

Alice Neel. *Margaret Evans Pregnant*. 1978. Oil on canvas, 57 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 38". Private collection

Alice Neel. *Nude Self-Portrait*. 1980. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40". National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C.

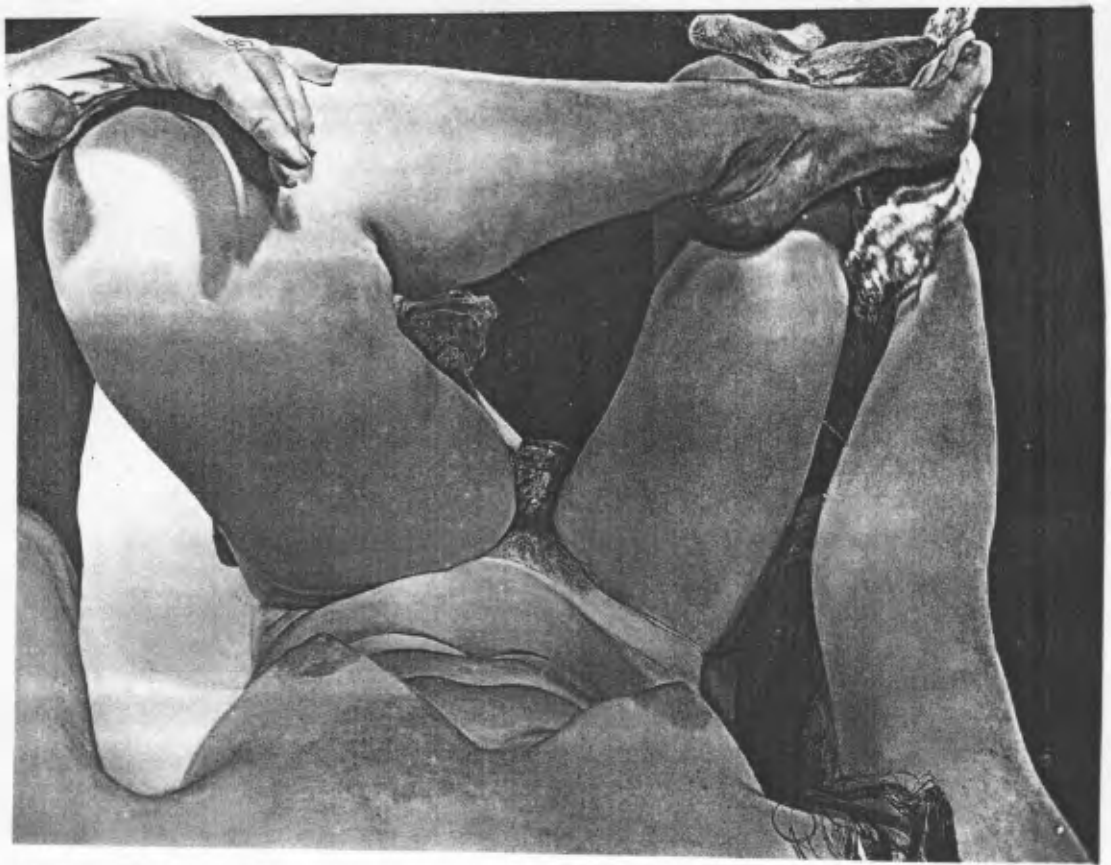
of female genitalia done by Betty Dodson's workshop participants, implies infinite possibilities that cancel the cosmetic limitations of tits in art and advertising.

Some of the most profound and visually astounding examples of studies of the female body are Joan Semmel's paintings of larger than life-size female nudes. In a series dating from the mid- to late seventies, the figure more than fills the canvas, and the looking is replete with pleasure. Each nude is monumental; the canvas cannot contain her. Semmel's nude is Adrienne Rich's "presiding genius of her own body." In many of the paintings the viewer and the nude share the same or a similar vision, which is the subject's body. Nowhere is the subject's head depicted, and in *Me without Mirrors*, 1974, the viewer sees exactly what the subject herself sees, so that identification and communal pleasure displace possible voyeurism, and body-as-object is not a given, but rather a question (page 200).

