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JOAN SEMMEL INTERVIEW

TOWARD A NEW HUMANISM

# JOAN SEMMELE

## INTERVIEW

After a number of one-artist shows in New York where her monumental, intriguing nudes stirred discussion and controversy, news of a planned book on women's imagery, and finally, her curatorship of the recent *Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content* show held in conjunction with *Women Artists: 1550—1950* at the Brooklyn Museum, the time was right to interview Joan Semmel.

Here she discusses her life, her work, her involvement in the women artists' movement, and the development of her thematic exhibition of contemporary women artists.

by Ellen Lubell

WA: Before we discuss the development of your work, and your other activities, could you please briefly describe your background?

JS: I was born October 19, 1932, in New York City, and went to school here in New York; I studied at Music and Art High School, Cooper Union, Pratt and the Art Student's League. My MFA and BFA both come from Pratt. Cooper at that time gave a certificate for a three-year course. I graduated from Cooper in 1952. Then I went back to Pratt much later; I got my degree there in 1963. In that year I went to Spain, and when I returned I got my MFA at Pratt in 1972. I went to Spain because my ex-husband had a job there.

WA: When did you start showing professionally?

JS: In Spain, in 1965. I showed in Spain and South America between 1965 and '70. I came back to New York in 1970, that's when I went back to Pratt for my degree because I wanted to be able to teach. At the end of my MFA I did a show at Pratt [1972]. That was my first show in New York.

WA: Could you describe how your painting developed, in terms of imagery and what you did with it?

JS: I was an abstract expressionist for many years, and the paintings I showed in Spain and South America were abstract expressionist paintings. There was a kind of overlay of surrealism in them, I would say, because of my European experience. So that when I went to Spain, from the very gestural kind of thing that I was doing here, there was a slight closing up of form. I think you can see what I mean by that by the paintings that you see [in her studio] although I still use the gesture very strongly. Still, the kind of forms that evolved had certain psychological overtones. And for lack of any other word, I call it a certain kind of surrealist influence, in Spain and Europe.

By the time I came back to this country, I had established a definite look that was particularly my own. When I came back to this country, though, my whole life changed. My whole pace, everything was completely different, it was like a complete opening up of my head. And my identification as a woman became much stronger. Just living in a country like Spain...I lived there as a separated woman with two children for a long time. There were a lot of ideas becoming current here in 1972, '71, '70 that I had lived through alone, without knowing that I was a "feminist." I didn't know what it was called. I just knew I had to work through certain things that made it almost impossible for me to exist as a person in that particular environment.

When I came back, the excitement of having other women to communicate with, to be able to really express those feelings, to have them understood and to relate to other women was for me very, very



important and very exciting. The work then started to change, too. I started going around and seeing the explosion of everything in New York. And what I saw at that time was lyrical painting, the spray, wall-to-wall painting, and that left me very dissatisfied. I felt a kind of sameness, an elegance I didn't like at all and couldn't identify with. I felt that my own work in no way was current with any of the feelings of New York. What I had been doing before was a certain kind of introspective painting that had much less to do with my life here than the kind of isolated life that I had lived in Spain. I needed another vehicle, another way of expressing what I had to say, but I couldn't find it anywhere in terms of what I was seeing.

That's when I decided to go back to the figure. I had always drawn from the figure; even through my abstract period, a lot of the paintings were take-offs from the beginning of a figure drawing.

My first feeling was, how do I use the figure in a way that has any meaning for me? Because I'm certainly not going to go back to doing academic nude studies,

studio studies. That's when I decided to use the figure as a vehicle for an erotic kind of theme. The figure in the present context had to be thought of in those terms more directly. I was just feeling my way. The first paintings I did that way were abstract and expressionistic. They looked like German expressionist paintings because they came right out of the abstract expressionism. It was only as I started working that I realized I got a lot more impact from the three-dimensional modeled form than from activating the paint. So gradually the forms started to build and then I started looking for another way of working, rather than from models, because I needed more information. I went to photographs, and that's when the work changed again.

