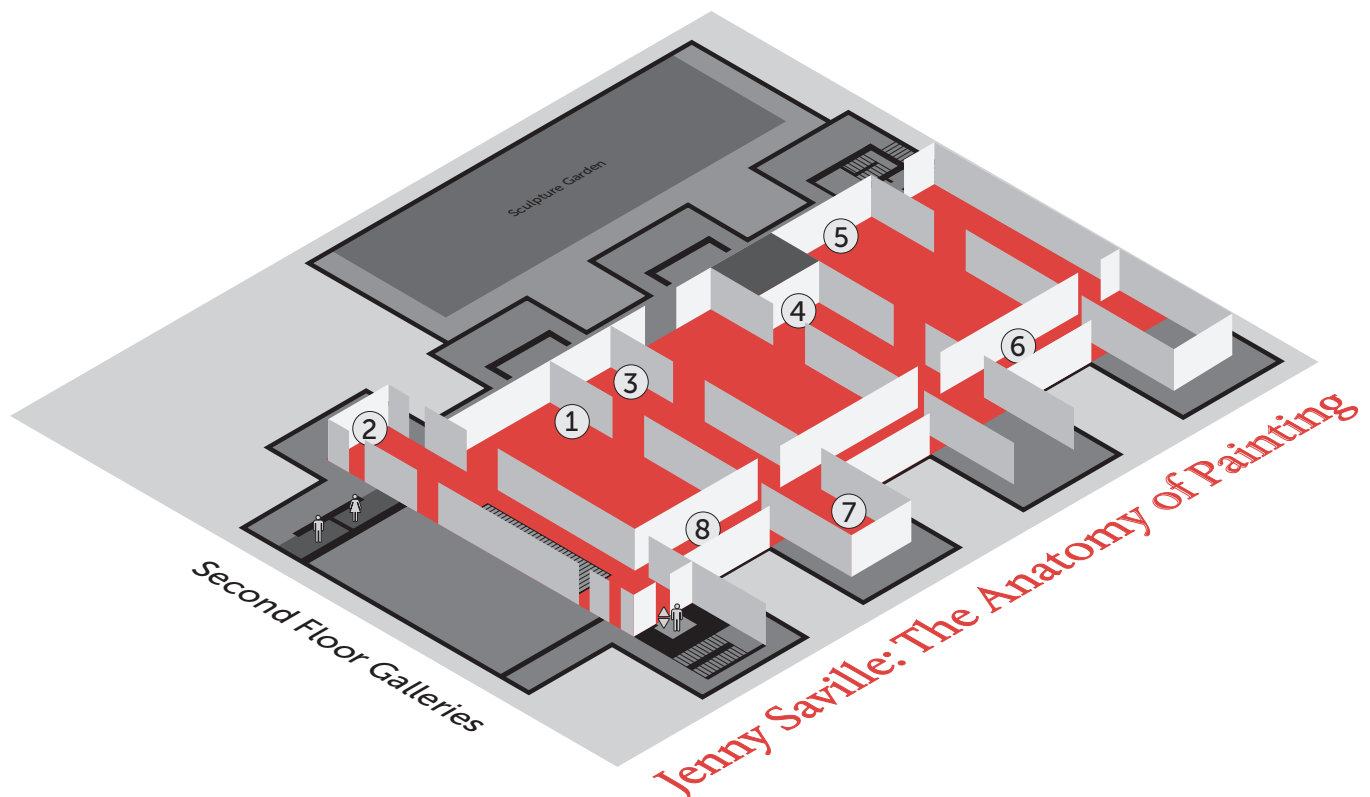


# Jenny Saville

## The Anatomy of Painting

Organized by the National Portrait Gallery, London



### 1. Introduction/*Propped*

ANDREA KARNES: Welcome to *Jenny Saville: The Anatomy of Painting*. I'm Andrea Karnes, Chief Curator at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

This exhibition was organized by the National Portrait Gallery in London and their Senior Curator of Contemporary Collections, Sarah Howgate. When it opened in London, *The Anatomy of Painting* was the first major exhibition in the United Kingdom dedicated to the work of one of the world's foremost contemporary painters, and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth is the only US venue. This exhibition has been made in close collaboration with Jenny Saville, whose own voice you will hear in this audio guide.

The exhibition's title is a quotation from the artist in conversation with art historian and Picasso biographer John Richardson in 2012. In the conversation, she said, "I started to think about not just the anatomy of the body, but about the anatomy of a painting."

Jenny Saville was at the forefront of reinvigorating British figurative painting in the early 1990s. Her large-scale depictions of the human form are a celebration of flesh and paint, and they allow her to work in both a figurative and abstract way. The exhibition presents the painter's enduring fascination with the landscape of the body and the anatomy of faces.

*Propped*, which was made for Saville's Glasgow School of Art degree show in 1992, opens this exhibition. The painting challenges art historical notions of female beauty and of the male gaze. It was originally hung facing a mirror in which the text carved across the painting could be read.

At Glasgow School of Art, Saville trained in the European tradition of figurative painting, from the Old Masters to 20th-century artists such as Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and Frank Auerbach, known as the School of London. Alongside these figurative influences, the works of abstract artists such as Willem de Kooning and Cy Twombly have been very important to her. At art school, she chose to work from her own body and from photography, practices she still maintains to this day.

