Joan Semmel
Greenville County Museum of Art
Greenville, South Carolina
June 4 - 30

May Stevens
July 2 - 28

Joan Semmel's and May Stevens' shows are the second and third segments of a four-part series
entitled "Selves," which embraces the time-honored themes of the ages of humanity, the content of each of
those ages, and the individual's search for meaning. In the context of this philosophical construct Semmel
deals with the realization of middle age and Stevens with the introspection of advancing years. The sequence
format of the exhibition series as a whole (including Bob Stanley in the spring and Andres
Serrano in late summer) may prove difficult for people who have missed the first segments.

None of the Semmel or Stevens paintings are benign in concept or visual impact; instead they are
invigorating and thought provoking. These large monochromatic paintings are disquieting and allow the
viewer very little relief. These particular pieces, chosen from larger, broader bodies of work, constitute a
strong, hard look at the search for meaning in life. None speaks simply of the joy of life. All is questioning,
reflection, realization.

Joan Semmel's large early works such as Me Without Mirrors (1974) focus on the youthful body of
the artist who sits quietly nude and contemplative. The works progress from this relatively realistic view
of the artist's young body to a more expressionist analysis of her aging life and body. In the later works
the artist/model often looks through a camera or toward a mirror, used as devices to indicate solitude
and analysis. The setting for these later works is a gymnasium or locker room where the artist is attemping
to stay some of the impact of time, even while becoming increasingly aware of those effects and the perceived
distance between the current self and the other, symbolically younger woman. Abeyance (1986) the largest and most colorful of the
paintings, shows a woman with her back to the viewer, now clothed, doing floor exercises squarely in
front of a gymnasium mirror. The woman's torso and face are bent to the floor toward the mirror; we see
only her back and stretched, straining legs. Reichlach Reflections (1991) shows the artist contemplating herself
in the mirror through a camera lens and evaluating what she sees. Known for her keen observation
and strong painting style, Semmel is able to reveal a great deal to the viewer through an unusual
angle or perspective and a momentary expression.

In Selves (1983-85) May Stevens is interested in portraying the loneliness of old age. Like Semmel, she,
too, uses a single model, her mother, for each of four works. These paintings are not only compelling in
their subject matter but painted with a forceful, intuitive hand. After the images for each piece were
determined and refined compositionally, they were drawn on the canvas. At this point the artist threw
herself exuberantly into the act of painting. The resulting works are overwhelming, both physically
and emotionally. Because of the scale (some are almost 12 feet wide) and imagery they seem to be
made for public display rather than for private living or working spaces. It is compelling to walk into the
gallery and be surrounded by these severely monochromatic figurative paintings. There is no respite
from the size, subject or task at hand.

Sharon Campbell

Sharon Campbell is a artist who lives in Greenville, South Carolina.