

MOMENT OF TRUTH

Joan Semmel is a painter known, since the early 1970s, for her powerful depictions of nudes. These works are distinguished by their unusual point of view—that of a woman looking down on her own, or a male lover's, nude reclining body. The audacity of these compositions with their dramatic lighting and perspective has earned recognition for Semmel as a key figure within the women's art movement.

In her new, monumental figurative studies of friends and colleagues, Semmel has made a significant departure, combining the strong modeling of her earlier nude studies with passages of brilliant color applied with vigorous brushstrokes. These exuberant touches contrast with a subtle treatment of the head—twisted just so as to catch the most revealing expression. Her colors seem to act as a barometer reading of unseen emotional states.

Besides her penetrating portraits, Semmel has recently turned to landscapes, or "summer pictures." In these, she takes delight in jarring otherwise serene depictions of nature with sinister nuances. Her painfully emaciated horses set out to pasture, or the decayed undergrowth in the forest unmasks the ruthlessness of existence and reminds us that nature assures its own survival first regardless of—sometimes despite—our own, individual passions, fears, and hurts.

Since the demise of her last gallery, Lerner-Heller, Semmel has had a difficult time attracting a viable commercial outlet, but her work can be seen through late February at the Bockley Gallery, in Minneapolis, and the Tomasula Gallery, of Union County College, in Cranford, New Jersey. Today, while a new generation of figurative painters is emerging and has been received with an enthusiasm inconceivable ten years ago, Semmel has already shown us how powerful statements are made.

—Lowery S. Sims



Semmel captures the revealing moment.