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Photographs by *BRYAN ADAMS*

*CREATIVE SPACE*  
British artist Jenny Saville  
in her studio in Oxford

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Jenny Saville welcomes me into her Oxford studio, carefully stepping over an array of tiny containers filled with paint in a seemingly infinite range of muted skin tones, like pots of melted-down flesh. There are raw, rosy pinks (the colour of a baby's cheeks, of third-degree burns, of our insides), an assortment of beiges (milky, sandy, neutral, golden), ashen greys and red-blue shades of blood in different states of oxygenation. This is the human paste that Saville uses to bring to life the visceral effigies on the ceiling-height canvases for which

she is famed. Here, on the far wall, is a painting from her *Stare* series (to appear in her New York show at the Gagosian in September), a child's head gazing blankly into space; to the right, Rosetta, a blind Sicilian girl with silvery eyes like orbiting planets; and in the centre, an image of Saville's own blood-drenched daughter emerging from her body into life so unapologetically physical that I can almost smell the saline scent of birth.

'The birthing room was like a photographic studio. My friend, photographer Jack Webb, was taking the pictures and feeding me arnica homeopathic pills at the same time. I wanted to do a modern-day nativity and I knew that this was my chance,' Saville, petite with faded-blue eyes, recounts with excitement. Her grey T-shirt and jeans are violently splattered with crimson paint, as if she had worn that very outfit during labour. 'I made this painting from the birth pictures to replace a nativity by Caravaggio that was stolen by the Mafia in 1969 from the Oratorio di San Lorenzo in Palermo.' Saville moved to the Sicilian

city in 2003, buying a 21-room derelict apartment in an 18th-century palazzo. 'Legend says that it is rolled up in a coffin somewhere and that it only comes out at Mafia weddings for couples to be photographed in front of. I loved the romance of that. I used the same lighting as Caravaggio's painting - the colouring and the flesh are similar. But the Vatican made objections to it. They didn't think it was very religious, so the whole thing is on hold.' Still, the project has its own admirers. 'My daughter is three now and she really loves looking at the photos. She loves to see the moment that she was born.'

Such photographs line the walls and floor of Saville's studio, images scavenged from art history, the internet and those of trauma victims from medical journals that serve to inform her paintings; torn pages from a de Kooning book flutter next to photocopied works by Bacon, a picture of a mutilated bus from the 7/7 bombings, images of other pregnant women, a close-up photograph of a failed suicide: a man with his brains blown out, but still alive. 'I used to have a lot more grisly images from pathology books, but the kids come here and skateboard around the studio after playschool so I don't keep as many of them out these days.'

Motherhood has changed 41-year-old Saville, both as a woman and an artist, although she sees no differentiation between the two. Before the birth of her son, now four, and her daughter a year later, time was her luxury. Painting hours stretched into days as she worked in the studio, often through the night. Today, she paints by discipline: she works between 8am and 3pm, returning to the studio until midnight once her children are in bed (watched over by her partner, painter Paul McPhail). 'I think it's a myth that motherhood is a drain on your creativity as an artist. It's about finding art everywhere. Even in the colour of shit in your children's nappies. I remember breastfeeding my newborn son, and I looked at his face and thought, "When will I ever get the chance to study someone up close for this amount of time, for 45 minutes?" And, "Ooh - look at the way the lemon-yellow goes around his eye." I work with the colours of birth a lot now. I have found the whole experience very creatively liberating.' This newfound perspective began when her babies were in utero. 'I painted with my brush on

a stick until I was eight months pregnant. It was an amazing experience, to grow flesh – create a body inside your body – at the same time as I was mixing flesh tones and painting flesh on canvas.'

It is Saville's figurative depiction of human tissue that has made her one of the most defining artists of her generation, not to mention the most expensive living artist under 30 in 2000. Her expansive fleshy nudes of corpulent female bodies, showcased in Saatchi's 'YBA III' show and 1997's 'Sensation' (followed by a series of her own solo exhibitions) – which balance so ambiguously the glorious and the grotesque – threaten to rupture the prevailing norms of female beauty. In their unflinching physical honesty (a candidness that has itself become shocking in our airbrushed age), Saville's behemothic, all-confronting billboards have become rare antidotes to the continuing myths about the female form, portraying not only what it is to live inside the female body (and its potential monstrosity) – the anxiety and often brutality with which we see ourselves – but also the inherent neuroses and distorting dysmorphias that so many of us find contained within our own self-image.

As such, Saville's nudes hold up a critical challenge to the Old Masters, the founding fathers of those myths about the female form. 'I like trespassing on territory that actually should belong to women,' she says. But recently, she has turned her attention to the iconography of the mother and child in art. 'Rather than thinking, "Oh my God – Bacon, Freud, Cassel didn't have to deal with this, I think, "They never had the chance to experience this,"' she says, beaming. 'Now when I'm painting a baby or a pregnant woman, I think that I have the extra power, that extra edge.'

