

RETROSPECTIVE

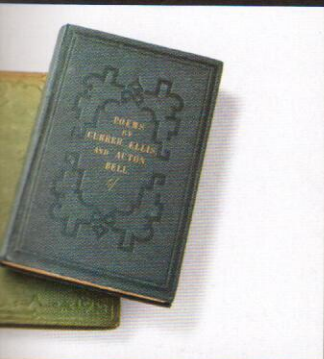
NEW SOLO SHOW

the anniversary of the birth of Charlotte
 the Morgan Library & Museum is set
 collection of the British author's
 a rare first edition of the writer's
Jane Eyre. Curated by Christine Nelson,
 certain to be as much of a sensation
 devotees as *Jane Eyre* was when it
 ed in 1847.

conventions levied upon women at
 first published, *Jane Eyre* appeared
 Brontë's pseudonym, Currer Bell.
 sisters—Charlotte, along with Emily
Wuthering Heights) and Anne (author of
Agnes Grey)—produced a prodigious
 rarely venturing far from the village
 however, far from succumbing to the
 mores, Charlotte was quick to criti-
 her own experiences to shape the
 protagonists. With *Jane Eyre*, histo-
 Brontë's childhood spent attending the
 School—where two of her siblings,
 died—as the inspiration for the
 School, to which the young Jane
 ed. Similarly, Brontë's employment
 believed to have provided the back-
 occupation as a tutor at Thornfield
 central place of action and home
 interest, Edward Rochester.

novel's unconventional plot line, at
 romantic and eerily thrilling, captivated
 the frank style Brontë afforded into
 still resonates today. That insight,
 Brontë's keen sense of pointed dialogue,
 a character that stands out vividly
 characters of the age. As becomes
 an exchange with Rochester, *Eyre* is
 ing her own. Having learned of
 to marry another, *Eyre* asserts her
 thing but his mistress. "I am no bird,"
 and no net ensnares me. I am a free
 an independent will." **JOSEPH AKEL**

"AN INDEPENDENT WILL" RUNS
 THROUGH JANUARY 2, 2017 AT THE
 MUSEUM IN NEW YORK CITY



Joan Semmel paints bodies—writhing, straining, contorted bodies—in states of erotic or self-investigative engagement. Some are lustful, locked in the tensile thrall of sexual acts. Others are at rest, loose, and lounging about. All are viewed from a curious vantage point with an unstinting eye given to fits of self-scrutiny and contemplation. Semmel has painted this way since the early 1970s, when she started showing in downtown New York. She lives and works now in the same loft she did back then, on Spring Street in a SoHo district that, at the time she moved there, lacked for streetlights and stores of more or less every kind. Instead, there were working factories, including a pipe cleaner factory on the floor above that would thrum all day and quiet down at night. "They used to bring us pipe cleaners," Semmel says, "and my kids would make little sculptures."

Her first solo exhibition in New York, in 1973, was a few blocks away, in a space she rented on her own to show work that galleries couldn't, or wouldn't, take on. The paintings in her early "Erotic Series" were close-cropped, wide-angle looks at couples in the grips of sexual congress, painted with slightly hallucinogenic, surreal washes of color that were inhuman and extremely human at once. After that, her view grew only more gimlet-eyed and intense, with a considered interest in nakedness and sometimes tender, sometimes awkward states of embrace. Soon after her first show, Semmel began paintings inspired by her own photographic self-portraits, a voyeuristic doubling, implicating both Semmel and the painting's viewer. At stake was a mix of frankness rare to the painting of sexual subject matters and, just as significant, a desire to show scenes of this sort with a woman—herself—as more than a passive actor or an object of desire.

"I felt like I was speaking, in a way, for women," Semmel says, "and I wanted to find what it was that would charge a woman visually." The source of that charge would be formally different: "Guys turn the lights on and we turn them off," Semmel says. But more important, the aspiration ran counter to centuries of tradition, a feminist opposition to art history and its conventional use of the nude. Early in her career, Semmel edited a collection of writings titled *Through the Object's Eye: Sexual Imagery in Women's Art*. It was never published in its original state, but remains a watershed moment in the emergence of feminist art. So does her powerful work *Mythologies and Me*, a 1976 painting that set a self-portrait of her torso between parodies of a *Penthouse* pin-up girl on one side and a mock Willem de Kooning "woman" on the other.

Semmel's identification with feminism has remained a constant throughout her career, both in her own work and collectively. She is reportedly an original member of the Guerrilla Girls, a group of female artists who continue to don gorilla masks and make a mockery of male-dominated art conventions. However, when asked about the group, she replies, "They're anonymous. I don't know who they are." Her 1975 painting, *Touch*, which depicts her hand creeping towards her vagina while a male torso lies (aroused? exhausted? oblivious?) beside her, now hangs prominently in a probing portrait show



at the Whitney Museum of American Art. It's an instructive example of a change in portrait painting, says Whitney chief curator Scott Rothkopf, wherein Semmel showed that "it was no longer about a male artist objectifying a female body, but her saying, 'Look, this is me, in bed, alive to these kinds of pleasures and also in control of my own representation.'"

More recently, Semmel has made a new body of work, on show September through October at her Chelsea gallery, Alexander Gray Associates, home to artists including Harmony Hammond, Coco Fusco, Hassan Sharif, and Lorraine O'Grady. Among her current interests are aspects of bodies, including her own, as they age. "The only bodies one sees are young," says Semmel, "and there are a lot of old people who would like to feel like they're human still, that they still have flesh."

Her depictions of flesh continue to be rendered as intensely as ever: closeup, flush with the sense of strangeness and liberation of seeing a body, any body, on its own terms. Semmel's points of observation remain her own, pointedly. "When I started using myself [as a subject], part of the idea was to project the idea of the woman as she sees and feels—and experiences—herself," she says. "For a long time I wouldn't even use a mirror because I wanted the body to be seen the way I see it, not as a reflection."

ANDY BATTAGLIA

"JOAN SEMMEL" RUNS SEPTEMBER 7 THROUGH OCTOBER 15, 2016
 AT ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES IN NEW YORK CITY