



BLAU INTERNATIONAL
Art Magazine

EUR 15 UK£ 14 CAD 24
CHF 21 US\$ 18

No. 5

BLAU

INTERNATIONAL

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JOAN

SEMMEEL

In the mid-1970s, when minimalism ruled and painting was declared dead, JOAN SEMMEL turned to the nude. Objectifying no one but herself, she brought female desire and, later, the aging body into the frame. At 88, and suddenly considered a feminist icon, she talks to *Mathias Döpfner* about her decades spent under the radar—and very much ahead of the curve

MATHIAS DÖPFNER: Do you know the Italian painter Elisabetta Sirani?

—JOAN SEMMEL: No.

I consider her to be the first true feminist in the history of art. She was born into a 17th-century family of painters in Bologna. She started painting as a young girl and was extremely talented. At that time, of course, a woman painting was considered inappropriate. But she did it anyway—against all odds. Later she launched the first school that exclusively taught women to paint. She received a great deal of criticism for that in Bolognese society until her death at the age of 27 under unclear circumstances.

—I'm not familiar with her at all. But it's very interesting, because there was a time when I was researching the pasts of women who had disappeared from history. Her fight for women's rights seems to be very close to the story of my life.

When did you start to paint?

—As a child, when I was around 11 or 12. I was a sickly child who was constantly getting ear infections. My parents gave me pastels and colors to amuse me, because I couldn't go out and play like other children. That was where it began. Then it was noticed that I was quite talented.

When you see yourself painting, what are the first images that come to mind?

—I remember the first images I did were copies of things that I had been given, like coloring books. I was a teenager when I did my first oil painting. I looked in the mirror and painted myself from the waist up, naked with my hair over my face, so you couldn't see it was me.

But you didn't think of yourself as a potential artist at that point?

—I was just experimenting. I didn't consider myself an artist until I graduated from college.

Were your parents supportive of your painting?

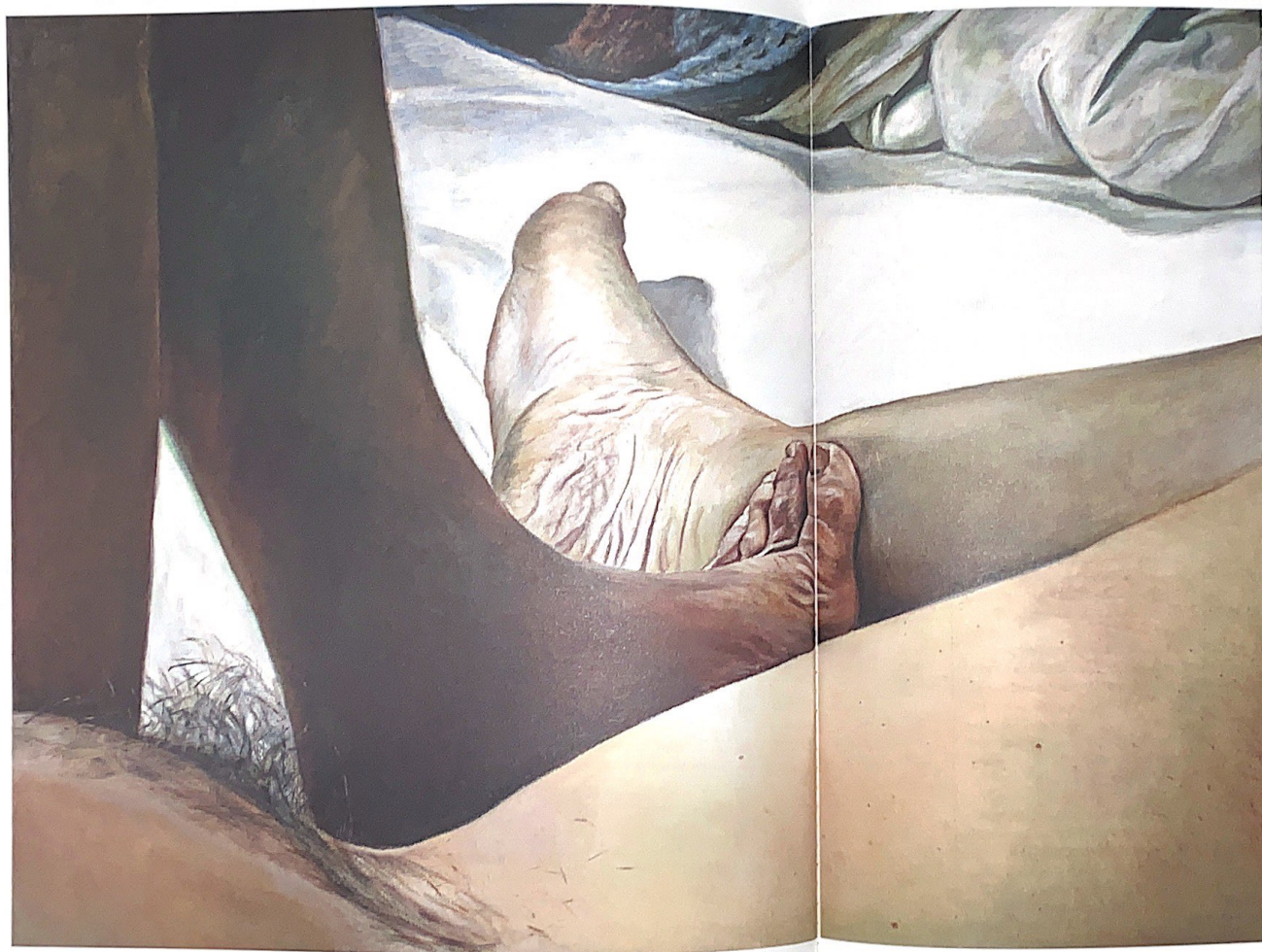
—My parents were not educated people, but they were interested in me being a successful woman, which actually meant who I would marry. It was considered a nice thing for a woman to paint. It made her more attractive.

