“Flesh is the reason oil painting was invented” To what extent is this statement confirmed through the representation of the female form in the paintings of Willem De Kooning, Jenny Saville and Peter Paul Rubens.

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Introduction

Flesh has always fascinated artists. It can be depicted in different ways evoking different concepts and features such as softness and sensuality but also raw, gruesome images. Flesh has no single colour in art, it is a complex mix of yellows, reds, blues and white. The colour of human flesh comes in such a variety of tints and shades and to be perfectly depicted it is necessary for artists to blend together different pigments to create a mixture of hues which successfully and convincingly represent the colour of flesh desired. Recreating flesh tones is one of the hardest jobs an artist faces, and there is no single recipe. The combination of colours used becomes artist dependent and often determines their own style.

Willem De Kooning stated that “flesh is the reason oil painting was invented”, suggesting that oil paint is the perfect medium with which flesh can be depicted, and in particular with the female form, there are many ways in which oil paint has been used to paint their curves and shapes. Oil paint dries slowly so it allows the blending of all the different pigments. It is also rich in colour and therefore enables the artist to capture the correct colour desired. It can be used to paint fine details, shadows and depths. Through the centuries many artists have achieved luminous and vibrant skin tones that give life and expression to the female form. However, I have chosen three very different artists, Jenny Saville, Rubens and Willem De Kooning, in order to investigate to what extent this quote is confirmed in their individual representations of the female form. All three artists have been a persistent source of inspiration to me in my own work exploring the voluptuous woman and the natural and
organic forms of the female body. They are all famous for their paintings depicting women, often large, curvaceous women and I will look at their use of oil to portray the female form in their very different, personal styles. Not only have these artists been heavily influential in my own artwork, but they are important in art history as painters who paint women. Historically they span 400 years and are each immediately recognisable in expression and style.

The way in which they depict their figures is directly related to the way in which they virtually paint flesh. The way the artist decides to paint and depict their figure’s flesh is a representation of how they wish to portray them. “Painting loves to lavish attention on the flesh, whether the plump, pearly perfection of an Ingres hand, the rouged dimple of a Rubens buttock, or the flaccid folds of a Jenny Saville nude.” (Bathurst, 2014)
Jenny Saville

Jenny Saville is particularly known for her large-scale paintings of the female nude. The scale is intended to celebrate and exaggerate the voluptuousness of the female form, but without making it obviously beautiful.

I decided to explore the Saville painting “Fulcrum”, 1999, as I believe the way in which the artist illustrates the women in the painting is a perfect example of the way this artist uses oil paint to depict flesh.

Saville’s painting shows three naked female bodies lying down horizontally. Each body is one on top of the other, with the one in the middle lying in the opposite direction, with her head at the other women’s feet. On the left there is a rope which appears to tie the women together and to the surface upon which they are lying. The composition looks awkward and is not a classic pose for a painting of three women. The women are lying on top of each other in such a way that the proportions and the physics behind their uncomfortable
positions becomes confusing and seems to be impossible. In addition, the women have very uncomfortable and suffering facial expressions which suggests their discomfort in this position. Naked and piled one on top of each other, their bodies closely packed and skin touching, doesn’t present a pleasant image. The painting has a cramped and suffocating feel to it which is also emphasised by the evident heaviness of these three women as they are squashed and tied together. There is hardly any background in the painting as the figures take up most of the space, again making everything look very cramped and constricted. The incredibly large size of the work, 261.6 x 487.7cm, adds to this effect of heaviness and restriction. The women are not painted to scale and they are much larger than a real figure so looking at them makes the viewer feel even smaller, while they seem even bigger and heavier and even more squashed.

Saville’s use of oil paint adds to the discomfort we experience. Her use of colour is very cold, with grey, pale blue and white occupying the background. There are hints of warmth with the peachy pink Saville uses on some parts of the woman’s bodies, mostly on the limbs and faces. The red used in the faces make them look flushed and increases the idea of them being uncomfortable and possibly in pain. Some parts of the women’s bodies are painted with bluer tones but there is always the red coming through. The blue paint is layered on top but, especially on the very blue face of the middle woman, you can still see predominant pink, red and layers of fleshy corals, yellows and dirty whites. Overall the colours are raw and exaggerated.
Saville’s brushwork is very loose and painterly, which together with the palette makes the flesh seem bruised and almost tortured. The different hues also create natural creases and fleshy flab in the women’s skin through their intensity in the different parts of the bodies.

The women appear lumpy and swollen, mountains of flesh achieved by the tone and colours but it’s done in a way that the paint still manages to look smooth as the colours are well blended together and are consistent. There are no harsh lines of colour, it’s all soft, yet the colours are harsh and brutal. Saville creates a sensory effect with her paint. Her women are flat but appear sculptural, bulky and mountainous.

