



ARTIST

## JENNY SAVILLE

PORTRAITS BY BRENDAN OLLEY

*Over the last two decades, British artist Jenny Saville has established herself as one of the most accomplished artists of her generation, and certainly one of the most accomplished painters. A deep seated interest in and understanding of colour and paint combined with often provocative subject matter have led to Saville creating some of the most striking images of recent times, deservedly garnering her much attention throughout the art world and beyond.*

*Born in Cambridge in 1970, Saville was aware from an early age which direction she wanted to take in life. 'I was probably conscious of wanting to be an artist when I was about eight' she explains. 'I was really lucky that my mother was a teacher and she just gave me this broom cupboard, which became my first studio. My uncle was an art teacher and a professor in art history, so he was a kind of link, a really important person in my life. He bought me my first set of oil paints, things like that. I was reasonably good academically and all those things, but art was just within my language from a very early age.'*

*Having developed that interest throughout her school years, Saville went on to study at the Glasgow School of Art and later at the Slade School of Art, her senior show proving to be a major turning point in her career. After attending the show, renowned art collector Charles Saatchi bought every single one of Saville's paintings and went on to commission further works to be exhibited at the Young British Artists III show in 1994. 'I can remember making the show for the Saatchi Gallery in a really small bedroom in Glasgow that I'd converted into a studio' says Saville. 'I had an old tenement flat and the rooms were quite big, but it was still quite a domestic setting. I just shut the door, didn't see anyone and painted for two years. I made this 21 foot triptych for the show but I could never see it as a complete piece in the space that I worked, I could only take photographs and put those together. So to actually go down to London and see the show in this enormous gallery was thrilling, it was amazing. The level of press was unbelievable; it was quite phenomenal. Charles knew the mechanism and how to create press and an interest in work, which was fantastic but very daunting at the same time. I was quite lucky because I had a scholarship to go to a studio in America almost immediately following that show, so I was fortunate to not get caught up in becoming a well-known artist; I was removed quite quickly from being in Britain to working in America where nobody really knew my work. That was quite fortuitous in terms of not getting an ego problem and all the other things that go with it.' This early connection with Charles Saatchi would prove indelible, with Saville labelled along with various other upcoming British*

*artists as a Young British Artist, or YBA as they would become known, many of whom would go on to feature alongside Saville in the notorious Sensation exhibition at London's Royal Academy of Arts in 1997. 'It didn't have the weight that it's got now, to be a YBA' Saville explains. 'Nobody took it that seriously; it was just a title that Charles had chosen for a series of shows. You didn't panic about being categorised because that term hadn't gained any cultural significance. I was quite open to a lot of that work, it's just that I liked oil painting and painting figuratively and there were not so many people around wanting to do that.'*

*Saville subsequently moved to New York, and whilst there she spent time observing the various procedures carried out by plastic surgeon Dr. Barry Weintraub in a quest to further develop her understanding of the human form. 'I was already interested in plastic surgery. I'd done paintings about that before and I was really lucky that the collector who was sponsoring me, I'd seen a photo of her when she was young, and her nose was completely different to the way it was when I saw her. I knew she'd had surgery so I asked her and she said "Oh, you must meet my surgeon, he's phenomenal!" I went along and he was really welcoming and allowed me take photographs, and I became like a medical student. I visited the New York medical library and had a sort of research base where I'd go and read, then I'd go to operations and take photographs. It was thrilling, really one of the most influential things that's happened in my life regarding my work. The first operation I saw was an Italian woman who was very slightly built and she was having DD breast implants. To see a surgeon with their fist inside a woman's breast, pushing her breast around to make space for the implant, was amazingly violent. Then they were holding up her body to make sure that the implant was settled properly, and that was like a crucifixion, like 'The Deposition from the Cross'. I smelt burning human flesh during a facial peel, where they literally peel off layers of your top flesh; it's like having third degree burns. All in the pursuit of beauty for a body which is inevitably going to decay and die. I had to go to medicine or pornography to see human bodies, areas which are seen either as deviant or only for medical eyes. If you see them with artistic eyes though,*



