

## Artlog



Joan Semmel, *Double X*, 2005, oil on canvas, 50x58 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

### SEE // A New Lens on the Female Body // Joan Semmel

Octogenarian feminist painter Joan Semmel remains as prolific today—if not more so—than when she began her career in Spain in the 1960s. Moving first from abstraction to erotic painting, Semmel's most recent mode of self-portraiture has developed around her perspective on aging. In the twenty-seven works now on view at the Bronx Museum, all made within the past decade, Semmel depicts an honest female form, devoid of any sentimentality or vulnerability. The exhibition, *Joan Semmel: A Lucid Eye*, is the artist's first solo presentation in a New York museum.

For many years, Semmel has been using photographs she takes of herself through a mirror to construct her paintings, yet only recently has she decided to expose her process, revealing the camera and the mirror's frame in her final works. The mirror and camera function as compositional devices, but also as conceptual ones.

In an interview with the show's curator, Sergio Bessa, Director of Curatorial and Education Programs at the Bronx Museum, Semmel explained that her use of a camera serves as a conscious disruption of photography's history in which the male has often been behind the camera and the female in front. The artist uses mirrors to underscore how "the image is always a construct." She explains that when she began her career, many took images as reality, but she wanted to make it clear that "when we look in the mirror, we see a reflection, and that reflection is controlled by the viewer and by the environment."

While Semmel was working in Spain, cultural attitudes toward women were particularly disenfranchising under Franco's rule. Semmel recalls that women couldn't have their own bank accounts or file for divorce. Upon arriving back in America in the '70s, Semmel expected to find an enlightened cultural outlook on gender equality as a product of the sexual revolution of the '60s. Instead, she found many of the same latent sexist attitudes she witnessed in Spain.

Semmel uses her powerful renderings to assume control over the gaze and the cultural conversation around depictions of women. As Bronx Museum Director Holly Block stated, "her paintings give us, quite literally, a new lens through which to see the female body."

WHERE TO SEE

Joan Semmel: A Lucid Eye will remain on view at the Bronx Museum, in Semmel's native borough, through June 16.

#what to see #joan semmel: a lucid eye #bronx museum of the arts #joan semmel #new york #painting #feminism

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