
ART REVIEW

Accentuating Women

NUDE OR NAKED. Vered Gallery, East Hampton, through July 20. Daily except Tuesday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

JOAN SEMMEL: RECENT WORK. East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art, through July 30. Daily 11 a.m.-7 p.m., except Sunday 1-7 p.m. Closed Tuesday and Wednesday.

By Helen A. Weinberg

Joan Semmel, a superlative figure painter and a feminist activist whose

subject is the woman's body and its customary environments, is well shown at this lively, young, nonprofit center for new art: Semmel's 1989 work, as exhibited in nine paintings here, has changed considerably since her well-known photorealist studies of the 1970s.

Semmel's new paintings, all oil on canvas, re-emphasize her interest in the female body, and this is especially clear in a large painting like "Locker Line." A close-up of two women's "headless" bodies are foregrounded while a third woman's body in the background has a head, but a head without a distinct face.

However, in "Locker Line," as in all the other paintings here, Semmel's strict photo-realist style of earlier work — "Pink Fingertips" of 1977 comes to mind — is transformed by looser brushstrokes and painterly passages. Even some paint drips are permitted to appear, and to provide a witty conceit, in "Shower Room." The body details, though still important, are submerged in a powerful overall sense of a Hopperesque atmosphere. In "Black Era," a pensive woman wrapped in a black towel stands amid the cubicles and mirrors of a locker room as if bemused by their maze-like quality.

The exhibit is neatly defined by focusing on the locker-room life of women. All but one of the paintings — "Sauna Shelf" — are set in the locker room. These settings could be the backstage of a theater as well as of a sauna, and their theatricality is emphasized by the predominance of mirrors. In two paintings, "Mirror-Mirror" and "Reflective Camera," a woman photographs herself in a mirror, making the point, it seems, that women's images of themselves are ambiguous, unreal, transient and difficult to keep in place. Images are multiplied, not pinned down in a realistic way, in the mirrors of these paintings. Semmel's more expressive style of the 1980s underscores the subjectivity implicit in this content.

In 1977, writing from an explicitly feminist point-of-view, Joan Semmel said: "Women's sexual art tends to stress either the strongly positive or strongly negative aspects of their experience." In these nine paintings there is no strong positive or strong negative. There is rather the concept of a very ambiguous female self, mirrored, photographed, simulated; the concept of self is now more important than the real body, constituting a shift from the physical to the psychological in this artist's subject matter and style. ■■■