

# SAVILLE



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## The Landscape of the Body: Ballard, Bacon, and Saville

John Gray

“The human organism is an atrocity exhibition at which he is an unwilling spectator.” With some qualifications, the words with which a character in one of J. G. Ballard’s novels describes the central protagonist could apply to a viewer of Jenny Saville’s work. The caveats are crucial: the viewer is not a spectator and is not unwilling. Saville’s paintings do not allow a disinterested glance. Once you look, you’re hooked. At the same time they do not force themselves on the viewer. They draw out something that is repressed or obscure in the viewer’s experience and bring it to light.

Saville’s work resembles Ballard’s in a number of ways. He has said he wanted to be a painter and it is true that he is a highly pictorial writer. His books can be seen as galleries of images—empty swimming pools, abandoned hotels, low-flying aircraft, deserted cities reclaimed by jungle. These images recur again and again and they are part of a project that is pursued throughout his writings. All Ballard’s work is a war against memory, but the intent is not to forget. It is to turn the debris of personal time—such as memories of his childhood in Shanghai—into images that are impersonal and emptied of time. The aim is to short-circuit the normal mechanisms of perception, and the dissolution of the personality that results from this process is imagined as a kind of freedom.

In *The Atrocity Exhibition* (first published in 1970, reissued in 1990 with marginal annotations by Ballard) this process can be seen at work in what may be its most extreme form. Unusually for Ballard, the imagery is often of the human body, but it is of the body turned into technology or landscape. The curves of a woman’s thighs are seen as sand dunes, while a human face is perceived as a geometrical construction. Even more disquietingly, the book’s central protagonist surrounds himself with images of atrocity and horror—torture and execution scenes from Vietnam as well as images of car crashes and their victims. His aim is not to mount a moral protest against inhumanity, or even to record the senseless ways in which human lives come to an end. It is more personal. He aims for a derangement not only of the senses but also of the emotions, and the depersonalization of the body is an integral part of this project. When the socialized self is experienced as a limitation the human body is prized not for what it discloses of personality but for the promise it offers of leaving personality behind. As I see it, Jenny Saville’s work expresses a parallel project of reclaiming the body from personality. There are divergences, some of them coming from the different media through which these projects are pursued—Saville is a painter, Ballard a writer. Ballard’s images are rendered into words and appear as episodes in narratives, while Saville’s work presents images without words or narrative. The images that fill Ballard’s books are of nonhuman things while the focus of Saville’s work is on human figures.

In *Suspension*—one of her most violent and painful paintings—the body that is in question is that of a different animal and still it recalls the flesh of humans. The result is not to humanize alien flesh but to enable human flesh to be seen as alien.

In a similar way, Ballard writes of the human body in order to remind us of its inhumanity. He began as a medical student and for him the human organism always has a reality that the person lacks. Certainly his characters use the body as a site on which to project their obsessions and fantasies. However, these projections point to an imagined escape from the constraints of personal identity. Even when the body is used as an instrument of personal liberation it is freedom from personality that is the goal.

Jenny Saville has spent a good deal of time with people involved in cosmetic surgery and sex-change operations and this is reflected in her paintings. From one angle, her portraits of people in various phases of surgical reconstruction can be seen as showing them engaged in a project of self-realization that is the opposite of the loss of self sought by Ballard's characters. People try to reshape their bodies because they resist the shapes their bodies have been given. Unlike Ballard's characters—who seek to erase the marks of personality from the flesh—they aim to embody their personalities more fully. In doing so, they enact a fantasy that much of Saville's work seems to me to be directed against—the fantasy that humans can be authors of their lives.

Viewed in this way, Saville's paintings of people involved in surgical self-reconstruction portray an experience similar to that which is rendered in her paintings of trauma victims. In *Still*, the wounds that seem to have been produced on the operating table may not be different in kind from those of an accidental death. In both, the human body has been subjected to an incomprehensible assault. True, in the case of cosmetic surgery the wounds are self-inflicted, but their causes are not for that reason any better understood. The source of the impulse to remodel one's body may be as obscure as the random events that lead to crash injuries. In both, humans are the sport of chance and no special significance can be discerned in their suffering. Like Ballard's writings, Saville's paintings can be seen as an attempt to explore the possibilities of a situation in which the absence of meaning is taken as given.

In different ways, Saville and Ballard are much concerned with violence and aim to show how violence that is suppressed in our humanist self-image returns to govern us. If Ballard's *Atrocity Exhibition* retains a powerful capacity to disturb, it is because the media landscape he describes his central character as constructing for himself

has become the environment in which we all now live. Ballard's book was fiercely attacked, and in America it was actually pulped because it suggests that images of atrocity have a role in maintaining psychological health: in present conditions sanity requires repeated doses of psychopathology and these are provided by media images of pain and death. If the suggestion is still shocking it is because it has proved so prescient—and because the psychopathology that is now on display is so transparent. The images that came out of Abu Ghraib showed torturers at play. The abuse of prisoners seems to be practiced as a mode of recreation—a penal extension of the porn industry. It is difficult to tell whether the agony and death suffered by the victims is seen as irrelevant, or adds to the excitement of the abusers. The revelation that the images afforded is horrifying. Indeed it may be too horrific to be tolerable and it is noticeable that the images have faded from the media. Even as doses of psychopathology they appear to be too toxic. They destroy the picture we have of ourselves as possibly misguided but essentially benign creatures and in doing so they plant a question mark over everything we imagine we believe.