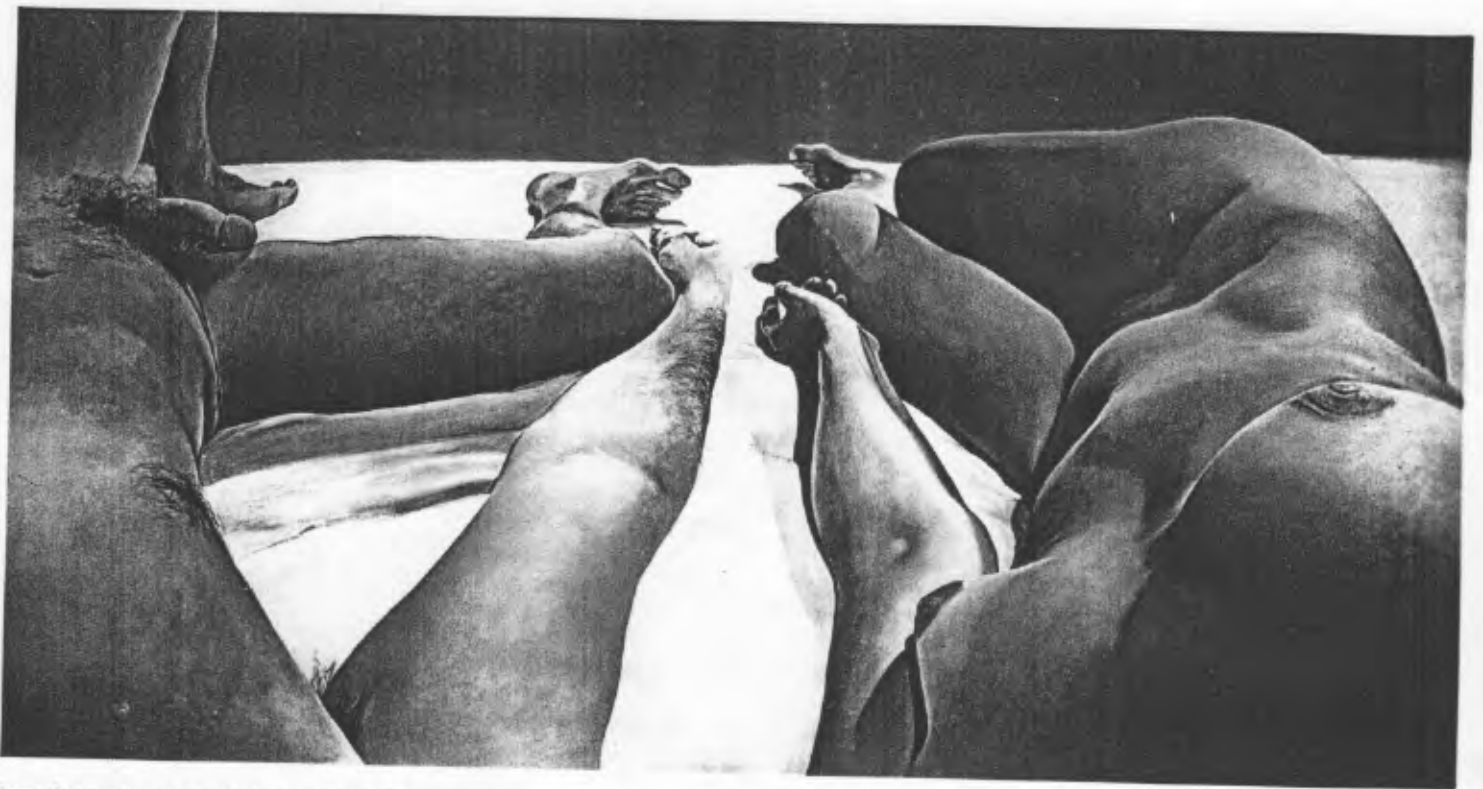
In the 1970s, feminists began critiquing pornographic portrayals of the female body, particularly violence done to its integrity by means of fragmentation and focus on particular parts.<sup>35</sup> *Me without Mirrors* and other paintings in the series frequently foreground breasts, and, specifically in *Me without Mirrors*, the crotch is central, due to Semmel's use of negative space, a fairly symmetrical composition, and a pink cloth that peeks up from behind the pubic hair. We see folds, creases, and mounds that are voluptuous, but not ideal; a close-up focus, often on "fragments" of the body, sometimes makes for an initially ambiguous reading of an image. But Semmel indulges in the view without misappropriating body parts. Her use of colors that are neither pretty nor naturalistic precludes easy consumption of the nude. Yellows, stone blues, eerie greens, and purples give the flesh an acidic glow, even a corpse-like remove. The conventional nude has been conceived anew—this is an attentiveness to the body that eschews conventional pornographic or art imaging, not only in palette, but also in body type, pose, and scale.

