The subject of Joan Semmel’s vigorous new paintings is artist’s perception of herself, more specifically, the propagation of what she sees of self at intimate moments when she is alone or with someone to whom she is physically emotionally close. Two mutations, the nude and the overt, are assimilated in Semmel’s unique autobiographical approach. In herings which we may think of as self-portraits and portraits spritualizing on bodies rather faces, the viewpoints of the and the observer are identical.

The cropping of the monumental figures and their facelessness (in only one composition, Patty and I, do we see part of a face) underscore the thematic focus on the nature and quality of physical communication; and in each painting the incidents of touch are gentle but sure and controlled. Semmel’s painting is about female sensuality, but her new images have become less erotic, yet more intimate. She no longer has to declare her right as a woman artist to depict explicit sexual activity, and now she shows greater confidence in her ability to paint a variety of personal subjects. Her treatment and approach is cool and objective, yet not detached. The larger-than-life scale, the full modeling of the monumental forms that come out at us, and the steep perspective that conversely draws us into the space of the canvas, all contribute to the sense of intimacy and the powerful immediate impact of the work.

Sennel uses the camera as a tool to capture the close-up images she sees. To get an accurate picture, it is set up exactly where her eyes are. Photographing the subjects is less disruptive to the intimacy of the situation than drawing a mirror image; and as conveyed in Me Without Mirrors, Semmel wants to present what she actually sees of herself, and not a reflected image which is a step removed from her direct perception. However, Semmel’s methods and aims are not those of Photo Realists. She does not project or greatly enlarge the photographs; the creation of a powerful cohesive composition is always more important than strict realism. For example, in the horizontal painting Intimacy-Autonomy, Semmel juxtaposed two images—one of the man and one of the woman—so the desired composition, which created subtle distortions since the foreshortened figures do not have the same perspective.

Throughout these paintings Semmel uses strongly contrasting areas of light and shade. The clearly defined shadows function both as independent forms in an interlocking abstract composition and as logical and accurate pictorial elements. Spaces between parts of the modeled bodies work similarly; for example, in Intimacy-Autonomy the triangle formed by the man’s arm, thigh, and trunk, or the irregular shape of the poignant gull between the man’s and woman’s arms. Thus, it is through the skillful handling and complex integration of many elements, including scale, perspective, modeling, color, and shape, that Semmel achieves the powerful images that coherently represent her perceptions and express her sensibility. (Lerner-Heller, September 30-October 18)

Judith Tannenbaum