



NEW JERSEY CLIPPING SERVICE

288 AH
xzebb 1 XX...

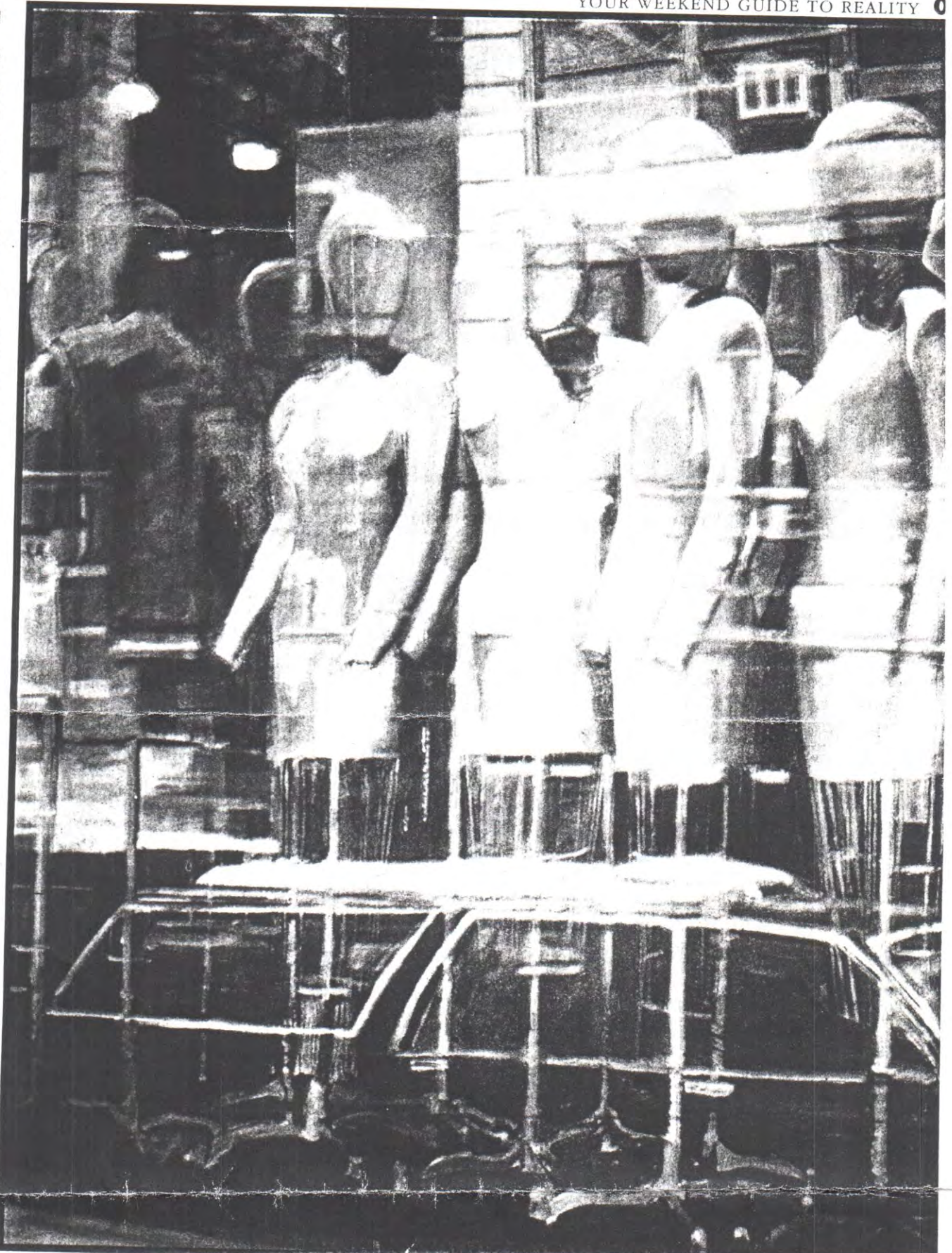
YOUR WEEKEND GUIDE TO REALITY 0

10V
TU
181
TU
8:
32

SYNAPSE SHOT

syn·apse
(si naps') **n**
the space between
nerve cells through
which impulses
are transmitted

syn·apse·shot
(si naps' shot) **n**
two pages of sudden
nerve cell stimulation



Jersey City Museum "Soho Display," a painting by Joan Semmel, can be viewed as a wry look at modern culture. She says of her Soho neighborhood, "It's like living in a mall."

She's no dummy

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

By FRED KAIMANN  On the Go Writer

Some people add clothes to mannequins. Painter Joan Semmel adds meanings. "They become surrogate humans in a funny way," the Rutgers emirata 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 instance, the mannequins that are somewhat broken have the meaning 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 suggestions 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, lined up on a shelf.

"The work is talking about the construct 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 extremities.

She arranges them like a devious, political store window dresser with a degree in art history.

One nude assumes the 400-year-old odalisque pose, a reclining nude woman 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 transcend 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 hip has a crack in it, like an attacker (or a brutal admirer?) pounded a hammer on her leg.

"When you see the cracked torsos, 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 expressionist training, Semmel melded a return to figurative painting with feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. She painted her body from her perspective.

"You'd look into the painting from her neckline," said Anreus. "She eliminated 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, understanding 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, usually. A male model with his arms crossed may stand in shadow behind a more expressive female. She's turning away from his closed gesture, seemingly repulsed by what just happened and unwilling to take any more. Semmel calls the painting "Snow White."

Semmel first encountered mannequins as a subject in 1996 when photographing a shop window for a series of paintings on reflected images. The painting she made from that image opens the show, but as Semmel began to see the expressive potential of the mannequins, her compositions became more simple, psychological and refined.

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 mannequin 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 illusions and are psychologically provocative. As soon as you try to pin it down too much, it loses that kind of mystery of why they move us."

"I have a lot of questions about what's been happening to our culture. I think that's clear from the paintings," Semmel says. 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 substance. It's like walking into the supermarket," she said. "It's the standardization of everything. There's a lot of loss. The loss of individuality, the loss of authenticity."

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

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

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

"Rutgers was a really good experience for me," Semmel said. "I enjoyed working with the students, seeing them come in young and unformed, and leave with dedication and see them out there in the world functioning as artists."

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