Semmel, Schneemann, and Wilke are key figures in the scrutiny and exploration of beauty and female pleasure in the 1970s. Schneemann and Semmel continue that adventure today, as did Wilke until her death in January 1993. Since innovation remains an art-historical criterion of genius, for both traditional and feminist scholars, Schneemann, Semmel, and Wilke, a matrilineage, deserve recognition for their origination of a feminist erotics, and for their charting, over the decades, of female pleasure.<sup>36</sup>

Although many feminist artists in the seventies dealt with the idea that femininity is not natural—women are not innately feminine, female beauty, culturally defined, is a cultivated attribute, and the nude is a purely aesthetic formulation—many feminists advocated a powerful connection between women and nature. While feminists like Susan Griffin in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* examined Western civilization's dangerous way of speaking in one breath of mastering nature and women, because man "set himself apart from woman and nature," they also acknowledged, as Griffin did with poetic beauty, that "we know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we see nature. We are nature seeing nature. We are nature with a concept of nature."<sup>37</sup> Anthropologist Sherry Ortner con-



**Joan Semmel.** *Me Without Mirrors.* 1974. Oil on canvas,  
50 x 68". Collection the artist



**Joan Semmel.** *Intimacy/Autonomy.* 1974. Oil on canvas,  
50 x 98". Private collection

of a chaise lounge. Cooling treatment of sex is daring and unusual for the seventies, a time when lesbians, whom society had identified in terms of their bodies and their sexual behavior, began to identify themselves in political and cultural terms, thus desexualizing lesbian identity. Unlike Cooling, Sigler almost always absents or obscures a represented subject, whom Sigler nevertheless often identifies as "She" and "The Lady" in titles written on her paintings and drawings. Sigler focuses on the intimacies of love, whether it be comforting or anguished, and *Let Me Love You In Fleshy Colors*, 1978, is characteristically poignant. Two silhouetted figures, whose sex is ambiguous, embrace in the shower of a pink bathroom, whose tender warmth is the color of their love.<sup>46</sup>

Hammond began a series of sculptures in the late 1970s, which continued into the 1980s, whose materials—cloth, wood, rubber, gesso, acrylic, rhoplex, and wax—are raw, sensuous, and not pretty. The large ovoid or grasping forms are bodies at once hard and soft, claiming physical and psychic space. Hammond equates them with the "raw, passionate, sensual" quality of Wittig's novels, *Les Guérillères* and *The Lesbian Body*.<sup>47</sup> *Kudzu*, 1981, all arms and legs and desire, seems to want to embrace a viewer. Like Eva Hesse's sculptures from the late 1960s, which incorporate rope, latex, metal, and clay, Hammond's wrapped sculptures are tactile and at once darkly and humorously sexual. Louise Fishman's *Angry Paintings*, 1973, are also viscerally potent. Portraits of women Fishman knew or admired emerged from feminist rage, visible in slashes, drips, and overlays of pigment that register bodily as well as emotional vehemence.

