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A Case for Abject Bodies

The corpse, the prostitute, the transgender, sweat, revolt - these are some examples of the *abject*. Many have experienced artworks with such subjects depicted.

Transgressive artwork is not new. For centuries artists have represented death through use of skulls, blood, slaughtered animals, and corpses. Call to mind a few examples to jumpstart your thoughts: Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, Francisco Goya's *Black Paintings*, Francis Bacon's disfigured and malformed figures, Soutine's slaughtered ox paintings. *Abject* is a term that has earned much of its weight from Julia Kristeva, French philosopher, within the context of Postmodern thought. Kristeva's thoughts on abjection were published in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* in 1982. I will reveal Kristeva's ideas of abjection by looking at contemporary art, specifically Jenny Saville's work. I want to avoid, as much as possible, talking about the obesity and feminist issues commonly discussed in Saville's work and focus on the abject properties. I will situate Saville's work as abject and connect her work to Kristeva's notions.

Leesa Fanning's (art historian, curator, and author) essay *Willem de Kooning's Women: The Body of the Grotesque* provides points of application to understand Kristeva's conceptions of the semiotic and symbolic in order to examine Saville's work. To resolve discomfort felt from abject art I propose looking at artist Kiki Smith's body art and applying a pragmatist theory to abjection. As a preface to this essay I would like to add that this is by no means a comprehensive

authoritative essay on this topic. I hope to express my understanding of Kristeva's ideas and Postmodern thought in application to contemporary art-working and viewing.

Forming and Situating the Subject

Two statements that Kristeva proffers in *Powers of Horror* clearly characterize abjection, which will later help to discuss abjection in Saville's work: "the subject has only one quality of the object-that of being opposed to *I*," and "abjection is above all ambiguity" (1, 9). Simply, abject could be understood as anything that opposes itself to something. We should look closely to see how and where abjection situates the subject, object, and formation of a boundary. We can find this within Kristeva's model of psychoanalytic development.

In Noelle McAfee's essay, *Abject Strangers: Toward an Ethics of Respect*, she describes Kristeva's psychoanalytic model of development. Kristeva's model follows Jacques Lacan's and Sigmund Freud's development models with added modifications. Lacan posits that the mirror stage is a time where the infant sees itself in the mirror and recognizes itself as an "I" and then distinctions are formed. Although the infant thinks that the image is itself, a form of narcissism takes place and thus the ego is formed (McAfee 117). Conversely, Kristeva's model asserts there is a first repression before the mirror stage. The primal repression of the chora:

The subject/object dichotomy (difference) cannot set in until the child represses the *chora*: this state of being one with all. To do this, the child expels part of itself from itself. It spits out the warm milk, the mother's body, psychically and physically in order to create itself. 'I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out,' Kristeva writes, 'I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself.' Through 'ab-jecting,' the child gives birth to itself as an I. (McAfee 117-118)

McAfee continues to explain, "The child begins to form personal boundaries. . . . This is not a one-time event but will continue throughout the lifetime the abject perpetuates the bounds of oneself with a threat (McAfee 118). In other words, when we are confronted by the abject we

seek the womb but know we cannot go back, so we are situated in an in-between state. I want to point out the expelling that occurs. A revolt occurs during the separation. The child is abjecting or rejecting the substance that nourishes it. This seems like a contradiction. In the act of encountering the abject there is a moment of defining the self and what it opposes. Not only is a boundary established, but also the distinction that occurs during this phase is confusing and ambiguous. Overlap and seemingly conflicting positions are engaged.

Kristeva continues to engage her reader in discovering this boundary, this border, this in-between. Regarding this important yet contradictory state Kristeva writes, “[the abject is] radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses . . . from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (2). This action is repeated over and over throughout lifetime. The tone of the passage is one of provoking followed by fearfulness. Kristeva continues, “the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and much. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them” (2). Vividly, Kristeva writes that in the presence of death “There I am at the border of my condition as a living being” (3). Note the provoking nature of the abject yet the interest one has toward it. The abject causes the subject to question their existence and a de-stabilizing occurs. When the encounter with the abject takes place the subject is forced into an in-between state. This state of in-betweenness is pervasive in Jenny Saville’s works as I will point out.

