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// Brittany Lockard

WHO ARE YOU CALLING FAT? EATING DISORDERED THINKING IN JENNY SAVILLE'S *PLAN* AND *PROPPED*

TROUBLED AND TROUBLING FEMINIST READINGS OF SAVILLE

As a young artist, Jenny Saville achieved near-immediate success with her large-scale female nudes, in part due to the openly feminist intentions Saville claimed for her otherwise traditional subject matter. Many articles and essays that deal with Saville address those intentions and read her images as problematizing cultural expectations of femininity but also as uncomplicated celebrations of the fat body. However, the overwhelming fat-hatred that saturates Western culture affects the English language, so that words used to describe the fat body have taken on pejorative connotations. As such, when writing about Saville's paintings, authors often end up rendering the fat body as other in their attempts to describe it. This happens even to authors who usually apply language rigorously, like Linda Nochlin, who describes Saville's nudes as "excess[ive]," "gargantuan," "gigantesque," "huge," and "gross flesh," all in the course of a single article (Nochlin 2000: 94–97). While it can be argued that not all of these terms are pejorative, certainly the term 'excessive' implies that the fat body transgresses appropriate boundaries, and 'gross flesh' reduces the depicted body (and by extension, the sitter's actual body) to its physicality.

Authors who aim to give fat-positive readings can also fall into societal traps and end up writing articles that do the opposite of their expressed intentions. For example, Sidonie Smith does an admirable job of opening up Saville's painting *Branded* (1992) to multiple meanings and of exploring its ambiguity. One of Smith's central points concerns the way that Saville's nude "exposes the unnaturalness of the words and meanings [like petite and delicate] carved across it" (Smith 2002: 138). Although Smith is pointing out the culturally constructed nature of our understanding of the body in this passage, she goes on to *other* the depicted body by assuming the painting's viewers (and presumably her readers) look quite different from it. That is, she assumes that the majority (if not all) of viewers will be slim. Smith notes that Saville implicates the viewer in the image, constructing it in such a way that she forces the viewer to assess her own position in relation to the depicted body. According to Smith, this sets up a dichotomy between the viewer's body and that of the sitter, such that the viewer

becomes the thin man to the (painted) fat lady. In making this argument, Smith denies a place for a viewer who is the same size as the subject of the painting, let alone larger. Smith's dichotomy falls apart if the viewer's body is anything other than a normative, or thin, body.

Unlike Nochlin and Smith, many authors, especially in the popular press, posit Saville's images as straightforward celebrations of the large female body. For instance, Jean Donald claims that Saville's paintings demonstrate that "even the art world is accepting less than perfect bodies" (Donald 1994: 11), while an article about a British fat activist and comedienne argues that Saville's "latest paintings [...] are controversial primarily because of their unorthodox celebration of female flesh" ("Dawn French" 1994: np). Although it is tempting to believe that the very act of depicting a large woman is a positive step – after all, images of large women are so rare that in order to satisfy her interest in the subject, Saville had to use medical texts and pornography to find models (Trenemen 1998: 19) – this is not necessarily true. There is no reason to assume that the mere act of representing the fat body allows an artist to disrupt cultural stereotypes; this is certainly not the case for other marginalized bodies.

The difficulty in labeling Saville's nudes as unproblematically celebratory can be seen by those critics who, even while claiming Saville's paintings as laudatory, suggest that the nudes must be unhappy with their bodies. For instance, one author believes that Saville *could* be praising the fat body, but undercuts this suggestion by announcing that the model for *Strategy* (1993–94) "doesn't share Saville's celebration of the voluptuous female: she has chosen to have liposuction treatment" ("Full body" 1994: 7). Saville herself has said, "[m]y paintings don't celebrate bigness" (Henry 1994a: 13).

