

Joan Semmel

ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

I first encountered works by Joan Semmel during my undergraduate education, in an introductory contemporary art class. The slides I was shown were of those canvases for which the artist is best known, produced in the mid-1970s, that portray sexual scenes from the perspective of one of the participants, Semmel herself. Incorporating a Polaroid aesthetic and rude, raw washes of color, Semmel's approach—I think of a canonical piece like *Intimacy/Autonomy*, 1974—gave rise to an unlikely effect both piquantly pornographic and uncannily clinical. That I was confronting these pictures during the mid-1990s (and thus some twenty years after they were made), and at a cultural moment supposedly more comfortable with (or at least rife with) images of the

Joan Semmel,
Transformation,
2010, oil on
canvas, 60 x 48".



nude body (and particularly the nude female body), would suggest that their impact might be softened. But this was not the case—I was seduced by them even as they held me at a strange distance, a sensation I had not consciously experienced before.

The effect, I would argue, still has not palled, even though two more decades have passed; and though the terrain of feminist practice is constantly shifting (while its stakes remain as urgent, complicated, and context-sensitive as ever), Semmel's own practice, begun nearly forty years ago, retains its coherency today. This has of course, much to do with the power of Semmel's early achievements, but it also results from the tenacity with which she has continued to produce literally marking a *body* that registers temporal and other shifts. This body is most obviously the artist's oeuvre itself, which enumerates a through line of concerns about painting as a medium, the nature of representation, and modes of translating the photographic into the painted image but it is also, literally, the *body*—effusively Semmel's own, as an object both of self-inquiry and social interface. And *that* body changes as much as it stays the same, delivering a literal and figurative portrait of an artist—to say nothing of her milieu—over time.

For her first exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates, Semmel presented just over a half-dozen works from the past three years. All ostensibly “self-portraits,” they, like nearly all her endeavors to date, benefit from a troubling of that term: They are “not me,” the artist has declared—a claim, as art historian Richard Meyer has argued, we need to take seriously. Likenesses of the artist, the compositions also resolutely decouple the self from its reflection, and the female body from any notion of essence. Indeed, the various filters through which Semmel mediates her subject—photographs and mirror-reflections among them—mark the painted images in a number of ways.

In some of the works on view, such as *Triptych*, 2009, Semmel's image stares back with what would appear to be a startling directness but the longer one looks, the more one sees that these lines of sight are somehow both undeviating *and* off-center, offering the artist's subjectivity while confounding attempts to grasp it or pin it down. In a similar manner, Semmel's compositions blur the boundaries of her own nude form: literally, in some cases, as in *Self-Portrait #2* and *Self-Portra*

#4, both 2010, in which detailed representations of the face dissolve into abstract marks suggesting movement or the loss of vision; in other cases, such as *Transformation*, 2010, and *Step-Ladder*, 2008, the body is layered upon itself, as though the image were a double exposure, or, more compellingly, as though the body itself had refused to confine itself to a single space or instant. Is this simultaneous depiction—in which the body both multiplies and divides—particularly powerful and strange because it delivers something rarely achieved by full-on frontality? The aging female body here asserts itself as resistant to clichés of disappearance or isolation by always appearing in time, and, further, showing how one moment in this artist's career will never be quite like the next.

—Johanna Burton