

Propped by Jenny Saville: Challenging the Aesthetics of the Female Body and Image

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Abstract—Western artists have long dominated human art history, and their aesthetic orientation has constantly influenced the general aesthetic and has become the key to defining mainstream art. They promoted beautiful, delicate, and elegant female figures in the creations, so people's aesthetics of female body images gradually developed toward idealization. For this reason, many feminist artists are committed to changing this situation. *Propped*, a painting by Jenny Saville, is one of the representatives of feminist artwork. Considered from a feminist perspective, this work critically focuses on the aesthetics of the female body image through its unique reproduction of the woman's body, thereby challenging the male gaze in society and reshaping the narrative of women in art history.

Keywords—analysis of artwork, anti-power discourse, feminism, visual art

I. BACKGROUND INTRODUCTION

Mainstream art, influenced by Western aesthetic tradition, has long been dedicated to pursuing the perfect female body. Nevertheless, with the development of the feminist movement from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, more and more women artists wanted to stand on an equal footing with male artists and therefore began to critically consider the definition of "beauty" in previous aesthetics. The British contemporary painter Jenny Saville is one of them. *Propped* (Fig.1), one of Jenny Saville's most iconic works was created in 1992 as an oil on canvas measuring 213.4 x 182.9 cm. Standing in front of this large self-portrait, one can often clearly see the various flaws and imperfections in the body of the female figure in the picture. Remarkably, the painting entitled *Propped* made history when it went under the hammer at Sotheby's in the fall of 2018. It eventually sold for a staggering £9.5 million (\$12.4 million), making it the most expensive work ever sold by a living female artist at auction. But there are still some issues to ponder: Is the artwork beautiful? Why do some people show revulsion? Why does the author incorporate her own body into the artwork? How does the picture question and reject normative notions of gender and aesthetics?

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This essay will analyze Jenny Saville's *Propped* in the context of feminist theory to illuminate how this non-idealized female nude painting critically focuses on the aesthetics of the female body image through its unique reproduction of the woman's body, thereby challenging the male gaze and reshaping the female narrative in art history.

II. PROPPED

Propped portrays the artist herself in the nude. Saville is shown sitting bare on a high stool in front of a mirror, peering thoughtfully into it. Saville's body is fleshy and large; her hands grip opposite knees, pulling her breasts tightly together. She wore high white heels with her feet crossed and tucked behind the stool to balance her heavy body. Her head is tilted upward, partially out of the frame. Scrawled on the mirror was a quote from feminist writer Lucy Irigaray, "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, disappear, make us disappear." [1]

In this self-portrait, there are several particular points we should note. First and foremost, this artwork is a bold representation of real female flesh. The painter does not want to present an ideal female image to the outside world as conventional artists do; instead, she draws fat and faulty bodies to show the rough and authentic sides of the female body. Secondly, the work has a unique painting perspective. Saville put an obese woman "...painted from a photograph through a fish eye lens..." and became even more obese, causing exaggerated perspective shortening of the knees and hands [2]. Thus, the figure is proportionally incongruous, with her thighs nearly twice as large as her head. In addition, Saville selects traditional oil painting as her medium to express unconventional feminine images. She has undoubtedly developed her own experience in systematically studying classical art and combined it into her artistic creation.

III. FEMINIST THEORY WITH NORMATIVE FEMALE BODY PATTERNS UNDER THE MALE GAZE

The male gaze, in short, is the view of women in the media from the eyes of heterosexual men. As Laura Mulvey asserts, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" [3]. The male gaze was prevalent in Renaissance artworks, such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1485) and Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538), which idealized and deified their models and claimed to capture the

perfection of the woman's flesh [4]. These fantasy female bodies were revered and established as canonical patterns by mainstream male artists, thereby assuming a single norm for the way women exist in art, namely that they are unconscious, decorative, and derivative. This leads to the hegemony of femininity and woman body models.



Fig. 1. Saville, Jenny. Propped. 1992. oil on canvas. Gagosian Gallery. London.

Feminist theories, however, are the opposite position; they intend to challenge the superiority of masculinity/heterosexuality in art and society, to obtain recognition and equal power for female artists, and to question assumptions about female identity in art. For instance, the concept of gender performativity is referred to by American gender theorist Judith Butler. Butler indicated that "gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" [5]. There is also the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, who advocates the Marxist view that society is constituted by materially unequal relations while maintaining that inequalities and divisions of gender structure society. Pollock argues that the exclusion and denigration of women artists in art history is a production of the patriarchal structure of bourgeois ideology [6]. Hence, the feminist theory provides a gender-based method of thinking for art studies, directing us to reveal women's social status and gender bias behind the forms and themes of artworks.

