

Is the distortion of Francis Bacon and Jenny Saville's artwork gender related?

Extended essay – IB Visual Arts

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Jenny Saville. *Propped*, 1992



Francis Bacon. *Self-portrait*, 1972

ABSTRACT

Pre twentieth-century the tradition of portraiture was representational, however as photography has become more commonly used in aiding portraiture representations of the sitter have become increasingly reflective of their character and emotions. Due to this, the unique distortion that artists are creating is now far more indicative of the sitter.

This essay aims to establish whether the distortion of Francis Bacon and Jenny Saville's artwork is gender related. In order to investigate this, the stylistic qualities of their artwork will be observed, including the techniques of distortions and the aesthetic qualities and motives behind their artwork will be examined. This analysis will enable the reader to understand the ways in which the distortion between Bacon and Saville's artwork differ. In presenting these findings, I have come to believe that both artists are aware of the visual boundaries between vulgar distortion and distortion which will simply engage the viewers due to its lasting visceral impact.

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INTRODUCTION

Recalling the first time I saw the book of Jenny Saville's artwork, I was repulsed at the grotesqueness of her artwork and crude portrayal of the sitters. Having already studied the work of Francis Bacon I felt as though Saville's artwork was an attempt to further redefine the aesthetics of art due to her desire to make a statement. Having said this, I understand the importance of classical art and the stimulus it has had for following artistic movements. However I have personally never agreed upon the idea that beauty had to involve the portrayal of evenly proportioned and elegant females alongside athletic and authoritative males. Consequently I took great interest into the way Saville's artwork, in a similar manner as Bacon's, has the ability to immediately engage viewers whether or not their personal response is like or dislike towards the painting. One of the common features of both artists work is the distortion of the subjects. I am going to investigate whether there are any distinct differences between male and female distortion. I will do this through the analysis of the stylistic qualities before developing these observations by interrogating the motives behind their paintings and the aesthetic qualities that they possess.

Francis Bacon (born 1909) has had a phenomenal impact upon art of the 20th century due to his powerful yet disturbing images of the human figure. The same could be said about Jenny Saville, however I believe her art will grow to become of an even greater significance in the 21st century. I had a particular desire to research Francis Bacon because there has been an ongoing fixation with him, as an artist and a person. Despite this, the stimulus behind his artwork has never been concisely pinned down, and hence still remains a mystery – regardless of the vast number of interviews recorded with him. I aspire to make my own personal interpretations about his underlying motivation because in Francis Bacons own words, 'It's also hopeless to talk about painting – one never does anything but talk around it.'¹ To add further depth to this exploration it seemed logical to compare and contrast Jenny Saville's artwork because she has openly acknowledged her admiration and inspiration of Francis Bacon. Her artwork has been approached with a similarly modern mindset, that nothing is a taboo.

¹ Domino, Christophe. *Francis Bacon: taking reality by surprise*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997

Distinguishable stylistic qualities to Saville and Bacon's artwork

Primarily the noticeable similarities and differences between Francis Bacon and Jenny Saville's artwork are due to the subjects both artists have chosen to portray and through the style in which they paint. This section of the essay will investigate the processes which both artists undertake to achieve completion of their artwork.

A painting style can be anything from the way the paint is handled to the brushstrokes, the colours applied or the choice of the subjects. Jenny Saville and Francis Bacon have very distinctive painting styles, yet despite the distortion they both create within their artwork, the portraits remain recognisable to the sitters. Both artists use paint as their predominant medium however their application of the paint is quite different. Jenny Saville applies paint thickly and sculpturally and this



Figure 1

technique is evident in *Reverse* [1]. Saville claimed, 'I like thick paint. I think you've got the solidity of the body of the paint itself. But there are areas of flesh that aren't thick. So using thick paint's not appropriate,'² and in this sense she views paint as the material to build the textural flesh upon her canvases. This technique helps create the contours round the bone structure of the figure and the face, forming solidity in the artwork.

