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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

“You Have to Get Past the Fear”: Joan Semmel on Painting Her Aging, Nude Body

by [Clarity Haynes](#) on September 9, 2016



Joan Semmel in her studio alongside “Embrace” (2016) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

[Joan Semmel](#) has created a distinctive body of work largely centered on painted images of her own body. For her new [exhibition](#) at Alexander Gray Associates, Semmel has created 12 large paintings, many of which have two layers, each with a nude self-portrait. She works on one layer at a time, and if she likes the first layer enough she doesn’t add to it. In the resulting paintings, echoing, repeating, and overlapping figures crouch, lean, sway, sit, and generally confound the viewer, mixing figuration and abstraction in ways that make us question what a body is. The works are brushy, open, assured, and masterful, employing both naturalistic and abstract color.

Semmel is a veteran of feminist art, and her career spans more than 50 years. She broke open art history as we know it in the 1970s, with her large-scale nudes painted from her own perspective, depicting her own body and various erotic encounters. As a longtime fan of Semmel's work, I was excited and nervous when I sat down with her at the kitchen table of the SoHo loft where she has lived for more than three decades. I soon felt totally at ease as she very openly discussed her life, work, and philosophy.

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Clarity Haynes: *Any artist who paints the figure now is indebted to you, because you made an intervention into art history. An artist cannot paint the body now without gender being an issue. You were so conscious about it: you were curating, you were writing. And I also think it was very brave of you to be painting.*



Joan Semmel, "Cool Light" (2016), oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York) (click to enlarge)

Joan Semmel: Not only painting, but painting the nude. As a feminist! It was verboten. And I was one of the first ones who talked about what I was doing.

CH: *Alice Neel did her [self-portrait at age 80](#), and yet, I can't think of many other images of nude old women in contemporary art. Can you?*

JS: Now there are a few, very few.

CH: *I love that Alice Neel painting. But your work was more self-consciously feminist.*

JS: Alice Neel was a force unto herself. She was what I would call a genuine eccentric. Not the work so much, but her as a personality. She wasn't analyzing what she was doing in any way. It was just the most emotional, direct response. And she was great! But she had to be Alice Neel to do it. Not that my work is less personal; it isn't. But it's just more politically centered in a different way. Hers was socially centered from a class point of view. She was certainly interested in class, and in social change. But she didn't see herself as an activist, I don't think. She didn't take on that kind of analytical cloak.

CH: *Sylvia Sleigh, Faith Ringgold, you, May Stevens ... I can't think of anyone else who really made an impact from that time who was painting figuratively.*

JS: Most feminists rejected painting as a practice.

CH: *Exactly. They were doing body art, performance, photography.*

JS: The theory saw painting as being male-owned. And I refused to acknowledge that painting was male-owned. I owned it, just as much as they did.

CH: *I refuse to get all caught up with "oh, the language is male, painting is male." That's absurd.*

JS: It is absurd. The whole thrust of feminism was to break the canon, right? Well, yes, I wanted to break the grip of the canon, but that didn't mean I didn't love a lot of those guys!

CH: *The other influence I think was going on then is that women weren't painting because they were told they couldn't, that they weren't good painters.*

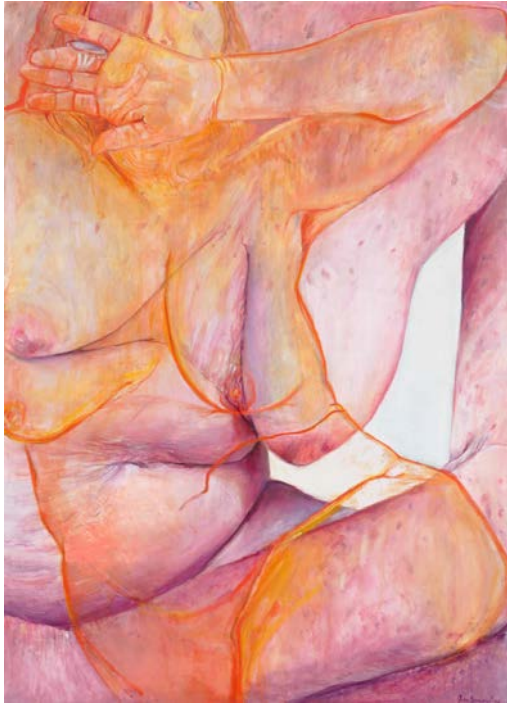
JS: There was an old saying that you needed balls to paint. You know what Alice Neel said to that? She said, "I've got 'em, they're just higher up!"

CH: *That is so good! I hadn't heard that!*

JS: That was the environment we lived in, so you were hit from both sides! From the theorists telling you that you can't do the nude because it was "colonized territory," to women being told that they couldn't paint. You were squeezed into a very narrow category of what you could do. And I just

said no way. I loved to paint. And I was turned on by art history. It didn't turn me off, it turned me on!

CH: *I think things have changed, especially for someone like me who was born in 1971. As a young artist I had a feminist lineage!*



Joan Semmel, "Open Hand" (2015), oil on canvas, 66 x 48 in (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York) (click to enlarge)

JS: That's important! I was teaching at Rutgers; I was one of the first women tenured in the studio area. There were art historians, but no women in painting or sculpture.

