



Joan Semmel, *Purple Diagonal*, 1980, oil on canvas, 78" x 104".

89

JOAN SEMMEL

ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES
APRIL 2 - MAY 16

A succinct selection of 15 works, this exhibition encapsulated the core issues of Joan Semmel's painting practice from 1964 to 2014. As feminist art was undergoing waves of change during this period, Semmel's vibrant and incisive paintings were always ahead of the curve. She has consistently focused on her own body throughout her career, but rather than coming off as narcissistic, her brave works are open to multiple interpretations.

As this exhibition made clear, Semmel is, at her core, a painter who has tested the limits of blending abstraction with figuration. In the midst of the sexual revolution, she made her "Sex Paintings," here represented by a 1971 canvas suggesting the intimacy of oral sex, juxtaposing loose brushwork with dead-accurate perspective. But her true innovation was to shift the entire scene to the woman's point of view, framing the figure from the neck down and thereby placing viewers in the position of the artist, who is clearly the female in the picture.

In the 1990s, Semmel revisited her most sexual work, adding ghostly depictions of middle-aged women to her scenes of youthful couples in her "Overlay" series. In works such as *Twins* (1973/1992), she doubles the power of the female gaze by boldly inscribing her own silhouette on top of a most explicit coupling, as if her older self is watching and reconsidering her earlier exploits.

As her own body has aged, Semmel's treatment of it has grown increasingly realistic. In *Centered* (2002), from her "With Camera" series, she is naked, holding a camera up to her face. Created by taking a picture with that very camera while staring at a mirror, Semmel appears confident and unashamed, ready to stare down her audience as much as herself. It is a feminist take on Manet's *Olympia* where the woman is not only the participant, she is also the artist. When contrasted with most depictions of women in the media, this painting demonstrates the power of capturing the female body from a woman's point of view. BARBARA POLLACK