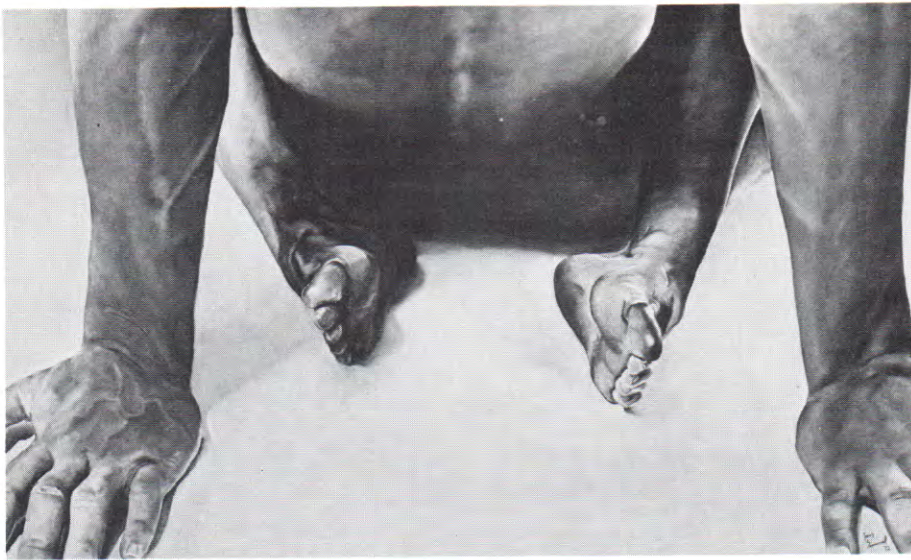
*WA: How did you use the photographs exactly?*

*JS: I used black and white photographs. I learned how to take them and I used them as you would a drawing. I worked from them. It was a slow process of learning, how to do a kind of work that I had never done before, and it was a little bit scary. I*

had already established a name and a reputation, not here, somewhere else, but still, in work that I was very sure of. This was the beginning of something that was completely new for me.

I was looking for not only an erotic kind of thing, but the erotic with a particular kind of feel to it. The reason I wanted to use an erotic element had to do with what I was seeing on the newsstands. When I came back to New York, the girlie magazines, the sexploitation all over was a shocker. Living in Spain for seven or eight years I hadn't seen any of it. When you've been away from it, it hits you very strongly. I was seeing all this stuff that for me wasn't even sexual, it was just hard sell. And hard sell in a way I found demeaning of women. In the past, women's sexuality had always been used against them. I felt very strongly the sexual issue was crucial in terms of real liberation. So I started to work in the erotic theme, but I was very conscious of it being erotic from a woman's point of view, rather than from what is normally a man's point of view.

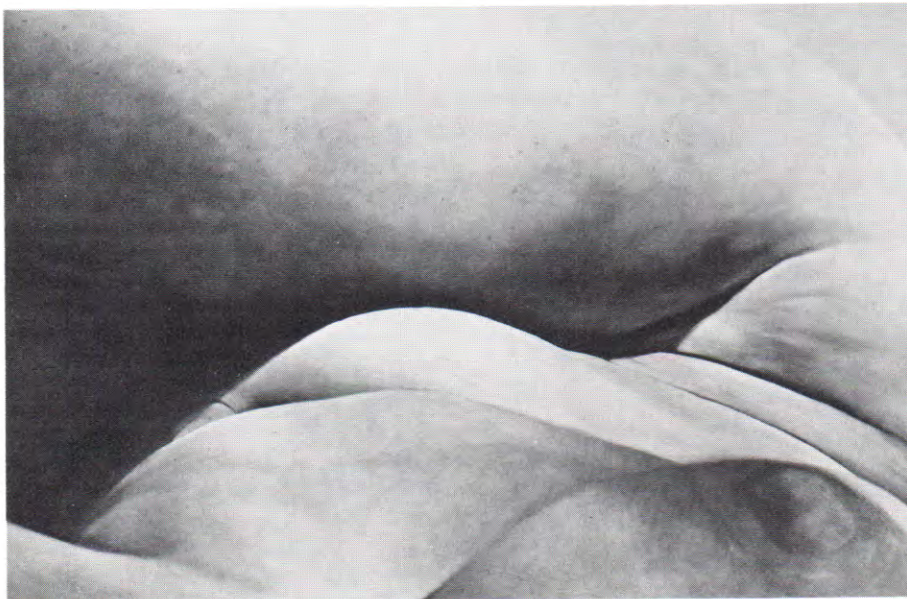
*WA: Something that has always interested*



Untitled, 1973. Oil on canvas, 48x69".



A Cat Called Che, 1974. Oil on canvas, 50x68".