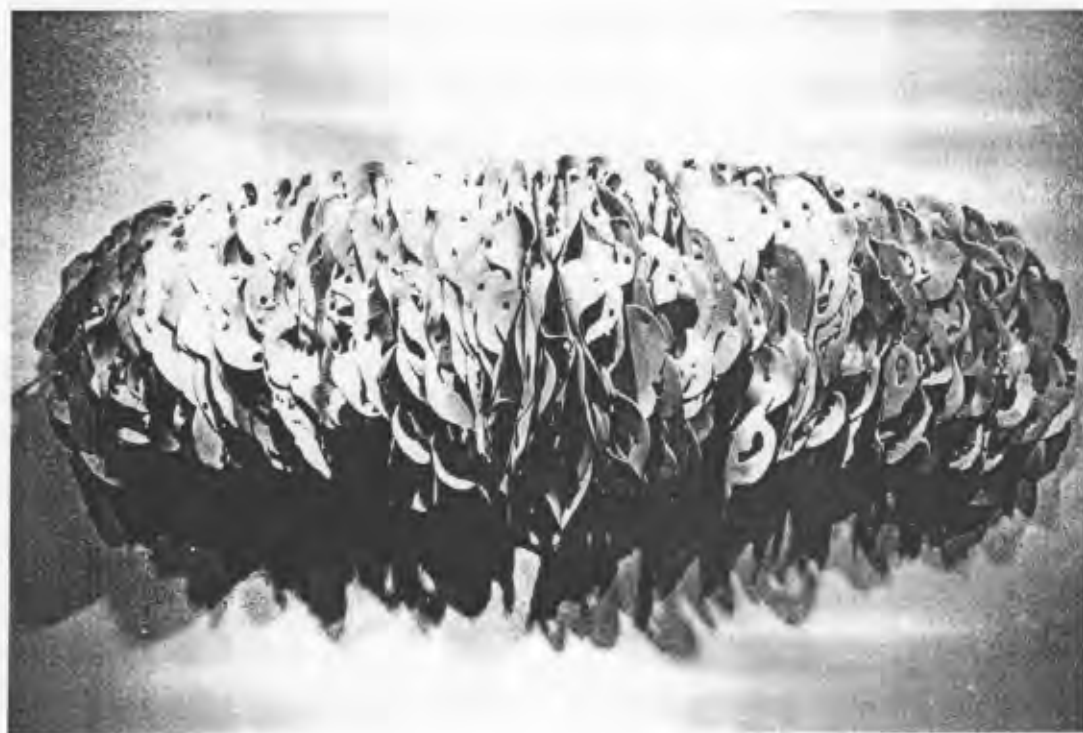
"The lesbian relationship as metaphor stands at the heart of feminist art and has on some level affected every feminist work," posits art historian Ruth Iskin in a theoretical conversation with art historian Arlene Raven, printed in *Chrysalis*. The

can describe a relationship of love among women which is lesbian regardless of whether or not their sexual practice is with women." Iskin agrees, "We cannot rule out the possibility that an artist who is heterosexual, bisexual, or celibate may act and live as a strong, independent woman, and those 'lesbian' feminist ideals may be apparent or dominant in her work."<sup>48</sup>

Joan Semmel's 1971–73 "fuck paintings," to use her term, focus on heterosexual partners, yet they exemplify Iskin's and Raven's ideas. Semmel's couples fill the canvas (with pleasure), have no heads, and are painted colors that alert the viewer to their abstractness and their actions. Semmel's combining of power and pleasure predates Betty Dodson's book *Liberating Masturbation*, in which she stresses pleasure-based power for women, "so we could avoid some of the mistakes of misusing power. If we achieved economic power without sexual power we would simply become a ruling matriarchal system, no different than the present patriarchal system, because they are authoritarian and sex negative."<sup>49</sup>

Semmel's series developed from her and other artists' interest in working with sexual subject matter and finding people who would "model." Through her research, Semmel located a man who liked to perform with his sex partners. As the contact, he would bring female sex partners with him to Semmel's studio, which became a studio/theater used by a group of people who filmed, drew, or photographed the sexual activity. Semmel would move around the couple with her camera, looking where she wanted, seeing with her desire, creating an imagery as different from standard porn shots as her single female figures are different from conventional nudes.

One of Semmel's most haunting works of a heterosexual couple is *Intimacy/Autonomy*, 1974. A woman and a man lie next to each other, post- or pre-sex. The aesthetically and emo-



**Hannah Wilke.** *Pink Champagne*, 1975. Latex rubber and snaps, 57 × 18". Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Opposite:

**Harmony Hammond.** *Kudzu*, 1981. Cloth, wood, metal, gesso, acrylic, celastic, glitter, rhoplex, wax, and charcoal powder, 84½ × 84½ × 36½". Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut



tionally perfect distance between their hands, which are their body parts closest to each other, is a space of contradictions—tension, longing, and utmost comfort. It is the space of eternity and spontaneity, a great divide that may never be crossed or that can be breached in an instant.

