

Joan Semmel: *Across Five Decades*

April 2 – May 16, 2015

“The balance between content and style has been an ongoing preoccupation. My formal training and passion for paint and high color are deeply held and instinctive in my work. The content has been consistently fired by my desire for the work to impact and help change the way women are perceived and how we perceive ourselves. The prism of the self-view also serves to focus on the social and psychological aspects of gender and age.” —Joan Semmel, 2015

Joan Semmel: Across Five Decades features paintings by the artist done between 1964 and 2014, from abstraction to figuration. Semmel’s artistic practice has consistently questioned female representation and subjectivity, emphasizing the possibility for female autonomy through the body. A graduate of Cooper Union, Pratt Institute, and the Art Student’s League of New York, Semmel moved to Madrid, Spain in the early 1960s. While abroad, she developed a substantial body of work mostly focused on abstraction, that was exhibited in Europe and South America. The political context of Francisco Franco’s regime in Spain, and its restricted legal rights for women, impacted Semmel’s consciousness, and upon her return to New York in 1970 her artistic practice and involvement with the growing Feminist community of artists would define her art making and activism.

1974 marked a pivotal moment in Semmel’s artistic development defined by her interest in unseating the male gaze of Western painting and popular culture. Turning the perspective of her compositions to her own body as subject, she began painting the nude female figure, shifting the point of view from outside of the canvas as the viewer, to a simultaneous observer and subject. During the 1980s Semmel expanded her formal experimentation by explicitly fusing figuration and abstraction challenging the notion of a unified style.

Throughout the 2000s, Semmel has meditated on the aging female physique. The works of these decades show the artist’s body, doubled, fragmented, in-motion, and hidden. Dissolving the space between artist and model, viewer and subject, the paintings are notable for their investigation of intimacy, color, light, and layering. As Semmel explains, “The issues of the body from desire to aging, as well as those of identity and cultural imprinting, have been at the core of my concerns. The carnal nature of paint has seemed to me a perfect metaphor, the specifics of image, a necessary elaboration.” Semmel’s work over the past five decades firmly situates the female body as a place for autonomy, and a vehicle to challenge the objectification and fetishization of female sexuality and the invisibility of the female aging body. Through her subjects and formal explorations, her work has greatly contributed to the history of painting and Feminist debates by confronting and subverting the dominant cultural narratives in art history and Western society.

Joan Semmel’s work has been featured in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014); National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC (2014); Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen, Germany (2013); Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (2013); Jewish Museum, New York (2010); Museum of Modern Art Arnhem, The Netherlands (2009); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH (2008); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2007); National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (2007); and The Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX (2006); among others. Semmel’s paintings are part of the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Orange County Museum of Art, CA; Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; Jocelyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE; Jewish Museum, New York; The Museum of Fine Art Boston, MA; Brooklyn Museum, New York; among others. She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including the Women’s Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award (2013), Anonymous Was a Woman (2008), and National Endowment for the Arts awards (1985, 1980). She is Professor Emeritus of Painting at Rutgers University, New Jersey.

Ground Floor Gallery



Perfil infinito, 1966
Oil on linen
76.38h x 67.32w in (194.01h x 170.99w cm)



Untitled (abstract study), c. 1966
Mixed media on paper
22.38h x 30.13w in (56.85h x 76.53w cm)



Red Ground, 1969
Oil on linen
50h x 36w in (127h x 91.44w cm)

Semmel moved to Spain in 1963, and lived there for seven and a half years before she returned to New York City. While in Madrid, her work was influenced by Spanish “Informalismo.” Her paintings moved away from broad gestural and spatially referenced compositions to layered, dense surfaces that evoked a surreal figure/ground configuration. At this time, Spain was under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, which placed institutional restrictions upon women regulated by the *permiso marital*, which prohibited wives from gaining employment, opening a bank account, signing a contract, initiating legal proceedings, or traveling without their husbands’ permission. As both a foreigner and an artist, Semmel was exempt from these restrictions, but her experience in Spain was foundational and would greatly inform the direction her work would take in the 1970s.