Fleshscape, 1976. Oil on canvas, 50x68". Courtesy Lerner-Heller Gallery.

*me about your work, is that the artist's, or photographer's point of view is part of the theme. It's obviously autobiographical just from the way you're looking at it.*

JS: It's very deliberate. What happened was, the very first paintings [at Pratt] that I did were still expressionistic and highly sexual; they were couples making love. I tried to capture the feeling of how I experience the act of making love, of what I would see, of how I would feel. But I couldn't really do it. I didn't have enough knowledge in terms of drawing from the body, I didn't have the experience of working with that kind of material.

I abandoned that aspect of it and started drawing from models. I had to let go of myself in that situation. I went through that whole series of paintings that were shown at 141 Prince Street [in SoHo], that were essentially looking on. The artist's vision was not in the first person. I did that whole series because I really wasn't able to do it any other way. Then, after I made the statement, I didn't want to just go on, making more of the same kind of thing. I wanted something else.

That summer, I was teaching in Baltimore at the Maryland Art Institute. I knew nobody down there, so I would sit and would look out over myself and I remember always seeing that same view: my hand, the coffee cup, the dungarees, looking over at the paintings. It was constant. So the first painting I did was that, of myself in that situation, contemplating the last painting.

And from there, I went into the idea of myself as I experience myself, my own view of myself. What I was trying to get there was first of all, the self, the feeling of self, and of the experience of oneself; secondly, the feeling of intimacy, of how one really relates to another individual, to another person, to another situation. The real quality of contact, of touch, of the eroticism of touch. When I came back to this country, I felt very much a lack of reality in people's relationships with each other and with things. Even when you go into a supermarket, you don't realize that any of that stuff ever grew out of the ground. Everything's wrapped, and people are wrapped in the same way. There's none of that real feel of contact. I was trying to get through some of that, and get more of a feeling of real touch, of real contact with whomever or whatever it was that I was touching, or seeing or whatever, in my most intimate contacts, with my children, with a pet, with a lover. At that point I wasn't interested in my relationship with the outside world so much as I was with that most direct and intimate situation. And that was the whole autobiographical series I did that was first shown at Lerner-Heller Gallery in 1975; that's the work in Houston right now.

The latest show was one with just single nudes of myself, at Lerner-Heller in Spring 1977. That's the most recent work, the single nudes. It was as if I was coming back to a strong sense of self at that point.

But also the paintings have gotten somewhat abstract in a funny sort of way: less specific in terms of what they were saying, but all of it still there. I think the sensuous and erotic nature of it was still there, certainly the intimacy was still there, the self, the looking for self was still there, but the authority was much stronger, because it's all said in a less narrative way.

WA: *Eliminating just about everything else, as you did in those canvases, focuses you on just that.*

JS: That's what I was looking for. Of course, I don't make a plan in my head, it evolves in the work itself. As I see it happening, I find something, and I know that that's what I'm looking for. That's how, basically, the work has developed.

WA: *Do you see this development, especially the search for self and the expansion of that theme, do you see that as a particularly female-related concept?*

JS: Yes. The self that I look for is a woman who understands first, that her sexuality and sensuousness is a power, not a commodity for exploitation. It's not something that should be repressed, it is natural and part of what a woman is in herself and is not in any way demeaning. Second, I felt the self thing for other women, in the sense of rejecting the male fantasy of what a woman is. If you look at the history of art, the kinds of images of women that are projected to us, are the idealization of the two grapefruit breasts, the hour-glass figure, presented always in terms of availability, delectability, not in any way as a mover, a person who comes from herself in any sense. This is very much a part of what I was feeling, and again, I didn't set up a plan that I was going to say this to other women. I think it's a process of internalization. When an artist is able to internalize all those feelings, when something really means that much to you it comes out in the work, somehow. It's not a question of making propaganda, or proclaiming an ideological position in any way. It's very much a part of who I am, and what I am and what I think and what I feel, and so that whole thing comes out in my work. It's there, and it projects itself in a way that I feel is unavoidable.

WA: *You had troubles finding a place to show.*

JS: Originally, yes. The first paintings, that group that I showed at 141 Prince Street, were very large paintings of couples making love.

