

Abstract: This article argues for a comprehensive understanding of the implications of the use of transgender and intersex subjects in the work of Jenny Saville. She is often praised for her feminist work wherein she paints cisgender female subjects in such a way that diverts the male gaze. However, she does not exclusively work with cisgender women; she has also worked with transgender and intersex subjects, citing their use as different from that of her cisgender female subjects. This article analyzes the narrative that Saville's use of these subjects creates and its consequences.

Introduction

Jenny Saville is a British oil painter who is best known for her large paintings of nude women. In her paintings, she works to decenter the male gaze that has long been forced onto women subjects: they are painted by men, for men, to be sexualized in ways beyond their knowledge or context. She accomplishes this through painting women in vulnerable, honest scenes, in which there generally seems to be an acknowledgement of the viewer, combating the predatory lens created by the artist for himself and the viewer.

Though Saville is mostly known for her nudes of women, she has stated that her interest lies not just with women, but with flesh: "I liked this idea that flesh was something you could manipulate and move, in the same way you do with paint" (Gagosian, 2018). This fascination has led her to view surgeons performing surgery so that she may have a more intimate understanding of such a subject, prompting her to create her work *Torso 2* in response to this fascination. *Torso 2* is a work in which Saville painted a hanging carcass which she viewed in a slaughterhouse, fascinated by its color and "state of in-betweenness" (Schama, 2005).

Saville is heralded in many circles as a contemporary feminist artist who not only disrupts the male gaze, but also gives attention to multiple types of bodies which are said to disrupt standard Western notions of beauty: fat female bodies and bodies of transgender people, which she describes in conjunction with her work, *Torso 2* (Saville, 2004). She states, "I'm drawn to bodies that emanate a sort of state of in-betweenness: a hermaphrodite, a trans-vestite, a carcass, a half-alive/half-dead head" (Schama, 2005). Although Saville talks about these subjects through the lens of a feminist painter, I find this comparison between a person with a marginalized identity and a carcass quite disturbing—it feeds directly into a narrative of trans necropolitics wherein transgender people, and especially Black trans femmes, are always already dead when they are spoken about, particularly in the news. Although her subjects are alive,

likening them to a carcass does dangerous work of playing into these necropolitics. Comments by Saville such as this one reveal that she does not fully take into account the complexity of the identities that she uses in her pieces—there is an intellectual dissonance between the narrative of Saville’s pieces and the complexity of the subjects’ identities she uses; she also disregards the implications of placing a binary trans person (i.e., someone who identifies as a trans man or trans woman) under the category of “between genders,” which takes on a seemingly unintentional trans medicalist view wherein transgender people are only the gender they say they are if they have had a number of surgeries that align with cisgender expectations. Through a queer/trans lens, I will further examine and break down Saville’s comments about her subjects, analyzing their implications, and further explain the dissonance between her language and the complex identities of her subjects.

Discussion

Saville’s subjects vary in identity, though she generally paints women, sometimes using herself as the subject. When asked about the importance of using herself in her works, she stated, “If my body can offer me the ability to get to something interesting, then I use my own body. If I can’t, then I work with somebody else” (Cué, 2016). This fixation on creating works for the purpose of gaining something interesting changes vastly when an artist is trying to explore “something interesting” within themselves, compared to using a subject who has a marginalized identity. For much of transgender people’s known existence, they have been outcast from society, and still are not fully accepted, even today. Their identities are complex, with them being more likely to be outcast in social circles, have difficulty gaining access to housing and traditional forms of work, and even having to go through strenuous and costly processes to be able to have simple things like having their name and pronouns be recognized. Even in a less official sense, trans people are often asked invasive questions about their genitalia, with people asserting that their gender is ultimately defined by those genitals. The quest for Saville to “get something interesting” out of her works by using subjects other than herself does not acknowledge any intersections of marginalized identity, and even further, ignores the experiences of trans people who are of color, queer, or do not “pass” as cisgender. As trans activists and scholars note, not actively working with intersectionality can help perpetuate harmful systems and allows

minorities to be categorized and marked as “other” by the majority, which is an issue that Saville’s language perpetuates (Westbrook, 2021).

Another issue with Saville’s language about her subjects is the idea she pursues with her trans and intersex subjects being “between gender.” In the works *Matrix* (Saville, 1999) and *Passage* (Saville, 2005) she explores this. Within both of these pieces, she relates the idea of being “between gender” as directly correlating to the subject’s body and genitalia. In relation to *Matrix*, a painting which explores this concept with an intersex person, and *Passage*, a painting with similar conceptual ideas, except with a trans person, she states:

With the transvestite I was searching for a body that was between genders.... The idea of floating gender that is not fixed. The trans-vestite I worked with has a natural penis and false silicone breasts.... I wanted to paint... a sort of gender landscape. To scale from the penis, across a stomach to the breasts, and finally the head. I tried to make the lips and eyes be very seductive and use directional mark-making to move your eye around the flesh... (Schama, 2005).