CH: *What year was that?*

JS: That was in the early 1970s, I think. I didn't have to teach a lecture class; I only had to teach painting. But I told them I wanted to do a class on women artists. There weren't any books on any of it! I went around collecting slides from different shows where women were showing. I had to find essays and writing. And I researched what there was in the past, back to what some of the nuns had done. It was an educational process for me, too. I would mimeograph the pages to distribute the lessons, the writings. There were no books. And this was only 50 years ago.

CH: *What a labor of love! In the mid '90s, when I was starting out, the internet hadn't happened yet. [The Power of Feminist Art](#) was published in 1995, and there was [a book by Whitney Chadwick](#) about women artists. I must have read it 15 times! But now, with the internet, information is so present, all the time.*

JS: And there's been so much research, writing, and curating done since then. As soon as women came into the professional area, where they could take part in what was going on, they asked questions. So they started collecting information, thinking about it, writing about it, and so on. I've always given thanks to the art historians of that period. Because the way the art world works is you're up for five minutes and down for 25. And during that whole period of backlash and lull, those art historians were out around the country showing our slides. They kept us alive, so that a whole new generation came in and they knew the work. I would say to students, "How do you know my work?" They said, "Oh, I saw your slides in my art history class!"

CH: *I don't know if you remember this, but I was trying to put together a show on feminism —*

JS: I do remember.

CH: *I emailed you to ask if you would be in this show, and you called me on the phone. You said, "I want you to know that you need to not become known as a feminist artist." You said that feminist art comes into fashion when the market is down, because women artists are less expensive. There is a sudden interest in feminist art, and then it quickly goes out of fashion.*

JS: It's true. It has been cyclical. But now I think we're all smart enough, and the focus is on pushing the institutions. And that's what's necessary. Before, we were all talking about the kind of art you were making, and the artist groups —

CH: *Just to make the stuff!*

JS: Just to be able to make it, right. But now the focus is finally coming on the institutions. And until the institutions support it, it's going to go up and down.

CH: *And not only do the institutions need to have the work, they need to show the work. Did you hear about the recent [protest](#) at Tate Modern? They did an expansion, and they put in Carl Andre's work, but not Ana Mendieta's?*

JS: Yes, so they can't get away with it the way they used to. They really can't. And the institutions are sensitive to it, so it's more hopeful than it used to be. But it's still going to be rolling the ball up the hill. You let go for a minute, and it comes right back down on your head.

CH: *At least now, it's harder for cultural amnesia and erasure to happen, because of the internet. I'm hoping.*

JS: We hope. It's about noise: how much noise gets made, about whom, when. Everything has to do with a strange balance of timing and support. You can't plan it. Somehow it just catches fire or it doesn't. But I think there's a better chance now. There are also many more strong women — as artists, but also as curators — who are willing to take a stand.



Joan Semmel, "Yellow Sky" (2015), oil on canvas, 51 x 71 in (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York) (click to enlarge)

CH: *You've always abstracted the body, made it disorienting. I feel like there's something of the maternal nude in all of your work. That might just be my response to it, but it's a larger body, like a landscape, and to a child, a baby, the mother's body is like a landscape. There is that intimacy.*

JS: I think it's partly your response. But there is the intimacy, and the scale. To a child, the mother's body is close. It's larger.

CH: *I'm always trying to figure out how to paint stretch marks, wrinkles, and age spots. And I love the way you're such a master at it, because you've been doing it for so long! It becomes almost abstract.*

JS: It becomes just patterning. It's about surface: the surface of the painting, instead of the surface of the body.

CH: *There's such a freedom and freshness to these.*

JS: Well, that's the thing about artists' late paintings. You know, I'm 83. If I don't know it now, it's going to be hard to still learn. So you have to have that sense of . . .

CH: *You have to own the fact that you do actually know what you're doing.*

JS: Exactly.

CH: *In the catalogue from your last show at Alexander Gray, [Across Five Decades](#), it was so great to see your early abstract paintings. They relate to your later work so much.*

JS: I started out as an abstract painter. So I've always played with combining abstraction and figuration. It forces you to look longer. You have to stop and say, "What's going on? What's happening here?"

CH: *Yes, you keep discovering new things. Like this crazy bright-green knee, or that beautiful passage of flesh that becomes a swooping arabesque. It's so complex and deceptively simple. Over here, the size of that forearm and hand in relation to the rest; it fragments even more. All the shapes, forms, and color — to make that work, and let it still be a body!*

JS: It's complicated. So you can see, they all have that kind of mystery.

CH: *All this repetition, echoing, overlapping, and abstracting makes us feel the reality of what a self really is. It's not just one unified thing.*

JS: No it's not. It happens over time. And it has many different aspects. None of us are simple.

CH: *People always ask me about the head not being in my work, so I'm curious: I looked through all of the paintings from your last show and only once did your face appear clearly in a painting, without being obscured by a camera or cropped in some way.*



Joan Semmel, "Aura" (2016), oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York) (click to enlarge)

JS: I did a [show](#) at the Bronx Museum that was all heads. So it's not that I don't want to use the head, but the whole of this work has been about the flesh. As soon as you put a face in it, it changes the story. It's narrative in a different way. You immediately get different kinds of psychological readings, and I wanted it to have sensual readings.