I will argue that Saville’s bodies depict in an in-between state and they also confront the viewer who reacts in confusion forcing them into an in-between state. Jenny Saville’s paintings often depict bodies, individually or multiples. Her bodies exist in a flux state, disfigured, bloody, bruised, swollen, cut, they are psychologically riveting. Saville is painting much more than flesh. She depicts massive rolls and folds of bloody, sweaty, cut, and dying flesh. Most times the

bodies hardly stay inside the picture plane; they almost spill out into the viewer's personal space. The sheer scale and graphic quality of her work is very confrontational and overwhelms the viewer.

In Saville's painting *Matrix* (c.1999) a transgendered body is depicted spilling out of a large seven feet high by ten feet wide canvas. The body is positioned horizontally and receding diagonally into space. At first glance the body appears to be floating, but there is an indication of a support beneath. I see what appears to be the head of a man on a female body. The private parts are exposed and the vagina is very near the viewer. This body exhibits an in-betweenness. A transgendered body can be seen as both male and female. In a 2005 interview Saville describes *Matrix* and another of a transgender (in *Passage* female head, breasts, and a penis) entitled *Passage*:

With the transvestite I was searching for a body that was between genders The idea of floating gender that is not fixed. The transvestite I worked with has a natural penis and false silicone breasts. Thirty or forty years ago this body couldn't have existed and I was looking for a kind of contemporary architecture of the body (Saville 126).

Saville makes a more generic statement about the bodies she paints, "I'm drawn to bodies that emanate a sort of state of in-betweenness: a hermaphrodite, a transvestite, a carcass, a half-alive/half-dead head" (Saville 124). Saville is very aware of the contradictions and subjects that display an in-betweenness. It appears that Saville is taking material straight from Kristeva.

Another theme that is often in Saville's bodies is the body in plastic or cosmetic surgery. We can see this type of body in *Plan*, *Rubens Flap*, *Pause 2*, and many of her works from the early 1990s. These canvases depict women who are in the process of altering their body through surgery. Eric Plemons, author of *Envisioning the Body in Relation: Finding Sex, Changing Sex*, discusses the confusion and complications associated with sex change or body alterations. Mainstream society tends to view sexuality and related topics as taboo. When it comes to

diagnosing sex or gender changes there are complex and confusing rules within medical practices. Questioning whether the operation is necessary and based on emotions or based on problems. There seems to be a lot of gray area. Is this right? Is this wrong? Ethically, physically, morally? Embedded in these issues is a great deal of ambiguity and in-betweenness. Saville says, “To see a surgeon’s hand inside a body moving flesh around, you see a lot of damage and adjustment to the boundary of the body” (Saville 124). “Boundary of the body” describes perfectly the reaction that is experienced when confronted by the abject. When we confront Saville’s canvases it is a reciprocal encounter. They confront us. They are large, abrupt, and graphic. They depict bodies that we don’t witness on a daily basis. The viewer is halted and sent questioning. This reaction is a perfect example of what Kristeva intended when she described the interaction with the abject. We have seen how the abject is formed the subjects and object (abject) being in opposition and forcing the subject into ambiguity and an in-between state. We understand how Saville’s work displays qualities of ambiguity and in-betweenness. Putting more defining characteristics to abject will help us to see the overt abjection in Saville’s work.

Defining Abject

The term abject has some very obvious characteristics that can be seen in Saville’s work. We see corpse like figures, bodily fluids, sweat, blood, and confrontational gazes. They are disturbing. Kristeva gives us some blatant examples of abjection in *Powers of Horror*:

The corpse A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty on the part of death It is something rejected from which one does not part what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer. . . . Any crime Immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady (2-4).