Last year, she showed her *Reproduction* series of sketches at the Gagosian in London. She found sketching an easier medium to juggle with her newborn son than oil paint (working in the hours in which he slept). The drawings are based on nativity sketches by Leonardo da Vinci (*The Virgin and Child with St Anne and John the Baptist*) and Michelangelo, but from the viewpoint of her own experience. Mother and child are no longer idealised and composed, but in symbiotic flux, the multiple outlines

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of her sketch mirroring the movements of her writhing infant.

She is currently working on her new show for the Gagosian (along with paintings and drawings in the *Mother and Child* series and *Store* paintings, there are new images, faces and bodies mediated by technology this time: a face negotiated by the blurred imaging of Skype; a pregnant woman projected with an Arabic text found on the internet). She is also due to donate a new work to a Christie's auction in October in aid of Women For Women International, an organisation that sponsors women in educational programmes in war-torn countries. The project is being co-curated by Saville and Nadja Romain, who she met when Romain invited her to take part in an artist portfolio for a special edition of *Tank* magazine for the charity in 2010. Her donated sketch sold for £180,000 – and the total raised was enough to put 800 women through the programme. For the new auction, Saville handwrote letters to fellow artists asking them to donate work. Those confirmed now include Tacita Dean, Tracey Emin, Bridget Riley and Taryn Simon.

Motherhood has been a call to action for Saville: 'I am fortunate that I was born into a time and place where women can be the creators of culture too. Women hundreds of years ago fought that battle for me – so that we could eventually be taken seriously as artists, writers, actresses and scientists. Now that we can also be the creators of culture, it's important to carry that on. That's what ties me to Women For Women.'

One of the women who opened doors for Saville was fellow artist Cindy Sherman. 'She was a huge icon of mine at college. She worked with the same myths of femininity that I was interested in, and she used herself in her art in a similar way.'

Saville, too, appears in her own art; in *Reflective Flesh* (2002–03), she paints the anatomical detail of her own vagina with the detachment of a gynaecological textbook. This steady eye of a surgeon, and with it a fascination for flesh, began in early childhood. 'I always used to play with the liver when my mother was cooking. I found it thrilling to watch its colour change in the pan,' she says. 'I remember that my father took me to a merry-go-round when I was five, and a child fell off and cut her leg open. He was trying to shield my eyes, but I remember all I wanted to do was see the blood.'

Saville was born in Cambridge in 1970, one of four children. She was a natural painter, taking up the brush when she was just eight years old – the one consistency in a childhood in which she moved from school to school around the country (her father was a county-council director of education). Her interest in rotund female forms was also triggered early on. 'I remember when I was five or six, sitting on the floor looking up at my piano teacher's thighs under her Fifties tweed skirt. She was big, and they rubbed together as she played. I was fascinated with the way her two breasts would become one, the way her fat moved, the way it hung on the back of her arms. I found it very animalistic.'

Her instinctive interest in the body was compounded by the rise of the body-beautiful culture of the Eighties. In 1988, Saville attended Glasgow School of Art. 'At college, there were so many super-talented women who were obsessed with dieting. I had one friend who used to draw a line on her legs of where she would like the outline to be. This obsession with body image became a real disability for these women.' She sighs. 'It still annoys me how it

distracts talented women. I have friends who are brilliant barristers, who think about their weight all the time. I think, "You're going to be rotting in 20 or 40 years' time anyway, so what are you worrying about that for?"

She was a prodigy at Glasgow, winning the Craig Award, the Newberry Medal and a six-month scholarship to Cincinnati University, where she observed masses of white flesh at shopping malls – women who ruptured the expected physical norm. 'Huge, huge, obese bodies. It was shocking.' These were the women who inspired her 1992 graduate-show paintings. *Branded* depicted a corpulent woman with pendulous breasts, squirming in her own form, inscribed with adjectives – 'petite', 'delicate' – to which she

clearly did not conform. In *Prop* and *Propped*, giant fleshy bodies attempt to balance and fit, awkwardly and painfully, on the tiny, rigid barstools of accepted convention.

It was such early paintings that drew the attention of Charles Saatchi, who spotted her work, tracking down and buying up the pieces sold from her degree show (which he later put up at auction for the sum of £2 million). Saatchi then commissioned her for the next two years, giving her carte blanche to paint a body of work to be shown at his gallery, saying: 'Whatever you want, whatever you dream - do it.' For 18 months, Saville slept three hours a night, painting solidly until she completed the commissions, with seven works being shown in Saatchi's exhibition 'Young British Artists III' in 1994. 'She was only 23, but critics were already likening her to Lucian Freud,' says Jenny Blythe, who was curating the Saatchi Gallery at the time.

Later that year, Saville returned to America to observe the operations at a plastic surgeon's clinic in New York. 'I met the women; the way they talked, it was like they actually thought that they were ill. They had this fictional idea that the operation would make them normal. They saw the surgeon and handed themselves over, and they would come out looking horrific. They were basically morphing themselves,' she explains, still with the remnants of horror in her voice. 'It was incredibly violent to see a surgeon's fist inside a woman's body, pushing up a breast, making space for an enormous implant. Liposuction was really violent too.'

