

Evaluate the way in which feminist artists' represent the female form in their artwork

Throughout history artists such as Pablo Picasso, Peter Paul Rubens, and Titian have painted and objectified the human figure, specifically the female body, portraying their own view of what the idealistic body looks like. Historically, the perfect female form has stereotypically been classed as obtaining long legs, small waist and an overall slim figure 'The pressure on many women to conform is constant, regardless of whether they'd be able to change anything about their appearance, even if they wanted to.' ¶¶ The art industry is a historically male dominated field therefore female artists carving out a space for themselves by painting the naked female form is very significant. Enforcing this, Jenny Saville is a contemporary British painter whose stylised nude portraits of voluminous female bodies, her work is small snippet of how contemporary female artists have expanded the self-portrait tradition, as she raises questions about accepted ideals of beauty in art and in her and other women's lives. The feminist artist's aim is to fight societal ideal of the perfect body is by showing her own enlarged and distorted body as the sole focus of the composition; the opposite of the skinny and boney figures we see on the covers of magazines. Saville's artist studies focus on her interest in "imperfections" of flesh, with all of the societal implications and taboos. She had been captivated with these details since she was a child, having spoke of seeing the work of Titian and Tintoretto on trips with her uncle, and observing the way in which her piano teacher's two breast squished together in her shirt becoming one large mass.



Figure 1 is Jenny Saville's 'Propped', a remarkable oil on canvas self-portrait created 1992. In this particular piece, Saville paints herself with closed posture highlighting a sense of vulnerability with the uncomfortable facial expression and nervously crossed hands dug into the skin on her thighs. This is a representation of her anxiety towards showing her natural, untouched body to the world; female nudity still being a taboo and controversial topic even in our modern era. "When a woman does it (talks about or shows her naked body), the thinly veiled slut-shaming is immediate." ¶¶ As a feminist, she is making her mark by altering how the art world

views the female form, distorting her own torso and breasts through painting with layered oil paint, making both body parts pendulous and imposing. "I paint flesh because I'm human," she has said. "If you work in oil, as I do, it comes naturally. Flesh

is just the most beautiful thing to paint.” ¶ Saville’s sensuous yet grotesque treatment of painted bodies is comparative to her artist inspiration Lucian Freud. Freud was one of the most influential figurative painters of the 20th century, his portraits and nudes were created with a thick laden brush. His paintings of either himself, family or friends reflected distinctive psychological space. Much like Freud, Saville emphasises features; broken skin, deformed, layered paint slabbed on not smooth. This rejection towards smooth, flawless skin arguably suggests that beauty is not just defined as a perfect complexion and body.

The fact that Saville has painted herself slumped on a such small, thin stool directly juxtaposes the size of her body, the comparison to the inanimate object truly exaggerates how large she views her own body. The choice to sit herself on such an everyday item signifies the day-to-day struggles she faces mentally and within society because of her appearance. As a feminist artist she doesn’t objectify herself in the piece with painting the stereotypical body of perfection associated with lust, beauty and sexuality, she paints to be confrontational, showing raw emotion and how she feels broken. Her artwork is at such a large scale to not only shock the audience with an unmissable piece of an arguably undesirable female exterior but confrontationally address female insecurities of weight, skin and size. “The vast majority of British women are depressed about the way they look. An astonishing 90 per cent say their body causes them to feel down, a survey reveals today” ¶ , with the gargantuan size of the painting, Saville wants her audience to face their fears of nudity and looking at themselves naked in a mirror, ultimately she wants viewers to embrace their bodies and accept who they are.

Furthermore, Figure 2 is another iconic Jenny Saville piece, ‘Shift’. The sensual interpretation of flesh in the artwork is again another oil painting reflective of Saville’s lifelong preoccupation with the body and skin. ‘Shift’ is an extraordinary mural which appears to be a contemporary portrait of several squashed female corpses hanging. The way in which the limbs are drawn could subjectively mirror the appearance of animals carcass’ hung out in a butcher’s shop. Saville applies thick brush strokes which layer across the canvas manifesting a captivating and clear texture that amplifies the piece’s intense realism. Executed with