Which is pretty much the opposite of feminism.

—It was the extent of their ambitions.

GLORIE-LISE, 2001, oil on canvas, 183 x 157 cm.
Opening spread / INDIAN, EAROTIC, 1975, oil on canvas, 147 x 183 cm





Joan Semmel

Would you say you had a happy childhood?

—I don't think I was a happy child. My brother was born when I was eight, and until then I was lonely a lot because I was sick so much. I have spoken to many artists with that kind of formative experience, of being less part of the group, more alone, relying more on their own resources.

Ben Hecht, a famous Hollywood screenwriter, said that childhood traumas are the foundation of our artistic careers. Would you agree?

—Absolutely. I think that's true for many, many artists—if you start digging, that is. It's not up on the surface. But looking back, which one tends to do when one is 88 years old, you tend to replay a lot of things that happened in the past.

I read that your mother's support for your work changed a little when she saw *what* you were painting.

—When I came out of a school that was quite avant-garde, and started as an abstract expressionist, she never understood what I was doing. And when I switched to doing the sexual pieces in the late 1970s, she again said, "I never understood what you're doing, better I shouldn't know."

Was that discouraging for you?

—I didn't expect them to understand.

What was the turning point that made you decide that you wanted to become an artist?

—I went to a high school for music and art. There, my whole attitude, my outlook and ideas, who I was and what I could do, changed, because it was a school where people came from all different social strata. I fell in love with art.

What were your most important influences then?

—Just being exposed to art I had never really seen before. I had only seen popular culture. That made a difference.

Was it a fascination with art in general, or did the idea of feminist art already play a role?

—I'd never heard of feminism at that point. The zeitgeist was totally different in the 1950s.

How did feminism come into your life?

—That's what focused my rebellion. At that point, the limits were becoming more and more stringent in terms of conforming to the model of what would be a successful middle class life in

“I’ve sometimes been asked, ‘Don’t you feel weird standing naked in front of the whole world?’ I say: ‘It’s not me, it’s a construct.’”