WA: *In orange and green and other colors.*

JS: I went to every dealer in town, where I could get past the secretary. I really tried to get a dealer, and I couldn't. I might have tried getting into a cooperative gallery, but at the time the only co-ops that were functioning were A.I.R. and 55 Mercer, and I don't think the kind of imagery I was using was one that either of those galleries would have responded to, even if I was really willing to get involved in what a cooperative gallery entails. It left

me very little alternative. I felt very strongly about my work, that it was good, and that it should be seen. Somehow, with the little funds that I had, I gambled in a sense of staking myself. I paid for the space. At that time the 141 Prince Street space was rented to Sachs gallery and some of the uptown galleries when they had a big show come down. They screened people, and obviously you had to have a certain professional level to show there, but you did do your own show.

What that did for me was to make me visible. Nothing really happened from the show itself. I remember how depressed I was afterwards because I had felt, 'Well, least I'll do it and then I'll get a gallery, and there will be reviews and there will be something.' Of course you know how it is in New York, nobody chases you. But what did come of it was there were several people who came in who were interested in doing photo stories, etc., one of whom was a good art photographer, Gianfranco Gorgoni, and I suggested that he see some of



the other women who were also dealing with sexual imagery. This is one of the things I learned by going to meetings with other women. When I first started doing this kind of thing I thought I was the only one who would be doing it. I said, 'Wow, no woman's ever done anything like this before,' and then I started going from one meeting to another, one studio to another, and I found there were so many women who were involved with some kind of sexual imagery. Some of it was more political, it had all different forms, but there were an awful lot of women working with that kind of thematic material. That really opened me up also in terms of the political connotations of the imagery: what it meant, why it was happening. I started putting a book together, because I realized that there was something more than my own personal reactions to my own life and my own situation, that it had to do with certain social conditions that were producing these kinds of reactions in a lot of women.

Gorgoni did the article on women doing erotic art and a lot of those pictures and a lot of articles were picked up by various magazines: *New York, Viva, Changes*. I was very dissatisfied with most of the articles. I felt I had given interviews for two hours and then two sentences would come out of the context that would lead into some sort of sexual liberation thing that would get somebody's audience off.

I just got very aggravated with that whole thing, and decided to do the book. I wanted the subject to be approached from a serious point of view, primarily from an art context, not just a social point of view. What I had wanted was to have it done from within the frameworks of an art critic, an art historian, an anthropologist, a psychologist, an economist. I couldn't get all of those people, frankly because the work has never been done, the research necessary in those areas, and of course there was no money involved.

But I did get some of that done. Lucy Lippard did a part on abstract erotic imagery, Carol Duncan did the historical piece, Eunice Lipton did a piece on contemporary women, April Kingsley did a whole section, a photographic essay on all the work, and so on. I had a very solid book. Roz Schneider did a piece on film and people in film and performance, and Elizabeth Weatherford did an anthropological piece. I did the introduction. Before I had the book together, when I just had an outline, I got a contract to do it. That's how I got all of the writers and paid them; I got an advance. That was from Hacker Art Books. What I didn't know at the time, I know nothing at all about publishing and had no contact at all in that world, is that he's a small firm, and once he does a book, he wouldn't go ahead and publish it until he had a distributor, and the distributors are the big companies. The whole thing was together, and he was overjoyed with it, he loved the book, but he couldn't get a distributor to back it. It was at the time of the ERA defeat, the depression, the publishing business was kaput. It was an expensive book to produce, and he tried, and he sat on it for awhile.

Now, after about two years, I have the book back here and have to start taking it around again because I feel that now, even though my ideas have changed and it needs editing and updating, the book would be right. It's almost as if it had been too early. Now the book is very marketable. I think that the ground has been prepared, that all the years we've been working here in New York has made it acceptable out in the country. I will take it around again. It's the most quoted non-published book. It was done four years ago. A lot of people in the book have surfaced and come up higher and higher.

## PART II

WA: *Do you think you could detail your involvement in the women artists' movement? When you joined what group, who you've worked with, and what you thought*

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*of the whole thing?*

JS: When I first came back to New York I got involved pretty quickly, just by going to meetings, which were just starting up at that point. I went to both Women in the Arts and Ad Hoc Committee meetings. Women in the Arts meetings tended to be enormous gatherings, with a more formal way of presenting themselves. I ended up meeting people I had gone to school with, and hadn't seen for 20 years. The Ad Hoc meetings were much smaller, more intimate, and what I liked about them was that you got to go to different women's studios as we met in different places all the time. You got the feeling of the work that people were doing that hadn't been seen. That was very important for me because when I first came back I still had a feeling that 'I'm as good a painter as a man,' with a little trepidation about being classed with the women. I had shown with men in the best galleries in Spain and in South America. I had made it, not in New York, maybe, but wherever I had been. And nothing could be worse in those places than to be called a woman painter. *Salon feminino* was the kiss of death, even though I had sent work to it, so that I still suffered from that a little bit when I came back. You put your foot in the water very gently, and the thing that was most important for me was going around from studio to studio and seeing the work and having it absolutely blow my mind, that it was so good and it hadn't been seen; nobody knew about it.

