

Appreciating Our Own Aging Bodies Through Joan Semmel's Self-Portraits

As the 89-year-old painter has her first retrospective, we look at how her nudes help us accept our less-than-perfect bodies.

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A portion of Joan Semmel's *Skin in the Game* 2019; oil on canvas; ©Joan Semmel/Artist Rights Society, New York

Recognition comes first: The breasts that have begun to look like hot water bottles; the mid-section that looks like unkneaded dough. Then comes relief: Thank God someone is showing, with dignity, how bodies well past their baby-making days really look. For decades, Joan Semmel has been creating a stir with her paintings of nudes. First, she concentrated on couples having sex, but since the 80s, she has focused on her own body. Now, the 89-year-old painter has been having her first retrospective at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Joan Semmel: *Skin in the Game* brings together sixty years of the iconic artist's groundbreaking paintings, from her early abstract-expressionist paintings through her movement-defining feminist art and activism to the vital work that she is making of her own mature body today.

"Semmel's work reflects the ongoing struggle for women's equal representation and power to make decisions about their own bodies and sexuality while centering female empowerment through the self," according to the notes on the retrospective.

Screw the “Male Gaze”

In a New York Times feature story on the artist, Daphne Merkin observes that what makes Semmel's nudes so revolutionary is that they are not sexualized.

“Although representations of nude female figures had been and continued to be a crucial part of the Western art tradition in the '70s, they were mostly done from a male point of view, and frequently had a voyeuristic and titillating slant,” writes Merkin. “Ever since the 1980s, Semmel's project has been to depict her own body—prone, crouched or twisted and frequently truncated—with drooping breasts and rolls of flesh and all, as it moves ever further from the idealized youth of traditional female portraiture.”

Speaking with the writer and professor Richard Meyer in 2007, Semmel said that she was trying “to find an erotic language to which women could respond, one which did not reiterate the male power positions and prevalent fetishizations.”

The art critic Deborah Solomon also weighed in. “In contrast to the nudes of art history, Semmel's figures are purged of idealization and offer us a view of femaleness that allows for awkward poses and bovine thighs,” she said in the New York Times story. “She paints skin that is clearly inhabited by real women—women who are variously shown sitting or lying down, touching, relaxing, intent on their own comfort and satisfaction rather than self-display.”

Another critic, writing for IFA Contemporary, said that her paintings “invoke a spiritual reverence rather than the inclination to ogle.”

Activist Art

As a woman of a certain age, you can't help be moved by what you see in her paintings. Whether Semmel intended this or not, there's a call to action implicit in her work and that is to stop cringing when you catch a glimpse of your naked self in the mirror. Stop apologizing or mourning what used to be or what you think should be. This is what real bodies look like “I identified with the female body,” Semmel said of why she chose to paint the self-portraits. “I felt very strongly that women needed to be able to express their own sexual desires rather than follow the Hollywood concept of the chivalric tradition, in which Sleeping Beauty is aroused to passion by the handsome prince. I was a woman at the height of my sexual powers and didn't want to be ashamed of it.”