



Joan Semmel: *With Stripes*, 2003, oil on canvas, 68 by 56 inches; at Mitchell Algus.

Joan Semmel at Mitchell Algus

In the early '70s, as feminism was finding its way to the art world, Joan Semmel commenced painting herself and her lover as she saw and photographed their bodies from her supine point of view. She was, among other things, challenging conventions of feminine beauty, which throughout history have presumed a controlling male

subjectivity, while also asserting her own visual and sexual agency. If her work did not immediately become part of the feminist canon in the '70s, the reason may have been because it was more personal than polemical. Much radical feminism of the time eschewed painting itself as an inherently male stronghold, just as many Marxists deemed it to be inherently bourgeois and therefore antiprogressive. Semmel's medium and subject matter flew in the face of traditional figurative esthetics, feminist proprieties and postmodernist biases, all at once.

Her new paintings are made after photographs of her own reflection and whatever part of her body is visible on her side of the mirror. The installation of seven pictures in Mitchell Algus's small, squarish main gallery had an unsettling Gulliver-among-the-Brobdingnagians aura: each showed the figure large and cropped, holding a camera focused on you, the viewer. The frankly naked body is shown as a topography of terrains: zaftig breasts, belly and thighs, along with areas of wrinkled skin. *Doubled* shows a white mannequin, familiar from an earlier series, behind the artist, in con-

trast to the living, mortal, flawed, yet dynamic and still-voluptuous body. Each painting shows a handsome signature turquoise ring, a glamorous touch and particularizing sign of personality.

The 72-by-62-inch *Close-up*, one of the largest and most severely cropped images included, emphasizes the torso's fullness through pronounced chiaroscuro. *With Stripes* shows, with dramatic foreshortening, the artist's right hand resting on her ankle, toes pressed against the mirror, as her reflected image leans back, left hand holding the camera. In all of the work there is an odd circuitry of vision and identity. The small, reflected camera, through which the information we are seeing has passed, also obscures Semmel's face, as though substituting its impartial optics for hers. Confronted by these paintings, you may imagine yourself being photographed from all sides, or, seeing what she sees, you may identify with the artist. Or possibly, you may feel trapped in someone else's drama.

Semmel explores diverse compositional possibilities, frontal and baroque, evenly and theatrically lit, carefully tracking shifts of flesh tones in light and shadow. Although she does not radically abstract the body, the most appropriate comparison to her project might be the photography of the redoubtable John Coplans.

—Robert Berling