These were the experiences that were the most meaningful for me, as well as the ability to communicate with the other women, the feeling of support that we had, the loss of the isolated feeling, the possibility of having friends on a professional level; you could communicate about what you did in a real way. Women were really isolated from that. Men wouldn't talk to you about your work except in a very patronizing way. It was occasionally a one-to-one situation, seldom a peer kind of situation. So it was exciting to have that kind of possibility, to have other women who were involved in the same kinds of concerns you were, who went through the same struggles you did. You couldn't have that with personal friends who weren't involved in art, they wouldn't understand what that kind of involvement was all about. This was a whole opening up of that kind of possibility.

WA: Was this a common experience?

JS: I think it probably was.

WA: So from there on...?

JS: After that I went less and less to the larger meetings, and more of the Ad Hoc meetings where I felt more comfortable. For me there wasn't any specific purpose that it served more than the bonding. Then I got involved in doing the book, which again opened me up to a lot of women's work, as I had to actively seek out people. It gave me a wider range of people whom I might normally not know. It broadened me, it radicalized me a lot, it

made me feel more strongly about things I had been feeling—political implications of what the women were doing, political nature of art, and so on.

WA: Was *Heresies* the next thing you got involved in? Are you still a member of any group?

JS: No, I'm not a member of any group at this time. I support whatever I can whenever I can. A lot of us who used to sit around and commiserate have gone out and gotten shows, gotten jobs, and career demands have gotten so intensive that there isn't time for that kind of activity. Until the beginning of *Heresies* the feeling was that women were finally getting a little bit, but women getting into things somewhat was obscuring the fact that there was a great deal left to be done. I think that was the reason for beginning *Heresies*. So much of the first part of the activity of the feminist art movement had to do with the feeling of being left out so completely, having such a hard time getting any representation anywhere. As soon as some women's art started getting seen and there was some representation, that pressure to make things change slowed down a little bit, but essentially many things had not changed. Like in any movement, there's a little bit of a buy-off, a bit of tokenism, but the realities on a wider scale have not changed.

The art world is a reflection politically of what's happening in the rest of the world. In each profession, people are attacking it in their own way. In my own way, with the book, I began to feel more strongly about the concept that women in art had something special to contribute that was not being fed into the mainstream culture, because of the resistance of the culture to that kind of input. I was interested in seeing not only women's art, but a particular kind of input coming into the mainstream. I think men have to become more feminized, not that women always have to become more like men, and I felt that culturally this would only happen when women have input into that culture. If the women who were granted access to that culture were only the women who produced the kind of work that the men produced, then nothing had really changed. And this essentially was happening to a large degree.

WA: It's obvious from your statement accompanying the "*Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content*" show that you believe to some extent that there is something to the idea of a discernible female content.

JS: Yes, I do. I don't think it is a straight-jacket in a sense that women have to show they're women in their work.

WA: Do you mean consciously or unconsciously?

JS: I mean consciously. There's a fear that some women have that they're going to be called upon to have something specifically female in their work. It's very divisive, and it comes from a false presumption, that that's what is expected. There's always

that kind of funny defensive motion. I don't know who's ever attacked in that area, I never said that women should make this or that. I don't think anybody has ever said that. But I don't think you can deny that many women have used certain kinds of imagery, and that doesn't mean that all women should, or that women who don't aren't bona fide feminists if they want to be. Nevertheless, when you start looking at the work, one thing after the other, it's unavoidable to see certain kinds of things in several different areas. The areas I set out [on the back of the poster published for the show by the Brooklyn Museum, see box] are the way I happen to see it; somebody else might set up a different formal structure. Obviously there are plenty of people who don't fit into the structure, who don't make that kind of work. Also there might be some men who do certain things like that. The point is, first of all, there are many, many people saying these kinds of things in a particular area; it has some kind of importance. Secondly, a lot of people who are saying those things are specific about what they're saying. They reinforce their art by the positions they've taken politically in the feminist movement, and are activists in that area.