The effect of Saville's work is to break up and tear apart our self-image. Alongside the meanings in terms of which we habitually understand our lives there is another region of experience, at once terrifying and somehow enticing, where no trace of meaning can be found and it is in this forbidden territory that she works. In her unswerving attention to this other side of human experience she resembles Francis Bacon, and she has acknowledged his influence. Yet in some ways Saville's work is more unblinking than Bacon's, and it seems to me that she has initiated an art that differs in kind from the type he practiced.

Though he seems to have been a lifelong atheist, Bacon belongs in a recognizable tradition of religious art. His early work was much influenced by the Australian painter Roy de Maistre, whom Bacon met and exhibited with in London in 1930. Roy de Maistre was a Roman Catholic who subscribed to the doctrine of original sin in the uncompromising form in which it had been stated by Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821). In fact Roy de Maistre was an invented name—the painter was born LeRoi Leviston de Mestre—that he appears to have adopted specifically in order to exhibit an affinity with the great reactionary thinker. For Joseph de Maistre, humanity was a “monstrous centaur” of which he wrote:

“He does not know what he wants; he wants what he does not want; he does not want what he wants; he wants to want; he sees within himself something which is not himself, and which is stronger than himself.”

In de Maistre's view no conception of human life could



be more shallow or more ridiculous than the secular humanism that had come to be shape, thought, and feeling in Europe with the Enlightenment. This humanist faith is false in every respect, but above all in its view of humanity, which it sees as lost in error, but essentially good. The truth of the matter is otherwise:

“Over all the numerous races of animals man is placed, and his destructive hand spares nothing that lives. He kills to obtain food and he kills to clothe himself; he kills in order to adorn himself; he kills in order to attack and in order to defend himself; he kills to instruct himself and he kills to amuse himself; he kills to kill.”

This view of humankind led Joseph de Maistre to write a celebrated eulogy of the figure on whom, he believed, all order in society rests: the Executioner. Describing the executioner at work, de Maistre writes:

“A poisoner, a parricide, a man who has committed sacrilege is tossed to him: he seizes him, stretches him, ties him to a horizontal cross, he raises his arm; there is a horrible silence; there is no sound but that of bones cracking under the bars, and the shrieks of the victim. He unties him. He puts him on the wheel; the shattered limbs are entangled in the spokes; the head hangs down; the hair stands up, and the mouth gaping open like a furnace from time to time emits only a few bloodstained words to be for death.”

The picture of “the terror and the bond of human association” that is given here seems to have been familiar to Roy de Maistre and to have appealed to Francis Bacon. A version of it can be discerned in the paintings in which Bacon renders his own personal associations and it runs throughout his work. As this vision presented itself to Joseph de Maistre it was bound up with a belief in the possibility of salvation and the same is true of Roy de Maistre. Seeing humanity—including themselves—as corrupt and flawed, they looked to a power outside the human world for redemption. For them a realistic vision of the human animal led inescapably to religion.

Francis Bacon had no faith in any such salvation, and yet the view of humanity that is expressed in his paintings is shaped by the same religious sensibility that moved Joseph and Roy de Maistre. Strange as it may sound, it is a sense of sin—without any corresponding idea of redemption—that pervades Bacon’s work. The emotion by which the viewer is confronted in his paintings is one of frenzy mingled with despair. The world is seen as a scene of unending violence, as in Joseph de Maistre, but the violence of history conceals no providential message. It is without meaning and it is from a revulsion against the lack of meaning that Bacon’s

work derives its energy. Bacon’s paintings could only have been produced in a time when Christianity was no longer a living force in art but persisted nevertheless as a demand for meaning. It is precisely because of this formative Christian inheritance that Bacon must finally be seen as a humanist artist. When we look at his work today we are seeing our past.

If I am not mistaken Saville’s work is an attempt to break with this inheritance. The gaze she fastens on her subjects is cooler than Bacon’s but not less impassioned. As with Bacon, technique serves an ulterior purpose, but there is no humanist nostalgia for meaning here. Saville has made her home territory the region of experience in which meaning is absent and it is this more than anything else that separates her work from Bacon’s. There are no crucifixions and the human bodies that are shown are not meant as illustrations of suffering. They point to areas of sensation that ordinary experience struggles to close off, but which can never be wholly banished.

From the standpoint of that earlier tradition of which Bacon may have been the last great exponent, an art that erodes the human self-image may seem an expression of nihilism. Yet in eroding the picture we have crafted of ourselves it is an art that serves an interest in truth. The struggle is to see more clearly, and the dismantling of defense mechanisms is a necessary stage in the shift of perception. The corrosion of meaning enables a zone of human experience that is not exclusively human to be accessed. Saville’s paintings of the human body allow the viewer to look out of the human world. What these post-humanist icons show must remain in doubt. They concern a zone for which there is no ready-made language—Bacon’s remark that if one can talk about something there is no reason to paint it is apt here—and they are highly resistant to interpretation. Saville’s work ventures into the most forbidding zone of human experience but for that reason it cannot be seen as finally nihilistic. In exploring this seemingly barren but actually highly fertile region, Jenny Saville is exploring what it means to be human today.