While it is possible to read Saville's images in fat-positive ways, I would suggest that these mixed and conflicted interpretations of Saville's paintings reflect mixed and conflicting contemporary attitudes about the fat body. I argue that Saville's paintings demonstrate a larger, cultural vision, a kind of eating-disordered worldview, in which women constantly judge their own bodies as well as the bodies of other women. This worldview discomfits viewers and even Saville herself, which ultimately can be seen in the artist's disfiguring of her painted bodies.

PLAN, BODY IMAGE DISTURBANCE SYNDROME AND THE CONFLATION OF SIZE/SCALE

Like most of Saville's early

works, *Plan* (1993) **(fig. 1)** is physically large, measuring nine by seven feet, and depicts a female nude whose body is based on Saville's own. She paints from photographs of her own body, supplemented by photographs of life models, as well as a variety of other sources (Sylvester 1994: 18). *Plan* shows a nude female figure, viewed from the mid-thighs up, centered in the frame with her pubic hair at eye level. She tilts her head to the side and looks down to meet the viewer's gaze, with her right arm cradling her breasts. The figure itself is quite large; not only does it fill roughly three-quarters of the canvas, but it also spills beyond the boundaries of that canvas. The figure's head is partially cut off, as are the edges of her thighs. She poses in front of an ambiguous gray background that could read as anything from a wall to a floor. Many viewers also find the figure's pose ambiguous, as it is difficult to determine whether the woman in *Plan* stands or reclines. However, based on the way her body remains relatively taut and rounded, it seems likely that the figure stands upright. The figure's skin is mottled and bruised, especially in the arms and thighs, an effect heightened by Saville's use of a gray, blue, and mauve palette, and by the way that her delicate, patchy brushwork augments the color to produce the sense that the flesh is dissolving.



// Figure 1
Jenny Saville, *Plan*, 1993, Oil on canvas, 108 x 84 inches / 274.3 x 213.4cm, © Jenny Saville. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian.

The most noticeable feature of this image is a series of concentric circles and ovals on the nude's thighs and stomach. Saville actually incised the loops into the paint itself. The two most popular readings identify the circles as the marks made prior to cosmetic surgery (specifically, liposuction) or the lines on a topographical map. Clearly, Saville is aware of both these implications. She acknowledges that the original inspiration for these lines came

from a tabloid article about the surgery. However, she also said that "[the body in *Plan* is] also like a landscape in a way. The viewer visually navigates and climbs the body" (Holmes 2003: 145). Judith Batalion goes further, suggesting that the incised marks "resemble military maps for conquest, and concentric circular targets. Saville's drawn lines evoke something brutal, something aggressive" (Batalion 2004: 99). Again, the title reinforces this idea, bringing to mind expressions like 'plan of action,' and even 'plan of attack.'

Although *Plan* shows a large nude on a larger-than-life size canvas, the nude's body does not appear fat to my eyes, even when keeping in mind that such labels are culturally constructed. Her distinct waist looks small in comparison to her hips. Her belly, though slightly rounded, does not swell out toward the viewer or overhang her pubis. Her thighs touch, but also appear relatively flat, especially in relationship to her hips. The impression of fatness comes largely from the strange angle at which we view the figure, which causes dramatic foreshortening such that her head appears tiny in comparison to the mass of her thighs and torso. This distinction between the size of the canvas and the size of the depicted body is not always made clearly by the viewers of Saville's works, who have difficulty separating the size of her canvases from the figures depicted on them.

For instance, Waldemar Januszczak reads *Plan* as a self-portrait, and writes this about Saville: "Fat – what an unpleasant word [...] 'Fat' loathes what it describes. Saying the word involves the mouth in a short spit of disgust. And the hard, harsh fact of the matter is that Jenny Saville is fat. Very fat" (1994: np). Demetrio Paparoni calls *Plan*'s subject "an obese woman" (2006: 89), and Erin Witte also confuses the size of the canvas with the size of the body. She writes about *Plan*, "[some people] would argue that this figure elicits disgust because her extreme obesity is not 'healthy'" (Witte 2006: 66). Although the exaggerated foreshortening of the figure creates the potential to misread this body as fat, designating it as an example of 'extreme obesity' seems a bit far-fetched.