Figure 2

Saville’s typical techniques and thought process, ‘Shift’ obtains unique surfaces of the figures’ flesh whilst thin strands of paint create detail of traced female body hair. Saville paints six different bodies, all different shapes and sizes, large and small breasts, thin

and thick thighs, some skinny enough to see the rib cages. She symbolically does this to represent that there is not one perfect female body unlike how the work of archaic portrait artists Peter Paul Rubens, and Titian may depict. Jenny herself has quoted "There is a thing about beauty. Beauty is always associated with the male fantasy of what the female body is. I don't think there is anything wrong with beauty. It's just what women think is beautiful can be different. And there can be a beauty in individualism. If there is a wart or a scar, this can be beautiful, in a sense, when you paint it." ¶ Furthermore, Saville clusters the six bodies together comparable to squashed sardines, in attempt to reflect the differentiation of human form within all of society, as well as portraying the notion that body and self insecurities, are not only a personal issue one has with themselves, but a societal issue, all face.

Moreover, the voluminously coated curves and flesh of the female bodies perfectly represent how Saville doesn't only want to expose the discomfort she experiences with her body, but the vulnerability women of all different backgrounds also experience when it comes to nudity. The artwork's cursive strokes immediately evokes the viewer into the painting whilst the monstrous scale forces the viewer to take a few steps back. Jenny Saville herself has stated "It's the effect of intimacy through scale that I want. Although large paintings are so often associated with grandeur, I want to make large paintings that are very intimate. I want the painting to almost surround your body when you stand very close to it...they (large scale pieces) give you a physical experience; it's not just about looking... I want the feeling that you don't only command the piece of work, the piece of work also commands you." ¶

Another feminist interpretation of the female form is Figure 3, one component of Sarah Lucas' 'Bunny Gets Snookered'. Sarah Lucas, born in 1962 is part of the generation of Young British Artists (YBA) which formed in the 90s. Lucas' work frequently employs visual puns and humour, incorporating photography, collage and found objects, the contemporary artist creates crude and often provocative pieces commenting on sexuality, death, and gender. Her artwork represents a bizarre world and playfully exploits unrealistic ideals to expose obscene absurdity created by those very constructions. 'Bunny gets Snookered' is an abstract installation consists of eight

mannequins arranged on and around a snooker table at Sadie Coles HQ, London in 1997. The structure is made out of several materials items; nude tights, black stockings, wood along with vinyl chair, clamp as well as wire and kapok. Moreover, each bunny is



Figure 3

attached and sat on chairs and help up in place by restrictive, somewhat chauvinist clamps, the bunnies sit slumped in different chairs as some describe the representation of women to be "sexual conquests, pocketed, in a horrible polygamy, by the malign presence of the overbearingly male snooker table." ¶ This idea of restraintment can easily be reflective of the lack of power and injustice of total freewill women stereotypically embody, even in 2019, "It's time to stop fooling ourselves, says a woman who left a position of power: the women who have managed to be both mothers and top professionals are superhuman, rich, or self-employed." ¶ The familiar posture of the bunnies reduces any idea of women empowerment, with no memorable facial features Lucas' piece provokes the notion that women are still being seen for only their feminine form; curvy hourglass figure, long legs. However, due to such subjection even women of today's modern era are still being bounded and restrained of their full capability within society.

Furthermore, each 'bunny' apart of 'Bunny gets snookered' wears different coloured stockings comparable to the colours in a set of snooker balls. 'Pauline Bunny', is in black stockings, which resembles the snooker ball with the highest value. The black stockings are also the most traditionally seductive of the selection of colours, associating this portrayal of a woman to the vision of sexual desire. "The stocking has an established place in the contemporary lexicon of erotic imagery. Elmer Batters, an American photographer, dedicated his life's work to documenting thousands of women in their stockinged feet. Stockinged women offer one of the most powerful images of modern female glamour and provide for the marketing of sexual allure." ¶ The selection of colour not only symbolises and composes this snooker table scene but suggests the sense of sexuality within the female form. This artist is implying that society views women's bodies to only reflect lust and attraction, they are only slumped mannikins for eye candy rather than smart and worthy individuals.