The show at the Brooklyn Museum was to put two things that I saw together: the kind of imagery that I saw occurring, together with people who had been active

in the movement. They were both criteria in the selection of the work.

WA: Do you think that ultimately, there is something that crops up unconsciously, or is put in unconsciously, that can identify a woman's work from a man's work?

JS: There are a lot of things that are put in unconsciously. I don't think all of the artists are conscious about what they're doing at all. But I don't think you can automatically identify a woman's work by it. There are certain tendencies, and those tendencies are identifiable, but I don't think it's an automatic one-to-one where you can look at the work, and say, yes, this person is this and this person is that. It's not that automatic. It's just that those of us who have been deeply involved with it and who have been exposed to a lot, know there are a lot of things you can recognize that keep cropping up and usually you're able to recognize it.

WA: It seems to me that, for example, certain critics' attempts at defining what it might be, get so broad and include so many different kinds of work and ways of doing things that it's almost too open.

JS: They tend to look for certain esthetic things that hold together, whereas my feelings may be less precise and have more to do with the content of the work. Now content is also esthetic, but it's a different orientation. I see it as a focus on different kinds of work, certain kinds of areas. I wouldn't attempt to schematize it

Semmel based the exhibition *Contemporary Women* on specific areas which she has found recurrent in women's art. The following are excerpts from the statement she wrote to accompany the show.

"...This exhibition focuses on four thematic ideas which occur with uncommon frequency in women's art: sexual imagery, both abstract and figurative; autobiography and self-image; the celebration of devalued subject matter and media that have been traditionally relegated to women; and anthropomorphic or nature forms..."

"...Women's sexual art tends to stress either the strongly positive or strongly negative aspect of their experience. Feelings of victimization and anger often become politically directed, especially in the more recent works. When female sexuality is celebrated as joyous, liberating and creative, the influence of feminist ideals is strongly sensed..."

"...The constant recurrence of self-images and autobiographical references in women's art has paralleled feminist preoccupation with the connections between the personal and the public...The depersonalization, anomie, and alienation, so much a part of men's world, are balanced in women's by an emphasis on intimacy and connectiveness..."

"...The ties of family and community are evoked in women's art by the use of skills traditionally passed from mother to daughter, like sewing, weaving and cooking. The result has been some very unconventional art objects: soft and poured sculptures, diaphanous fabric constructions, embroidered and beaded paintings. There has been a conscious effort to attach affirmative meanings to subject matter and media formerly avoided as unsophisticated and unsuitable, or worse yet as decorative..."

"...Biological processes, so central to woman's nurturing role, are inextricably bound up with the rhythms and forms of nature. Flower and bird images with varying degrees of anthropomorphic connotations, abstract biomorphic forms, process art, all are indications of women artists' identification with the unity and continuity of nature."

by saying it's grids or spirals or circles; I don't relate that way to the work.

WA: *What do you think of Linda Nochlin's view, which is basically, that women and men are different, and because there's a difference biologically and experientially in this society, there has got to be some kind of difference that shows up in the work. She hasn't been able to define it really, but she thinks that because there's this experiential difference, there's got to be something.*

JS: I would pretty well agree with that, except that there are an awful lot of women who try to be like men. So they try very hard to mask what they're doing. It's a process that starts from a very early age. If one could get beyond the mask that would be true.

One of the reasons I've worked so hard to try to establish some of these ideas is because if women no longer feel that they need the mask then we have a chance to get to a more authentic kind of thing. What will happen then I don't know. Some women may genuinely operate in a way that has been defined as masculine. Fine, if that's how it works out.

WA: *The definitions haven't been very good, either.*

JS: Right, the definitions aren't very good, but nevertheless, I do think that the cultural experience is so different for men and for women. The experience of an American man and an American woman is much more different than that between a French man and a German man, in terms of what their life experience is about, in the way they relate to touching things, to doing things, to thinking about things, to analyzing things, completely different. Nobody questions that you can see a difference between French art and German art, but everybody questions if you can see a difference between men's art and women's art. They're both differences in cultural experiences. So why is one so questionable and the other not questionable at all? The reason is because it's threatening, men feel very threatened, and some women do too.

