

‘Choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests and construct a 2500-word essay critically assess and consider primary themes, key writers and relevant practitioners’.

Student Name: Emily Eeles

Student Number: 1802010

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Tutor: Alex Duncan

‘Art, like speech, is a means of communication’ (Tolstoy, 1896), language differing from artist to artist. Imagery, symbolism and context are potentially vehicles for conceptual depth. This essay will critically analyse such factors to decipher themes and ideas in the works of artists relating to my practice and interests. In reassessing my practice, I’ve found inspiration in utilising the life room which has stimulated an interest in human figuration. Jenny Saville is a contemporary artist belonging to the Young British Artists movement who deals heavily with the representation of the female figure. She challenges the conventions of traditional figurative painting, contradicting and reshaping them to construct a more contemporary and telling take on the nude tradition. In addition, I will be exploring the work of Damien Hirst as his morbid style has had great influence on my subject matter.

The nude; in fine art, historically embodied ideals of male and female beauty as seen in Greco-Roman Sculpture and later European oil painting (Rosemary Barrow, 2018). Unblemished, toned and mathematically symmetrical and proportionate bodies of both the male and female form saturated the genre yet they were perceived differently. The depiction of the male anatomy in such works was a celebration of male physicality and athletic prowess, revered for technical composition. However, ‘the female nude is a matter of containing sexuality’ (Nead, 1990). Such differences imply that the depiction of the female nude is synonymous with eroticism and embedded with the ‘male gaze’. This term; originally conceptualised in relation to cinema, examines ‘woman as image’ and ‘man as bearer of the look’. Under this theory, the woman serves as ‘erotic spectacle’ for the male observer. (Mulvey, 1975). She is defined by the desire of the spectator, she feeds the appetite of strangers through the lens of the camera or in many cases also, the brush of the artist. Arguably this is evident in that of De Kooning and Picasso. The image of nudity perhaps connotes freedom and purity as ‘to be naked is to be oneself’ yet as proposed by John Berger: ‘to be nude is to be seen naked but not recognised as oneself’ (Ways of Seeing, 1972). With the addition of a spectator, the subject becomes object, displayed and dictated to their liking. This implies there is something innately dehumanising about the nude.



Berger's perspective, while informative, isn't based on personal experience. In an effort to greater understand the role of the life model, I conducted primary research in the form of an interview. I approached a female life model with no particular question rather an invitation to discuss her experience and relationship with the gaze of the artist.

In response she states: 'I reclaim my body in the summer. I don't feel objectified as such but I do feel that something happens to my sense of self by making myself so openly nude for all the world to look at and draw and paint. When I'm modelling, I'm almost leaving my body. I become invisible. There is a kind of split that goes on between my experience of my earthly body and this other place I go to in my head. This place could be interpreted as a form of protection. If I'm not attached to my own body, then the gaze of the person who might be objectifying me; I'm buffering myself from the possibility that they could use the image of my body in a sexually gratifying way. I have to put up a protection zone without knowing it. My aim is to create a relationship with the artist. Humour is a strong thing because if someone is laughing with you, its harder for them to see you as a pair of tits'.

This research reinforces the notion that an element of objectification is innate in the practice of depicting the nude from life yet this objectification isn't always sexual. The idea of 'reclamation' is indicative of lending ownership of the body to the artist almost. The life room is the stage of transaction.

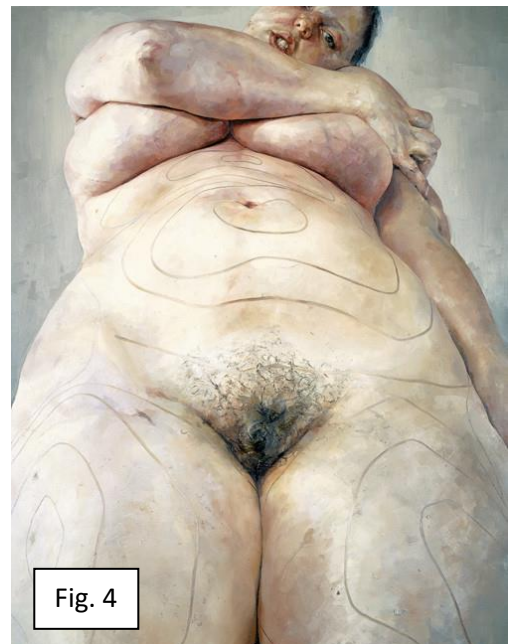
Saville confronts this tradition in Western art that purposed women as an 'object of the gaze' (Johnson, 1997). The artist doesn't pander to any spectator; combining realism and abstraction to portray unidealised figures of all races, genders and sizes. Saville deconstructs social and cultural constraints, all elevated notions of modern humanity, all romanticism and scrutinises the figure for its raw, bestial nature. Part of Saville's practice is a fascination with flesh which she renders in a pictorial yet stylised manner. The flesh is sculpted with an emphasis on weight and physical presence. In terms of composition, the brushstrokes are visible and thick with impasto. This aggressive rendering differs from the smooth skin tones and delicate brushwork evident in most traditional nudes. The surface of the flesh carries a



Fig. 2

rich spectrum of colour that is realistically evocative of the blood and veins it envelops. Saville's technique arguably creates a paradoxically hyper-realistic yet unnatural look. Consequently, some pieces have a palpably dark tone.