Saville studied Francis Bacon's work closely and commented on his ability to 'juxtapose a flat bleeding ground with one or two sweeping flesh-coloured marks that create a jawbone for instance.'² Visible in the *Portrait of Michel Leiris* are the predominant sweeping brush strokes of white which contrast the dark colours beneath and provide shape and structure for the face. The lack of clarity creates a movement in this portrait which is not visible in Saville's *Reverse*. Despite this there is still a sense of depth and ambiguity in his work perhaps to a greater extent than is present in Saville's. The black background seems as if the figure is partly concealed in the shadows, yet the paint does not appear at all dense and the consequential luminosity and translucency has been suggested to look like an 'x-ray photograph'. Bacon worked to achieve the 'complete interlocking of image and paint' so that 'every movement of the brush on canvas alters the shape and implication of the image.' This is achieved by the arguably eloquent application of paint in a manner that seems dramatic, yet expressive, within the foreground of the painting and appears to submerge

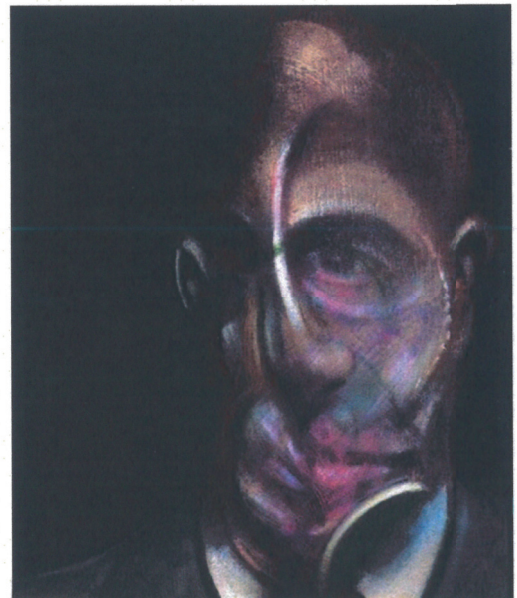


Figure 2

² Gagosian Gallery. *Jenny Saville*, New York: Rizzoli, 2005.

from the monotonal background. In addition, Bacon paints directly onto the canvas without any preliminary drawing to further ensure that the image and painting technique are inseparable. This is quite different to Saville's work where the background serves purely for its purpose of filling the canvas rather than interacting with the formal elements.

Part of the stylistic aspect of an artist's work is the application of colour as this contributes significantly to the mood and atmosphere of the piece. A noticeable difference is that Jenny Saville's use of colour tends to be more neutral and realistic compared to Francis Bacon's work. Saville, like Bacon, was inspired by the work of Velázquez (born 1599) particularly his *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* [3] and has commented on the 'brilliant reds and violent blues' within the painting and perhaps these colour schemes directly inspired her use of colour in *Stare* [4].



Figure 3

One of Saville's artistic techniques is to saturate colours on *Photoshop* to increase the intensity of colours and make the pictures more aesthetically engaging. Saville amalgamates the juxtaposition of primary colours through the use of reflection and paint splatters which creates a loose interaction between the background and main subject of the artwork. The angular application of the red tones on the face is evocative by reflecting the brutalized theme Jenny Saville wanted to depict and she enforces this theme through the psychological link that connects red with violence. Francis Bacon also completed a series of studies based upon



Figure 4

Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* partly due to the admiration he had regarding the 'magnificent colour of it.'³ David Sylvester, a well established art critic, said Bacon had a 'tremendous drive to make variation after variation on this image,' and one of the progressive developments that



Bacon made was to adapt the colour schemes of his paintings. Experimentally, Bacon would integrate strokes of scarlet into the setting of the painting which contrasts the dark backgrounds but the regal colour also introduces an element of violence in the atmosphere of the artwork. In Saville's other painting such as *Prop [5]* even though the colours are seemingly realistic they still appear 'unexpected' as Saville is not afraid of conveying 'flesh which is puckered, scarred and bruised',⁴ and the translucency of the skin and painted tones are aesthetically unattractive.

