an interview with Elena Cue



“The best work I’ve ever made has been through my instinct. When I try to be too clever or too analytical, it doesn’t work.”

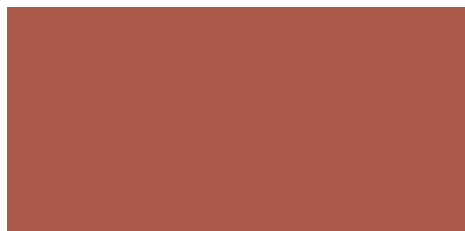


This is portrayed in every aspect of her work: the impulsive characters, smearing paints, destructive strokes, unmixed paints. Her, and her intentions come through unapologetically in every stroke, the dragging paint indicating an experience that lingers over someone’s face -the part of them the whole world will see- a feeling that clings to them and yet is intangible to and incomprehensible to anyone but them.



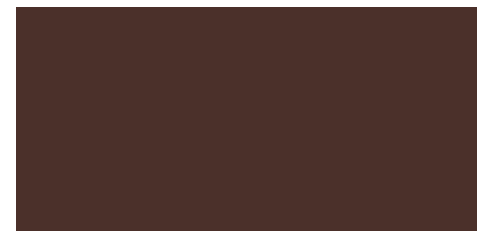
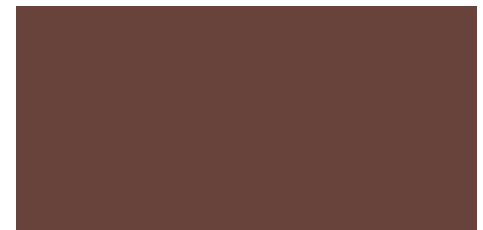
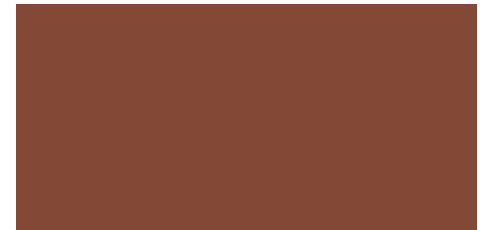
Finally, her Piece propped. It was created for her degree show -a huge piece at 214 x 183 cm- in 1992. Once again it is made with oil paints on a stretched canvas. It depicts a plus sized woman with exaggerated curves. The emphasis and intention on each stroke that builds her body is a rebellion by Saville against modern beauty standards. Compared to her later pieces this one's palette is dull and muted; the majority of colour expressed in her rendering the skin. There is apparent and hidden emotion in this piece visible in the lull of the subject's head, the tense thighs, and the hands gripping the skin. The tension of being depicted, or showing a body the modern world has taught you is ugly. This self-portrait is incredible and a perfect execution of Saville's self-view. The first thing that comes to mind for me is dysmorphia. The way Saville makes the features slightly exaggerated: the fingers are too large, and the thighs spread. It, while based on her, is not an exact depiction but rather an emotional depiction which shows the impact of the overbearing beauty standards of today's age.

“I feel that she is exactly the type of artist that is present and listening to the needs of today’s society. Saville responds to current issues with a bang, unashamedly disturbing and unsettling her audiences.”



States one person in an analysis of her work.

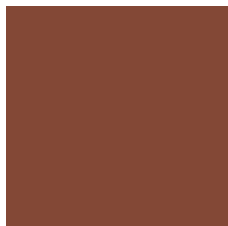
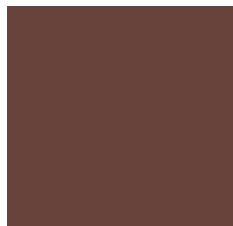
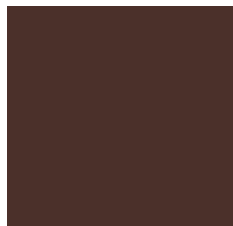
It's true. Saville themselves states that they want you to look at this body and to confront the disgust most people feel when looking at it. For decades, centuries, probably longer, art has primarily depicted women in a deceitful way; with only the trending body type at that time. It is awful that bodies should be a trend and Saville sees that. The intention of this piece and many of her works is to battle that by displaying the other side of bodies. The side the world won't accept as beautiful or as desirable in a male gaze.



The painting is so large to dominate its space. To force you to look at this piece that's perfectly crafted with clean and intricate rendering, a beautiful show of skill, and yet the viewer will be disgusted at such an aggressive and confrontational view of 'obesity'. That is the intention; to show you another side of experience and to force you to confront why it doesn't sit with you. The same person as previously mentioned also says

“Her work was gritty, real, and quite frankly disconcerting. Her work begs to be stared at, but makes you feel uncomfortable at the same time. Each piece challenges you in a completely different way.”

Which reinforces my point.



After researching Jenny Saville, I believe that her work is incredibly important and influential, and definitely necessary in the modern day especially in a world so heavily dependent on beauty standards to place value on a person.

Her recent pieces really emphasise experience and emotions conveyed in an interesting way.

Through colours and marks and textures, to reveal this deeper value and an experience that is usually held close to the heart rather than projected for everyone to see the way Saville does it. I love the strides she takes in modern day body acceptance. She is not “pro-ugly” or “anti-beauty” (her own words) but rather is just showing the beauty in flaws, and what extra they bring to the lives of those who have them.

That’s incredibly meaningful in a world blossoming and becoming more and more expressive and diverse, and really pushes forward that narrative that anyone is beautiful, if you look at them as more than social standards and rather as an actual person with experiences and emotions.

I believe her work has had a potent effect on the art world. It does exactly what she intended for it to do. To see Volta with its vibrant yellows and reds and pinks and to think it's beautiful and raw and significant even if the model doesn't fit your typical beauty standards, to see Drift and to look into vacant eyes, at the undoing of flesh, of motion, and to feel it on a visceral level, or finally in propped, to feel disgust and apprehension and true discomfort, and to wonder how a painting can make you feel that.

As she is still a very active creator, I can't wait to see how she battles the challenges we face in this aesthetic-value society going forward; how she builds the flesh and experiences in new, creative and startling ways.

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1 hour, 4 minutes, 44 seconds

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