The depiction of obese women is at the forefront of Saville's work as if to completely contradict western ideas of beauty. Inspired partly by her observations in American shopping malls and childhood fascination but perhaps also referential of the plumper female figures that were abundant in Renaissance pieces (Michelle Perrot, 1993). For example: Peter Paul Rubens' *The Three Graces* and *The Entry of Marie de Medici in Marseilles*. Saville makes 'imperfections' the focal point of her work as if to provoke the spectator, an effect exacerbated by the sheer scale of the works also. Her once 'Anti-beauty' status prompted an emphasis on areas socially deemed unsightly (Alina Cohen, 2018). The piece *Plan* is a response to what she coins the 'cult of exercise' (Saville, 1994) In this self-portrait, she is mapped with lines laid out in preparation for a liposuction procedure. She depicts the arresting fear of excess that is faced in an age of photoshop. Blemished skin with ridges and folds of fatty tissue are skilfully rendered in oil paint and perspectives are manipulated to warp the figure. Saville utilises the proposed 'Aesthetics of Disgust' (Meagher, 2009) to elicit a visceral response from the viewer. She 'overwhelms the spectator' with images of distorted proportions and grotesque exaggeration upon the canvas of a fleshy, mottled and voluminous form that transcends the picture plane. In doing so, fixed body boundaries shaped by centuries of male dictation are threatened (Meskimmon, 1996). Saville's paintings embody societal disgust and taboo as if to interrogate it. What is it that informs our disgust? Expectation perhaps; and its contradiction.



From youth we are bombarded with images that shape our society and culture. Such images inform our every movement and define intangible concepts that language cannot. One such example being notions of beauty. Berger proposes that 'women watch themselves being looked at' (Berger, 1972), she sees herself in relation to men. She is hyperaware of how she is perceived and projects an image that aligns with that she was taught. Saville's figures lack this inward gaze that is evident in much of the nude genre. The representation of the female form in art has been regulated to conform to the movement of historic masters. This is made evident by Marcel Duchamp's cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase (No.2)*, which was rejected by curators on the basis that 'a nude never descends the stairs' 'a nude reclines' (Godfrey, 1998). Passivity was almost criteria. The figure is posed to appear compliant with a certain calculated charm, an open posture and a gaze that beckons the spectator. She is designed to be as if awaiting male intervention, her existence defined by just that. Saville's subjects however appear to act organically and as if no one is watching, their portrayal isn't voyeuristic. Since Saville often paints herself, there is no barricade between artist and subject and subsequently no façade and no outside gaze.

The piece *Mirror* is a direct critique of such customs.

The gestural charcoal drawing is a merging of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, Manet's *Olympia* and the artists own figure and face. The bodies are chaotically entwined: a poetic confusion of heads, limbs and torsos with echoes of their previous erased renderings. Such layers are evocative of movement, trace and time which is seemingly referential to these historical paintings. The layers allow 'simultaneous realities to exist in the same image' (theartstory.org, n.d.) and allow the past and contemporary 'reclining nude' to exist in the same



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

space. The historical works are overlapped and obscured by the modern woman which could be interpreted as a disregard for past definitions of femininity. Arguably, Saville's presence (a common motif in her body of work) is confrontational, her status giving power

to such a notion. Her gaze is direct rather than beckoning and the posture of the tangled bodies is open yet dominant, not soft and delicate like that of the women she obscures.



Fig. 7

Mothers is also referential to art history in its portrayal of a contemporary *Madonna and Child* from the Renaissance tradition. Saville recreates the archetypal scene but with a realism not represented in these pieces. Such artworks were known as ‘icons’ (loyolapress.com, n.d.) and often present the unattainable. Perhaps our present day ‘icons’ are found on the likes of social media as there is parallels in this notion of unrealistic ‘perfection’ and the censorship of reality. The image of the virginal mother is alongside her still and compliant children isn’t representative of the maternal experience. Saville utilises the spectator’s knowledge of an existing powerful image to retell a narrative. She distances herself from the ‘cutesy and bubbly’ baroque style instead depicting the ‘animalistic’ nature of infants (Saville, n.d.). Not yet influenced by societal expectation. The piece as a whole is an intimate, energetic, chaotic and raw glimpse into motherhood.