We understand that Kristeva has defined the abject very broadly. Two of Jenny Saville's paintings that contain abject imagery are *Reverse and Fulcrum*.

Fulcrum (c.1998-99) is a large painting on canvas that stands nine and a half feet tall by sixteen feet wide. The main subject is three stacked female bodies, big, fleshy. The bodies are stacked horizontally alternating head to toe. As if the bodies weren't connected enough from the stacking Saville uses similarly colored flesh between the unclothed women suggesting a skin grafting or Siamese twin apparition. There is a medical feel to the environment they are placed in, cool blue and green hues suggest this. Some are familiar with the stacked bodies at mass graves from victims of genocide, Auschwitz and the Final Solution running experiments on the Jewish people. The bodies seem to rest on a surface like a patient table at the doctor's office, perhaps adding to the medical examination feeling. The flesh is directed at the viewer more than eye contact of the women. The flesh looks ghastly with the pale green and gray blues. There are areas of crimson that suggest blood showing itself on and beneath the skin. A line of thin rope is wrapping around the bodies on the left side of the canvas, so taught that it is incising the skin and flesh. There are a number of characteristics present within the painting that identify as abject. Mostly the ghastly pale flesh and stacking of bodies remind us of the corpse. The viewer is confronted by overwhelming subject matter and scale, which sends us into a state of uneasiness and ambiguity, searching for some ground to stand on and identify with the image.

Another remarkable painting is *Reverse* (c.2002-03). *Reverse* depicts a very large head and cropped shoulder of a child, quite likely a girl. Why is the head horizontal? Is this a dead body? The big eyes stare out at us betraying death. The flesh is thick and oily. It sags off of her face. The color palette Saville employs is bloody crimsons and cadmiums adding to the sweaty feeling present on the skin. Lips are agape showing teeth. We can almost see into the dark cavity of her mouth. Why is her head reflecting on the surface it rests on? Is this another medical table?

Not only are we confronted with an apparently lifeless head; it is a child's. This is extremely confrontational. The viewer may think of violence seeing this image and a child is the least likely victim we expect to see. Again, the abject imagery in *Reverse* is a perfect example of how Kristeva defines the abject. And the viewer is left in an ambiguous state searching for firm ground.

Saville's work easily reveals abject qualities. Besides the transgressive character in Saville's work it is remarkably poetic. I admire her canvases for her technique and application methods producing well formed and rendered bodies. These ideas of poetry and perfection are revealed in Kristeva's notions of semiotic and symbolic.

Understanding Semiotic and Symbolic

The semiotic and symbolic are terms rooted in semantics, the study of language and theory. Kristeva would say that one cannot exist without the other and that much of art reveals this. As I will show, semiotic is more closely linked with abjection. Saville's work reveals this poetic notion and situates itself perfectly with Kristeva's ideas.

Leesa Fanning's essay, *Willem de Kooning's Women: The Body of the Grotesque*, analyses de Kooning's *Women* paintings regarding the semiotic and the symbolic.

Although Fanning does not mention Saville, Saville speaks regularly of de Kooning and acknowledges his influence. She describes de Kooning's paint application, "his juicy liquid color colliding into itself" to emphasize the movement between static and flux. Saville compares de Kooning's work to music, with its different cadences and sounds able to produce emotion (Saville 125-126).

Fanning states, "two 'types' of bodies [exist] . . . the 'semiotic', non-Cartesian body of flux, fluidity, and excess, which characterize the grotesque bodily forms of de Kooning's women, and the 'symbolic', Cartesian, or classical body as a contained and stable form, which

existed as the dominant mode of representation from the Renaissance to the early twentieth century” (242-243). Fanning believes Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man* is a good example (243). I find it most helpful to think of the symbolic in art as something static and maintains a very traditional classical rendering.

