

Jenny Saville

## METAMORPHOSIS : A LOVE STORY

by Patricia Cronin



**Jenny Saville**  
*Propped*, 1992  
collection of David Teiger



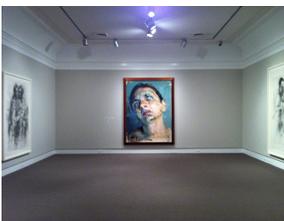
**Jenny Saville**  
*Reverse*, 2002  
"Jenny Saville"  
Norton Museum of Art



**Jenny Saville**  
*Hyphen*, 1999  
private collection



**Jenny Saville**  
*Stare*  
2004-05



"Jenny Saville," installation view with *Atonement Studies* (Panel 2), 2005-06, at the Norton Museum of Art

Nestled an hour north of Miami at the Norton Museum in West Palm Beach is "Jenny Saville," a survey exhibition of paintings and drawings by the celebrated Young British Artist. The first exhibition in the museum's "Recognition of Art by Women" series (RAW), it is organized by Cheryl Brutvan, the museum's new curator of contemporary art, and proves, if such a thing was in doubt, that women are now routinely in the artistic forefront (and also lead in the market -- Saville has 70 sales at auction, the top price being \$2.4 million).

The exhibition brings together 27 of Saville's paintings and works on paper made from 1992 to the present. Saville is well known for her monumental nude female figures and portraits, painted with a furious application of confident expressive strokes. The scale of her figures indicates the psychological space the body takes up in our collective psyches -- we are obsessed with diets, nutrition, physical fitness, health, vanity, self-esteem. Saville's somber, adult lens, directed towards the nude, takes off where Lucian Freud ends, and her interest in surgical and biological metamorphosis reveals an almost "End of Empire" view of the human form.

The earliest painting in the show, *Propped* (1992), is an enlarged, nearly nude self-portrait of the artist perched atop a stool, her mammoth legs gripping for dear life, her ankles crossed, her feet in high heels. Saville's crossed arms squeeze her breasts together, and her fingers gouge into her hefty knees, a pose purportedly inspired by Michelangelo's works. Her head tilts back as if to fall out of the canvas, lips parted in psychological distress. Backwards mirror writing is scrawled across the surface of the painting as Leonardo was known to do. But Saville quotes Luce Irigaray, the Belgian feminist theorist, saying, in part, "if we speak as men have spoken for centuries, words will make us disappear." Clearly, Saville's portrait aims to be radically different than the way any man has ever painted a woman.

While Saville's paintings have the feeling of sculpted paint, the bodies and faces she depicts often seem to have been physically assaulted -- beaten, scratched, cut, stretched, pushed and pulled, prodded, scarred, cut, bound, scraped, etc., a list of actions reminiscent of Richard Serra's 1960s *Verb List*, except that Saville has applied it to the human beings she paints rather than to inanimate sculptural materials. Her past experiences witnessing face-lifts, compounded with her time spent sketching corpses in morgues, have given her a usually well-informed understanding of the insides of the body.

Whether plastic surgery or sexual reassignment surgery, Saville's overarching interest has been the body in transformation. The show also includes two sketches on paper of transsexuals -- or "in-betweens," as she calls them -- both titled *Transvestite Paint Study* (ca. 2003-04). They are beautiful, skillfully and honestly rendered.



**Jenny Saville**

*Reproduction Drawing IV (after the Leonardo cartoon)*, 2010  
collection of Stuart & Gina Peterson



**Jenny Saville**

*Atonement Studies (Panel 2)*,  
2005-06  
Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica



**Jenny Saville**

*Time II*, 2010  
private collection



Jenny Saville with collector Glenn Fuhrmann and her painting *Isis* at the Norton Museum of Art

Portraits abound in this show. *For Reverse* (2002), a fiery horizontal self-portrait showing the artist lying on the floor or on a table, Saville manually manipulated the flesh of her own face by stuffing cotton in her cheeks, a modification inspired by actor Marlon Brando in Francis Ford Coppola's film *The Godfather*. *Hyphen* (1989-99) is a double portrait that seems to render Saville and her sister as giant Siamese Twin babies. Several paintings and drawings are part of a series titled "Stare," executed between 2004-2011, which depict a young boy whose full lips are curled into a subtle snarl. The undeniable lushness of Saville's painterly bravura is mitigated by an element of detachment, as the subject's eyes are painted behind a soft focused haze.

Abundantly represented is her latest series of charcoal and pastel works on paper, "Leonardo 2009-2011," inspired by Leonardo's *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist* (ca. 1499-1500). Here, Saville's exquisite draftsmanship and frenetic mark-making reign. The squirming infants wiggle uncontrollably on the pregnant women's bodies. But these physical transformations are biological, and sexual activity, not surgery, has transformed the female body to the enormous sizes reminiscent of some of her earlier figures. It's fascinating to go back to the first gallery and view *Fulcrum* (1997-99), installed just a few steps away.

The exhibition culminates with *Atonement Studies: Central Panel (Rosetta)* (2005-06), which depicts a blind woman Saville met while living and working in Palermo. Saville calls her subject "the most beautiful woman I ever photographed" -- and indeed her titled head, parted lips, milky eyes and striking bone structure are all illuminated by her peachy skin tone and blueish shadows, a feat of expressionist glory.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with informative essays by Cheryl Brutvan and Nicholas Cullinan, curator at the Tate Modern, and is elegantly designed by Bethany Johns. The book includes many photographs of Saville's studio, along with art historical and forensic source material.

Saville's work doesn't titillate or entertain, but asks larger questions about what it means to inhabit a body in the late 20th and early 21st century. We are all born with this flesh and these bones, and no matter how we choose to alter them, they remain ours. Then they're gone. Saville's work takes us on a tour through some corporal possibilities -- and I, for one, enjoy the ride.

"Jenny Saville," Nov. 30, 2011-Mar. 4, 2012, Norton Museum of Art, 1451 S. Olive Avenue, West Palm Beach, FL, 33401.

PATRICIA CRONIN is an artist who lives and works in New York. A solo exhibition of her work, "Memorial to a Marriage," goes on view at Conner Contemporary Art, Feb. 4-Mar. 10, 2012, in Washington, D.C.