Alison Rowley provides a remarkable reading of *Plan*, clearly elaborating one source of this misrecognition of the size of the depicted body. Rowley regards the painting as a sort of psychic projection, showing Saville's internal belief about the (over)size of her own body, rather than reflecting the size of her actual body. In part, she derives this reading from the strained foreshortening of the body, which she convincingly argues is seen from an angle that

could only be achieved by the sitter staring into a mirror at her feet (Rowley 1996: 93–95). However, I would argue that the same angle could be achieved if the nude looked into a scale, so that the painting depicts an imaginary 'scale's eye view' of the woman. If this is the case, then the viewer, dragging her gaze up the figure's body to meet her eyes, plays the role of the scale – assessing, weighing, and ultimately judging that body.

Saville's own discussion of her work adds to the interpretation of her painting as a psychological, as much as a physical, portrait. About *Plan,* she says that "women have usually only taken the role of model. I'm both, artist and model. I'm also the viewer, so I have three roles" (Davies 1994: 21). In this scenario, Saville plays out this psychological drama for herself, as she models for the image, acts as judge and interpreter as she paints, and views the image – critiquing her own body and her painted body at the same time. Certainly Saville is frank about her own struggles with body image. She has said, "I can't escape it. I'm just as susceptible to the pressures as anyone else, and yet I don't believe in those pressures" (ibid). She speaks about deliberately intending to portray these struggles in her images. "I do hope I play out the contradictions that I feel, all the anxieties and dilemmas" (Saville 2003: 168–171).

Beyond this, *Plan* can also be read as a psychological self-portrait for female viewers. Saville often discusses the pressure to conform to idealized body norms experienced by women, including the impulse to weigh and judge one's own body: "as a female you get so used to the sensation of being looked at, you are always taught to assess yourself" (Brittain 1999: 26). And Saville certainly intended these anxieties about the fat body to be communicated by the way that the figure's body overflows boundaries and towers over the viewer, which leads many to misinterpret the body size of the painted figure. Saville said about her early works, including *Plan,* "I'm not painting disgusting, big women. I'm painting women who've been made to think they're big and disgusting, who imagine their thighs go on forever" ("Jenny Saville" 1994: np).

But the psychological tension of imagining one's body to be larger than it actually is goes beyond any one viewer of the painting. The mis-recognition of the size of one's own body (by imagining it to be larger than its actual size) is considered by the medical community to be an identifying feature of anorexia and bulimia. The clinical term for this symptom at the time Saville was painting was Body Image Distortion Syndrome (BIDS), although

it is more commonly referred to today as Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). Moreover, before eating disorders became commonplace, clinical discussions of this 'bizarre' phenomenon were often accompanied by illustrations of an anorexic woman *standing in front of a mirror* which reflected back a distorted image of her body, a trope which continues to be popular on eating disorder websites today, and contains obvious similarities to the pose of *Plan* (Bordo 1993: 55). Furthermore, as many authors have pointed out, if one attempted to diagnose eating disorders based on BIDS alone, almost every woman in England would need treatment (Fraser 1998: 281). The mis-reading of the size of the body in *Plan* as 'obese' and 'fat' by critics indicates that Saville's painting does more than merely tap into individual fears. It taps into a cultural phenomenon in which viewers not only cannot judge the size of their own bodies, but also cannot accurately judge the size of *other women's* bodies, as though BIDS has become a societal norm, rather than a clinical symptom. Or to put it another way, in a society with an increasingly narrow definition of what constitutes 'thin' and 'attractive,' any minor deviation from the body typically shown in advertisements and popular media reads as fat to most audiences.