Untitled from the “Sex Paintings,” 1971
Oil on canvas
70h x 80w in (177.8h x 203.2w cm)



Untitled (figure studies), c. 1971
Mixed media on paper
35h x 22.5w in (88.9h x 57.15w cm) each

Upon Semmel’s arrival in New York in 1970, she quickly became involved with Feminist groups such as the Ad Hoc Women Artist’s Committee. Inspired by the Women’s Liberation Movement, as well as the political fervor surrounding the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, she reconsidered representation as a viable form of artistic expression. Untitled (figure studies) represent Semmel’s early study of the figure while a graduate student at Pratt. In 1971, she created her first figurative series, “Sex Paintings.” In Spain, she had followed the American sexual revolution from abroad, but found instead the sexualized commercialization of female bodies for sale when she returned to the United States. Semmel explains, “I wanted to find an erotic visual language that would speak to women. I was convinced that the repression of women began in the sexual arena, and this would need to be addressed at the source.” Working from sketches, Semmel depicted sexual encounters that underscored a female approach to eroticism. These paintings were rendered with expressive gesture, as Semmel continued to employ rich, vibrant colors—evocative of her training as an abstract painter—for her figures.

Second Floor Gallery



Beachbody from the "Beach" series, 1985
Oil on canvas
68h x 68w in (172.72h x 172.72w cm)

Since 1971, Semmel has spent her summers in East Hampton, purchasing a house and establishing a permanent studio in Springs in 1987. The artist's "Beach" series was painted over the summers of 1985 and 1986, and is unique in Semmel's oeuvre as a series in which Semmel positions bodies outside in a landscape. In a thematic departure from her 1970s self-nudes, she aimed to capture a psychological experience, particularly the feeling of aloneness that can persist even while on a crowded beach. This decade revealed new forms of experimentation, as Semmel explains, "I combined realist and painterly methods insisting that a unified style was not preordained." *Beachbody* shows her hand, leg, arm, and torso with the smooth and fine mark-making of realism, but opens the gesture to a more lively use of color and line for large or accenting swaths of her figure and background. The distant and removed figures within the landscape provide scale and perspective. Semmel allows the paint to drip, and her use of fluid striking brushstrokes gives the work's surface depth and texture.



Overlays Series "Twins," 1973/1992
Oil on canvas
68h x 58w in (172.72h x 147.32w cm)

Semmel created her "Overlays" series in part as a response to the backlash against Feminism during the 1980s and 1990s. She decided to "recycle" works from the 1972 "Erotic Series" by superimposing figures from her "Locker-Room" series (1988–91) over them. In the "Locker-Room" paintings, Semmel observed various beautification rituals performed among an all-female domain, often featuring accurate portraits of middle-aged bodies. In *Overlays Series "Twins,"* Semmel painted, with fluid expressionistic strokes, a middle-aged woman applying lipstick facing the mirror over the pre-existing composition. The "Overlays" series firmly insists on the sexuality of older women and challenges the notion of an idealized female body. It also represents a fertile moment of formal experimentation as Semmel began exploring coloring and transparencies, compositional elements that she would continue to refine into her present-day work.



Purple Diagonal from the "Echoing Images," 1980
Oil on canvas
78h x 104w in (198.12h x 264.16w cm)

Semmel's "Echoing Images" series (1979–81) highlights her ongoing stylistic concerns and experimentation with both abstraction and realism. The series is characterized by the repetition of the main compositional figure in a smaller realist form and a second in a large expressionistic version. For Semmel, "They are almost like internal and external views of the self that combine a perceptual image with the ambition and striving in the emotive ego." *Purple Diagonal* is painted with thick expressive brushstrokes in vivid colors, and the encompassing echo image lends the artist's doubled body a sense of movement against the deep purple background.