### PART III

WA: *Could you outline the "Consciousness and Content" show? Explain how it came about?*

JS: Accidentally. I was hired at the Brooklyn Museum Art School last year to teach, and this year they had a reorganization in which they created a position called full-time painting instructor, which is me, and part of the duties of that position would be to have some tie-in with some of the things that were happening in the Museum, to try to have the Art School and the Museum have a little more to do with each other. I would have the opportunity to put together one show in the Art School exhibition space. When the job was outlined for me and I accepted, I said okay, the show that I would like to do is "Consciousness and Content," and the

dates that I would like to do it in are the dates that would coincide with the opening of the historical show ("Women Artists: 1550-1950).

WA: *So you made that decision.*

JS: Right, I made that decision, it came from my own incentive in taking what they had offered to me as part of my job and using it for that purpose.

WA: *What was your aim in doing the show and timing it with the "Women Artists" show?*

JS: Obviously, there isn't a single museum in this city that is willing to do an exhibition on contemporary women. It's perfectly all right to treat women as a group when you're excluding them, but if you try to treat them as a group to include them, that's reverse discrimination and you have a blocky situation where you can't have women's shows, you can't have sexual

women's show that had received so much attention all over, it would be getting all that attention again, and it would be an ideal time to try to get contemporary women some representation. I wasn't in any position to try to pressure the museum for a large contemporary women's show, because obviously the answer was no, that was pretty clear.

I thought at least this way there would be something coinciding with it in terms of contemporary women. The problem of course, and some people misunderstood this I think, was that I didn't presume to make a survey of contemporary women from 1950 to 1977. There was no intention on my part to do anything like that. It was a very particular point of view, my own, a feminist point of view. There are many women who may not associate themselves with a feminist point of view. I did not



*Panel discussion at the Brooklyn Museum, October 23, expounded on issues and questions raised by Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content, curated by Semmel. From left to right, panelists are: Semmel, artist Harmony Hammond, critic Carter Ratcliff, artist May Stevens, artist Joyce Kozloff, critic Lawrence Alloway.*

segregation for an exhibition. The only exhibition in an institution we've ever had as a group in this city is the "Women Choose Women" show, at the New York Cultural Center. That was an enormous show, and it got very good mention and it was the city's token gesture to women. The kind of energy it takes to pressure for that kind of one-time thing is very difficult to keep up. My purpose for doing this show was that it was an ideal situation for doing something. It would receive attention because it coincided with the historical show, it wouldn't just be lost as another little show somewhere, another women artists show, like the "Works on Paper" thing that had been done at the Brooklyn Museum a while back, a women's show. That got a little bit of attention but it didn't have the impact because of the fact that it was an isolated incident.

I felt that obviously, with the big

want to include anyone in that show who did not feel comfortable in that context. I tried to pick only women who in some way had been supportive and whose work fit the kind of tendencies that I personally felt were out there.

I knew that there would be some resentment. Obviously the space was so small I had to leave out people unless I wanted a show of miniatures. It was a very selective process of using people who I felt put forth a certain viewpoint in one way or another.

WA: *You said earlier you responded directly to the opportunity of mounting a show with your proposal for "Consciousness and Content." Does that mean that you had been formulating the idea for this kind of show in your mind previously?*

JS: I have wanted to see this kind of show for the last two or three years. As I was working with this material I kept seeing all



of these kinds of things, and I wanted to start doing some exhibitions around this. At the very beginning of the women's movement it was fine to have these great, big, all-inclusive shows to show that women make good art.

Basically there is much more acceptance of women as artists at this point, but what I'm interested in is something more than that. I'm interested in coherent presentation of the art so that women's contribution in the culture is recognized. Not simply that women make more art, but that women contribute a certain kind of thing and that women have something to say with their art. What happens then is not that what women have to say is picked up by men and brought forth in another form that then becomes another male mainstream movement. Unless we clarify, and start defining, and making some of these statements, that is what will happen, it will filter in and become part of the whole other thing. Which is fine, let it become part of a whole other thing, but don't write us out of history again.