If Saville's paintings express the difficulties of looking at the fat body, it is significant that her subject is the *female* nude. Although many men suffer daily from anti-fat prejudice, the female body bears special burdens in relation to anti-fat biases.[1)] Statistics on eating disorders and plastic surgery from the time when Saville was painting *Plan* reflect the intense pressure women felt to maintain normative body standards. At that time, between eighty and ninety percent of patients undergoing weight loss procedures were women, and between ninety and ninety-five percent of those suffering from anorexia or bulimia were women (Bordo 1993: 67). And if, as previously discussed, the inability to identify the size of one's own body correctly plagues women, the same problem occurs in men. But as the BBC series *Obesity* pointed out, unlike women, who tend to overestimate the size of their bodies, men tend to underestimate their size, resisting interpretations of their body as fat, even self-identifying as 'normal' so strongly that the label of 'obese' makes them question medical and governmental standards for the body (2006: np). Of course, the fact that men and women feel differently about their bodies is due to the West's underlying patriarchal social structures, which insist that women be sexually desirable (young, thin, etc.) in order to have social capital.

1) Extensive literature exists on this topic. See, for instance, LeBesco (2004) or Bordo (1993).

PROPPED AND PUNISHED Beyond merely expressing anxiety about or interest in the fat body, Saville's early works like *Plan* and *Propped* (1992) also work to alleviate those anxieties. *Propped* **(fig. 2)**, a seven-by-six-foot canvas, shows a large female nude, wearing only glossy white shoes, perched on an improbably small, black, prop that can be read as a pedestal, a bed post, or even an object of phallic penetration. Saville centers the nude on the canvas, and as in *Plan,* the borders of the canvas cut off her head. Her posture indicates the precariousness of her position on the prop: The figure's feet cross behind the support, and her torso hunches forward over her thighs to maintain balance. Her arms also cross, and her fingers dig into her thighs with such painful urgency that the flesh bunches around them.



// Figure 2
Jenny Saville, ***Propped***, 1992, Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches / 213.4 x 182.9cm, © Jenny Saville. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian.

Similar to the composition of *Plan,* Saville depicts the figure from below, and again she tilts her head to meet our gaze, although she lowers her eyelids to such an extent that her eyes could be read as closed. Also as in *Plan,* the figure is dramatically foreshortened, although in this case she expands toward us to the extent that her knees almost project into our space. However, Saville undermines the three-dimensionality of the image by writing *into* the paint, across the figure, setting up a tension between the illusionism of the figure and the flatness of the picture plane. The quote, which comes from French feminist Luce Irigaray, is written backwards, and states, "If we continue to speak in this sameness – speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other. Again words will pass through our bodies, above our heads [...] make us disappear" (Kent 1994: 84).

In contrast to *Plan,* this figure takes up relatively little of the canvas, approximately one-third. She perches in front of an ambiguous gray background; the post and the figure seem to be floating precariously in an amorphous space. And unlike *Plan,* the figure's body is fat, although not to the exaggerated extent that critics claim. Her thighs balloon out around her knees, and their irregular contours suggest the sagging of fat flesh. Moreover, even though her position squeezes her legs together, her knees do not meet. Her breasts also bulge around the confinement of her arms. However, her ability to achieve this posture suggests

a relatively flat stomach. Otherwise, she would have to lean much further over her thighs to achieve balance, and her breasts would be pushed up and out instead of in and down. Additionally, her collar bones are sharply delineated, where in a fatter body they would be smoothed over. And, as in *Plan*, some of the thickness of her thighs in relation to her head and torso can be attributed to the extreme foreshortening of the pose and the angle from which we view her.

Saville's choice of palette, as in *Plan*, is dominated by cool blues and grays. Saville constructs the figure's kneecaps, however, with warmer, redder tones. The redness of the kneecaps, combined with their location at eye level and the foreshortening which makes them appear to project out from the leg, also has the curious effect of making them look like nipples. This effect is heightened on the left side of the canvas, where the figure's knee echoes in form and color the nipple which peeks out from behind her arm, and also by Saville's distortion of the knee caps' size — they are disproportionately small (which also serves to make the figure's thighs look disproportionately large).

