

Jenny SAVILLE (1970)

Mother and Children (After the Leonardo Cartoon)

Charcoal, with stumping and touches of rose chalk, on white paper.

Signed and dated Saville '08 at the lower right.

1518 x 1215 mm. (59 3/4 x 47 7/8 in.)

This monumental charcoal drawing is a study for Jenny Saville's painting The Mothers, completed in 2011 and today in a private collection. Depicting the pregnant artist holding two squirming babies, the canvas is part of a recent group of large-scale paintings and drawings that reflect a new interest in portraying the intimacy of pregnancy and motherhood. Saville gave birth to her first child, a son, in 2007, followed by a daughter in 2008, and the experience of motherhood soon found expression in her work. The artist made paintings and drawings of herself throughout her pregnancies, and also asked several expectant mothers to model for her while working on this series of compositions.

Saville has recently described the genesis of these works: 'I had thought about doing mother-and-child images because I have never done anything with children before. I've tried to stay away a little bit, about the issues surrounding biology being determinate and that women are here to have babies. But, it's so powerful and I thought, well, I quite like tackling grand, old subjects. It's a challenge to make a painting with a child that isn't sentimental. It's a real challenge to actually make the sort of physicality of a baby's body, and not be cutesy and Baroque and bubbly; to find a dynamic within the body. Children are quite animalistic and that is difficult to create.'

Simon Schama has aptly characterized this new series of mothers and children by Jenny Saville in a review of a recent exhibition of her work: '...take a look at what Saville has done with her astounding paintings and drawings of her naked self with her baby boys exploding every which way from arm and lap...Not since Leonardo (whose own studies were a departure point for Saville) and Rembrandt has an artist got the peculiar body language of very small children exactly right. One of the baby boys arches his

back in precisely that pre-tantrum power-moment no parent is likely to forget; others have the juicy-lipped, groggy fullness of the milkily sated...To convey the whirl of them in motion, the storm of fidget, Saville has done something so simple, so brilliant and yet so unprecedented that once you've seen it you can't believe no one arrived at the idea before. She has retained all the drawn pentimenti of possible positions for the infants into the eventual painting or drawing, so that the same image contains within it a baby boy asleep, another in a tensed tantrum, another hanging loose, another in arms, another tumbling away...Saville has created movie animation for modern art and the effect is liberating, exhilarating, dumbfounding in the best possible way.'

Like other works from this series, this drawing is inspired by Renaissance images of the Virgin and Child, and in particular Leonardo da Vinci's large cartoon of The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist, also known as the Burlington House Cartoon, in the collection of the National Gallery in London. Leonardo's monumental drawing is thought to be a cartoon for a now-lost painting, and has been dated to c.1499-1500. As Saville has recalled, 'I have quite a personal relationship with Leonardo da Vinci, because my parents had a very small reproduction, about 20 cm by 25 cm, of the Burlington House Cartoon. I moved house quite a lot as a child and that used to reappear quickly, so that was my permanence – the drawings I made that I carried around, and this image. I used to go and see it when I went to school, so it became a powerful icon in my life.'

This exceptional drawing highlights Jenny Saville's brilliant, self-assured draughtsmanship. As one recent scholar has noted of the artist 'In her drawings related to Leonardo's work, she suggests a changing sense of perspective by her varied marks that rise up in passages to define the figures in changing proportions. At the same time, these abundant marks obscure the figures as they radiate out across the paper or canvas support.' As Saville herself has said of these recent graphite and charcoal drawings, 'in this series, I've embraced drawing in a new way. I'm a bit more confident.'

Mother and Children (After the Leonardo Cartoon) may be grouped with a handful of equally large drawn studies by Saville of pregnant women with baby boys, mostly executed between 2009 and 2010, which find their inspiration in Leonardo's Burlington House Cartoon. While some of these are drawn in pencil on fairly sizeable sheets of vellum, others are, like the present sheet, drawn in pencil or charcoal on much larger sheets of paper. Dated 2008, this drawing is one of the earliest of this group.

In a recently published article, Jenny Saville has stated that 'Leonardo's sketch for the Burlington House Cartoon – I call it the Black Mass drawing – is, I think, the greatest drawing ever made in the history of art. It really pre-empts everything that happens in art all the way up to abstraction. I never tire of looking at it. I have it around me all the time. You see it in Giacometti, you see it Auerbach now, this sort of energetic mass of forms. It shows you – to the most extreme level – what Leonardo could do, which was internal structure mixed with movement. I think that the intelligence of the artist is shown in the drawing. His lifelong curiosity has always been something I really loved: his desire to see something through drawing, to understand something himself rather than just relying on other sources.' And, as she also points out, 'There's no one better to look at when you're learning how to draw than Leonardo.'

Provenance:

New York, Sotheby's, 18th Annual 'Take Home a Nude' benefit auction for the New York Academy of Art, 7 October 2009, where acquired by a private collector
Private collection, until 2010.

Literature:

Susan Moore, 'Old-fashioned values', Financial Times, 23 June 2012, p.7; P. L. Henderson, 'Images of motherhood', Resurgence & Ecologist, November-December 2023, illustrated p.55.

Artist description:

Born in Cambridge, Jenny Saville studied at the Glasgow School of Art, graduating in 1992 with a final show in which every painting was sold. While still at art school, she took part in the British Portrait

Competition at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 1990 and in the Van Gogh Self Portrait Competition at the Burrell Collection in Glasgow. Shortly after her graduation, the artist's work came to the attention of the collector Charles Saatchi, who purchased several of her paintings. Between 1992 and 1993, Saatchi commissioned Saville to produce a number of paintings which were later included in the exhibition Young British Artists III at the Saatchi Gallery in London in 1994, where the work of the twenty-three year old artist received a significant amount of critical attention. Working on a very large scale, Saville created paintings characterized both by an abiding interest in the naked female body and the sheer physicality of oil paint. A desire to learn more about anatomy led to an opportunity, during a stay in America in 1994, to make a careful study of cosmetic surgical procedures. In 1995 and 1996 she collaborated with the photographer Glen Luchford on a series of paintings of a female model pressed against a sheet of glass; these works were exhibited at the Pace McGill Gallery in New York in 1996. Saville's paintings were included in the controversial exhibition Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection at the Royal Academy in London in 1997, alongside the work of Damien Hirst, Chris Ofili, Tracey Emin and others, which brought her work to the notice of the public at large. Saville's paintings were also included in the exhibition The Nude in Contemporary Art at the Aldrich Museum of Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut in 1999. In 1998 a solo exhibition, entitled Territories, was mounted at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, followed in 2003 by another exhibition entitled Migrants.

Saville was appointed a lecturer of figure painting at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where she taught between 2000 and 2006. A solo museum exhibition of her work was mounted at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Rome in 2005, and the following year she completed a commission from the Italian collector Carlo Bilotti for three paintings to decorate the chapel of the Museo Carlo Bilotti in Rome. These were installed in 2006 alongside other site-specific works commissioned for the chapel from Damien Hirst and David Salle. In 2007 she was elected to the Royal Academy, and in 2011 and 2012 a retrospective exhibition of her paintings and drawings, which included the present sheet, was held at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida, and at the Ashmolean Museum and the Modern Art Museum in Oxford. Another major solo exhibition took place at the George Economou Collection in Athens in 2018-2019, while another was held in the Museo Novecento and several other locations in Florence in 2021-2022. Most recently, Saville's work was included in the exhibition Women Painting Women, at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in 2022. After working for several years between studios in London and Palermo in Sicily, Saville today lives and works in Oxford.