Additionally, the phrase 'to be snookered', in the game of snooker means to be prevented from scoring, "In a situation where the cue ball position is such that one cannot directly hit the required object ball. (informal) In a difficult situation, especially because of the actions of others." ¶ This bunny 'girl' is 'snookered' and trapped by her own femininity, her appearance and overall essence as a woman is being used against her as she plays against her fellow bunnies in a stereotypically masculine game. "Rebecca Kenna (ranked third in the World Women's Snooker rankings) felt "abandoned" after being stopped from playing in two fixtures due to some clubs in Keighley operating a "men-only" policy." ¶ The scenery and setting playfully addresses gender roles and norms that viewers will be able to connote and recognise through the perception of snooker being a male only sport. This piece is reflective of all of Lucas'

artwork and style as she specialises in challenging gender stereotypes through unconventional imagery and challenging the conventions of representation and framing, as she specialises in the publications and language forms within modern day pop culture.

Referring back, Figure 1, Jenny Saville's 'Propped' was created in 1992 as Figure 2, Jenny Saville's 'Shift' was created in 1997, similarly Sarah Lucas' 'Bunny Gets Snookered' was constructed and exhibited in the same 90s time period, 1997. Both artists embody the female form in their work however, doing so in quite opposing manners. In Figure 1, Jenny Saville strips down, exposing and exploiting her body to the world in order to highlight her insecurities as she makes her audience face their fears of their own naked form. Figure 2, another Saville painting is too reflective of this notion as she paints 6 different female bodies portraying a sense of similarity within variation. Alternatively, Sarah Lucas' artwork was not created as a stance to insecurity, but to reflect the lack of power women obtain and how this is portrayed through their frame. It is interesting that even so close in era, within the same subject of the female form, two feminists artists have conceived two different ideals. The 1990s has been classed as the 'Third wave' of feminism "The third wave benefited from the preceding ones, but rejected many of their mentalities. Unlike their academic fore sisters, they believed that feminism should be for everyone, rejecting the universal sisterhood...promoting a feminism defined by the individual. Lipstick feminists tossed aside the idea of beauty as patriarchal oppression and embraced push-up bras and high heels to prove that femininity and intelligence were not mutually exclusive." ¶¶ Even with new found power, both artists arguably portray the notion that women still feel and are perceived as powerless. With clear differences in technique and such, known feminists Saville and Lucas both strive to show that there is more behind a woman than just her body.

In conclusion, feminists artists are continuously striving to take a stance and carve a name for themselves and women in the art world and in society, "Museums and galleries across the UK staged exhibitions on historic and contemporary female artists, with events that celebrated 100 years since British women won the right to vote." ¶¶ In this essay I have analysed and investigated two female composers and feminism activists, both of which experienced the pinnacle of their career in the 1990s. The 90s is famously known for the rise of the momental "girl power" movement, "girl power" being defined as a "a slogan that encourages and celebrates women's empowerment, independence, and confidence." ¶¶ Interestingly, that being said both Lucas and Saville explore opposing notions, the lack of power prevailed through the female form, objectification of such and the insecurities formulating women to feel powerless and unworthy. In response to my personal investigation, the exaggerated raw female form

produced by both Saville and Lucas is explored through the development of my final piece. The ripped open and exposed internal body I created is reflective yet, juxtaposing of the exposure portrayed by both artists through their use of tactical posture. Saville and Lucas contrast in overall connotations of their pieces, Saville's work appearing liberating as Lucas' work shows deflation, my own exploration embodies both these elements. I show deflation of the body coming apart by growing obesity, while at the same time I mimic Saville's liberation with my model showing their raw, super-sized body with open ribs and stomach.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 introduce packed and layered flesh toned paint which captivates a modern audience with its outstanding realism and relevance of personal and societal issues. With this in mind, my personal investigation uses textured yet smooth media and materials, inspired by the layered colour and surface present in Jenny Saville's pieces. The stomach and teared back skin in my final piece mirror the pure tones of an untouched body while exhibiting the insecurities associated with ones large, obese form, ultimately the result of over eating cakes and sugared desserts. On the contrary, Figure 3 demonstrates experimentation with obscure structure and materials to reflect the hourglass figure, long legged 'perfect' female form, "The hourglass ideal has its roots in Elizabethan England, when women enhanced their curves with corsetry, bustles and layer-upon-layer of structured petticoats." ¶ Although it is evident that in current day 2019 women are fighting to be taken seriously by society and be treated the same as men, the 90s were more than 25 years ago and feminist artists today are still composing ideas of female form and inequality through a creative and controversial style.

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