Because trans people and intersex people do not inherently occupy the same identity, it is noteworthy that she aims to explore the same idea with both types of subjects. In this assertion, she reveals that she is analyzing their identity, not through their thoughts and ideas about their gender, but instead through their genitalia and physical appearance, again taking on a medicalist approach. This can again be observed by another of her assertions when asked about works relating to gender in an interview: “I’ve only really developed that in drawing because I can change so much... a male body over the top of a female body and that suddenly [becomes] a hermaphrodite. But I’m not drawing a hermaphrodite. I’m drawing many bodies together so that the gender becomes fluid.” For many trans people, their revelations about their gender involve many factors—societal ideas of gender, their voice, how others perceive them, their hair, their body, their height, etc. What makes a trans person transgender varies for every trans person, and sometimes has nothing to do with genitalia, breasts, or lack thereof. The idea of being “between gender” would have to be something that her subject actually identifies with in order for Saville’s exploration to make sense and be appropriate. In other words, in order to explore the concept of being “between gender,” the person whose identity is being explored would have to feel and think that way; it would not inherently have anything to do with body physicality, genitalia, or intersexuality. In this way, being “between gender” cannot necessarily be explored through viewing a person’s genitals. Further, it reveals that she views her subjects’ gender as something for her to play with rather than them to disrupt themselves—she is not representing how their

gender works for them, but rather, parts of their bodies that she finds interesting—,exerting a kind of control over her subjects

In a quote from the interview with Schama, Saville states, “Thirty or forty years ago this body couldn’t have existed...” which also reinforces the idea that Saville does not know (or chooses to ignore) facts about trans and intersex people. This interview took place in 2005, and although trans or intersex people may not have been able to easily have false silicone breasts in the 1960s or 1970s, that type of body—one with breasts and a penis—could have existed whether the person was transgender or intersex.

Intersex people make up about 1% of the population, which means that being intersex is roughly as common as having red hair (Medina et al., 2021). An intersex person can have traditionally “male” or “female” sex organs as well as hormones, and can also identify as cisgender. For instance, an intersex woman can have breasts and penis, while potentially also having a uterus and facial hair. Had Saville known about or chosen to acknowledge the complexities of this identity, she would not have been able to make such an assertion. Intersex people have had a long history of receiving medical intervention without their consent, so it is less likely that an intersex person of the variety that I previously described would have been allowed to live peacefully; however, she makes no reference to this fact or the personal experiences of intersex individuals (Colliga, 2013).

In another piece of the Schama interview, Saville states,

When I was painting the genital area, I was trying to think about ways to use intense color and make marks that heightened a feeling of sex. Then when I painted the thigh... The white dripped right across the thigh on towards the genitals. It was this incredible, orgasmic.... In that thigh I had more about sex than the whole penis put together.

This claim of creating an “orgasmic” sense within the thigh not only over-sexualizes the subject in *Passage*, but actively perpetuates the hyper-sexualized view in which non-cis men are viewed. In this way, she is, in a sense, working directly against her philosophy of deconstructing “the stereotypes of beauty and eroticism of the female body as seen through art and through men...” (Cué, 2016). Although the subject is not female, it is significant that she essentially abandons this ideal about creating art that is not “erotic in a sexual sense,” but “erotic in a life force or drive” when her subjects are not cisgender women (Cué, 2016). Transgender women have historically had to use sex work as an avenue for income due to social discrimination, leading them to be viewed simultaneously as sexual predators and sexual objects. Through her reading, her subject

(who cannot really be referred to as anything else when referencing her words) becomes sexually objectified in a similar way that also feeds directly into these historical connotations.

By only examining gender through physicality, Saville does not actually disrupt gender norms in the ways that others assert she does. By exclusively using genitalia to conceptualize what it means to be “between gender,” Saville reinforces gender norms about what men and women’s bodies are supposed to look like, because as in many previously mentioned quotes, her ideas about combining “male” and “female” bodies through drawing are what she asserts makes them in “between gender.” Through this language, she creates “hermaphrodites” as a third sort of gender category, wherein women with penises or men with breasts cannot simply be men or women, but rather, a peculiar kind of nonexistent third gender that she “creates” in her drawings. In a Gagosian article, the author stated that “the construction of a gendered identity” became the focus of Saville’s work, stating that it was informed by “a language of contemporary discourse around feminism and critical theory” (2018). However, none of her works in which the subjects are not cisgender women analyze a gendered identity through avenues other than breasts and genitalia.

Further, authors who engage in the history of feminist theory acknowledge that Western gender standards are influenced directly by the objectification of Black and lesbian women, which Siobhan Somerville analyzes in her book, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, wherein Somerville analyzes the history of gendered and racial stereotypes (which are especially pertinent to trans people and trans people of color):

One of the most consistent medical characterizations of the anatomy of both African American women and lesbians was the myth of an unusually large clitoris. As late as 1921, medical journals contained articles declaring that “a physical examination of [female homosexuals] will practically in every instance disclose an abnormally prominent clitoris.” Significantly, this author added, “This is particularly so in colored women” (27).