Figure 5

Another aspect in which Jenny Saville and Francis Bacon are very different is pictorial space, one example of this is the relationship Bacon's work shows between the figures and the backgrounds. The figures are generally painted with a great detail of depth and highly visible brush-strokes. This contrasts with the thin layer of paint that they are set against resulting in the artwork looking 2-dimensional. Enforced by this is the isolated space which surrounds the figures that are always in full view and this aesthetic quality of Bacon's artwork is very different to Saville's. In comparison, Saville's artwork seems 'compressed' and one viewer responded to the artwork by saying that it was 'spatially ambiguous'⁴. This is due to the contorted angles of the model's body which visually attract the viewer to the figure, ensuring that this is the main focus of the artwork. In addition, Jenny Saville uses a technique called foreshortening in the majority of her paintings. For example in *Strategy [6]*,

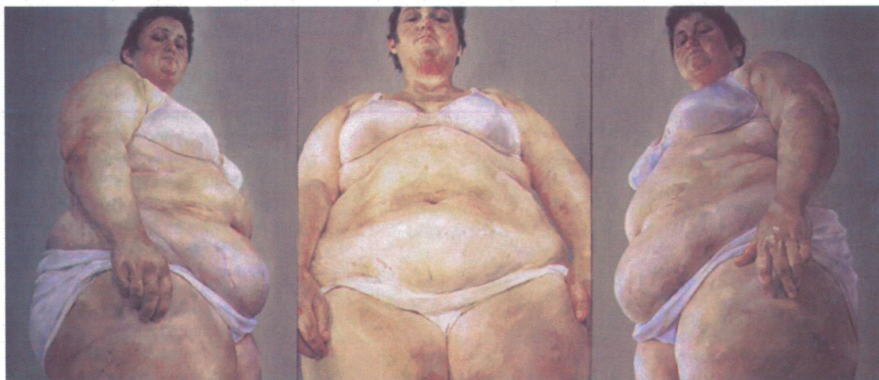


Figure 6

this gives the impression that the figures are oversized for the canvases and adds three-dimensional volume. Many of Bacon's triptychs have a strongly asserted symmetry and visually they appear balanced because the middle portrait will be painted from a frontal view and the perspective of the

³ Sylvester, David. *Looking back at Francis Bacon*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000.

⁴ Meager, Michelle. *Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust*. *Hypatia* vol. 18, no. 4 (Fall/Winter 2003).

other portraits are painted to be looking towards the middle. An example of this is in *Three Studies for a Portrait (Peter Beard)* [7]. This makes the triptychs seem closed as none of the portraits are facing beyond the canvases.



Related to pictorial space is the huge magnitude of Saville's work and one of her reasons behind this scale is that she finds 'working from life very intimidating'⁵. Consequently, her artwork creates a sense of over empowerment upon the viewer. As a viewer you have a different outlook upon the painting depending on the distance from which you stand from the painting. On the contrary, Bacon always painted on the same scale, regardless of whether they were heads or figures, and this scale was around 75% of life size. However *Study of a Nude* [8] proved that he did have the capability of working in different scales as this was only about 1/8 life size, but he generally painted to his preference.

The final stylistic quality to be investigated is the importance of photography to both Jenny Saville and Francis Bacon. After looking through books showing including of their studios it is clear, from all the photographs pinned to the walls that these sources of inspiration are significant in the artistic process both undertake. Jenny Saville acknowledges the importance of medical books and specimens in aiding her artwork as she is directly reliant on these sources to help her understand and correctly convey the anatomy of the body. Francis Bacon used photography as a reference to help him work on proportion in order to achieve the successful resonance of distorting brush strokes.