## 2. Hyphen

JENNY SAVILLE: Figurative painting has a long tradition, and I'm interested in the craft of painting figures and portraits. In *Hyphen*, it's a portrait of myself and sister, exhibited in my first New York exhibition entitled Territories.

At that time I was interested in the body as landscape, and the exhibition included several large works I'd made, like *Fulcrum* and *Hem*. *Hyphen* works as a pivot of two heads angled around the neck with two heads nestled together, one tilted backwards and one forwards. I started with a red stain, and which still is a little bit visible on the cheek, and I used fleshy pinks in both heads to make one united whole.

Figurative painting in the 1990s was probably not as prevalent as it is currently, but it is what I enjoyed and whether it was relevant or not, that was the language that I worked in and I continue that tradition.

## 3. Reverse

JENNY SAVILLE: Painting flesh, the way light is reflected on a head or a body, the underlying structure of the body, has held a fascination for me. Every one of us has slightly different flesh and as we grow, our flesh tells a story. There's a narrative and a life within it. I enjoy making paint look like flesh, capturing the light and the moment that a human being that a human being embodies. *Reverse* is a self-portrait I painted, it's my head on the side, with a mirror reflecting the bottom eye.

There's a long tradition of painting self-portraits and portraits using mirrors, and I hope that this painting adds to the lineage. I like to paint until I find a solid structure of a head that has voluminous form, and embodies some kind of nature of itself. I work until a painting feels right, until it looks convincing and has balanced proportion and a strong armature.

## 4. Stare

JENNY SAVILLE: Usually I prefer to know the model that I work with, there's an obvious connection to them and a deeper emotion with memories of them. But I've also worked with models I've only recently met or with found images, and the *Stare* series I made is an example of a group of portraits from a found image. Sometimes you can put a lot of emotion into a painting like that, because the mystery of who they are becomes part of the painting. Who are they? What's their story? And the journey of making the painting navigates that mystery. How can I bring out the humanness even though I don't know them or their story? Could I access a type of humanity or compassion from a found image? Is it possible? And the work is a testament to that discovery.

## 5. Compass

JENNY SAVILLE: Old Master paintings have always interested me. I like the work of Titian, Caravaggio, Velázquez, Rembrandt, Degas, and feel connected to that work. It's not a contradiction to like that type of painting and a painter like de Kooning or Bacon or Frankenthaler or Basquiat. They all have a connection to the art of the past, but have managed to offer something new and convincing with their craft.

I like looking at all types of painting. It's a long lineage. In *Compass*, I worked with a couple and built their bodies in pastel until an interconnected shape of bodily forms became convincing. Creating groups of intertwined figures is one of my favourite ways to work, and I've done this periodically over the last few decades. To build a convincing mass of particular bodies that I hope speaks to our shared humanity.

## 6. Stanza

JENNY SAVILLE: I made a group of portraits that started during the Covid lockdown that were quite specific to that period in time. We were all living, working, and educating ourselves on screens, and I made *Virtual*, *Cascade*, and *Stanza* in Covid lockdown and the period following, in response to the conditions we were all living through as a human community. They are some of my most experimental pictures in terms of traditional portraiture.

I like looking at all types of painting and have never found it a contradicting situation at all to like abstraction and figurative painting. I'm a painterly painter and tend to look more at painters who make paint come alive on a surface, whether that's an Old Master painter like Titian or Velázquez, or Soutine, Degas, Monet, de Kooning, Twombly. Painting is a language every mark and colour emits emotion. Usually the paintings. I like, the painters I like have good technique, but are prepared to be daring.

## 7. Rosetta II

JENNY SAVILLE: *Rosetta II* is a large scale portrait on paper mounted on board. She has a grisaille base underneath to set a warm tonal structure and then I built the flesh on top so small, warm areas can still be seen through the fleshier paint like on one of the ears and on the inside of the nose.

Over the years I've approached portraiture and figure painting in various ways, starting with stained canvas and drawing up the figure, tinting the ground to a mid-tone and building form from there in thicker paint, or even starting from abstract passages, and find suggestive ways to build the forms and figures and portraits. 99% of what I do is with the canvas upright and building sculptural form involves a necessarily rational approach, but occasionally and most often at the beginning, I put the canvas horizontally to create stained tones of light or dynamic sweeps of paint for backgrounds that create movement and gravity.

## 8. Chasah

JENNY SAVILLE: Painting people has always fascinated me. I like to bring out the humanity of the sitter, especially through the particularity of the eyes, the mouth and the teeth. What makes them, them? Every model I've painted has a particular anatomy. There's a common structure that we all share, but there's also something that each model has. Whether it's a larger structure of their eye, the bridge of their nose, what makes them, them? Working on such a large scale inevitably brings technical issues about creating the convincing scale without losing a sense of them.

After the advent of photography, portraiture had to develop itself as the photograph took much of the ground of traditional portraiture. But painting someone is very different from a photograph of them. You access a different level of emotion from the model and what painting does as a medium.

I'm a painter who paints figures and portraits, and that's always been the way I work. But equally should always stay open to the possibilities of ways to develop yourself as a painter.