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Thanks partly to Jenny Saville, the 'female nude is no longer the currency of conversations between men' (Kent, 1994) as it is repurposed by her intervention. The dynamic is altered when both artist and muse are female, in this case the potential element of sexuality is eliminated. Influence is drawn from history and retold with a contemporary brush. Saville captures intimate tales of self-image, self-realisation, reality and the enactment of fantasy. She paints bodies of activity and emotion which magnify the human experience rather than hollow idealisations. In doing so, the spectator is given an insight into the classified by unmasking taboos, exhibiting otherness and portraying them in the most provocative manner. She considers human visceral responses to command a certain response and attention from the spectator. Ultimately however, Saville is 'quintessentially figurative' (National Galleries of Scotland, 2018) and driven more by a fascination with flesh and human extremities than the conceptual possibilities that come with it.

Saville's rise to acclaim was propelled by her presence in Charles Saatchi's iconic yet infamous show *Sensation*. *Sensation* compiled works by Young British Artists (YBA) that are alike in their radical nature and 'violated' traditional art practice (Desmond, 2011).

Alongside Saville, was artist Damien Hirst. Hirst's work is very much in keeping with the show's title, it is inescapable in its ability to connect with visceral human responses like fascination and disgust. 'The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' (Barthes, 1967) as such responses essentially finalise and determine the effectiveness of pieces in the public eye. Hirst seems to feed off the provocation of the spectator, he is almost antagonising in his approach. Much of Hirst's pieces concern death-related themes in both a literal and conceptual sense. A contemporary take on *Memento Mori* perhaps.

The physicality of death is Hirst's most iconic subject matter and medium. Known best for his 'ingenious conflation of the Duchampian readymade and memento mori' in the form of animal carcasses preserved in formaldehyde (Godfrey, 1998). *Memento Mori* (Latin for 'remember you must die') defined an 18th century cultural and art movement provides context on which Hirst's work sits. With the blossoming of modern science and outbreaks of disease came a new understanding of life and death and a morbid curiosity which inspired its exploration. *Memento Mori* examines mortality in a context void of religion and aims not to conjure fear but instead reflection and optimism. *Vanitas* are symbols associated with the

works and were a means of conveying themes of decay and messages of morality. Common Vanitas symbols include skulls; which incorporate themes of death, rotten fruit; symbolic of gluttony, age and decay as well as images of time to reflect the brevity of life. Hirst is undoubtedly influenced by this movement where mortality is examined clinically.

Hirst's 'pickled specimens' (Archer, 1997) appropriate wild animals into the clinical gallery space. In doing so, they are re-contextualised which provokes interpretation. Aesthetically, the pieces confuse the borders between repulsion and allure, conveying the biological beauty found in the grotesque. The most influential of which: a 14-foot tiger shark submerged in formaldehyde titled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*.

Through the safety granted by lens of the vitrine, the spectator can engage with a symbol that epitomises death and human vulnerability. In its interactive nature, there is a certain sublime



sensation evoked by engaging with an animal that communicates with our most primeval of instincts. In a natural context, without the protective barricade of media, one wouldn't experience such proximity without danger. One could argue, the piece attempts to embody the human existential condition by acting as mediator between the physical world and the intangible state beyond it. Looking death in the eye is the closest we can come to comprehending it.

Arguably the most interesting element of Hirst isn't his artwork but his brand. He produces highly commodifiable art arguably deeming it superficial and empty. Interestingly however, the work embodies the lunacy of art's current condition. Hirst is seemingly self-aware and conscious of his critics. He manufactures outrage, 'His medium is the tabloid press, and the auction market, and his collectors' (Gopnik, 2012). He is subject to endless criticisms but nevertheless, his work is easily accessible to the masses in that it is universally visually stimulating. He possesses a certain audacity that has allowed him to transcend into celebrity status.

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Figure List

Figure 1. Available at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_sculpture#/media/File:Belvedere_Apollo_Pio-Clementino_Inv1015.jpg

Figure 2. Available at:

<https://blog.artsper.com/en/a-closer-look/10-things-know-jenny-saville/>

Figure 3. Available at:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Three_Graces_\(Rubens\)#/media/File:The_Three_Graces,_by_Peter_Paul_Rubens,_from_Prado_in_Google_Earth.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Three_Graces_(Rubens)#/media/File:The_Three_Graces,_by_Peter_Paul_Rubens,_from_Prado_in_Google_Earth.jpg)

Figure 4. Available at:

<https://curiator.com/art/jenny-saville/plan>

Figure 5. Available at:

[https://www.manet.org/olympia.jsp#prettyPhoto\[image1\]/0/](https://www.manet.org/olympia.jsp#prettyPhoto[image1]/0/)

Figure 6. Available at:

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Figure 7. Available at:

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Figure 8. Available at:

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Figure 9. Available at:

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Figure 10. Available at:

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