Transparent Mask from the "Transparencies" series, 2014
Oil on canvas
48h x 36w in (121.92h x 91.44w cm)

In *Transparent Mask*, part of her most recent series, Semmel explores motion and time as well as the nuances of invisibility as it is experienced by older women. Concerned with the aging female body and the cultural ramifications of the process, the issue has come to dominate her work of the past decade, reinforced by her chosen painting techniques. Semmel explains, "Layered transparencies suggest motion and time passing, a perfect way of visualizing the inevitability of aging. In a culture so driven by youth, but due to suddenly be overtaken by the baby boomer generation in old age, it seems essential to address our expectations and priorities... Age cannot be denied as part of the human spectrum."



On The Grass from “Self-Images” series, 1978
Oil on canvas
48h x 74w in (121.92h x 187.96w cm)

In *On The Grass*, from the “Self-Images” series (1974–79), Semmel turns the perspective of her compositions towards her own body to capture “the feeling of self, and the experience of oneself.” Closely cropped and painted from a photograph the artist took, Semmel is simultaneously the observer and subject. Creating a personalized and subjective alternative to the art historical idealized and objectified female nude, Semmel explains, “I wanted the body to be seen as a woman experiences herself, rather than through the reflection of the mirror or male eyes. The fundamental problem of subject and object was always present, and using my own body was one method of dealing with this.” In portraying her own body, Semmel also aimed to subvert the tradition of male artist and female muse from within the painting realm. Although painted with a naturalistic palette in a realist style, the close viewpoint and cropping frame Semmel’s figure as an abstracted landscape of the body.



Erotic Yellow from “Erotic Series,” 1973
Oil on canvas
72h x 72w in (182.88h x 182.88w cm)

The “Erotic Series” was Semmel’s second series focused on sexuality from a female perspective. Unlike her earlier “Sex Paintings,” Semmel worked from photographs rather than sketches, a process she maintained throughout her career. She states, “The shift from drawing into photography was a significant departure for me. At that time, the use of photography by a painter was considered not quite legitimate. I appropriated the modeled form and smooth surface of the closely cropped photograph into my paintings which tended to push the image out from the picture plane into the viewer’s space.” In *Erotic Yellow*, like in her previous figurative series and abstract work, Semmel maintained the use of vibrant color.



Centered from “With Camera” series, 2002
Oil on canvas
48h x 53w in (121.92h x 134.62w cm)

Centered is an emblematic example of Semmel’s use of the camera as it relates to both her process and subject matter. As she explains, “While my work developed through series, the connecting thread across decades is a single perspective: being inside the experience of femaleness and taking possession of it culturally. I have used both the mirror and the camera as strategies to destabilize the point of view (who is looking at whom), and to engage the viewer as a participant.” While her previous use of the camera was to document herself from her own perspective, the series “With Camera” (2001–06) marks the first time Semmel purposefully poses in front of the mirror with the camera. The mannequin on the left side of *Centered* points to Semmel’s series “Mannequins” (1996–2001). Featuring old mannequins she found in her Soho neighborhood, these battered but idealized versions of the female body served as a means for Semmel to explore the isolation and fetishization of the female body.



Ghost from “Shifting Images” series, 2009
Oil on canvas
48h x 48w in (121.92h x 121.92w cm)

As Semmel experimented with different ways to photographically capture her body for subsequent paintings, she began using a timer camera. Racing back in front of the lens, the resulting images show her in motion, giving way to the “Shifting Images” series (2006–13). Semmel explains, “I liked the implications of such images and began to paint modulated surfaces and blurred and shifting figures, which seem to reference the anxious moments of personal lives, as well as uncertain times.” The subject matter of the series also allowed Semmel to explore how to portray movement and transparency through paint application. She painted in layers to convey the evidence of age on her body. With the textural quality of flesh that permeates paintings such as *Ghost*, Semmel emphasizes that sensuality is not confined to youth.