America. It was quite rigid after World War II, and young girls in particular suffered. Don’t forget, that was when movies suddenly became important—the image of what Hollywood expected one to be, and what it promoted as being worthwhile and important was what dominated the culture of people of all levels, especially the “strivers.” You wanted your house. You wanted to look like the women in the ads. That’s what I rebelled against by becoming an artist.

When did that rebellion happen?

—Between high school and college. I got married when I was 19, and as a young married woman I was very unhappy. I got tuberculosis and was hospitalized for six months, when my child was a year and a half old. A piece of my lung was removed in a major operation. The hospital was where I became who I am today, more than anything else in my life. It’s something that was tragic and terrible at the time, but very positive in terms of my formation as a human being. It was where I took stock of what I was doing and why I was doing it. I had the time to just look back and think. I read a whole book every day just to keep myself engaged. It was a formative experience.

Did any one person have a particular influence?

—The surgeon who operated on me used to come and speak to me almost every day, and one time he asked, “What are you going to do when you get out?” I said, “I guess I will have another child and a house.” And he said: “That’s not what I asked. I asked: ‘What are you going to do?’”

A wise person.

—Right. I think that moment was very important for me.

Because you had an answer, or because you didn’t?

—Because I hadn’t even thought about it. I only thought of myself in connection to my family. I never thought of myself independently, and I understood during that time in the hospital that my family’s life went on *while* I was confined to the hospital. I was separate from them. My life was different, and I understood that at that point.

You’ve mentioned that you grew up feeling isolated. Do you think that this is almost a precondition for becoming an intrinsically driven artist?

—I don’t think you can generalize and say it’s

an essential factor. For me it was, as it was for many others. But there are many kinds of artists.

I think the way people grow up now is different. Just look at what happened with Covid-19. Suddenly, people were inside. So much of young people’s lives is about learning how to operate in a group, and suddenly they’re thrown into isolation in their family unit. I think that changes people.

Why did you start painting yourself instead of other women?

—Many feminist theorists and artists used to consider it negative to engage with the female nude. It was seen as objectifying women. When I began that work, it was truly radical, not only in respect to society at large but also in relation to my own movement’s politics. It was not the “right thing” to do.

And you did it in a kind of figurative manner, which was also probably incorrect.

—Yes. In avant-garde art circles, figurative painting was considered academic. It was about being correct all the time.

I started using my own body because I didn’t want to objectify other women. I felt that if I used my own body, nobody could accuse me of that.

Because it was your perspective.

—It was my perspective, and that was made very clear. So that was my intention and my motive for moving in that direction.

Paula Modersohn-Becker also started with self-portraits of her nude body.

—She did! And you know what, early on, when I was a member of the Guerrilla Girls, my pseudonym was Paula Modersohn-Becker.

Really? I didn’t know that.

—That was in the 1980s. We all took pseudonyms to preserve our anonymity. We didn’t want to be identified.

To get back to this feeling you had of not belonging, perhaps it helped you to develop the courage to say: “I’m going to do things differently, and I’m going to start to paint myself.” It reminds me of your doctor asking, “What do you want?” It’s like, “Look at yourself.” That’s basically what you did.

—Exactly. That’s true. That happened in the late 1950s, early 60s.

Joan Semmel



JOAN SEMMEL, photographed by TAYLOR MILLER
Following spread: TOICCH, 1975, oil on canvas, 145 x 262 cm

So you did your first nude self-portrait in the 50s?

—No, the nude self-portraits were done in the early 80s. I came back to the US in 1970 after living in Spain for seven and a half years, and during that whole time I’d been an ab-ex person, totally abstract. When I came back to the US, I went to the figure and sexual paintings.

That’s when you did your first sexualized images—that first series nobody wanted to show, so you had to rent a space yourself—a series which earned you some feminist approval.

—Clearly. But at that time, I immediately got involved with political artists, and they were all pretty much on the left. Then the women broke off from the group and formed the first feminist groups, and I was involved in all of them. It was at that time that I was doing the sexual work, which later became a self-image. And that started because I didn’t want to continue simply doing sexual work. So that’s when I started using myself.