The lightest part of the painting is the centre, where the middle woman’s abdomen and the bottom woman’s thigh are situated, two of the largest body parts in the entire painting. These two body parts are painted lighter so they stand out more, the eyes immediately focus on this when looking at the painting. Other areas of the painting, for example the women’s faces, include blue tones, along with the red, making them recede and stand out less. This suggests they are not as important to look at as their enormous bodies are. The paint is purposely being used to emphasise the body size and the fleshiness of the women. Saville is, in a way, trying to convey the idea that these figures have no identity and that women are often judged by their
bodies more than their faces. The painting suggests how largely body size is considered in our society before other things. These women need no face or identity as Saville is focusing mainly on their immense bodies.

Saville’s fascination with fat is something which she has had since her early childhood when she would observe her piano teacher, “I'd spend the whole time looking at the way her thighs never parted and how the flesh would rub against the tights” (Mackenzie, 2005). Saville, in fact, says she loves to paint large women because she loves to paint flesh. Fat tissue and flesh are things that she says are the most beautiful things for her to paint. The bodies she paints aren’t the conventional ideas of “beauty” as she says that she likes the “down and dirty side of things,” “I don’t like things to be too polished. We’ve got fashion magazines for that” (Hudson, 2014).

The way Saville paints is very abstract and yet still figurative, even if these two styles seem to oppose each other. She paints real things, female bodies, but in an exaggerated way which makes them almost abstract and renders them irregular and disproportionate.
A second piece of Jenny Saville which I decided to study is “Branded”, 1992. This piece is a self portrait of Saville, using her own face on her enlarged body. This painting shows every single imperfection on her body. Every vein, pimple and dimple of cellulite is shown and even highlighted with the use of colour and tone.

Similarly to “Fulcrum”, Saville paints a large woman, amplifying her body parts and changing the perspective to exaggerate the size even further. The woman’s head is illustrated proportionally smaller than her body and is also painted in a darker shade, almost as if it is in the shadows whilst the breasts and stomach are painted with very light white highlights making them stand out more.

Something rather grotesque about the painting is the way the words that are visible on the woman’s body almost seem to be carved into her, as if they have been cut into her flesh. It suggest that those certain words, such as ‘delicate’, ‘supportive’, ‘irrational’, ‘decorative’ and ‘petite’, have hurt the woman and have been cut deep into her skin. These are all words which do not seem to have connotations to her body size. They almost contradict the
way Saville has painted her body. The words seem to represent what in society a woman’s body is “expected” to be like, whilst Saville goes against this by showing an obese woman with the words written all over her body. The woman Saville has depicted represents “real” women while the words on her body represent the woman society expects. The woman has an idea of what she is “supposed” to look like, painfully imprinted in her, but she cannot even reach that. The way the words seem to have been carved into her skin makes her seem like a piece of butchered meat, the reddish and ‘sagging’ flesh recalling animals just slaughtered, the title, “Branded”, confirming this idea and suggesting the ‘labelling’ of meat. Saville’s raw female suggests the suffering of women to conform and be beautiful sexual objects.

The colours Saville uses are very similar to the ones she uses in “Fulcrum”. However the tone is darker as the background is not white but a green, brown, blue colour. The dark background make the image of the women even darker and more ghastly as it creates a grim atmosphere and makes the woman’s pale flesh stand out even more. The woman’s skin is painted with a peachy colour, but blue and grey are also present in areas of her body. Parts of her body such as her chin and her left hand are painted with a lot of red and dark red which creates a sense that there is a lot of pressure. The effect of the oil paint in these areas, such as the redness in her hand, shows how...
tightly she is gripping her stomach, which too is painted very reddish and enhances the excess of the flesh.

The skin is painted with luscious daubs, appearing patchy and mottled, creating deep shadows between fold of fat, although it also resembles bruises. This suggests that the woman has been physically hurt as her body appears almost beaten and butchered with the carved words and the bruises. The way in which Saville mixes and applies the different hues maintains a grotesque yet realistic image of flesh even when the form of the body is so unrealistic and exaggerated, thanks also to the perspective the viewer is made to look from.

“The history of art has been dominated by men, living in ivory towers, seeing women as sexual objects. I paint women as most women see themselves. I try to catch their identity, their skin, their hair, their heat, their leakiness. I do have this sense with female flesh that things are leaking out. A lot of our flesh is blue, like butcher's meat” (DAVIES, 1994). In this quote Saville explains how she finds it important to paint women in the way they see themselves, focusing on how large women, because of society’s standards, compare their ‘extra’ flesh to meat. She doesn’t depict it however in a negative way as society does, but shows a realistic image of how women see themselves, even if it is exaggerated.

