

Visual Arts

Semmel's retrospective show reflects times and issues

By Ray Mark Rinaldi

Staff writer

ALBANY — Mirrors have always been a big part of Joan Semmel's paintings, either through their obvious presence or their conspicuous absence.

In her earlier mid-1970s work — as the retrospective of her work at the State University at Albany Art Gallery shows — the looking glass was left deliberately out. Her oil paintings were of her, from her own perspective, literally, downward views of her own body from the chest down.

The reflection was internal. Semmel was exposing her own flesh in nearly photorealistic displays with a no-mistaking-this message for women in the midst of a tumultuous sexual revolution: Drop the male-made sex-kitten standard of beauty and take a good long look at yourself.

"The way women have always identified themselves follows the way men would like to experience women, rather than the way women experience themselves," said Semmel during a recent interview in her huge modern SoHo loft. "My work has always been about women coming to terms with themselves and their own self-image."

In recent years, however, Semmel has added mirrors and used them to expand her message. Several of her recent paintings feature them. "Locker-Line" from 1989, for example, is a mirror view of three women in a locker room in various stages of dress. It is busier painting that speaks to an audience now more sophisticated in its self-perception. The fact that it is a reflection effectively forces viewers to become part of the painting and then invites them to reflect on their own attitudes.

The awkward setting — locker rooms are the domain of men — strips away the familiar female trappings and leaves the subjects ripe for observation. We see how women see women. Some avoid

looking at their reflected likenesses. Some appear to sneak glances. Others confront themselves head-on — in fact, some of the women in her paintings are photographing their own reflected images.

The viewer is conscious of all their matter-of-fact, detached easiness, as well as their discomfort with the images of themselves.

"We are trained from day one to look in that mirror. That is who you are," said Semmel. "We are told that

looking is narcissistic, yet the message is loud and clear: You better pay attention."

The SUNYA show, curated by gallery director Nancy Liddle, escorts the viewer down the road with Semmel. The 17 works, mostly oil on canvas, are large — as much as 6 feet by 9 feet — and fill the gallery's tall second floor.

The trip begins with the bold, realistic view. In 1974's "Me Without

Mirrors," flesh is smooth, tight and shiny. Semmel, the subject and painter, takes a look at her body and dares others to do the same.

"It had to be me to make sense," she explains of her early self-portraits. "I could have created an artificial me, but I thought it might lose something in translation."

The work progresses and matures with its creator. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Semmel turned playful. Vibrant, colorful, expressionistic im-

ages are placed beside and on top of the realistic images. In 1979's "Turning" they are intertwined to create a painting that moves and twists.

The two earlier styles metamorphose into the current work. The representation is clear, but neither exact nor exotic. The images are modern and interpretive. She paints flesh rather than skin, lumps rather than curves. Skin tones are a mottled mix of yellows and browns and colors in between.

The women are of different ages and their bodies have changed. "It's about aging and about mortality," said Semmel. These are issues that men must also face and there is a great deal for males in this work. But Semmel takes the position that, despite strides by women in the self-perception arena, aging is still "much more painful for women; their body image is still who they are."

Semmel's work focusing on bodies occurred during a time when Americans started paying more and more attention to their bodies. Health clubs were inundated. Bulimia and anorexia were "discovered." Jane Fonda was a bikini-clad sex symbol when Semmel began, and now the culture has turned her into a fitness guru. That has made Semmel an important painter, as her long list of group and solo shows proves.