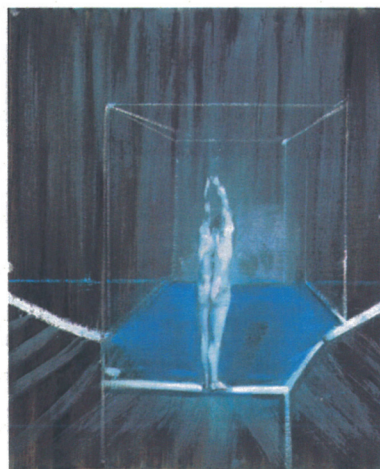


Figure 8

⁵ John, Elton. *Interview with Jenny Saville*, Arts Publications, October 2003.

The aesthetic qualities and motives behind Jenny Saville and Francis Bacon's paintings

So far I have provided evidence that there are some visible similarities between the artwork of these two renowned contemporary artists. I now intend to look at whether the underlying similarities are related more to their motives and attitudes towards the subjects they paint rather than their stylistic qualities.

Aesthetics include the judgement of sentiment and taste and art critics have debated aesthetics regarding art for centuries. However the work of Jenny Saville and Francis Bacon push these boundaries for many viewers who find the subjects unpleasant and unattractive to look at. Jenny Saville's artwork models contorted body angles and this is one of the aesthetic qualities to her work. She doesn't conceal any aspect of the painting and this honesty to 'paint how it is'⁶ despite the grotesqueness, is an unrivalled quality for an artist. Saville chooses to paint from unique perspectives, such as in *Propped* [9], which has the model looking down in an



Figure 9

uncomplimentary body position and consequently causes the model to just become a mass of flesh in the centre of the canvas. Due to these angles *Propped* looks to have what Michelle Meager classifies as 'disturbed proportions'. She continues to explain, 'the knees and thighs dominate the image...each knee is larger than the women's breasts, larger than her head.'⁶ Why then is Jenny Saville's art so captivating? Perhaps it is the uniqueness because traditionally art has always had to be aesthetically pleasing to be popular, but this definitely isn't. It is engaging because it works to redefine beauty. It highlights imperfections and insecurities – which every human possesses, and in this each and every person can relate to the artwork.

Aesthetically Bacon and Saville share the similarity of making a lasting impact upon the viewer and one of the qualities in Francis Bacon's work is the development of his triptychs. These advanced both in style and abstraction throughout his career. 'Triptychs,' said Bacon in 1979, 'are the things I like doing most, and I think this may be related to the thought I've sometimes had of making a film.' Many of Bacon's triptychs portray one person but within this he juxtaposes the three paintings by including contrasting perspectives of the sitter as well as different painting styles and he has explained, 'I like the juxtaposition of the images separated on three different canvases.'⁷ *Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne* [10] demonstrates the influence Picasso had upon Bacon. The distortions in the painting resemble African tribal masks and similarities can be seen with Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* as the shift in perspective, particularly in the middle painting, is an identifiable feature of Picasso.

⁶ Meager, Michelle. *Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust*. *Hypatia* vol. 18, no. 4 (Fall/Winter 2003).

⁷ Sylvester, David. *Looking back at Francis Bacon*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000.



Figure 10

Another motive behind Bacon's work is its ambiguity. Looking at many of his portraits David Sylvester commented that the convulsions which Bacon was interested in painting could 'depict either pain or pleasure'. To expand on this, the grimaces in Bacon's portraits 'could mean both agony and orgasm which were interesting to Bacon as an indication of an intense feeling'. A quality that Francis Bacon highly values in art is, what he describes as, 'violence'. By 'violence' he is simply referring to the energy in the artwork 'being conveyed through a very immediate manner'⁸ and this is due to the aesthetic engagement that the artwork provokes due to the depiction of subject and colour. However it seems it is not vivid colour which necessarily attracts the viewer, because one of the peculiarities about Bacon's paintings is that they are all intended to be viewed through glass. This explains there is an element of translucency in many of them and also removes the subjects several times from the viewers. Adam Phillips claimed that the images are 'so daunting they need a frame within a frame.'⁹



