SYNAPSE

The space between nerve cells through which impulses are transmitted.

SYNAPSE SHOT

Two pages of sudden nerve cell stimulation.
She's no dummy

Joan Semmel's mannequin subjects have much to say about body consciousness and contemporary culture

By FRED RAIMANN

Joan Semmel, a painting by Joa
Semmel, can be viewed as a
wry look at modern cul-
ture. She says of her Soho
neighborhood, "It's like liv-
ing in a mall."

Some people add clothes to man-
nequins. Painter Joan Semmel
adds meanings.

"They become surrogate hu-
mans in a funny way," the Rut-
gers emeritus art professor said
about her most recent subjects.
"Because they're not human, they
have the possibility of multiple
meanings and one can play around
with the multiple meanings. For in-
stance, the mannequins that are
somewhat broken have the mean-
in of being an object that is
broken but goes beyond that to
imply the vulnerability of the human
being."

The vulnerable, neglected, wounded,
battered and beheaded forms in
Semmel's most recent paintings hang in
a one-woman show at the Jersey City
Museum through June 3.

She usually paints these figures
wearing lipstick (they come that way)
and little else, hands starkly on hips
or without hands at all. There are sugges-
tions of sexuality, body consciousness
and warped interpersonal interactions.

One painting has a mannequin
with a plastic bag over her head. Another is
missing its head. A third is all heads.

"The work is talking about the con-
struct of femininity and masculinity," Semmel
allowed, but she wouldn't go
much further. "I don't like to tell people
what to think. I just like to throw it out
there and let them think about it."

Semmel's models date from years
ago. When the common mannequin was
wood, not plastic, and the limbs had
metal-bar attachments, not snap on ex-
tricities.

She arranges them like a deviant, po-
itical store window dresser with a
degree in art history.

One nude assumes the 400-year-old
Odalisque pose, a reclining nude wom-
an posed on her side. This figure has
seams at the waist, shoulders and neck,
with that startled mannequin look off
into the distance.

"At first glance, they seem sexual," said
Alejandro Anreus, curator at the
Jersey City Museum. "But they tran-
scend any obvious sense of sexuality."

| **JOAN SEMMEL** |
| **Recent paintings** |
| **Through June 3** |
| **The Jersey City Museum, 472 Jersey Ave., Jersey City** |
| **10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.** |
| **Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays** |
| **10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.** |
| **Wednesdays** |
| **(201) 547-4514** |

The head in Semmel's "Odalisque"
is disturbingly white and steel-gray
with apple-red lips and sky-blue eyes. And
her hips have a crack in it, like an attack-
er (or a brutal admirer?) pounded a
hammer on her leg.

"When you see the cracked torso,
they're very disturbing," Anreus said.

"So are the headless ones."

"A headless mannequin is someone
not taken for their mind," Semmel said.
"But a headless person is someone who
has been murdered and brutalized."

The distinctions keep her art on this
side of tasteful and push for tough
meanings.

Emerging from an abstract expres-
sionist training, Semmel melded a re-
turn to figurative painting with femi-
nism in the 1970s and 1980s. She
painted her body from her perspective.

"You'd look into the painting from
her necklace," said Anreus. "She elimi-
nated the distance between the viewer
and the painting. In effect, you became
her."

Her subsequent subjects included
women at her gym, which gave her a
window into women aging, under-
standing their mortality and sexuality
in older years.

"The other paintings are much more
physical," Anreus said. "These are
more psychological."

"The figures are alone or in pairs, usu-
ally. A male model with his arms
crossed may stand in shadow behind
a more expressive female. She's urging
away from his closed gesture, seeming-
ly repulsed by what just happened and
unwilling to take any more. Semmel calls
the painting "Snow White.""

Semmel first encountered manne-
quins as a subject in 1968 when photo-
graphing a shop window for a series of
paintings on reflected images. The
painting she made from that image
opened the show, but as Semmel began
to see the expressive potential of
the mannequins, her compositions became
more simple, psychological and re-
fined.

She bought a few mannequins on
the street and borrowed some from friends
to pose and paint in her studio. Others
are painted from snapshots of manne-
quinn stores.

Semmel doesn't add obvious clues to
her paintings.

"They're not like a political tract," she
said. "They touch on all of these il-
lusions and are psychologically provo-
cative. As soon as you try to put it down
too much, it loses that kind of mystery
of why we make us.

I have a lot of questions about what's
been happening to our culture. I think
that's clear from the paintings," Semmel
said. She looks at people in her
New York City neighborhood, Soho,
where she's been renting since 1970,
and grows uneasy.

"People seem very packaged, brittle.
A lot of surface and not a lot of sub-
stance. It's like walking into the super-
mall," she said. "It's the standardiza-
tion of everything. There's a lot of loss.
The loss of individuality, the loss of au-
thenticity.

"I don't know what the answers are,
but the questions have to be asked."

(That Soho has changed more radi-
cally than the rest of America, Semmel
is only too conscious. "It's like living in
a mall," she said. "Everything I've al-
ways ran away from is now here."

Now she will enjoy her retirement
from Rutgers and paint more.

"Rutgers was a really good experi-
ence for me," Semmel said. "I enjoyed
working with the students, seeing them
come in young and informed, and
leave with dedication and see them out
there in the world functioning as ar-
tsists.

"Of course I'll continue to paint. It's
a great luxury to do one's work without
putting in the time teaching."