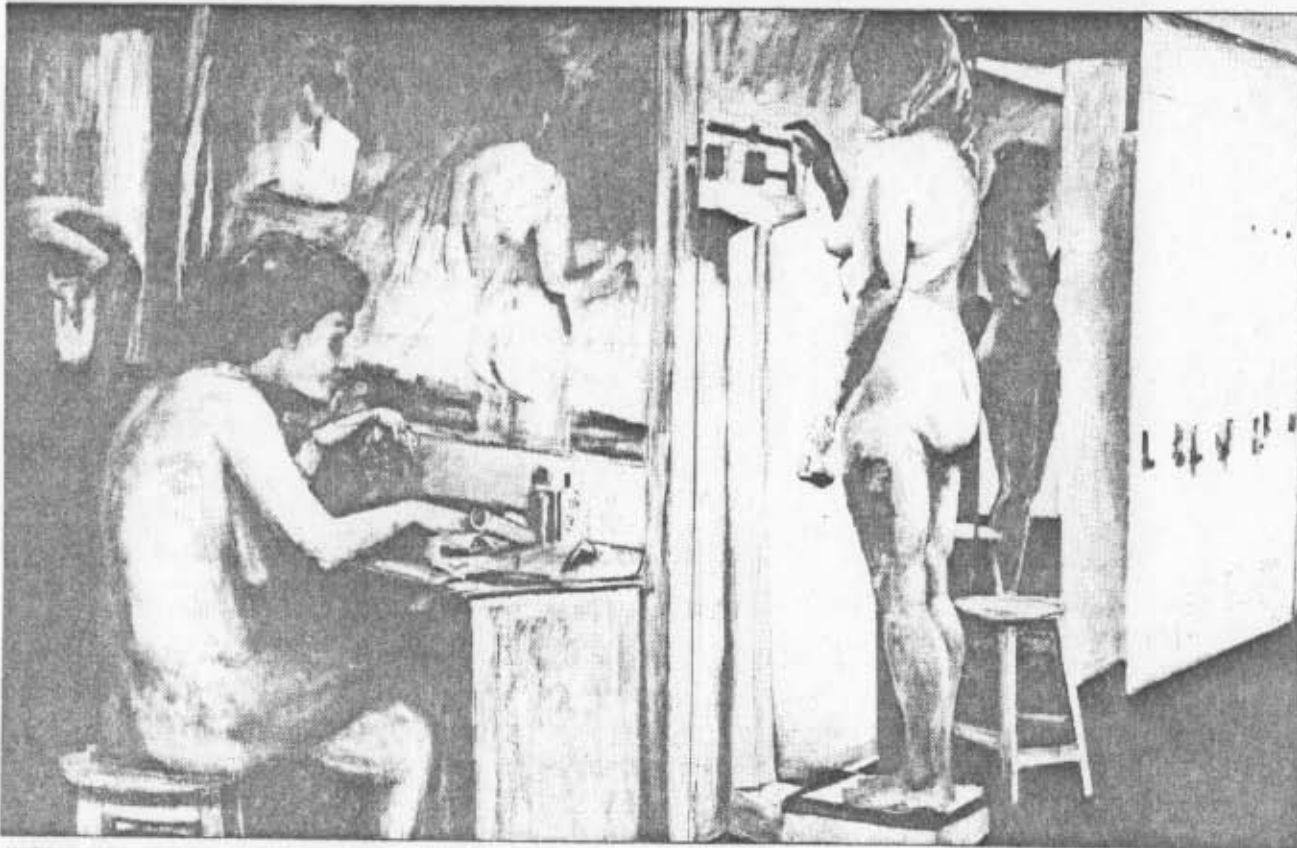
But she has received more than a fair share of scrutiny. While her work has included images of men and all sorts of portraits — including the SUNYA-commissioned portrait of former university president Vincent O'Leary — it is her females nudes that have provided her reputation.

Skin has always made some people nervous. Semmel, whose paintings tend even larger than life-size, has seen her work branded as obscene and pornographic. Rarely during the anything-goes '70s, but increasingly so during the '90s, when conservatives have made the boldest of gallery operators — especially government-funded ones — cautious.

Still, she has never held back from allowing sexuality and sensuality into her work. She brands current attitudes absurd.

"I don't buy it, and I refuse to be constrained by it," she said.

"Through the Object's Eyes: Paintings by Joan Semmel." Nude studies, portraits and tableaux. Through April 12. University Art Gallery, State University at Albany. 442-4035.



WOMEN'S IMAGES — "The Changing Room," painted in 1988, reflects women coming to terms with themselves and their images.