*Stare. 2005*



*you do look at it differently. I saw this surgeon sculpting flesh, moving flesh around, and it really became a way to think about making paintings. The way that I mixed paint became a sort of human paste, in the same way that the surgeon was working on someone's face.'*

*While Saville was out in New York, British Vogue arranged to send along a photographer to take her portrait for their magazine. 'It was actually a photographer called Mary Ellen Mark who'd originally been commissioned to do it but she couldn't make it, so they said they were sending this photographer called Glen Luchford. I was really disappointed because I wanted to meet Mary Ellen Mark but instead they sent this wide-boy from Brighton.' Saville and Luchford soon hit it off though, resulting in a hugely successful collaboration. 'We went to lunch and talked about lots of different things, we had a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon. He came to my studio and I'd built this contraption with a piece of Perspex with which I was trying to squash my flesh, after what I'd seen at the surgeon's. I was having terrible trouble with the reflections when photographing my body from underneath, and Glen just took his coat off and said "I know how to do this". Within a few hours we'd started taking these incredible Polaroids, and the portrait for British Vogue became a sort of afterthought.' After that, the two found what time they could between Luchford's jobs and Saville's painting to continue taking pictures for the project. 'When I saw them I realised that I couldn't transfer them into paint; they had a life of their own and it evolved naturally into a photographic project, which I'd never thought I would do. Glen wasn't used to having someone like me to work with, dictating to him what to do, and I wasn't used to working with someone who was used to working in the fashion industry and involved with very traditional ideas of beauty. It was quite a crackly, inspiring moment.'*

*Upon her return to London, Saville began visiting the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons, and her findings there, coupled with the extensive research she had already done whilst in New York, led towards her developing an interest in hermaphrodites. By chance, whilst in a café in Islington, Saville met Del LaGrace Volcano, a meeting that would lead to Saville painting her first major work on the theme of hermaphrodites, 'Matrix'. 'I was aware of Del LaGrace's photography, and he said to me "Are you Jenny Saville?". I said "Yes, and you're Del LaGrace". We swapped numbers and I called him up and asked him, really tentatively, if he'd consider modelling, and he said yes. He's astonishing. To have a body that you self-design...I'd been working with a plastic surgeon*

*who's concerned with putting everybody through this system of very conventional beauty, and Del LaGrace was somebody who was doing almost the opposite of that by his own design. To see someone with hairy breasts that they wanted, it was just visually thrilling.'*

*This inherent interest that Saville has in the human form and it's potential for manipulation – 'contemporary architecture of the body' as she puts it – has directed her work from the very beginning, something which she ascribes in part to the influence of other artists. 'I just had a taste for it I think. When I was a kid, I looked at Velázquez all the time, and Bacon, and Freud. There was this huge Bacon show at the Tate when I was 15 and that just blew me away. Then I remember being 17 when there was a Freud show at the Hayward gallery, and it just felt the right way; I felt connected to it. I was painting friends, anyone who would sit long enough for me to paint, and I guess I just followed my instinct really. I've always been a real painter's painter and had an interest in the human body. Just being a woman and living in that period of time, when everybody was obsessively dieting and having plastic surgery, and women's magazines had a lot of mention of liposuction. It was a new thing to have liposuction, so I started collecting images like that, and there were friends at art school with eating disorders. It became an interest in how we control our bodies.'*

*Saville's love of figurative painting is something which can also be directly traced back to the influence of previous masters. 'When I was a kid I used to look at the likes of Caravaggio, Velázquez, and in terms of figuration, I like very old figurative art like Michelangelo; at the moment, I've got a love affair with Leonardo da Vinci going on. That period of art making was before the advent of photography, and there was a freedom to being a figurative painter. The last 100 years has been a kind of panic about what to do in the face of photography and film. I admire Bacon enormously for trying to find a language that could talk about figuration or the human body - he created a specific language that you can't go near. Quite amazing. The painting that I like tends to be that which can only exist as a painting; I don't like super-realism or painting that is too closely linked to photography. I think that the only person who's pulled that off is Richter, and even he has gone towards being an abstract painter. It's a challenge. De Kooning's probably the painter I look at more than any other painter now. It's a combination - I look at more recent abstract painters in general and then very old figurative painting. I've got key artists and key pieces that always bubble up when I'm working, that I refer to and kind of steal from. I've just been to Madrid to the Prado to see Velázquez, and you*



*Branded. 1992*



Matrix. 1999

look at his paintings and they feel like they were made two days ago. The paint's incredibly fresh and his level of humanity through paint is just astounding. I tend to like the painters that, when you're standing in front of their work, they make you want to paint.'

