

ART REVIEW/Phyllis Braff

Joan Semmel

Guild Hall Museum, To June 7.

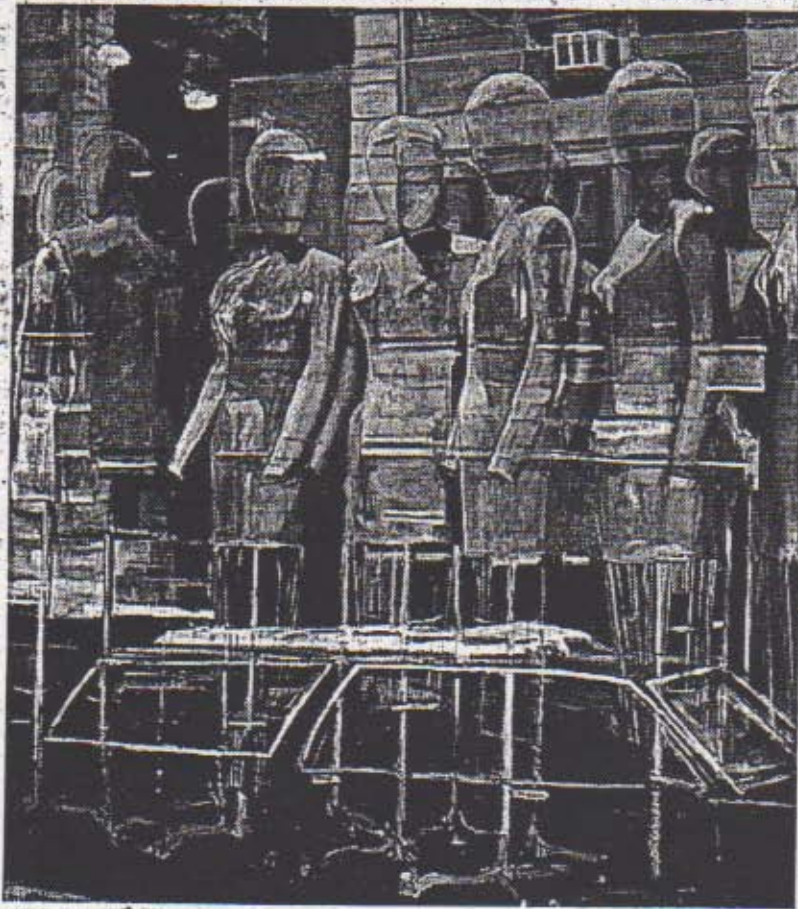
Joan Semmel's forceful paintings concentrate on both visual impact and psychological message. The 10 massive figurative works in this high-powered exhibition touch on aspects of her approach since 1977, a decade after she began to show regularly in museums and galleries — initially in Spain, where she lived during the 60's. In recent years she has divided her time between East Hampton and Manhattan.

Ms. Semmel's assertive and occasionally confrontational canvases entice viewers to ponder multiple meanings. Some are autobiographical, yet they also address broad feminist issues. Others are transparent overlays, suggesting the transience of relationships between individuals and their surroundings.

Still others use mannequins as surrogates for exploring human situations. There is an edgy probing of aging implied in two over-lifesized examples. The warm-toned "Galetea" is vibrant and confident. Her head is raised and her outstretched, well-manicured hand seems capable of anything. An icy blue tone covers all but the bright red lipstick in "Hot Lips," which poses the mannequin with head lowered and one hand missing.

Ms. Semmel uses bodies as both vehicles for social commentary and as pliable expressive forms for building strong perceptual sensations. Unusual angles, reminiscent of the quirky distortions possible with a camera, contribute to a number of the dramatic effects. Others have an up-close cinematic orientation and still others incorporate mirrors that radically alter the picture space and provide the repetition of shapes useful in establishing formal harmony.

Illumination is frequently exaggerated, which introduces a mystical quality in "Out of Darkness" and "Red Spread." A central light mass gives additional power to "Abeysance."



"SoHo Display" by Joan Semmel, is among her works on display at the Guild Hall Museum in East Hampton.