The androgyne does breach the sex and gender divide, and traditionally it has been a symbol of love and the unification of opposites. The manifestation in the 1970s of the androgyne grew in part from 1960s flower-child unisex style, which was not simply a fashion statement, but rather an embodied embrace of both gender and sexual differences. Feminists adopted androgyne as a symbol and enactment of male/female and feminine/masculine equality. Mary Daly expressed the 1970s feminist position toward androgyny in *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973). She viewed masculinity for men only and femininity for women only as "caricatures of human beings" and advocated an "androgynous mode of living" enacted by "psychologically androgynous beings" who would transcend gender.<sup>50</sup> Androgyny interested the art world, too, as shown by the publication of three articles in the November 1975 *Artforum* that dealt with the androgyne.<sup>51</sup> For Nancy Grossman, androgyny unifies the human and divine, animal and devil, racial, sexual, and magical. Her *Cob 1*, 1977–80, a leather mask over a wood head, further distinguished by horns, both exaggerates Grossman's own features yet looks not at all "feminine."<sup>52</sup>

The cover of psychoanalyst June Singer's *Androgyny: Toward a New Theory of Sexuality*, 1977, which is a serious Jungian study, shows a woman dressed in a double-breasted man's suit. The brim of a fedora hides the upper half of her face. Dressing in drag here represents the psycho-physical cross-dressing despised by Daly in 1978 in her book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*: "The semantic abomination, androgyny, is a confusing term which I sometimes used in attempting to describe integrity of be-ing. The word is misbegotten—conveying something like John Travolta and Farrah Fawcett-Majors scotch-taped together."<sup>53</sup> Daly's recanting exemplifies some feminists' fear that androgyny was a simplistic term, but women artists in the seventies used androgyny in bold, subtle, dark, and humorous ways, notably Lynda Benglis in her *Artforum* ad.

Since the 1940s, Louise Bourgeois has produced abstract sculptures whose organic, tumescent shapes often read as female and male, from which an aura of psychological trauma has consistently radiated. The knifelike female figure shape in *Femme couteau*, 1982, is tense, fragile, static, restless, vulnerable, and dangerous. *Femme couteau* is a blade with exposed female genitalia. Bourgeois says the work "embodies the polarity of woman, the destructive and the seductive . . . A girl can be terrified by the world. She feels vulnerable because she can be wounded by

the penis. So she tries to take on the weapon of the aggressor."<sup>54</sup>

Benglis's abstract encaustic sculpture *Valencia*, 1972, like *Femme Couteau*, shares male and female sex organs, which "love" each other under the artist's touch. Labial folds grace phallic form, and the sensation, as with Bourgeois's work, is organic, but unlike Bourgeois's, it is playful and orgasmic. As we know from some feminists' insistence on "cunt-positiveness," female genitals were long regarded as taboo (*vulvic* has yet to be *normal* vocabulary) and male genitals have been totemized, held in high regard by patriarchy. Benglis joins the two in aesthetic and public display.

Judith Bernstein's huge charcoal drawings of cocks-as-screws are, like Benglis's *Artforum* ad, seizures of phallic power. Although the penises are puns about getting screwed—frank and nasty statements about phallic force, painful, mechanistic power and rape—the hairy strokes with which Bernstein covers the forms are sensuous and make them feel touchable (see Brodsky, page 105). In a 1975 article critic Cindy Nemser quotes Bernstein, who says that works such as *Big Horizontal*, 1973, are metaphors for women "ready to admit things hidden for a long time—that they have the same drive, the same aggressions, the same feelings as men."<sup>55</sup> In the early 1970s, that admission was a revelation.

Just as Alice Neel defrocks motherhood, so Sylvia Sleigh removes the reclining and resting nude's feminine habit. Appropriating celebrated paintings and themes from the history of Western art, she replaces female with male figures. Men stand, sit, and lounge around in *The Turkish Bath*, 1973, which is neither a facile reversal nor parody of Ingres's *The Turkish Bath*, 1863. Satire is not the only point, for Sleigh wants to humanize the nude, not simply feminize men in order to ridicule the human body's gendered costume.<sup>56</sup> Ingres's feminine actresses, all young, curvaceous, and lacking body hair or facial character, become men of differing ages, whose body shapes, hair patterns, and faces are individualized in a de-aestheticization of the nude. Unlike Ingres's pleasure, which is invested in homogeneity, Sleigh's wit and pleasure create disparate portraits of the body.

As women artists in the 1970s invented ways for women to escape self-loathing through self-love and become presiding geniuses of their own bodies, their work, like that of feminists in other fields, challenged a woman to live "up to and including her limits," a phrase I borrow from Schneemann's mixed media performance of the same title. Presented several times between 1974 and 1976, *Up to and Including Her Limits* featured Schneemann nude and suspended in a harness, marking up a wall behind her. The piece demonstrates endurance and fragility and makes use of unpredictability and randomness. One's limits are not known in advance, but the feminist artist must be willing to love what she does not yet know.