Although Somerville’s rich and detailed explorations of the construction of western gender are not required to demonstrate feminist theory in Saville’s work, her failure to explore issues of race and sexuality further reveal her lack of feminist education, despite purported knowledge of feminist theory; she does not examine ways in which gendered identities affect trans people, women and people of color, queer people—identities that are included in “critical feminist theory.” This lack of use of feminist theory is also exemplified by her use of the terms

“transvestite” and “hermaphrodite,” which do not acknowledge the subject’s gender or pronouns, despite their names being publicly known. Apart from this, these terms are also outdated, inaccurate, and offensive to some. The interviews referenced in this article, which occurred in 2005 and 2016, were both recent enough that appropriate terminologies to refer to trans people not only existed, but were used frequently. The term “transgender” was in use by the 1990s, and so a person—especially one in feminist circles who interacted with trans people—should have known that “transvestite” and “hermaphrodite” were no longer appropriate to use. Although the use of language such as “transsexual” has returned for some trans people, it is meant to be a self- or community-based identification rather than one used by cisgender people who refuse to speak on gender identity contextually.

Saville’s language is also especially noteworthy because of her status as a white cisgender woman. Due to her whiteness and the authority with which Saville speaks to experiences that are not her own, she has garnered credit for feminist knowledge for which she does not deserve. In failing to recognize the extreme faults in Saville’s language, those who acclaim Saville also reveal themselves to have very little bearing on the work of feminist and gender studies. Several well-known feminist and queer authors, such as Jose Munoz and Kimberly Crenshaw (who invented the term intersectionality) reveal that integrated study of topics such as the disruption of and social construction of queerness, race, and gender identity are required for having true understandings of feminist work because all modern issues of marginalized people originate from capitalist white supremacy. Saville furthers these limiting (and white supremacist) ideals of gender by insinuating that the hermaphroditic form originates out of the more ‘standard’ or ‘normal’ ones, which disregards the analysis of well-known feminist scholar Judith Butler, who states, “there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*” (Butler, 956). In this case, Butler is referring to people perceiving homosexuality and drag as poor copies of cisgender heterosexual “originals.” While this may not be the context of Saville’s work, it is pertinent that her “original” is always a cisgender man or woman from which the non-hermaphrodite hermaphrodite forms.

In her article, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” Linda Alcoff articulates the tricky-ness of talking about identities which are not your own. In some parts, she demonstrates how refusing to talk about identities that do not affect oneself reveals privilege. She says,

I would stress that the practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. And the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies.... But this development should not be taken as an absolute dis-authorization of all practices of speaking for. It is not always the case that when others unlike me speak for me I have ended up worse off, or that when we speak for others they end up worse off (29).

Despite the need for outsiders to speak on issues that are not their own, it should always be done with ample education and a desire to amplify marginalized voices, rather than to “find something interesting.” I find much of Saville’s language so disturbing because it does seem, in many ways, to come from a desire to seem to know more or just as much about trans and intersex bodies as the aforementioned groups rather than a desire to *learn* more about them. The problem, then, is not Saville’s desire to speak for or about these people, but rather how she does so—she is heralded as a feminist painter while so blatantly ignoring the importance of language and social location when talking about a group of people, regardless of membership in that group. Despite pointing very much to Saville’s own language, her failures reflect larger ones:

[T]he way I [Alcoff] have articulated this problem may imply that individuals face it and have to (and can) make an individual choice concerning their own discursive practices. This is not what I wish to imply. The problem is a social one, the options available to us are socially constructed, and the practices we engage in cannot be understood as simply the results of autonomous individual choice (11).

While Saville’s language is her own, it also reflects many larger problems that deal with privilege and allyship. As a white woman in western capitalist society, Saville exists just below white men in the social hierarchy. Racial capitalist society’s aim is that individuals use statuses (i.e., cis whiteness) that are similar to that of the majority in order to propel themselves forward, creating individuality and separation rather than community and unity (Melamed). Although this in no way excuses Saville’s language or actions, it demonstrates how she is able to use her whiteness and cisgender status while talking about minoritarian subjects to elevate herself as opposed to helping others.

Conclusion

In a similar analysis about Saville’s works including fat women, R. Colls concludes that Saville’s assertions about her subjects create “a distinction that has previously placed fat as an

unwanted ‘other’ upon bodies, and which does not allow for a woman to have a relationship with fat beyond that of estrangement and disavowal.” This analysis is unfortunately similar to her portrayal of her trans and intersex subjects: she relates the use of a trans subject to a carcass, she focuses on gender exclusively through physical appearance and genitalia, sexualizes her subjects, and uses outdated terms at times when knowledge of more appropriate terms was common, especially by feminists. By failing to truly interact with feminist language and practices, Saville further marginalizes these people. Through this analysis of Jenny Saville’s work, I hope to call attention to Saville’s misappropriation of transgender and intersex subjects and social issues of privilege and allyship. Because Saville is an artist who works in many feminist circles, it is important to note that her work influences the way other artists integrate feminist ideals into their own work. Due to the inaccurate ways Saville has used to represent transgender and intersex people, her focus and terminology are not only inaccurate, but damaging and irresponsible. By using these marginalized people as subjects without attention to the complexity of their identities, she creates an alternate harmful gaze which is different, but not dissimilar, to the male gaze which she so seeks to avoid.

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