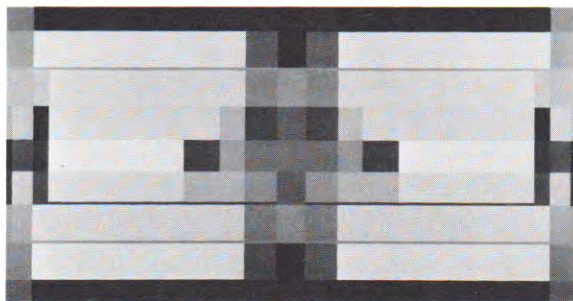
*WA: How do you feel that the content of your show demonstrates what we've just discussed?*

*JS: I think that anyone, frankly, walking through that show feels very strongly the impact of woman in it. In an isolated situation, any one artist, stylistically, could be included in any other grouping of that style. But when these things are put together, one very strongly sees the viewpoint of women as a whole.*

In the case of sexual imagery for instance, Marisol is an example of someone classified stylistically in another area. She generally came out at the time of the pop artists, and never quite fit, was always a little bit off to the side. One of the reasons she never had the same kind of impact on the mainstream culture, as someone like Warhol did was that her work had a very different feel to it, a very personal viewpoint. If you look at her imagery and what she's trying to say, it's overwhelming, in terms of a woman's viewpoint. But that was never picked up on. She was just another artist. So her position in terms of being an innovator, and in terms of establishing a mainstream kind of following and so on was undercut because of that.

When an artist is discussed simply as an individual, without a context, her work may hold up as an individual's over the centuries, but the force of what she had to say is lost, and that's what happened consistently to so many women. That's part of the reason I had wanted to use women in the show whose work had been acclaimed in other contexts. I had to do it that way, so one could see that these were not disgruntled women who haven't been able to make it in the art world, and who haven't been able to achieve the kind of thing they wanted to achieve. They all have feminist things they want to say, but have been put away in stylistic categories.

*continued on page 29*



## FANNY SANIN

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Alice Landes	Benson Woodrooffe
	Susan Zises

*Long Island's Cooperative Gallery of Women Artists*

JOAN SEMMEL *cont'd from pg. 21*

That's why I was careful to use some of these people in the show to establish that connection between the various women.

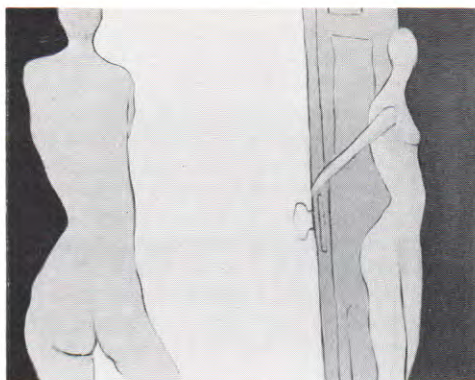
WA: *I don't know what response you've garnered to the show so far, but are you satisfied that the show is doing what you intended it to do?*

JS: Yes, I am. I think if there is any dissatisfaction or differences of opinion they will probably surface Sunday [at the panel discussion at the Museum October 23 to discuss various aspects of the show, see Report in this issue] when I'm up there personally. I think that's fine, it's important for women to have differences in opinion. They don't all have to think about things the same way. All of these things are open to discussion, as long as people don't feel in any way that differences in opinion are threatening.

I've heard certain kinds of things, like, why didn't we have a better space, and well, why weren't this one or that one or the other one included? That was part of the conditions I had to work with and it was that or nothing. To be perfectly honest, I would have loved to have the Museum of Modern Art do it. We are still operating in a situation where everyone is still a little nervous and uneasy on all sides. Women are still a little bit nervous about things hardening in terms of their recognition, of being left out or forced into a box. Both of these things are there. Men are uneasy for the same reasons, that some women are making things theirs that now they can't touch. The uneasiness is there simply because definitions are being made. I don't think any of the definitions are meant as cages, they're meant as clarifications, they're flexible. Women's lives are changing so their art's going to change.

WA: *Don't you think there's been a hint, in some writings, that people who were not pursuing feminist imagery, or did not have that kind of content in their work, perhaps weren't feminists? That seems to be a feeling that some artists hold, and women who do consider themselves feminists, but paint something totally different from what's being defined, resent it highly.*

JS: There are lots of women who consider themselves feminists whose work does not have some of those ideas in it. I don't think it makes them any less feminist. There's a difference between a feminist person and a feminist art, which is a particular kind of art. Those things are not necessarily inclusive of each other, they can exist side by side with no lessening of anybody's position or intention. The belief that things have to change for women is very strong and I hope that it is going to happen. For some of us who work as artists, it's going to be in our work, and for others functioning as women and artists will be an ideal and an example to other women.



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