In contrast, Fanning describes the semiotic. She states, “Kristeva defines the semiotic as based on Freud’s conception of the primary processes, the pleasure principle, instinctual drives, and the unconscious. The semiotic is characterized as fluid, excessive, rhythmic, and energetic, as a dispersed bodily force” (Fanning 243-244). Fanning describes the semiotic as being poetic. Fanning’s contrasts of de Kooning’s energetic unstable forms from classical “perfectly contained” bodies. Because of the semiotic push of de Kooning’s *Women* she concludes they are abject. The ambiguity and disruption of stability is pointed up. I would like to extract these ideas from Jenny Saville’s paintings. Specifically we will look at some of Saville’s paintings aforementioned.

Fanning does make a case for de Kooning’s *Women* containing symbolic characteristics namely the stasis and dominant image of the female form. There are areas where body parts are still and recognizable. Looking at Saville’s *Matrix* there is a dominant figure that is static. Form is built through her use of color and excellent draftsmanship. In those aspects we can understand the symbolic, the orderliness in *Matrix*. The semiotic on the other hand can be seen in the gestural brush marks that often are very wide and sometimes random. Even though the color palette employed lends to building form, we can see how the colors meld into each other in this patchwork of flesh. We see the rose tone underside of the breast abutting to the cadmiums and yellows.

Intense swathes of pinks and reds form the abdomen. There are shades of muted pink grays colliding with purple and blue grays that extend up the thigh. The colors don’t stay in their

bounds. The intensity of color sings. The flesh seems fluid and pliable enough that it sags and could drip off of the bone. In these elements we can see the poetry of the semiotic.

Reverse employs a similar strategy of brushwork but heightened with an even more intense color palette dominated by crimsons and cadmiums. There are skips and abrupt stops of color on the chin, cheek, and ear. The flesh looks sweaty and oily. We can sense the energy and movement of the artist's brush; they are loose and fluid. In this we see the flux elements expressing the semiotic challenging the stasis of the symbolic. Through use of those semiotic elements we see the abject challenging of boundaries, disruption of order, and ambiguity. Semiotic is in this sense related to abjection. I think the viewer can become somewhat unbalanced and unsettled by looking at Saville's abject bodies. I would like to assuage this discomfort by asserting a practical use for abjection.

Pragmatism and Kiki Smith

So what can we take from abjection? How can the abject help to shape the artist, the viewer, and society? It is not a requirement of art to be prescriptive. Saville's form of abjection has a quasi-aesthetic that could be seen just for its beauty. I like Richard Rorty's ideas and Diane Zeeuw's ideas of "edifying" artwork. I think abject artwork has the possibility to get the process of communication going. Maybe these works can help in forming both personal and societal identity. Kristeva's formative model has an emphasis of regarding the "other". Of being forced into contact with it. The abject, in a sense, is offering an alternative. Is it ironic that even though we are repelled or ab-jected by the mother, we also live by it and are nurtured by it? Is it also ironic that the same excrement, and fluids that we abject from our bodies come from what nourishes us?

Kiki Smith is a great example of another artist who deals with ideas of abjection in her works. Smith's work *Pee Body* (c.1992) is a female figure squatting, urinating a string of yellow

beads. Author Helaine Posner posits that Smith's figures confess its lack of physical and psychological stability. Because body fluids in her women are hardly contained there is a lack of stability. Already we know Smith is working in abjection because of the encounter with body fluids. Smith argues, "making 'horrific things' can serve as a type of 'exorcism'. . . making the scariest things you can make and placing them outside you, to protect one's internal psychic being" (Posner 20-21). Smith is engaging in the practice of something cathartic. This is not uncommon; I have heard other artists describe their practice as cleansing. This is a productive means for abjection for the artist.

Christine Ross, who writes on abjection, says, "Object art is saying to the viewer: this failure is not necessarily unproductive, for it can have the effect of complexifying the body" (Ross 286). What she means by this is that we have constructed an ideal of the human body. When object art confronts us with a different perspective it challenges us to have a larger understanding of how complex the body actually is. These bodily abjections challenge how we have sometimes falsely constructed identity and should influence how we will construct identity in a broader sense. I liken this to a pragmatic approach to art.