Figure 11

There is a distinct possibility that one of the appealing traits of Francis Bacon and Jenny Saville's art is the way they view beauty. Associated with this is their personal stance on male and female self-image, which differs considerably. Francis Bacon doesn't have such strong opinions on self-image as Saville, however his opinions remain unique to him, with a distinct element of fatalism. He saw all humans as 'meat' and claims 'we are all potential carcasses.'¹⁰ This pessimistic outlook on life is evident in *Painting, 1946* [11] in which there are limbs and parts of human corpses which appear to hang like meat, similarly to that in a Butcher's shop, showing a belief in the absolute mortality of man without hope or redemption. There are few artists who painted more self-portraits than Bacon and when asked whether he had a different style painting self-portraits compared to portraits of others he replied: 'No. I loathe my own face...' so clearly he did not value his own self-image greatly. Richard Dorment noted that in *Study for Self-portrait* [12]. Bacon 'alternates between a feminine and masculine identity'¹¹ doing so through the posture and poise he captures. He goes on to say, if the figures in this triptych 'are seen as embryonic shapes desperately trying – and failing – to form a single, secure identity, then they speak of a universal human condition, with which we struggle all our lives – and this is the stuff of the greatest art.'¹¹

⁸ Sylvester, David. *Looking back at Francis Bacon*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000.

⁹ Phillips, Adam. *Psycho analyse, Tate Modern*.

¹⁰ Whitehead, John W. *Francis Bacon's eye of despair*, Gadfly online: <http://www.gadflyonline.com/11-5-01/art-bacon.html> (accessed January 17, 2009)

¹¹ Domino, Christophe. *Francis Bacon: taking reality by surprise*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997

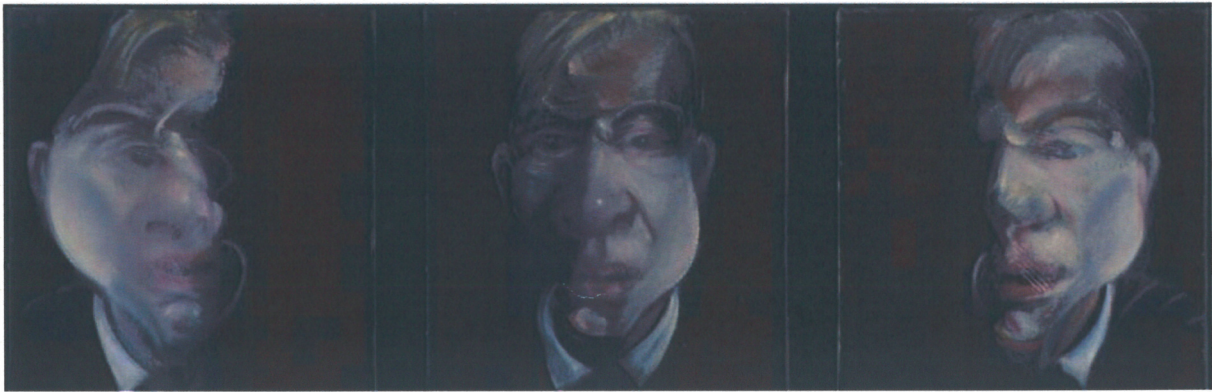


Figure 12

Jenny Saville shares Bacon's interest in self-image but viewers may argue she does this due to her own personal interest in feminism. Michelle Meager wrote an essay titled '*Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust*' in which she commented that Jenny Saville's 'work interrogates assumptions about beauty by depicting bodies that are not all beautiful in a conventional sense.' For



Figure 13

centuries, in classical art, the female nudes painted have always been slim, elegant and evenly proportioned – whereas Jenny Saville's artwork goes against all pre-made expectations of models in artwork. Nevertheless, she goes on to argue that 'the success of Saville's work is not dependent on aesthetic practice that redefines the boundaries of beauty.'¹² Instead, Saville's work is successful due to her acceptance of 'experiencing oneself as disgusting'. She does not attempt to alter the models and many viewers would not consider her work as aesthetically attractive but it does give viewers a confidence to be happy with themselves, no matter what their body is like.