Saville’s women are considered very “Rubenesque” as the way she paints large women and the way she depicts flesh has similarities with the way in
which Rubens depicted it. Saville describes Rubens’ art technique with “passages of quiet, suggestive paint and then a flurry of brushwork that describes form in an almost abstract way. There can be a melancholic atmosphere to the studies that’s absent in the large canvases. His great strength in the large works is composition. He can orchestrate twisted torsos, limbs and cloth into a believable painterly mass” (Saville, 2015). This similarly is done by Saville for example in “Fulcrum” as the grand scale of the canvas ensures that the composition is one of the major strengths of the painting. The way in which the women are placed one upon another is orchestrated in a very strategic way to create an impressive, provocative and grotesque effect. However this effect enhanced through Saville’s greatest strength, her use of oil paint and colour to perfectly and realistically depict the fleshiness of the women.

**Peter Paul Rubens**

Rubens undoubtedly comes to mind when observing Saville’s work for his similar use of oil to accurately and sensually illustrate voluptuous women. Rubens is famous for his handling of oil paint and unique depiction of curvaceous women. His name is widely used today to describe this body type with the term “Rubenesque”. His figures are often described to be excessively fleshy and vigorous, however Rubens chose to paint them in this way as he valued ancient Greek and Roman sculpture which showed ideal body forms. He recreated these in his own paintings to “make the human body into
an expressive force of emotions and passions utilising only oil paint” (BBC). 

Whilst Saville uses oil paint to recreate the imperfections women see in themselves, Rubens uses it to express passion and strong emotions using the human body.

Similarly to Saville’s “Fulcrum”, in “The Three Graces”, 1635, Rubens depicts three voluptuous women.

The three Greek goddesses, the three Graces, were the daughters of Zeus and they embody splendor, good cheer, and mirth.

“The painting of three nude amply proportioned women illustrates his extraordinary handling of incarnate or human flesh” (Edwards, 2013).

The way Rubens uses oil paint realistically portrays the curves of the women in a flattering and attractive manner. The women are painted in a garden with very warm
colours, surrounded by flowers, making the entire painting appealing to the human eye.

The women’s curves and dimples are all painted in detail but the way in which Rubens has composed the painting with the women standing together, holding each other with smiling, happy facial expressions makes the painting very different to those of Jenny Saville. Yet the colours both painters use are very similar, blue being very evident with a pale pink to paint the women’s skin. Whilst Saville’s figures look like butchered meat in a shocking and humiliating composition, Ruben's women are painted with pale softer hues in a positive and joyous setting. His use of shadow to create the women’s curves is achieved with darker shades of the same colour, not by using very different hues such as Saville does with blue and dark reds.

Baroque is an art style dating back to the late 16th century which is characterised by large scale works which often illustrated Biblical compositions. They are mainly characterised by “a strong sense of movement, using swirling spirals and upward diagonals, and strong sumptuous colour schemes, in order to dazzle and surprise” (Encyclopedia of Art History). Rubens is a Baroque painter as the way he paints his curvaceous, plump women is in a flattering and delicate manner with a lot of movement. The characteristics of Rubens' painting is what is meant by the term “Rubenesque”, a term often used for the way in which Saville paints her figures, even if it is definitely not delicate or flattering.
Rubens paints an “elegant beauty of naturality and healthy figures” (Weebly). His use of oil paint to create detail allows him to give each of the women in the painting their own body type. In this way Rubens “focuses on not only what is ideal for his time period, but also the range of ideals from athletic, average, and heavier set women” (Weebly). Rubens paints women with different bodies to represent all women. The choice of painting three Goddesses in this manner enforces and empowers the idea of this being a good and healthy body size, obviously within the canons of beauty during the Baroque period. On the contrary, Saville’s larger women are criticised, shocking, and considered as vile.

Rubens uses oil to closely paint every detail, whether it’s a dimple or a fold in their skin or the vertical spinal crevice on their back. Every detail is captured by the painter as he wants to emphasize the women’s size. Rubens doesn’t only rely on the way he uses the paint and on the colour he utilises to represent the figures, but the way he places their body parts and the way he studies how each fold of the skin would look according to their position is extremely detailed and allows the figures to appear three-dimensional and real.

The way in which Rubens uses oil is what allows his figures to look as realistic as possible; “Rubens used an array of impastos to create clear, smooth,
almost plastic-like surfaces. He achieved this by using fine ‘impasto’ colors to produce a more sensitive image which portrayed the subject as realistically as possible.” (Artble, 2015). Impasto is a painting technique where the paint is used very thickly, usually with the brush strokes visible.