# Migrants

Linda Nochlin

The work in Jenny Saville's *Migrants*, reveals her to be the most interesting and exciting painter of our times. I do not say this lightly. The works are not just exciting but disturbing, hugely upsetting. Part of their formidable power derives from their scale and the ambiguous nature of their subject matter, certainly; but what makes them even more disturbing is the ambiguous nature of the formal language these works deploy, a language that inscribes a conflict at once visceral and intellectual between the assertive pictorial naturalism of the subject matter and the openly painterly, at times almost abstract, energy of the brushwork. It is as though a Sargent had mated with a De Kooning before our eyes, and the coupling was more of a violent struggle than a love match.

Saville's work is post post-painterly: painting reinventing itself in the whirlpool of the present, painterliness pushed so far that it signifies a kind of disease of the pictorial, a symptom of deeper disturbances lurking beneath the visible relation of paint to canvas. For although surface and grid both play an important role in Saville's pictorial invention, they are paradoxically melted down and at the same time sharpened up by the virtuoso yet oddly apotropaic brushwork that marks her style.

Saville's vision is not controlled by that pictorial past she so often and so knowingly engages with. This is a return to painting mediated by the photograph. Saville herself has said that she dislikes painting from life and prefers photographic models. All of her monumental subjects are based on photographic precedent, but not in any simple way. She collects illustrations from pathology textbooks, full-color photographs of horrific burns, bruises and injuries, as well as books of reproductions of the work of Velasquez, Sargent and De Kooning. The beautiful, the grotesque, high art and pages from the website: Vaginoplasty/Transexual Women's Resources, the imagery of pain and deformity and that of its substantive recuperation in the brushwork of Titian or Rubens, are co-mingled, scattered across her studio floor, piled helter-skelter on chairs and tables.

If Territories was involved with gender issues and often depended on her own body as model, the current exhibition, *Migrants*, indeed migrates, in the most literal sense, to a more diverse imagery, that imagery of trauma and violence so characteristic of the visual diet provided by our news media at present. 9/11 made an impact on Saville's visual imagination: even more than in her previous work, her new paintings are replete with evidences of death, trauma, disease, deformity and bodily horror.

In *Suspension*, for example, she turns to the animal world for an instance of death and martyrdom as poignant and punchy as that of any saint in a Baroque altarpiece: porcine but

human, all too human. The giant canvas hits the eye in an explosion of bold red paint, belly first, the little nipples emerging from the skin, sometimes shaded in blue, like tiny volcanoes. The image, a dead baby pig from her brother's farm, is positioned so that it almost completely fills the space of the canvas: only its torso and trotters are presented to the viewer, not the head, which makes its animal status a little more ambiguous. One trotter is tied back, but the other, with incredible pathos, reaches out toward us like a pleading hand, suggesting a kind of animal pietà, a potent image of hopeless victimization. The paint is skillfully layered on in thin glazes, and at the time I saw the work in process in Saville's studio, she had created textural effects on the surface of the painting with burn bandages, a pictorial ploy which at once suggested fatal injury and at the same time, related the squares of red paint incised by the cloth to the shape of the canvas itself. The colors and textures of *Suspension* are reminders of the painterly ebullience of, say, a cardinal's robe in a sixteenth or seventeenth century ecclesiastical portrait and of more recent photographic images of the scarlet, painfully bloated torsos of burn victims that Saville has, in abundance, in her studio.

The most complex of all Saville's paintings is the ambitious *Reflective Flesh*. Here, through the magic of mirrors and multiplying of photographic images, the artist has created a nude that is at once aggressively sexual and physical, yet at the same time, unabashedly abstract. With its legs painfully splayed apart, the breasts and the gaping cunt front and center, the head veiled in shadow, the great nude creates a powerful emotional and pictorial presence. Nowhere does the agony of paint as volumetric representation in space struggling against the temptation of paint as pure form on the surface—always an issue in Saville's work—play itself out more overtly. The multiple reflections both add to the sexual impact, yet at the same time, fracture it, spread it out, splinter the initial sensual shock into multiple shards of visual experience. It is Cézanne's bathers one thinks of in the presence of this image, not pornography.

Jenny Saville has indeed returned painting to its origins at the same time that she has made it new. In *Migrants*, the artist moves courageously into unexplored territory, armed with the unexpected. Out of the recalcitrant raw material of the burn books, the unbearable medical photos of damaged bodies horribly garlanded with tubes and wires, out of the candid snaps of murdered corpses and traumatized heads, Saville has constructed new and provocative oppositions between a re-focused tradition and untrammelled invention, offering a feast for the eyes and a stimulating jolt to the mind. Above all, she has recreated painting in the image of our own ominous and irrational times, and that in itself is no small achievement.

*Excerpt from Migrants, published by Gagosian Gallery, 2003*