As a neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty was concerned with practicality. Rorty states, "the pragmatists tell us, it is the vocabulary of practice rather than of theory, of action rather than contemplation, in in which one can say something useful about truth" (722). He is not terribly concerned with the question of what is truth moreover what do we do with knowledge and questions and a line of questioning that resembles: "What would it be like to believe that? What would happen if I did?, What would I be committing myself to?" (Rorty 723). The tone of these questions and thoughts seek an action. Furthermore he points out, "The vocabulary of practice is uneliminable" regardless of area of discourse (Rorty 723). This means that conversing and conspiring will not decrease and that all discourses are relevant.

I will try to approach the abject in that light - which asks if there is in fact some redemptive quality that it has. I think in understanding different perspectives of the body I can show respect or understanding towards people who live in this same skin. This same both dry and oily, confining yet malleable, taught yet loose, lovely and grotesque body.

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A Case for the Abject Body

Kristeva defines abject:

- “abjection is above all ambiguity”
- “ the abject has only one quality of the object– that of being opposed to *I*.”
- Is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses
- A “something” I do not recognize as a thing
- Puts us “on the edge of nonexistence and hallucination

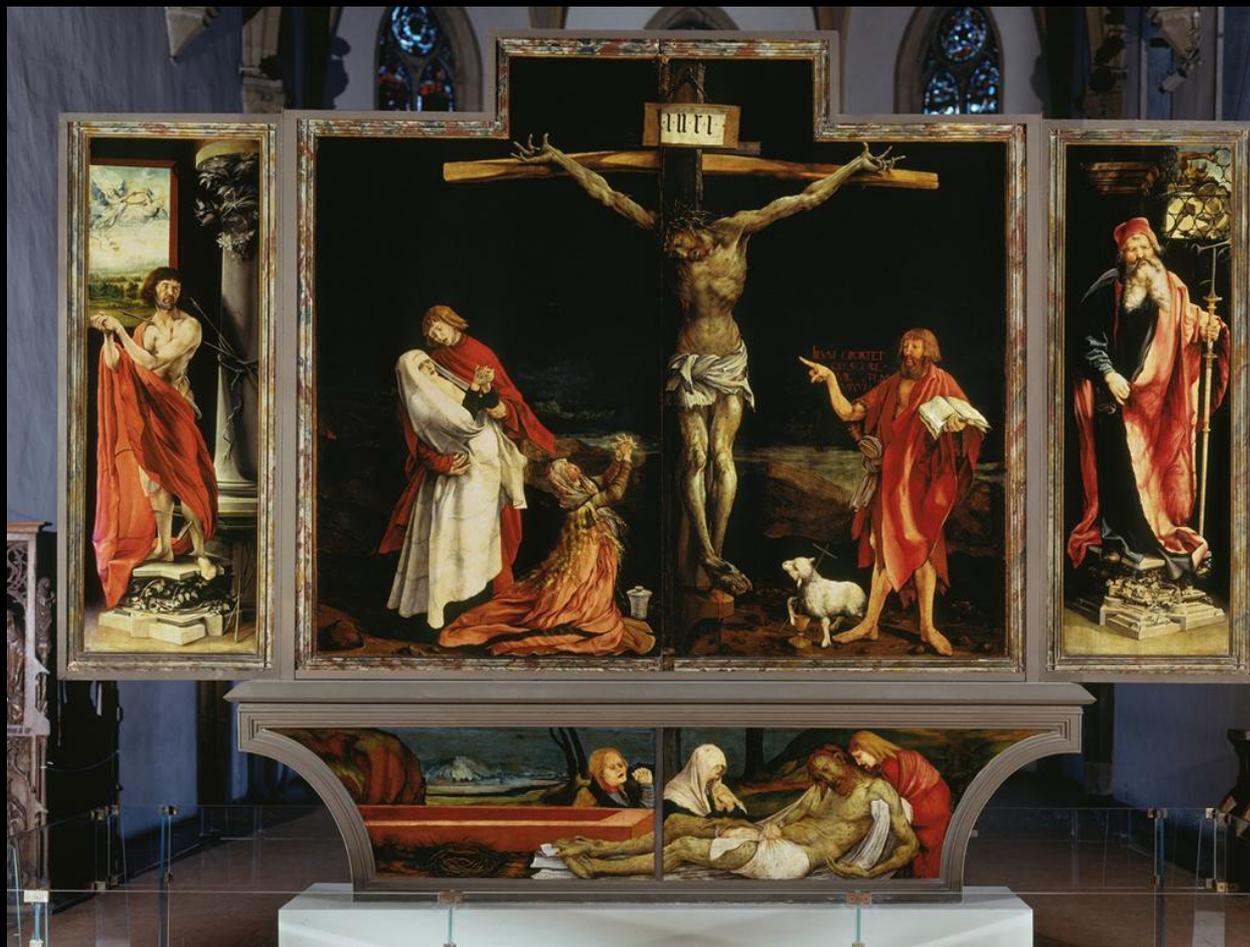
- “Loathing a food item, a piece of filth, waste, or dung...the skin of milk...the corpse...a wound with blood and pus, or the sickly acrid smell of sweat, of decay.”
- “What disturbs identity, system, order...what does not respect systems, borders, rules...the ambiguous, the in-between, the composite... traitor, liar, criminal, rapist, liar.”