With much of her work featuring women, including herself, often large, natural women whose appearance falls outside the standard parameters of traditional beauty, Saville has also found herself viewed in parallel with well-known feminist artists such as Cindy Sherman, a fact which Saville is mostly happy to embrace. 'I was really influenced by Cindy Sherman when I was at college. I found her way of using femininity as a sort of myth really interesting. Like a lot of other women artists, it was a way to own your history, and it was a challenge. To paint your own body naked, as the Guerrilla Girls had done in the seventies, as a way of showing everybody that the majority of nudes inside a museum are naked women but painted by men. It became political in one regard because it was a way of saying "This is my body and this is how I see a female body". Also, it was practical; there aren't a lot of people you can get to lay on a piece of glass and smash their bodies around to produce a certain visual effect. I can't say it was always political, because often it was for convenience. I would say that when I use my own body in my art, there is an intrinsic honesty to it. You're not projecting onto another body or getting a body for an idea; there is something that's very raw about working with your own body and a sense of revealing that. I'm not as interested in that as I was, but I still think there's something very potent to it. I'm a bit bored with it now; I've painted my nipple about 100 times. I did do some drawings around the time I had children because my body changed, so it became inspiring to do that. The dramatic change made my body interesting again. In the last few years though I've become more interested in other bodies and other subjects.'

Over the years, Saville's work has taken her around the world and led to her relocating several times, and whilst each location has had a clear impact on her work, the overarching threads to her art have remained. 'I would say that the core elements that run through my work haven't changed at all; I don't feel that different to when I was eight. What I would say is that I've learnt different things in different places. In New York I completely fell in love with abstract expressionism and felt that that was really the last great moment in painting - to stand in front of De Kooning's 'Easter Monday' or 'Woman 1', or a large Pollack in the Met, it just felt like



Passage. 2005

painting was important.' In 2003, Saville encountered the Italian city of Palermo for the first time, a city with which she felt an instant connection. 'Glen (Luchford) has got a house on the island of Savignano, a little island off of Sicily, and I'd just done a big show and was pretty knackered. Glen told me to go and recuperate in Savignano, so I did. I met an architect friend of mine from Rome and he suggested we go to Palermo for the day. I went by bus and got to this incredible city, and it just felt visually right; I knew I could make work there. I was lucky enough to find this old building to buy and I started painting in it. For four or five months a year, Palermo is unbelievably hot and has these violent shadows between light and dark, and the smell of death is everywhere. I worked above this old medieval meat market, and you could see the intestines hanging from the meat, people were grilling them, and the next day the whole thing would happen over again - you got a real sense of the cycle of life. The fruits and vegetables changed according to the season, not like going to the supermarket where you can pretty much get the same fruit whatever month you're in and hermetically sealed meat which you don't really believe has anything to do with death. I was working in a city which has this thing called Cappuccini where they preserve their dead - you walk in a vault and there are thousands of bodies hanging up. It's a completely different perception of what death is; it's very close to you. I enjoyed working there for that. There's not very much modern technology though, it's very difficult to get work in and out of there, you can't get materials - there were a lot of practical problems that eventually choked me, so I don't work there anymore. I learnt from Palermo a sense of history though and not needing to be right in the middle of the art world. I've worked right in the middle of London, right in the middle of New York, in the countryside, in an old city, and all of those things have shifted the work, but the core elements of the work have really stayed the same.'

