



ART REVIEW: Carnality and Culture, Part II: Jenny Saville at Gagosian

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by Sally Grant

Two of the most important painters of the human figure working today are currently exhibiting new works at two of New York City's powerhouse galleries. Both shows engage with the carnal body and with cultural memory and myth. This review, of Jenny Saville's "Ancestors" at Gagosian in Chelsea, is being published in tandem with last week's review of the [Marlene Dumas "Myths & Mortals"](#) exhibition at David Zwirner.

At the beginning of her novel "How to Be Both"—an inventive double tale that celebrates art's potency and the layers of life—Scottish author Ali Smith includes an epigraph quoting Hannah Arendt:

"Although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living - "

As considered by Arendt (in regards to the work of Walter Benjamin), and explored in Smith's novel, the idea of invention emerging from, indeed depending on, decay is also a guiding theme of Jenny Saville's latest paintings currently on view at Gagosian. Saville's "Ancestors" exhibition consists of 11 monumental works, all of which were completed in 2018, considering the contemporary human body in relation to earlier figurative depictions in painting and sculpture. These arresting works are as immersed in history—of art, literature and religion—as they are cognizant of the to-be history of the palpable present.



Jenny Saville, "Ancestors," Installation View, 2018. Artwork © Jenny Saville.
Photography by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

In the first gallery, four large oil paintings and an oil pastel and mixed media work are united by the number three. Both *Red Fates*, a blood-red mass of energy, and *Delos* (2017-2018), a more softly colored but no less energetic composition, depict three nude figures upon a stone-like plinth, their bodies entangled. The tripartite nature of the imagery also informs the three, roughly 8-foot-square

paintings on the gallery's southern wall.

Termed, from left to right, *Fate 3*, *Fate 2*, and *Fate 1*, these compositionally complex images feature individual nudes that are fragmentary amalgamations of realistic-looking body parts and statue-like heads. Their positioning on pedestals only accentuates the figures' status as artistic monuments.



Jenny Saville, "Ancestors," Installation View, 2018. Artwork © Jenny Saville. Photography by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.



"Fate 1" by Jenny Saville, 2018. Oil on canvas, 102 3/8 x 94 1/2 inches. © Jenny Saville. Photography by Mike Bruce. Courtesy Gagosian.

Saville is known for [her engagement with the art of the past](#) and the entire exhibition is steeped in an awareness of the art historical canon. Not only does the sculptural quality of the works raise the notion of the *paragone*—the Renaissance debate as to whether painting or sculpture was the more noble art—but the artist also draws upon specific artistic references.

Fate 1, for example, was partly inspired by Paleolithic fertility goddess statuettes, but the characteristically voluptuous body of such figurines is here modeled by the meltingly opulent, viscous markings of oil paint. The work's bracing effect is assisted by the way in which the nude's rotund fleshiness is truncated by Cubist geometric forms and countered by the angularity of her head and right breast. That the woman's head recalls those of figures in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and, in turn, the African masks that inspired that seminal artist, only furthers the idea of pictorial and cultural layering. This vital, protean quality is enhanced by sections of variously colored impasto and briskly sketched, abstract markings that, Twombly-like, express the mark-making poetics of paint.

While the combination of the paintings' immense scale, frequently bold coloring, and visual complexity is immediately impactful, their titles, like those of [Marlene Dumas's paintings](#) exhibited a mere block away, contribute to the viewer's understanding of the works. For the Greeks and Romans of antiquity the three Fates determined the path of human life; this theme of mortality, as well as the connected thread of history and culture, is tangible not only in the *Fate* canvases, but throughout the exhibition. Also akin to the recent paintings by Dumas, "Ancestors" combines such classical and mythological references with depictions of people who are very much of the here and now.