Mesmerised by the concept of self-moulding, the following year Saville began to collaborate with fashion photographer Glen Luchford for a new work called *Closed Contact* (originally meant as the preparatory photographs for a painting series, and later shown in its own right in 2002). Her idea was to press her body against Perspex and to be shot from below, in order to emulate the surgical procedure. 'But first I needed to fatten up to get more fleshy for the photographs. I stuffed myself with muffins and doughnuts. Glen would take me to a diner and say, "Come on then, eat up!" "There was a Robert De Niro/*Raging Bull* quality to it,' Luchford tells me. 'I hadn't seen anyone before who was ready to use their body in such an aggressive way to achieve their goals. It really hurt her body to be squished on glass for hours.' The resulting Polaroids, expertly lit by Luchford to replicate not only surgical lighting but fluid too (Saville resembles a biological specimen floating in a jar), are at once both gruesome and beguiling. Her flesh is squashed, contorted and distorted, as though she has sliced through a cross-section of herself.

That's how I feel sometimes, I tell her, laughing: pressed up against the glass. 'So many women have said to me about [*Closed Contact* and] my paintings, "That's just how I feel." I have noticed this secret dialogue among women,' she replies. I point out the inherent metaphor of the glass ceiling. 'Other women have said that too.'

The hint of formaldehyde links her to another artist: Damien Hirst, who Saville showed alongside in Saatchi's notorious Royal Academy show 'Sensation' in 1997. 'The shark was phenomenal. The moment I saw it, I knew it was iconic,' she says. 'Charles Saatchi did this amazing thing for a generation. He didn't care about your background or whether you were male or female. It was just "Could

you do it in the time?" and "How big was your idea?" He gave everyone a platform for their dream. There was this group of energetic post-punk aesthetic artists, who mixed with this immigrant guy who had money and no hang-ups about belonging to the right family. Saatchi put London on the art map.'

At 'Sensation', five of her giant canvases hung next to Tracey Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*, Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, Marcus Harvey's Myra Hindley portrait and the Chapmans' *Great Deeds Against the Dead* as the only traditionally figurative works of art, although Jenny's anarchic attitude to the tradition of nude painting was true to the exhibition,' says Blythe. Even so, Saville feels that her inclusion in the YBA bracket is inaccurate. 'I didn't go to Goldsmiths, I came out of the tradition of Bacon and Freud. My work was labour-intensive. I was in my studio a lot, so I wasn't part of that drinking, coke-taking, rudeness thing...'

In the predominantly conceptual world of contemporary art, Saville was swimming upstream; but the importance of her stoical commitment to her method cannot be underestimated in today's art canon. 'In the 1990s when painting was "dead", Jenny emerged with a body of work that helped restore the art world's interest in the medium by playing with the technical aspect of figurative painting and championing the aesthetic diversity of the female body,' says gallerist Dasha Zhukova. 'Jenny created a dialogue that encapsulated her time while criticising the status quo.'

But for painting it is the end of an era, Saville says wistfully. 'It was a double whammy to lose Cy Twombly, who I knew and adored, and Lucian Freud almost at the same time. I felt very empty for a few days. Cy worked in Gaeta between Rome and Naples, when I worked in Palermo. Freud was my guiding light; I saw his Hayward show when I was 17. He was a painter who came to represent Britain.'

It is a baton that has passed to Saville herself, who shares with Freud a tireless commitment to 'the search for something human, which isn't instant like a photograph, something that takes a long time to get'.

In this search, Saville has explored human tissues, the recesses of our bodies, the folds of our epidermis and adipose layers. In her 1999 show 'Territories', featuring paintings of transsexuals, she turned her eye to the mutations of gender, and in 2003's 'Migrants', to the brutalities of trauma victims. But it is in her studies of the female body that Saville holds her greatest power.

Works such as *Closed Contact* are now over a decade old, yet their pertinence is ever-growing. 'In 1994, I had to explain to people in England what liposuction was; now it has swept across the Western world, along with Botox... I find it fascinating that the best Botox comes from the corpses of other bodies; the fact that women are willing to inject themselves with that... We need to question why older women are not something we can look at in our culture.' Perhaps, she says, it is a topic that she will explore one day. Although she may not like me saying it, I, for one, cannot wait for Jenny Saville to age. □

Jenny Saville's *Continuum* is at Gagosian Gallery, New York, from 15 September to 22 October. *Artists for Women For Women International* is at Gagosian Gallery, London WC1 ([www.gagosian.com](http://www.gagosian.com)), from 27 September to



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*THE SKIN I LIVE IN*

*Clockwise from above: Saville in her studio with her paintings, 'Propped' (1992) by Jenny Saville. A view of the installation 'Closed Contact' (2002) by Saville and Glen Luchford at Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills*



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1 October. Christie's ([www.christies.com](http://www.christies.com)) will auction the works on 15 October. To see images that will feature in the auction, visit [harpersbazaar.co.uk](http://harpersbazaar.co.uk).

