

Art in America

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Joan Semmel at Bypass and Pratt Manhattan Gallery

It is possible to read the evolution of Joan Semmel's work, as presented in this pair of exhibitions, as a record of the passages of a contemporary woman's life. For the last 20 years, Semmel's ongoing subject has been the female nude. The terms of her explorations have been dictated both by the evolution of the feminist debate on the politics of representation and by the artist's own changing perceptions of her body and the bodies of her female contemporaries.

Semmel initially set out to define a female gaze that could transform the traditionally inert and objectified female body into a sentient female subject. In some of her earliest works, Semmel painted headless female bodies as they appeared to their owners gazing down their torsos toward their feet. Some of these paintings also contain graphic images of heterosexual sex, again depicting

the tangled bodies as they might appear from the female participant's point of view.

As time has passed, Semmel's approach has changed. The focus on male/female interactions has given way to the exploration of an all-female enclave, the gymnasium. But again, it is the female gaze which defines the scene. A series of paintings set in a gym locker room reveal women of a range of body types and ages. Though they are in various stages of undress, these figures are anything but titillating. Ungainly, exhibiting the sagging breasts and lumpy flesh of middle age, they seem heedless of the naked, camera-wielding artist who is glimpsed in fragmented mirror reflections. Semmel's subjects weigh themselves, pull on socks, apply lipstick and blow-dry their hair. They appear totally absorbed in the rituals of self-maintenance which mark our distance from the hedonistic '70s.

The contrast between Semmel's early and late works is not just a matter of aging bodies. There also seems to be a different sense of self which accompanies the passing of the childbearing years. The early works, for all their brave rejection of the male gaze, still exhibit the narcissism of youth, with its pride in taut muscles and smooth skin. In the locker-room works Semmel's women, even as they battle to contain time's damage, seem resigned to the gravitational pull of age. They seem comfortable in each other's company and appear

willing to trade the excitement of passion for the pleasure of self-acceptance.

This metamorphosis is most strongly felt in the most recent works, which consist of new images laid over Semmel's old paintings of young bodies coiled in sexual intercourse. While the original figures are substantial and realistically rendered (though often painted in unnatural shades of red, green and blue), the overlays are translucent, expressionistically rendered images of older women lifted from the locker-room paintings. They float dreamlike over the scene, at times masking and confusing an already abstracted composition. Painted over flat, colored grounds, both old and new images seem suspended outside of time. Mysterious, poignant and wryly self-reflective, these latest paintings bring Semmel full circle.

—Eleanor Heartney

Joan Semmel: *Green Field*, 1992, oil on canvas, 69 inches square; at Bypass.