In many ways, *Propped* epitomizes the ambiguities of Saville's feminist project, as well as her own ambiguous attitude toward the fat body. Despite the injunction of the Irigaray quote that is literally inscribed in the figure's flesh, her pose on a phallic object and the sexualization of her knees seems to encourage the interpretation of the figure as a sex object, as do the shiny white shoes which draw attention to her nudity. In this case, the nude's clenched fingers, slightly parted mouth, lowered eyelids, and languid expression suggest orgasm. Although here, too, the image is complex, since seeing the fat body as an object of physical desire or as capable of sexual pleasure troubles societal expectations of that body, which insist that the fat body is undesirable and asexual. Batalion suggests that the same features that can be seen as signs of sexual fulfillment can be read as signs of self-abuse or sexual punishment: "Grabbing, groaning, and in stilettos, [the figure] seems to be smack in the act. But the penetrative engagement does not evoke a sense of pleasure. Further the figure cannot negotiate her awkward limbs and seems confused. Perhaps penetrative sex, whether masturbatory or not, is also a form of self-mutilation" (Batalion 2004: 103).

Saville obviously intended to implicate the viewer in *Propped*. In its original exhibition, the painting was shown with an equivalently sized mirror, placed seven feet opposite the painting (Nochlin 2006: 235). In order to read the writing, the viewer

had to turn and face the mirror, literally becoming part of the image. When first facing *Propped,* the backwards writing implies that, like Alice, the viewer has passed through the looking glass, into the world of the mirror. The viewer is the figure's reflection, the mirror that judges and condemns her, as in BIDS images. But when the viewer turns to read the writing in the mirror, she crosses back through the looking glass, and becomes a part of the image. The viewer is forced to evaluate and assess her own body as she does the figure's, and in turn become viscerally aware of the way that her own body is also constantly being evaluated and assessed.[2)] In combination with Irigaray's text, this would seem to suggest that it is patriarchal society that causes us to evaluate the woman's body so harshly.

Yet Saville's pictorial language seems to encourage negative readings of the figure. The smallness of the figure's perch and the extreme foreshortening of the image serve only to exaggerate the size of her body. The clenched fingers, which can be read as a sexual gesture, or an attempt to achieve balance, also suggest a punitive scoring of the flesh. This implies not only that the figure feels ashamed of her body, but that there is something amoral about it – that her fatness is a sin for which she is impelled to atone. This comparison does not escape critics like Janusczak. Although he is speaking here of *Branded,* his comments are equally applicable to *Propped*: "I was reminded of those mass-produced Christian images of saints displaying their stigmata. The unspoken but unmissable meaning of such art is: I have suffered this for you. The Christ who asks doubting Thomas to insert his finger into his spear-wound is an image designed to evoke guilt in the spectator. Saville's twist on this traditional cycle of accusation and confession is that she gets to play both accuser and confessor at once" (Januszczak 1994: np).

These inherent ambiguities come from Saville's own ambiguous relationship to the fat body. She has stated: "My work was never about empowering fat women [...]" and describes her subjects as examples of "extreme humanness" (Holmes 2003: 145). This characterization serves to *other* the fat body, making it something outside the boundaries of 'normal' humanity. This theme continues as Saville notes, "Anything against normality. I find the narrow view of normality quite boring. I like extreme humanness." (Ross 2000: 6). Saville also said, "My paintings don't celebrate bigness. More than half the population are size 16 or over. Fine. But obesity is something else. Many women are not happy with

2) For an alternative reading of the mirror in regards to psychoanalysis, l'écriture féminine, and gender, see Wallace (2004).

their size. Dieting is a secret epidemic" (Henry 1994a: 13). Here Saville seems to subtly display some anti-fat bias. She is prescribing limits for the acceptable female body by indicating that it is fine to be larger than a size 16, as long as you are not 'obese,' and implying that 'bigness' is not something to celebrate. But drawing a line between bodies that are fine and those that are 'something else' will always make women who are near the line or across it 'not happy with their size.' Saville seems unaware that women's unhappiness with their bodies, dieting, and anti-fat prejudice are linked.