Saville's painting *Plan* [13] portrays vulnerability as the lines painted onto the body are the marks they make before you have liposuction done. In an

interview with David Sylvester Jenny Saville explains the ambiguity that comes from having liposuction,

'...you've got to have some vulnerability to go and get it but some people think it shows a loving caress of the body.'¹³ These lines act as contours and this complements the idea of 'self-exploration' that Saville saw in *Plan*. So, are the motives behind her artwork to improve the female self-image? To a greater extent, yes, she sets out to 'make you feel your own body.'¹³ As a spectator she aims to make you acknowledge your gut-reaction to her artwork. It may well be disgust but she uses this as the predominant method of engaging the spectator. She reminds the viewers that 'there can be beauty in individualism. If there is a wart or a scar, this can be beautiful, in a sense, when you paint.

¹² Meager, Michelle. *Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust*. *Hypatia* vol. 18, no. 4 (Fall/Winter 2003).

¹³ Sylvester, David. *ART: Areas of Flesh*. *The Independent*, January 30, 1994.

It's part of your identity...'¹⁴ This reassurance is what females need to hear in a culture obsessed by dieting and celebrities, there is no need to change yourself – we should just accept how we are. From this it could be concluded that Bacon's was not so concerned about male or female self-image as Saville but instead used art as an attempted method to discover his own self-image rather than promote others.

To some extent although both artists must share an interest in the subjects that they chose to paint; inevitably their personal attitudes to the subjects will be different. Upon observation, there is a noticeable development in the abstraction of Bacon's portraits. Each abstraction is different because the distortion is unique to the sitter's personality. Bacon and Saville's artwork is both primarily self-portraiture because Bacon refused to complete commissioned portraits. Consequently he chose his models, who mainly consisted of his special friends and due to the intimate relationship he had with his sitter's it was almost a reflection of himself. Richard Dormont suggested that in doing these portraits he was 'searching for the essence of the person.'¹⁵ He portrays these findings through the way he drags the paint across the face and these striations could suggest physical movement or have a partly hidden meaning revealing part of the sitter's character. Unlike Saville who covers her figures with an epidermis of flesh, Bacon excavates the faces by using concave sweeps of paint to define facial features. In this sense every brushstroke of Bacon's art is crucial in building up form and the portrait may well be treated as a form in which Bacon can work out his conflicting feelings of 'affection and hatred for the person he is painting.'

Both Jenny Saville and Francis Bacon painted a number of nudes in which the gender is uncertain, these androgynous figures may symbolise a shared attitude that essentially, there is no difference between the male and female gender. Jenny Saville revealed that she was interested in 'the idea of floating gender that is not fixed'. This is partly because she admits, 'I'm drawn to bodies that emanate a sort of state of in-betweenness.'¹⁶ However it is clear that Saville and Bacon both share a 'fascination with the body' and it is this interest in their subjects that tempts them to push the boundaries of their artwork further and further. Saville declared herself as a feminist 'conscious about the female body and representation' and this plays a huge part in her attitude to the subjects she chooses to paint. Her work constitutes a feminist recuperation of the female form and as an artist she



Figure 14

¹⁴ Mackenzie, Suzie. *Under the Skin*, The Guardian, October 22, 2005.

¹⁵ Dormont, Richard. *A Fresh side of Bacon*, The Telegraph, June 22, 2005.

