

April Kingsley

Joan Semmel—Lerner-Heller, 956
Madison Avenue, March 5-31

Someone said about Joan Semmel's exhibition that it reminded him of Monet's *Nymphs in the Orangerie* in Paris because it gave the impression that behind the white walls interspersing the paintings was a continuous world of sensuous flesh. The installation is exquisite. Each of the seven paintings in the show is situated so as to read as a unique image, yet as part of a vast complex of similar imagery. The big change in Semmel's work with this show is that her color, which used to be handled abstractly, is now much more realistic, while her forms, which were formerly quite realistic, are being handled increasingly abstractly. Her surfaces no longer have the uniformity that made it seem as though they were photo-realistically pro-

duced. Instead there are painterly passages where the paint seems to be being applied for its own sake, rather than as descriptive matter.

Joan Semmel's involvement with photo-derived, sexually charged figuration dates only from the seventies. She moved into it—as much to her own amazement as anyone else's—from a long-term intense immersion in Abstract Expressionism. In that style her color was very intense, tending toward an expressionist clash of red and green, and her compositions were centrally focused with linear networks flung out toward the corners. Interestingly, in her latest canvases this composition seems to be making a comeback. Contours of thighs, arms, and torsos form a nexus in or near the center of the picture with connections stretching out to all the edges from there. The way she fragments the view of the female body turns it into a sort

of aerial-view landscape which is remarkably similar to that of her earlier abstractions.

Semmel works from (but doesn't opaque-project) photographs that she has taken herself of her own body and then montages into usable compositions. Thus her imagery is close up, angle-distorted, and fragmentary. Viewing one of her paintings is like looking down at your own body, which accounts in large measure for their compelling quality. They are also very sensual paintings; your eye passes over the undulating hills and furrows of flesh the way a hand does and the way her paintbrush did. The viewer derives a steady sensation of stroking, smoothing, gently touching flesh on flesh from these paintings. They almost mesmerize you. This sensuous approach to the nude has been one aspect of the subject since Titian of course, but Ms. Semmel's particular approach seems bound into recent feminine and sexual liberations in its essential positivism. In other words, what was traditionally covert in the content of nude figuration is now out in the open. It is, in fact, being celebrated, as it ought to have been all along.



Semmel's *Center Hand*

Courtesy Lerner-Heller