Saville's ambivalent feelings about the fat body can also be seen in the violence done to the painted bodies of her nudes, as in *Plan* and *Propped*. In both of the images, Saville actually gouges into the paint, defacing her nudes – and imaginatively, herself (as the model). Although this defacement can be seen as a reenactment of the structural and physical violence done to women's bodies in patriarchal culture, it could also be interpreted as a more inward-directed gesture.[3)] Her markings can be seen as destructive, both physically and psychologically, if these paintings act as surrogates for Saville or the viewer. Saville digs into her own painted body just as many real women cut into their actual bodies. Critics pick up on the anger of this gesture: "[Saville] describes the gouging of words into canvases it may have taken her as much as a year to complete as a form of artistic vandalism, defying the prescriptive patriarchal traditions of paint. But the effect carries disturbing echoes of self-mutilation, reminders that while the gaols are full of men expressing their frustration as violence or criminality, women tend to turn their destructive impulses inward" ("Blubbernauts" 1994: np). Batalion sees a potentially positive, feminist reading of Saville's defacement of her nudes. She writes: "The figure in *Branded* pinches her own skin, but likely branded the words into herself with fire or razor [...]. Saville expose[s] the fact that self-mutilation is common and an issue for feminists. On the one hand self-mutilation seems masochistic and passive, but on the other, it is a means of control over one's body – a control that women still lack. The self-mutilator slashes the skin, or depletes its adipose tissues and thereby contains its pain" (Batalion 2004: 103).

However, as with all of Saville's themes, this one is complex and holds potentially dangerous consequences. Although, as Batalion suggests, self-mutilation does offer control to the mutilator, and seems to operate as a way to trouble or thwart patriarchal control over the female body, like dieting (Batalion's other

3) My thanks to Anja Herrmann and Kea Wienand for this interpretation.

reference), self-mutilation ultimately serves to reify patriarchal control of the body. Both impulses (the impulse to literally carve one's flesh, and the impulse to carve away flesh through dieting) are ultimately gestures, not of self-control, but of acceptance and internalization of external standards. They are both rooted in hatred of the body, hatred which is derived from a patriarchal, anti-fat culture that insists that the female body be controlled, regulated, and forced to conform to stringent beauty standards.[4] As such, self-mutilation serves less to re-establish female control over the body than to punish it for its failure to live up to those standards. Saville's imagined cutting into the canvases and the bodies of her figures could suggest her discomfort with those bodies, and her need to release anxiety over the shape of those bodies and to regain her own control over them.

CONCLUSION Jenny Saville's early paintings, *Plan* and *Propped,* refuse to provide a comfortable viewing position for the audience. Saville creates intensely discomfiting works that constantly ask the viewer to judge and evaluate women's bodies, reminding the viewer that her own body is being judged and evaluated in its turn. They tap into a pervasive cultural anxiety about the size and regulation of the fat female body, one so intense that even Saville's mutilation of her canvas surfaces cannot fully resolve the tension caused by those bodies.

4) For more on the mechanisms by which we learn to police ourselves to meet standards imposed through outside sources, see Samantha Murray (2008).

// Image Credits

Fig. 1: Jenny Saville, *Plan*, 1993, Oil on canvas, 108 x 84 inches / 274.3 x 213.4cm, © Jenny Saville. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian
Fig. 2: Jenny Saville, *Propped*, 1992, Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches / 213.4 x 182.9cm, © Jenny Saville. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

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