



Joan Semmel: *Cross Over*, 1979, oil on canvas, 64 by 90 inches, at Lerner Heller.

### Joan Semmel at Lerner Heller

Joan Semmel takes her characteristic studio nudes—the studio is a kind of everyday reality for the artist, and so always in danger of becoming all too familiar, all too workaday—and doubles them in a fragmentary, painterly abstract image, which at once reduces them to a kind of smooth and overly simple shadow and gives them a new kind of substance, or rather, makes their flesh of paint self-evidently “fleshy.” Working in a sense against the grain of her original image—overworking it until it becomes obscure as a specific figure yet retaining its figural character—Semmel nakedly reveals its constituents, the process in which it originated and to which it can be reduced.

The naked paint and the naked model—the painterly fleshiness and the fleshy figure—yoke in a kind of narcissistic tryst. The self-embrace of the figure, its dual existence as both representational and abstract, amounts to a kind of visionary awareness of both the limits of painting and the limits of figuration. Extremes are evoked without necessarily being reconciled, although there is a clear pattern of echo-forms between the representational and abstract, a kind of abortive mirroring or mutuality.

This is Semmel's ideal, and there is a great deal of freshness in it; in particular, it gives individual works a local freshness of detail. But the final results are uneven, because there is hesitancy in the vision, and uncertainty of its implication; it remains too much of a formal possibility for Semmel, and so tends to become a formal exercise, now eloquent, now uncertain, but never with a perfect force. The works become frisky rather than forceful, tokens of an ambition rather than marks of its realization. Yet, in and of itself, each work possesses a kind of vigor, for it breaks the limits of style by denying a single style to the whole work, and so achieves a kind of energetic singularity.

This is perhaps what is, for me, of most interest in the works: the way, perhaps inadvertently, they re-invoke that ideal of stylelessness that once haunted avant-garde art, from Picasso to Abstract Expressionism. To be avant-garde in fact once meant to try to be free of the trammels and convenience of a consistent style—to be free of enslavement to one kind of form, which seemed to carry with it a limitation of reference, a premature hermeticism. Semmel, unwittingly, revives the possibility of stylelessness, and the significance—extra-artistic as well as artistic (in terms of outreach as well as inscape)—it seems to promise. This, it seems to me, is a kind of triumph in itself.

Whatever Semmel's works might finally mean for figurative painting, and whatever their place in the strong revival of it going on, they show that even with one of the most traditional of subject matters, seemingly overburdened with stylistic mediators, stylelessness is a possibility which, however utopian, seems to revive our sense of the significance of the subject matter and the artistic possibilities it might raise.

—Donald B. Kuspit