How did you feel when nobody wanted to show your paintings in the beginning?

—I was totally shocked that they were shocked.

You literally didn’t expect it?

—No, I didn’t expect them to be shocked. But I used shock as an element in the work, of course. I understood that I was doing something that hadn’t been done before. But I didn’t expect *that* level of religiosity to still be effective in our culture. We had just gone through the entire flower-children thing, the hippie revolution, so I just assumed that there was a whole different attitude.

Isn’t it interesting that, from ancient Greece to today, the two taboos have been religion and nudity?

—One of the incentives for making art might be a desire to understand one’s body in space—one’s body in the space one occupies and how the body relates to another body. Those things are the kinds of very early explorations that individuals undertake in terms of becoming themselves, always. It doesn’t matter which culture you belong to. That’s just part of growing up. A baby, not long after it’s born, does that when it looks at its hands.

I think it might also explain why almost every artist has, sooner or later, dealt with their own body or other people’s bodies. It starts in art school, where it is still a mandatory exercise in painting.

—It begins in life, and it’s so essential to one’s being that it almost always becomes part of what art does.

This kind of archaic desire—to depict the self—contrasts starkly with the shock reaction it elicits. Although it’s the most natural topic of all, it’s something people still have problems with.

—I’ve sometimes been asked, “Don’t you feel weird standing naked in front of the whole world?” I always say: “It’s not me, it’s a construct. It’s what I make, but it’s not me standing there.”

That’s funny, because so many people take art literally. Which is always a mistake.

—Of course!

A piece of art is, in any case, something other than reality. If it doesn’t have a double meaning and different levels of perception, then it’s a cliché.

—I covered my face. You didn’t know it was me, but I insisted that it was, just by the position I took. Then I used things like the camera and the mirror, which I initially rejected. At first, I didn’t want to use a reflected image, because I felt that we always see ourselves through the eyes of somebody else.

I've sometimes been asked, 'Don't you feel weird standing naked in front





WAITING, 2020, oil on canvas, 122 x 122 cm

"I've sometimes been asked 'Don't you feel weird standing naked in front

Joan Semmel

So, you looked down at yourself and painted what you saw. Was that intuitive or conceptual?

—It was a conceptual thought. I did it deliberately.

You said you did it because you didn't want to be accused of objectifying other people, but that sounds a bit defensive to me. At the same time, it's also a very self-confident gesture, saying: "This is what I'm interested in—looking at myself."

—It was both. There was the aspect of avoiding blame, but I was also working from a certain kind of political position. And it was the exploration of the body. I wanted other women to accept their bodies too. It was, in a sense, looking for a way to accept one's imperfections as something that one could feel good about.

What led you to step away from abstraction to your first realistically figurative sexual paintings?

—My work gradually developed over my years in Spain. I continued to be abstract, but I left behind the total obsession with gesture, and form gradually returned to my work. Then the trigger was the political situation I got into when I returned to New York. At that time, I also couldn't identify with what was happening in the city in terms of abstract art—essentially color field painting. I felt it was completely backward.

I was looking for another way to express myself, and I decided to go for what was least appreciated, or even undesirable, back then: figuration, the use of the body. How could I use the body in a way that was relevant to my life at the time? That's how I started doing the sexual pieces.

Were you influenced in any way by the schools that existed at the time, such as photorealism or pop art?

—I wasn't interested in those specifically. I didn't like the mechanical aspects. But I wanted representation and I wanted realism, and I used the photo to work from because I didn't have the training to work out of my head without models.

If you look at other female artists, such as Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta, or Cindy Sherman, they are either very frequently or almost obsessively—in very different manners, of course—dealing with their bodies. Do you have an explanation for that?

—A feminist position liberated women, enabling them to expose themselves in that way. It was an

attempt to break down the element of shame that had always been there in respect to nudity, and using one's own body was a way to do that. The first part is psychological, the second is politically driven, and the third is the use of the body simply as a convenient art instrument.

Did you know any of the four artists I mentioned personally?