IV. *PROPPED*—A FEMINIST PRACTICE

In this part, I will analyze *propped* in the framework of feminist theory to research how the artist penetrates the boundaries of patriarchal cultural ideology through this work, criticizes the inequitable status of men and women in art, and exposes gender issues in art.

A. *Questioning the Aesthetic Paradigm*

The artwork was heavily criticized upon its release, with some viewers and scholars claiming that it scandalized the female body; that the artist's representation of flesh made them feel uncomfortable or disgusted. For this, we must ponder why the image of obese women evokes loathing in several people. In Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity," she stresses that gender is performative, e.g., girls/boys wear dresses/ties to make meaning of gender identity. Butler considers the two primary mechanisms of gender performativity to be citation and repetition. This theory can be applied to the hegemonic problem of female bodily patterns and femininity. Precisely the veneration and persistent, repetitive imitation of the Idealized female nude in the creation of mainstream artists throughout history has led to the exclusivity and sanctity of the ideal female nude form and the establishment of a standardized aesthetic. Certain types of comprehension are preferred in this framework, while others are unthinkable [7].

However, in *Propped*, Saville utilizes mottled pink, mauve, yellow, brown, and blue pigments and large brushstrokes of color blocks to exaggerate the skin textures, folds, and every imperfection of the body. Saville challenges the typical depiction of feminine beauty in Western art history: those imaginary silhouettes, harmonious curves, and smooth skin; She pictures the imperfect flesh to embody unconventional femininity. At the same time, it echoes Butler's opinion that femininity is not a product of choice but a compulsory invocation of a canon. Consequently, this artwork challenged the binary aesthetic system of the thin/perfect woman image as beautiful and the fat/flawed female figure as ugly, broadening the form of the female nude in art and questioning and destroying preconceived paradigms of female beauty.

B. *A Challenge for Gender Hierarchy*

Griselda Pollock advocates the substitution of gender for class; the oppression of women by men is like the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. Based on this view, we can discover that in most of the artistic process, the man/artist is clothed, while the models, mostly women, are nude and frequently display some kind of powerless or uncomfortable pose [8]. As Pollock says, the ambivalent relationship between painting and feminism can be traced in the contradictory position and significance of two bodies: the "painter's body" and the "woman's body" [9]. This is sufficient to reflect the apparent discrepancy between men's and women's status in art history. Yet Saville is both the artist and model in this self-portrait. By depicting her body, she rebels against this current situation of artistic creation and the unequal identity and status between men and women in the process of creation, denying the dominant position and power of men in the creation and breaking the hierarchy of gender in the drawing.

Furthermore, Saville has received systematic instruction in the art of painting, but her interest is not in using painting to demonstrate her superior technique; rather, it is in highlighting gender and women's issues in society through the careful selection of subjects and forms for artwork. For example, she employs oil painting, a medium historically associated with male artistic practice, when creating *propped*, and combines it

with her own experience and body as a woman; She depicts every dark side of the skin, scars, bruises, and folds to represent the woman's nude body from a female perspective. There is no doubt that Saville defies the limitations of the traditionally masculine art medium with this performance, reclaiming the female figure from the male gaze. Simultaneously, it signifies that women artists can control and represent their art from a female viewpoint, gaining the power to reinvent the female narrative by telling their own stories.

V. CONCLUSION

The body is an important site of oppression and exploitation, the locus of social disciplines and violations, and the field of enjoyment and desire. In the art history of patriarchal societies, the criterion of greatness has been clearly defined by men. They are often able to occupy more social resources and invoke and replicate fantasy images of the female nude to construct paradigms of the female flesh in their paintings or highlight gender hierarchies in their art creations to maintain the privilege of their own gender. In an effort to shift this limitation, more and more female artists have started to challenge the dominance of men. *Propped* of Jenny Saville is a forceful practice. Through feminist theoretical perspectives, it is not difficult to realize that Saville not only challenged the inequitable gender status in art through the form of self-portraits but also used oil painting as a medium to exaggerate the elements of her body on the canvas that were commonly deemed unseemly by society in order to subvert the elegant and gentle female nude of the long-standing male gaze. In other words, the women's body image that could satisfy the male visual pleasure. As Saville said, "I am not painting the big, disgusting women. I am painting women who are perceived as big and disgusting" [10]. One could say that the painting stimulates consideration of the aesthetic standards of the female body and gender inequality, enriches the pluralism and difference of aesthetics, and encourages female artists to oppose the manipulation of the female body by masculinity ideology so as to write a feminist narrative.

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