CH: *Some people have a visceral negative reaction to seeing images of bodies. It's almost like they're freaked out. I think a lot of women especially have body issues.*

JS: There's always been so much shame attached to the body. And the religions, look what they've done, how much they've enforced that kind of shame, the whole idea of shame. And it affects men, too. It's not just women. I've talked at times about working against the shame of the body, the shame of getting old, all of these shames that are laid on our heads. You should be ashamed that you're old, instead of being proud to have lived? All of these things, culturally, have really distorted what life is about, in many ways. So religion has a lot to answer for.

CH: *And now you're exploring the sensuality of aging flesh, and making a point that sensuality is not gone.*

JS: It's also about the acceptance of mortality. It's about being a body that changes, that ages, that loves, that hates, that does all of these things! It's not about being some sort of a model, a perfected ideal of any kind.

CH: *Not even an ideal of aging, or of aging sexuality.*

JS: No. It's something that's constantly morphing.

CH: *Which is really what embodiment is.*

JS: Yes, it's a kind of constant changing. Aging is so much about vulnerability, and how do we understand that? How do you get past that? You have to get past the fear. That's the biggest thing in life, is the fear of death. That's what art is about!

CH: *But then to put that out there, visually — you know, you're not supposed to represent the body in certain ways — takes a lot of guts!*

JS: In a funny way, I'm old, I'm not supposed to, right? But the point is that it takes a certain almost egocentric sense of your own rightness, that what you're doing is OK. I don't know if it's even confidence, so much as it's just that sense that you're *right*.

CH: *People may think you're trying to shock, or trying to be grotesque. And I know, because you do it so beautifully, that that's not what you're doing. And I understand your impulse: I agree with you that those forms are beautiful. I crave seeing them, because we don't see them enough.*

JS: And I feel that so many women — there's so much self-hatred. What woman do you know who won't stand in front of the mirror and say, "Oh, my breast is too low, my nose is too short." You're never just right! There's always that element of self-hatred. "Nobody will love me because I have freckles!" These are the things that we deal with, and more than ever, today, with all the cosmetic surgeries and cosmetics to change how you look, and the constant barrage of images of beautiful, gorgeous, plastic-looking people.

CH: *That's why it's so rare to see bodies that don't conform to that image of what a woman is supposed to be, even in art. And even a lot of feminist art doesn't question that.*

JS: The early people did.

CH: *But the women who used their own bodies a lot, in performance, had very perfect bodies.*

JS: And a lot of the women were quite beautiful. But the beautiful women had problems also.

CH: *Because they weren't taken seriously as artists?*

JS: As anything! They were considered bimbos. Just by the fact of being beautiful, they were automatically considered not too bright. It's a strange kind of distortion of life, in such a way that's unfortunate. I think it's much worse now than it ever was, because of the media barrage, the millions of photos that everybody has. The need to conform to those other images is really overwhelming. But when the environment is modified enough to give people choices, things do change.

CH: *Do you feel like your work in some way is your contribution to that?*



Joan Semmel, "Intimate Spaces" (2016), oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York) (click to enlarge)

JS: It's the best I can do! I'm offering myself, in a funny kind of way, as a model for what it could be. How we need to feel about ourselves. How we need to have the confidence to assume that we're OK just the way we are! We don't have to be perfect to be lovable, especially to ourselves. To care about yourself, to feel like you're all right, is a primary need.

CH: *It affects your life, how you feel walking down the street, how you feel doing anything. Because you're in your body, for better or for worse.*

JS: You're always there, in that body. So when they say, "Why are so many women doing this kind of work?" I say, "Because that's where we live."

CH: *I think it's so generous. Nobody was paying you to do this. Nobody said, "Hey, will you do this?"*

JS: I wanted to change the world.

CH: *And you did!*

JS: As a kid I wanted to be a man. I used to have arguments with my father. I used to say, "I want to be this," and he'd say, "You can't, you're a woman." What do you mean, I can't, I'm a woman? I want to do something in the world!

I was bright, I was smart. I wanted a life that went beyond my mother's life. I identified with the male areas of expression. I couldn't stand the idea of spending my life dusting furniture. It's actually not that I wanted to be a man; I just wanted to do things! I've had my down periods where nothing was happening. I taught for years to support myself and my children. And there were periods where it was really rough going. But it wasn't even a choice. It's like now, why do I have to make more paintings? There's plenty of work. Well, because that's what I do! That's just who I am and what I do. That's what makes me happy — the process of discovering things, being totally at one with myself.

CH: *Amazing that there's all this shame about aging. Every artist wants to work for as long as possible, and to continue at the height of their powers, as you are. It really feels cumulative, like all the work you've done has put you in a position to be able to do this now.*

JS: I feel like I'm doing everything I ever did, so to speak, in these paintings. It's all there.

Joan Semmel: New Work is on view at [Alexander Gray Associates](#) (510 West 26 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 15.