—Carolee Schneemann was a friend. Philosophically, we were interested in similar things, but our practices expressed that very differently.

One male artist that painted in a very realistic manner, Mel Ramos, seems almost to be the antagonist of your work. He portrayed the female body in the most sexist manner, as an object of sexual fantasies, of advertising, and of commercialization. How do you see that body of work?

—I frankly don't think that Mel Ramos had an ounce of irony in doing those works. To him, they were beautiful objects, and he never thought more about it than that. He thought he was admiring a woman when he made them.

Do you not like pop artists in general?

—I've never been a fan of pop artists, any of them. I always felt that their work was ironic in a certain sense. They were advertising for their own purposes and making their images into beautiful objects, and they took no responsibility for what they were talking about. The imagery was supposedly neutered, but using content that is debased to begin with and then not taking responsibility for what it symbolizes is not something I admired.

Let's go back to the phase when you were finding your artistic persona. Who supported you and what kind of rejection did you experience?

—Rejection and acceptance were mixed. It depended on the person.

Did you experience a gendered difference?

—I didn't care about men. I was working for women, as a kind of incentive. I understood that men would be resistant.

Would you then say that your work is made for women, to encourage women?

—Exactly. I was upset when women rejected it, saying it was not feminist because it was so

nude, and still calling it seductive and a negative thing to be doing. I never considered it seductive.

But why wouldn't one work of art be viewed differently by different viewers? One sees it as very seductive and another sees it as very shocking.

—Right. All of those reactions had nothing to do with the work. They had to do with the person who was looking at it.

Why didn't you care what male viewers would say?

—Well, that's a blanket statement, and it's too extreme, because obviously I cared what any critic said. I cared what a gallery director said. I cared when I was rejected. But what I actually meant was that it could rattle some guys and making them nervous wasn't a concern of mine. I wasn't trying to please them anyway.

Did you get surprising support or positive feedback from men?

—Yes, I did.

Would you say that male feminism exists?

—No, I don't think it's possible. It's like saying white supporters of Black issues have the same degree of understanding and comprehension that a Black person does. It's not possible. You can't stand in my shoes.

Not in the same way, that is true. But while they can never have the same perspective, they can share goals and values.

—You can share values. But the difference is that we are acculturated by the systems we grow up in. This means that men, from the word go, are treated in a way that is different to the way women are treated. They just are in every aspect. So, a thing or an aspect of something that might upset me will not upset you. It's about experiencing the same things, but in different ways.

Your expectations of yourself are different. As a woman, confidence in yourself is different to the confidence of men. It's built from the very outset on what you are told you can and cannot do. And overcoming those limitations is extremely difficult.

Do you think it's possible to distinguish pieces of art based on gender categories, to say, "This painting could have only been painted by a woman?"

—No, I don't think that's true, because there are still infinite variations within each category.

I would even go a step further and suggest it would be dangerous, because it would limit how we perceive gender. I've never seen either a 100 percent male or 100 percent female person. We're all a mix.

—Not only that. We also know at this point how fluid the whole idea of gender is. That concept didn't exist back then.

I also see it in my own collection, which has some pieces painted by women in the 19th century. Some of them seem almost macho. They often have a super-sexualized and objectified perspective that you would think was typically male, but then it turns out it was painted by a woman—or vice versa.

—Of course, I don't think it's a hardened definition. I do think, however, there is a kind of thematic thing that occurs very often in women's work, and there are certain attitudes that come through in men's work. But I don't think that they are limited to male or female expressions. First of all, we absorb a lot of the attitudes of what's good and what's bad. In other words, what's good is macho, what's bad is feminine.

You were very much at the forefront of feminist art in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Today this topic has a totally different meaning, a totally different relevance. People no longer say things like, "Women can't paint," at least not publicly.



INTIMATE SPACES, 2016
Oil on canvas, 152 x 123 cm

Joan Semmel

—We hope. But it's still there. The greatest compliment we could ever have gotten years ago was that we paint like a man.