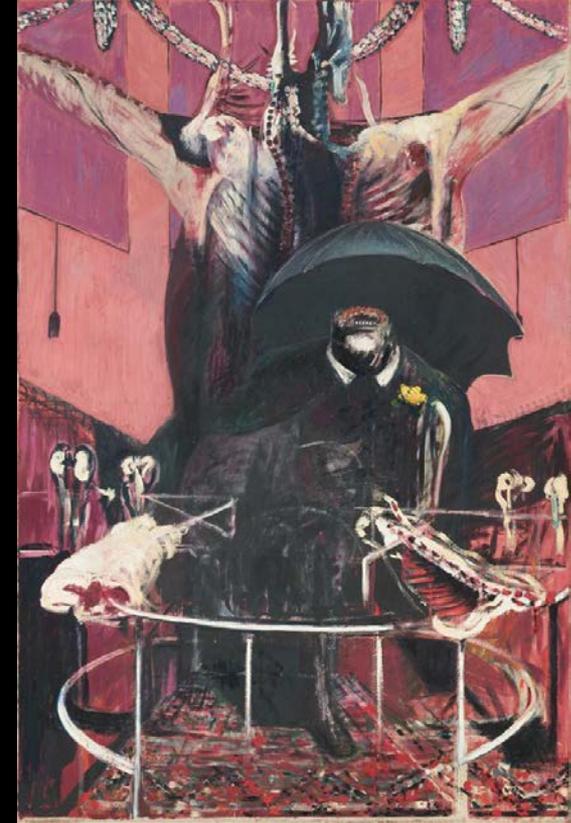
Rembrandt van Rijn
Slaughtered Ox c.1655