In the second gallery, a charcoal work called *Thread* reveals the *pentimenti* of earlier drawings and layered lives; this gallery also has two striking paintings depicting nude couples. While their titles, *Vis and Ramin I* and *Vis and Ramin II*, reference the epic 11th-century Persian poem, and the flesh tones and the figures' bodily entwinement recall the sensuality of that tale, the highly individualized subjects connect the ancient romance to contemporary life. At the same time, the rapid painterliness of the canvases, with patches of impasto and splashes of pigment, and the fracturing of the subjects' bodies with geometric shapes, emphasize both their status as art objects and their carnal mortality. It is as though the brushstrokes reveal their very innards.



"Vis and Ramin I" by Jenny Saville, 2018. Oil on canvas, 98 1/2 x 137 7/8 inches.
© Jenny Saville. Photography by Mike Bruce. Courtesy Gagosian.

The three paintings in the third gallery make explicit the Fates' impact on life. Each takes the traditional pyramidal structure of the Christian Pietà, but in Saville's *Blue Pieta* the figure of the Virgin Mary, who cradles the body of her dead son, has been replaced by a man in a contemporary war-torn city. Perhaps even more wrenching is the adjacent, more abstract, *Byzantium*.



"Byzantium" by Jenny Saville, 2018. Oil on canvas, 76 1/2 x 94 1/8 x 1 1/4 inches.
© Jenny Saville. Photography by Mike Bruce. Courtesy Gagosian.

The gold background and deep red, blue, and burgundy pigment of this painting recall the glowing colors of Byzantine icons, while the central figure's rigidly frontal stance and direct gaze replicates such icons' representation of the sacred. But here Saville combines Renaissance and Baroque imagery—the convincing flesh tones of the dead child, the exquisite modeling of his feet, the way in which the child appears to reach out to the viewer and the fingers of the deity squeeze into the child's flesh—with modern and contemporary forms. The gold coloring seems to disintegrate before the viewer's eyes, leaving drips as it reveals a red background, and the seething mass of abstract lines and paint splashes capture the visceral body as convincingly and as tragically as precise anatomical drawings.

Regarding artists' depictions of the body, in Smith's "How to Be Both" the narrator of one of the two tales, a 15th-century Italian painter named Francescho, cites Leon Battista Alberti: "the process of drawing and painting outwits death and you draw ... any animal by *isolating each bone of the animal, and on to this adding muscle, and then clothing it all with its flesh* : and this giving of muscle and flesh to bones is what in its essence the act of painting anything is." *Byzantium* and the

other boldly raw paintings of “Ancestors” lay bare the very palpable act of creation described by Alberti, an act that, perhaps, “outwits death.”

The exhibition’s closing work, *Chapter (for Linda Nochlin)* (2016-2018), created with charcoal on cotton duck canvas, provides a coda to this painterly exploration of the messy, iterative process of life, death, and art. It again takes up the form of a Pietà, with a self-portrait of the artist in the place of the Virgin Mary. Below her are the heads of children and an energetic mass of overlapping lines from which emerge legs and arms. Geometric shapes frame two of the children’s faces, emphasizing the process of artistic representation.



“Chapter (for Linda Nochlin)” by Jenny Saville, 2016 – 2018.
Charcoal on cotton duck canvas, 102 1/2 x 93 x 2 inches. © Jenny Saville. Photography by Mike Bruce. Courtesy Gagosian.

But the composition also recalls Leonardo’s tender paintings of the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* and of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, and underneath Saville’s self-portrait a drawing of another woman is just discernible. Considered in relation to its title—which calls to mind not only Linda Nochlin, a great supporter and friend of Saville, but also her now classic essay, [“Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”](#)—the work would seem to suggest that this is merely a chapter in a story, but one in which Saville as a female artist convincingly takes her place.

Like Arendt’s “pearl diver,” Saville has delved into the past and from it created something entirely new. The compellingly complex paintings of “Ancestors” are both enlivening and sobering references to this layering of time, as they heed those who came before and acknowledge those who will, it is hoped, follow.



Jenny Saville, “Ancestors,” Installation View, 2018. Artwork © Jenny Saville.
Photography by Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

BASIC FACTS: “Jenny Saville: Ancestors” is on view May 3 to July 20, 2018 at Gagosian, 522 West 21st Street, New York, NY 10011. www.gagosian.com.

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