Does it feel like a victory, or do you still feel things have not gone far enough?

—This is what I've been working for all my life. But it's like the sexual revolution. We always wanted to have free sexuality, and then I looked around and said, "Oh, my God, what are they doing?"

It has never been so unfree, so limited, so fearful.

—Exactly! The breakthroughs are necessary, and then there are the corruptions that set in to any revolution.

The revolution eats its children. What are the corruptions you see now? What makes you angry?

—It doesn't make me angry. It makes me feel as if all of the things that I worked for are no longer relevant, and that's discouraging.

Why wouldn't what you worked for be relevant?

—When certain things become calcified and overdone, you start to question why you wanted them to begin with.

Would you say that certain feminist topics have become stereotypes, or superficial items of propaganda?

—I think, for instance, that things have to move on. They have to change and they have to develop. The reasons and the motives behind feminism were about inclusion. What does inclusion mean? I didn't want to be segregated in a corner of feminist women's art; I needed it to be respected and given credit for being as good as any other kind of art. What feminism needs to do now is to stop repeating the list of injuries. It needs to move on to the next stage, whatever that is.

Do you think that focusing on the injuries puts you in the position of a victim?

—I never want to be seen as a victim. I'm not a victim. I have stood up and I have been an activist. I want other women to be activists too. We've achieved so much, and now that we're recognized, it's time to ask, "What's the next step?" The next step is that we are the mainstream. We are more than men in terms of numbers. Our art is as good as men's. It is building the culture. We are not people who enhance what men do. We are not just decorative objects for men's eyes.

And you are not a ghetto of female art. You're a natural and normal part of artistic creation.

—Of the culture. Absolutely. I want the institutions to open up to what we do.

Would you say that more female art of importance has been produced over the last decades, or has that been the case for centuries, only it wasn't regarded as such?

—It's both. Women in the past did not have the opportunities they have today. It's just like how women have now entered certain professions because they forced their way in. They are educated. They are in a different position of power.

Is the market also affected? If I look at Austrian painter Maria Lassnig, for example, for decades her works went for 25 percent of the price of works by her male peers, and now her prices have risen sharply.

—Everyone's prices have risen sharply.

Is that something that reflects the development of what's considered normal?

—Prices don't reflect anything about the culture. They reflect who's investing in what.

Do the prices of your work matter to you?

—They matter in as much as I wouldn't like to see my work undervalued.

If you look at the state of feminism and the state of in 2021, what should happen next?

—Let me answer it this way: a student once asked me, "How long do you think feminist art will last?" I said, "For as long as we need it."

What is the next step or the ideal outcome?

—The ideal outcome seems to me that those who choose to be called feminist artists can be feminist artists without it being negative. It's still something negative in men's eyes, and in many women's eyes, to be called a feminist, rather than just being called an artist. It is the same with Black artists. "Don't call me a Black artist, just call me an artist."

There are distinctions within the work, because there are distinctions in the way we see ourselves and in the way we move in our space, the way we move in our culture, and those things come into the work. I'm proud to have been and still be a feminist artist. But I want my work

"What feminism needs to do now is to stop repeating the list of injuries. It needs to move on to the next stage, whatever that is"



Joan Semmel

to become part of the mainstream. I want those characteristics to be available to both men and women. I want women to be included in all senses.

That would be true inclusion.

—What it means is that, unless there is wind behind a big group demanding recognition, getting attention is extremely difficult for an artist to do alone. So, you have to be part of something dynamic and moving. Whether it is feminism or Blackness, or whatever it could be. You need that kind of push to get the attention of the larger culture and then become absorbed in it. You cannot do it by yourself.

What has happened before—and what I assume will happen again, unfortunately—is that a movement gains traction at a time when the larger culture is at a standstill. In other words, the energy is moved away from the main stumbling block that controls the market and the institutions. Now the real energy is no longer there. It comes from groups that have been excluded and are moving in.