Rubens adopts blues, greens and a range of flesh tones with undertones to create depth and recreate textures to appear realistic. “Rubens extended his colors for the flesh tones and devised new ways of creating tones to accentuate his subject in various lights. He also did this to depict the character of the subject by emphasizing their femininity or masculinity” (Artble, 2015). The painter used a lot of color and paint as he believed it would exaggerate the image. He did this also by painting with thick layers to make the image more prominent, with a white under layer to brighten the image, mainly to brighten the bodies and the skin of his figures.

These painting techniques all permit Rubens’ paintings to depict his figures in a very noticeable and representative manner, most importantly being able to accurately illustrate their flesh.

**Willem De Kooning**

“Rubens’ painting, taking in all of its aspects, I often think has a relationship with a very fulsome abstract painting, like a De Kooning. Figurative paintings today, or from the recent past, tend not to be so fulsome. De Kooning and Rubens are alike because of the nature of their paint – the movement of their mark-making – and the nature of their vulgarity” (Saville, 2015). This quote
from Jenny Saville suggests how she is influenced by both Willem De Kooning and Rubens' art. The two painters have very different techniques, De Kooning is considered an Abstract Expressionist whilst Rubens is a classical Baroque painter, yet their methods of using oil paint to depict flesh are often related because of the “nature of their paint” (Saville, 2015). Saville believes the work of De Kooning and Rubens have a technical relationship which have influenced her own work. She states that De Kooning’s “twisting of the brush and color” recalled “the looping of cloth and bodies from Old Master paintings” (Nayeri, 2015).
An example being Caravaggio’s “The Seven Works of Mercy”, 1607, recalls this idea of bodies and cloths intertwining, similarly to De Kooning’s brushstrokes.
Both De Kooning and Rubens paint “large women”. In Willem De Kooning’s “Woman I” 1950-52, he paints a large, very aggressive looking and menacing woman, very different to Saville and Rubens’ more realistic figures.

“Her threatening stare and ferocious grin are heightened by de Kooning's aggressive brushwork and frantic paint application. Combining voluptuousness and menace” (MoMa, 2006). The painter uses strong brushstrokes to create a loose form of the woman with very vibrant fleshy colours. He gives her large rotund breasts and a large body while her eyes and mouth are exaggerated to “echo” the rounded shape of her breasts. The movement of his brushstrokes is very gestural and vigorous which gives an urgent, violent quality to the painting, amplified by the fierce glare of the woman.

Similarly to Saville, De Kooning’s woman is painted rather grotesquely on a very large scale, the painting measuring 192.7 x 147.3 cm. However, De Kooning’s painting differs considerably from Rubens and Saville’s
work as he uses the oil paint to represent the woman but he completely loses the idea of traditional figuration. He paints the woman with no body, or no obvious body, she is what the artist imagines her to be like, “a fabulation of colour and brushwork, with the splattered, pushed, released paint telling us unequivocally that it is a furiously sexual vision” (Jones, 2002).

De Kooning paints the woman in a sexual way, with the violent, vibrant fleshy colours all representing a vigorous energy. The paint appears to have been layered many times which gives a thick, almost sculptural, texture to the painting. This texture creates a sensory image where the paint actually begins to resemble the real flesh of the woman. The paint is used freely and dynamically, not paying attention to small little details as Rubens and Saville do. Saville and Rubens rely a lot on the composition of their work to convey the fleshy, voluptuousness of their figures, whilst De Kooning uses almost no composition. He relies mainly only on the paint and on the colours.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this investigation it has become apparent that while the use of oil paint certainly lends itself to a lusciousness and richness in texture and colour palette, the overriding qualities of brushwork, composition, scale and colour are probably more or at least equally important in the work of the three artists. Similar effects could be achieved with acrylic medium, although the surface of oil paint certainly helps give a more sensual and lavish appearance to the women depicted.
The De Kooning quote, “flesh is the reason oil painting was invented”, is to some extent confirmed in the work of the three artists, but further investigation into the way oil paint is also successfully used to paint other subject matter such as landscapes and still life, would be necessary in order to confirm whether the use of oil for depicting flesh is in fact the only reason for it’s creation.

Therefore, in conclusion, as I have demonstrated in the works of Jenny Saville, Rubens and Willem De Kooning, while there are other components which contribute equally to effective painting of the flesh, oil paint does allow it to be depicted in a very successful manner, yet the claim that it is the reason for its invention, cannot be entirely confirmed.
Bibliography