Perhaps one of the most high-profile uses of Saville's images came when the band Manic Street Preachers chose her paintings to grace the covers of two of their albums, the triptych 'Strategy' for their 1994 album 'The Holy Bible', and 'Stare' for their 2009 album 'Journal For Plague Lovers'. 'I'd just done my show at the Saatchi gallery the first time round and they had apparently approached the gallery to use my painting 'Strategy' explains Saville. 'I think Saatchi gallery had told them that it was going to cost a lot of money, which had never been referred to me so I knew nothing about it. Richey (Edwards) called me and started talking to me about the album, and after we'd talked I asked him to fax me some of



Strategy. 1994

the lyrics. He faxed me '4st 7lb', and I just sat and read it, phoned him straight back and said "I'll do it". I wasn't a big fan so I didn't really know about them, so I asked a couple of friends in Glasgow who are real musos and they said "You've got to do it, they're just amazing". I did it for free and it became this huge cult album, and even now whenever I'm anywhere to talk about my work, there are always people queuing up with Manic Street Preachers albums wanting me to sign them.' The band returned to Saville's work for the cover of 'Journal For Plague Lovers', an album which features lyrics written solely by previous band member Richey Edwards who went missing in 1995, announced 'presumed deceased' in 2008. Saville shares the sense of loss felt by many who have come in to contact with Edwards's writing. 'When you listen to the lyrics of that album, I really wish we'd developed more of a relationship because we were really into a lot of the same subjects. I feel like he would have been a good person to talk to through the years. It's such a shame that he disappeared.'

One strange footnote to this was the reaction by some major retailers towards having 'Journal For Plague Lovers' on display in their stores, deeming 'Stare' too violent an image for general viewing, and many stores opted to use a plain slip cover instead of the original. 'I was pretty surprised at that' says Saville. 'It didn't feel like a controversial painting; I'd made much more controversial paintings than that. I just thought it was a lot of hoo-hah over nothing to be honest. It felt like the numbness of supermarkets maybe didn't want that level of reality.'

This removal from how her work is perceived is a constant throughout Saville's painting. 'I just make the work that I want to make, so I don't really ever think about a target audience or what people are going to say. I've been lucky enough to never have had to work like that. I've made work that's much less commercial, like transvestites - there's not a huge market for transvestites, or "chicks with dicks" as my dealer calls them - but I always make the work I want to make. I tend to work on bodies that are border bodies, that are in states of in-betweenness; that's something that has run through my work. You have a head that looks like it might be alive or might be dead, a body that's not male, not female - they're at a border that's quite fluid, and I've found that an interesting place to work. There's a sense of freedom within that.'

Saville is now based in Oxford, with a studio in the centre of the city which she describes as 'the best studio I've ever had', and she maintains

that a strong work ethic and staying busy are key components to the creative process. 'I'm a real believer that work comes out of work. I like to work quite regularly, and it comes out of doing it every day. It's quite a practical activity in that, if I'm painting every day, when I finish one piece then the next piece just naturally flows, and if you're on a good run you just keep going. If you're on a dry spell, you just have to ride it. I can have two or three months where it will go really badly and you're walking with your feet in mud, then all of a sudden it flows and you're just running. It's the endurance to keep going and believing that you'll reach another level or take a daring step, that sort of thing. That only comes from the commitment of working. You can't sort of do it and then not do it for a couple of weeks - it doesn't work like that.' Saville's work is still evolving as well and she is always looking to challenge herself and try new things, as evidenced by her current preparations for a major upcoming exhibition in New York. 'I've been doing a lot of mother and child images. I'm trying to make images that you read simultaneously which contradict each other, so that you can experience more than one image at the same time. I've managed to do it in drawing but it's proving quite difficult in paint.'

As for the art world itself, Saville feels that it has changed dramatically over the last two decades. 'It's sort of exploded hasn't it? It's become global and enormous and glamorous; what a difference from when I graduated in '92. That was a really exciting period because it was the first time that being young was allowed in galleries. Damien and everybody else were curating shows and Charles's space in London was the space. That's where I went to see the first big Cindy Sherman show; it was serious and it was international. That was the only big space, except for maybe the Anthony D'Offay gallery. Now that landscape's changed completely. It's still a precarious life to be an artist but there are quite a lot of opportunities to work, either in the art world or as a curator; it's just an enormous industry. What I think is probably lacking though is enough people who are really good painters; to remain in a studio day in day out doesn't necessarily fit in with the way people want to live their lives now.'

So, given her vast experience and considerable success as an artist, what would be the one piece of advice that Jenny Saville would pass on to any aspiring young artist? 'Your self-belief is the most important aspect of making art' she says.

Philip Goodfellow