

## NEW YORK

### Joan Semmel at Mitchell Algus

Joan Semmel's monumental nudes painted in the late 1970s are enjoying a resurgence. Last summer Robert Gober included several two-figure Semmel compositions in an eclectic group show he curated at Matthew Marks Gallery. This was followed, in the fall, by a show (Semmel's first New York solo in six years) at Mitchell Algus. The show consisted of three of Semmel's mammoth nude self-portraits, each painted from the unusual viewpoint of the artist gazing down at her own body without the aid of mirrors.

The canvases dwarfed every wall of this tiny SoHo storefront space, making for a powerful display. Upon entering, the viewer was confronted dead on by *Pink Fingertips* (1977). Here, the artist paints her reclining body. One leg is bent, with the foot resting on the opposite knee so that the limbs form a triangle. The painting's lower half is occupied by the folds of her belly and one flattened-out, pimple-speckled breast. The fingertips of the title gesture toward her pubic mound, which is positioned at the center of the picture.

In the other two paintings, both 1978, Semmel presents her limbs in a similarly triangulated fashion. In *On the Grass*, she sits on brownish grass in a half-lotus position, clasping her ankles together. In *Sunlight*, her legs are tucked to one side,

while oddly two-dimensional tendrils of hair cast shadows on her breasts. The viewpoint is so steeply foreshortened and the body parts so hard to figure out that the painting looks almost abstract.

Studying this work, I found myself increasingly aware of Semmel's painting technique. In some instances, passages of paint retain their fleshy look until one gets quite close. Elsewhere, especially when it comes to secondary sexual characteristics, such as pubic hair and nipples, the detailing seems more impressionistic and dissolves more quickly into stains and splotches of paint.

Since the 1970s, a lot of vapid feminist art has come and gone—Karen Finley, Lutz Bacher and Beth B being a few of the names that spring to mind. While the work of such artists frequently purports to deobjectify the female nude, it often seems more concerned with advertising the artist's sexuality. In contrast, one of the most moving aspects of Semmel's work is that it treats every part of the female body, from wrinkled ankles to pendant breasts, with equal importance. And, even as this makes her fleshy universe seem highly realistic, Semmel's curiously geometric compositions seem to suggest a more metaphysical universe. It's the combination of these metaphysical intimations with a powerful physical presence that lends these paintings their enduring importance and originality.

—Carol Kino

Joan Semmel: *Sunlight*, 1978, oil on canvas, 72 by 96 inches; at Mitchell Algus.