¹⁶ John, Elton. *Interview with Jenny Saville*, Arts Publications, October 2003.

wants to break rules and cross boundaries. Saville has scratched words across the figure in *Branded* [14]: supportive, petite, precious... These are all words which evoke ideals of femininity which most people would say the painted figure does not comply with.

CONCLUSION

As observed there are several common prominent features causing Jenny Saville and Francis Bacon's artwork to be easily identifiable. They both share a quality of having a visceral impact upon the viewer, predominantly because their subjects make a lasting impression, and this quality provokes their unsettling nature. Having said this I think the mood and atmosphere the artwork conveyed by both artists is quite different and this is a reflection of each individual artist. Francis Bacon's artwork has a sense of futility which I think becomes especially apparent later in his career when he began to do more self-portraits. He acknowledged that 'I've only got myself to paint'¹⁷ as lovers and close friends began to pass away. Whereas, Jenny Saville's artwork seems to convey a more optimistic outlook through her promotion of female self-image and as it provides a reassuring humanism.

The distortion techniques which both artists use are different in terms of the perspective, application of paint and exaggeration. These differences cannot be put down to gender but more individual style. However I feel Francis Bacon's distortion is more about impact due to the strength of definition in his brush strokes. This portrays a confidence, perhaps more natural to males, because Bacon only had one chance to put down the paint which goes to form a vital aspect of the portrait. Similarly, Saville and Bacon use distortion as a stylistic technique to personalise their art as well as a method in which they attempt to understand the limits of human form. They do this by pushing the distortion to the point at which the sitters remain recognisable to themselves and the human form. Each artist recognises the point at which distortion becomes grotesque and prevents their art from reaching this point. By leaving it with distortion the paintings will stimulate viewers natural intrigue.

To conclude, I think that although there are unique stylistic differences between the artists, fundamentally the foremost consideration for both artists is not to promote their gender. I have concluded this because Bacon's paintings of females are handled with distortion consistent to his male portraits. Saville is in an early stage of her career and I believe that she is still exploring the visual potential of the female form, not deliberately avoiding the male figure. Both approaches to distortion are unique through their ability to express action and energy, using paint as a medium to 'really get under skin'¹⁷ and as a form of art portraying what cannot be expressed otherwise.

¹⁷ Dorment, Richard. *A Fresh side of Bacon*, The Telegraph, June 22, 2005.

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- 2) Bacon, Francis. *Portrait of Michel Leiris*, 1976. Oil on canvas. 0.35 x 30.5 cm
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- 3) Velázquez, Diego. *Pope Innocent X*, 1650. Oil on canvas. 140 x 120 cm
 Bacon, Francis. *Study after Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953. Oil on canvas. 60.25 x 46.5 cm

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Picture from: http://mattkirkland.com/2007_06_01_archive.html

- 4) Saville, Jenny. *Stare*, 2004-5. Oil on canvas. 3.05 x 2.5 m

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- 5) Saville, Jenny. *Prop*, 1992. Oil on canvas. 2.13 x 1.83 m

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- 7) Bacon, Francis. *Three Studies for a Portrait of Peter Beard*, 35.5 x 30.5 cm (each)

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- 8) Bacon, Francis. *Study of a Nude*, 1952-3. Oil on canvas. 61 x 51 cm

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- 9) Saville, Jenny. *Propped*, 1992. Oil on canvas. 2.13 x 1.83 m

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- 10) Bacon, Francis. *Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne*, 1965. Oil on canvas. 35.5 x 30.5 cm (each)

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- 11) Bacon, Francis. *Painting, 1946*, 1946. Oil on canvas. 198 x 132 cm

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- 12) Bacon, Francis. *Three Studies for Self-Portrait*, 1979. Oil on canvas. 35.5 x 30.5 cm (each)

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- 14) Saville, Jenny. *Branded*, 1992. Oil on canvas. 2.13 x 1.83 m

Picture from: <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/kuspit/Images/kuspit9-15-18.jpg>