

# Anatomy of Painting: Jenny Saville [B2]

Una mostra alla National Portrait Gallery di Londra ripercorre l'evoluzione di questa artista britannica ed esplora il suo interesse per il corpo umano al di là dei canoni dominanti.

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British artist Jenny Saville paints bodies too big, too **flabby**, too **flawed**, too **scarred** or simply **out of sync** with real-world perceptions of what beauty is. While her subjects are usually women, men and other identities are implicated as Saville challenges gender and genre norms. This summer a major retrospective of her work is held at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

## YOUNG BRITISH ARTIST

Born in 1970 in Cambridge, England, Saville attended the Glasgow School of Art from 1988 to 1992, spending a **term** at the University of Cincinnati in the US. Her studies focused her interest on corporeal imperfections, with all of its societal implications and taboos. Saville **rose to fame** as a member of the Young British Artists (YBAs), the **loose** group of painters and sculptors who came to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and who were **championed** and financially supported by the art collector Charles Saatchi.

## ART INSPIRATION

In her early **depictions** of the female form as corpulent or '**fleshy**', Saville began **to push at the boundaries** of both classical figuration and modern abstraction. One of her most famous works is her early work **Propped** (1992), which **sought** to challenge the preconceived notions of female beauty in ancient art forms. She explored how the body has been represented over time and across cultures — from antique and Hindu sculpture, to Renaissance drawing and painting, to the work of modern, mainly male, artists such as Henri Matisse, Willem de Kooning and Pablo Picasso.

## MONUMENTAL WORKS

Inspired by the larger works of Titian and Tintoretto, Saville's painting became increasingly monumental, and incorporated a synthesis of styles: from ancient Renaissance portraiture, to cubism, abstract expressionism to fauvism. However, she did as much to counter the classical representation of bodies in art, which in itself is a form of interaction between artist (mainly men) and subject (usually women.)

## COSMETIC SURGERY

Saville became intrigued by the faces and bodies of mass media; the way that images in men's, women's and fashion magazines compared to the real-life bodies of people she encountered. While in Connecticut in 1994, Saville observed a New York City cosmetic surgeon at work, reflecting on the seemingly infinite ways that flesh is transformed and disfigured in the name of correction, and the fruitless search for plastic perfection.

## PERFECTIONISM

In oil paintings such as Plan (1993), Saville brought attention to the issues around the female body, and the line between fun, healthy and obsessive exercise. In the artwork she reflects on the ever more robotic, constructed perfect image of the form, that makes women and men discomforted about every little flaw. Saville's intention was to transgress the cultural aversion to 'flab' as, increasingly, competition mounts within gender boundaries and social peer groups.

## PATHOLOGY

In the subsequent photographic series Closed Contact (1995-96) Saville depicts the violence and anesthetised pain of transformation through cosmetic surgeries. Saville also explored medical pathologies: viewing dead bodies in the morgue; examining animals made into slabs of meat. Her own

encounter with pregnancy led to an interest in mothers and their children depicted chaotically in a series entitled The Mothers (2011).

## OUT OF THE NORM

Saville focuses compassionately on individuals whose bodies don't fit into perceptions of gender, raising questions about society's approach to the body and its potential for change. The contrast between image and internal worlds is explored in Hyphen, an artwork that portrays Jenny Saville and her sister as wearing social scars, challenging societal beauty standards and turning humans inside out, so that they wear their experiences on the outside. The National Portrait Gallery show is broadly chronological, spanning charcoal drawings to large-scale oil paintings. It offers a comprehensive guide to Saville's exploration of the human form and its challenge to conventional and historical notions of beauty.

## A VOTE FOR BODY POSITIVITY

What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat is a 2020 book by American writer, podcaster and activist Aubrey Gordon. Gordon, who describes herself as "very fat" was working as an LGBTQ community organiser in Portland, Oregon when she began to post articles online under the name Your Fat Friend. Over a five-year period Gordon gained so many followers that a publishing company asked her to write a book. Gordon critiques the systemic and cultural bias against fat people and highlights how anti-fatness controls many lives. She accuses the diet and wellness industry of encouraging people to get stuck in unhealthy obsessions, triggering eating disorders. Being fat, Gordon says, is not a personal failing but a result of societal structures and attitudes. Gordon was the topic of a British documentary called Your Fat Friend (2023) directed by Jeanie Finlay.  
Until 7 September 2025 [www.npg.org.uk](http://www.npg.org.uk)

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# Glossary

- **flab** = ciccetta
- **slabs of meat** = pezzi di carne
- **to get stuck** = bloccarsi
- **depictions** = ritratti
- **Hyphen** = trattino
- **bias** = parzialità
- **scarred** = con cicatrici
- **out of sync** = fuori dagli schemi, non conforme
- **cosmetic surgeon** = chirurgo estetico
- **peer** = pari
- **failing** = fallimento
- **Propped** = puntellare
- **to counter** = contrastare
- **broadly** = generalmente
- **triggering** = provocare
- **inside out** = capovolgere
- **flabby** = flaccido, molle
- **term** = semestre
- **loose** = approssimativo, non strutturato
- **to push at the boundaries** = forzare i limiti
- **ever more** = sempre più
- **mounts** = aumentare
- **rose to fame** = raggiungere la fama
- **championed** = sostenere, promuovere
- **fruitless** = infruttifero
- **fleshy** = carnoso, corpulento
- **sought** = cercare
- **charcoal** = carboncino
- **flawed** = imperfetto, con difetti
- **spanning** = abbracciare, coprire