Chaim Soutine
Carcass of Beef c.1925



Matthias Grunewald
Isenheim Altarpiece c.1515

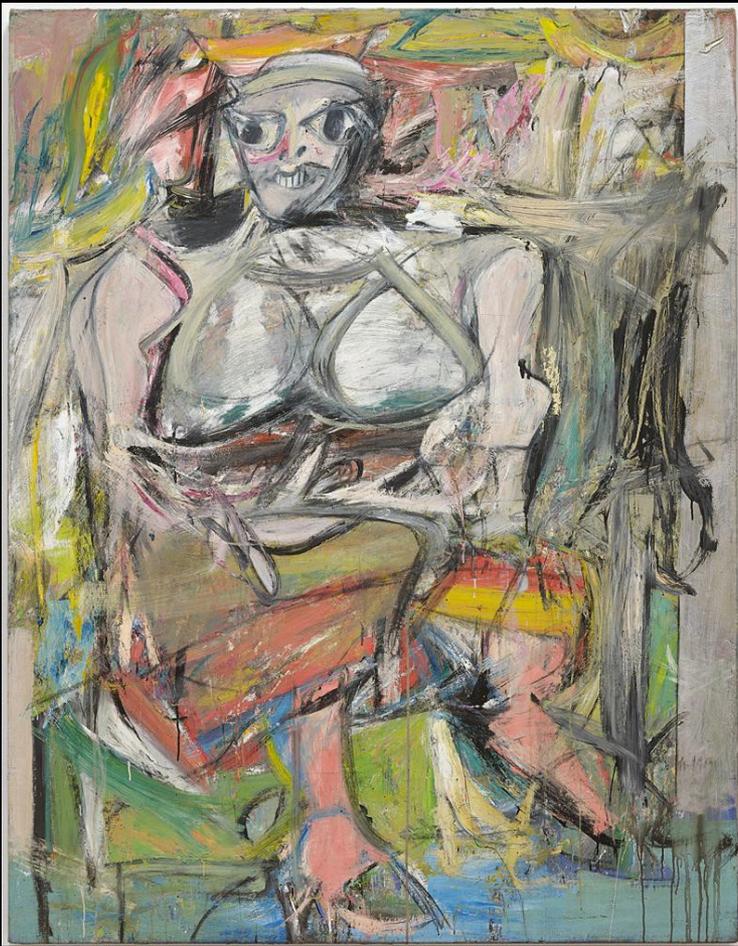


Painting c.1946

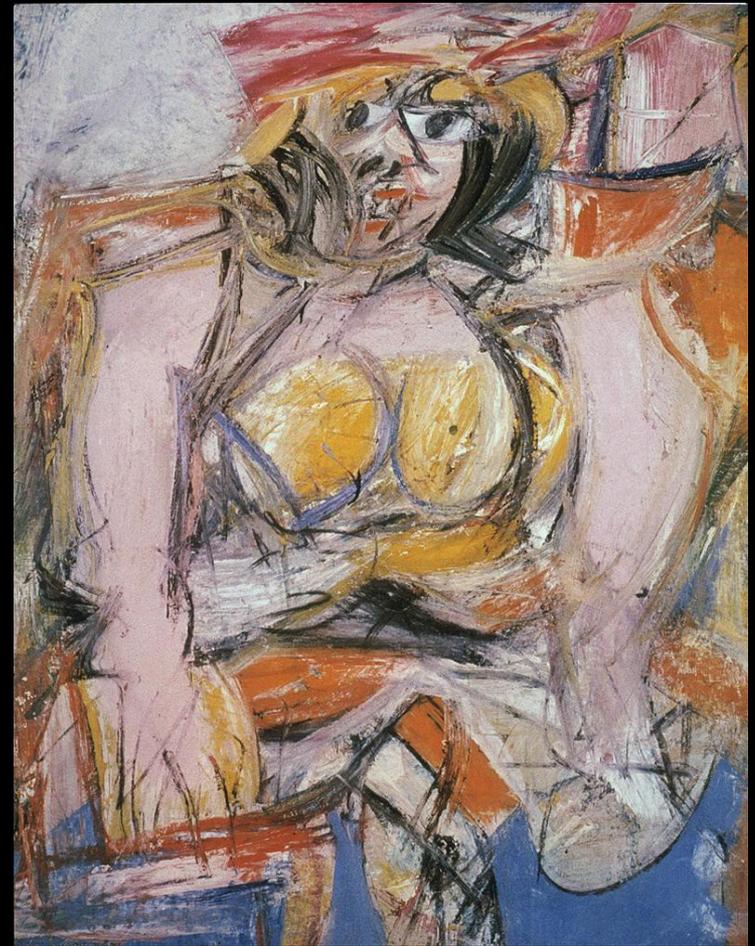


Human Body c.1982/84
Left and right panel

Francis Bacon



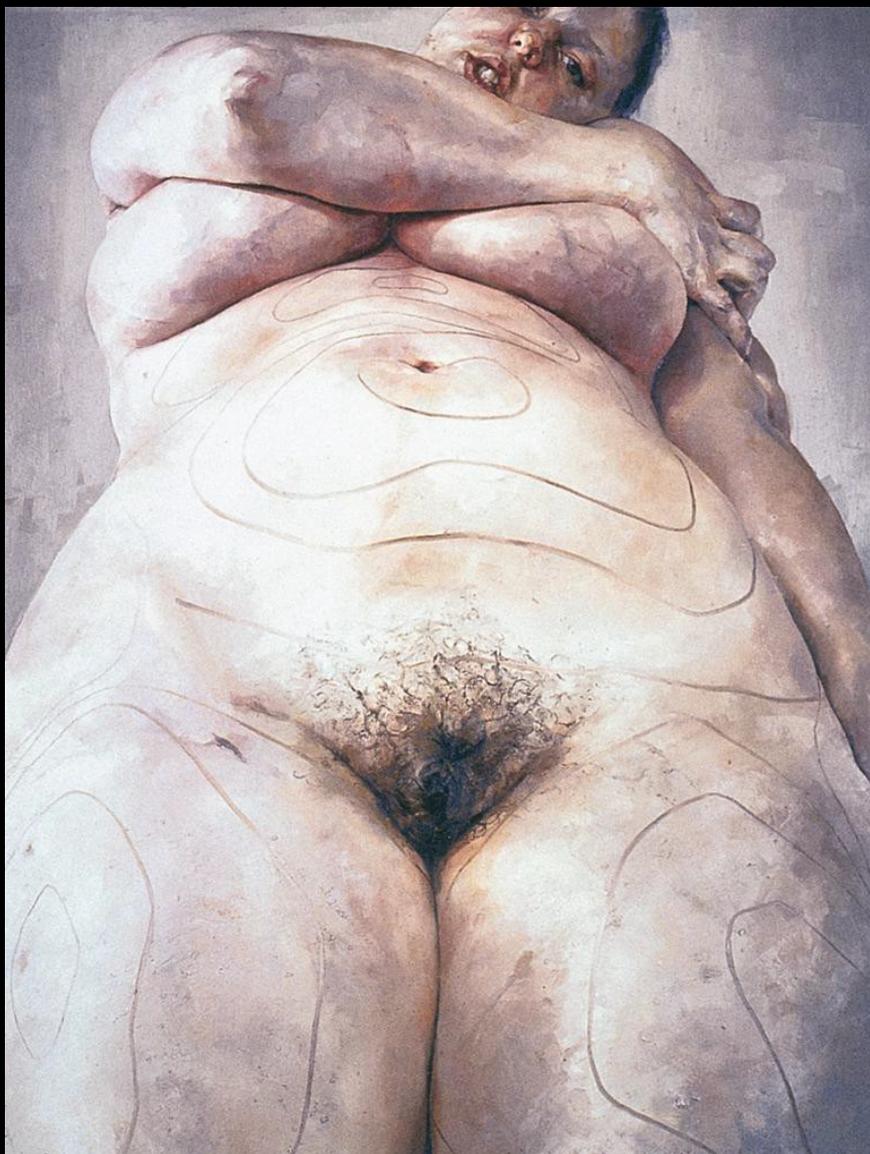
Willem de Kooning
Woman I c.1950–52



Willem de Kooning
Woman IV c.1952–3



Jenny Saville
Matrix c.1999



Saville
Plan c.1993



Saville
Reverse c.2002



Kiki Smith
Pee Body c.1992



Kiki Smith
Tale c.1992

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