If we look at recent political developments, we also see phenomena related to the nude female body. There have been artists and activists who argued that we should remove some paintings that purportedly portray women as sexualized objects. Is that something that you find helpful? For me, it is ahistorical. We cannot view images from the 19th or 17th century in today's context and, when these images don't fit in with today's understanding, remove them from sight. What is your take on that?

—I prefer tolerance with an explanation. There could be a text that goes along with the piece explaining that this was a prevalent attitude at a particular time. Then it's no longer seen in that way. But it's always a question of degree.

Taking it out of the public sphere is censorship. That is, in my opinion, not only the opposite of art, but it also limits the discussion, because we no longer see historical developments. By censoring colonial misperceptions, colonialism doesn't become better. We just deny it, basically, and that is also true here. We need lively criticism.

—It needs to have critique alongside it. One doesn't censor. That's not what should happen.

On Facebook, *L'Origine du monde* by Gustave Courbet is still censored because the algorithm cannot distinguish between art and pornography.

—This happens all the time. But there is a difference, and this has to be understood.

You discuss these topics with young female artists?

—I no longer teach. I'm not aware of how young people are being introduced to any of these topics. What concerns me is how feminism is being taught in schools. What comes out is just a sort of parroting of the issues and the ideas that we were working with way back in the 1970s and 80s, instead of developing ideas that come out of today. I'm tired of having to repeat the stuff I did back then. But it's still so very relevant for young people. That's discouraging. Why is it still so relevant?

Your life, and artistic life, have very much been dedicated to equality, inclusion, tolerance, and freedom. Do you think that certain well-intending developments could lead to a world where there is less equality, less inclusion, less tolerance, and less freedom? Because in order to push new narratives through, there might be new forms of exclusion.

—I know that these developments exist. I don't usually agree with them. I don't think that they're the major problem they're made out to be. I still believe that the balance stands on the side of the need to correct the way the culture has treated people of color and women.

If we look at some of your works from the 1970s, it seems that some color and stylistic elements have returned in the paintings you're making now. Green and blue, for example, and also the style of painting. Take *Close Up* from 2001 and *On the Grass* from 1978: there's 23 years difference, but stylistically they're very similar. Is that an intentional reference?

—I think it's a coincidence. I've always been very closely focused on what I was doing without necessarily considering what it's related to in the past. The content has always been the common thread, but I married style and the way the paint was used. I was interested in making the work style-free, so that it did not fit into a particular category. At that point, it was almost postmodern: we could use style like a bank of tools, and we could pick any one that we wanted and combine them in any way. That was what interested me more than having a similar and consistent style.

Many of your paintings remind me of landscapes. Is that something you also have in mind?

—That has often been said in reference to my work. I didn't intend my paintings to look like landscapes, but I can also see it. It just has to do with scale. If you bring the body up close, it takes on the kind of scale that gives you a landscape.

What is beauty for you?

—When feeling and vision come together to give one an insight into surface.

If you look at the different phases of your work, is there any one you feel is particularly exciting now?

—I always say that my last work is the best work I ever did. I know that isn't always true, but sometimes it is. I do think that my late work is as powerful and as important as the earlier pieces. I'd say that the early sexual and self-images, and the very late self-images are the most important.

Some of your work of the last three decades deals with the aging body, which reminds me very much of the contemporary body positivity movement that plays an important role these days. Did you think about it in that sense?

—It was an intuitive response. I was determined to use the body in a way that wasn't fetishized and idealized, then the theme of aging appeared. I didn't look for it. When I saw it in the work, I understood it had a certain power and meaning and necessity.

I think that there is a very feminist element in that...

—...a very strong feminist element, because women absolutely disappear from sight and sound after a certain age. And the commercial interests of anti-aging are enormous. All of those things affect a woman's life.

The fight against aging is the only fight that we'll definitely lose.

—We're definitely losing, but always fighting.

Joan Semmel: Skin in the Game, the first retrospective of the artist's work, will be on show at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from October 28, 2021–April 3, 2022.

BLUETAGS, 1973, oil on canvas, 58 x 51 cm
Previous ground, ON THE GRASS, 1978, oil on canvas, 122 x 183 cm

