

## ART REVIEW

## Body, as Mannequin, Reinterpreted

By BARRY SCHWABSKY

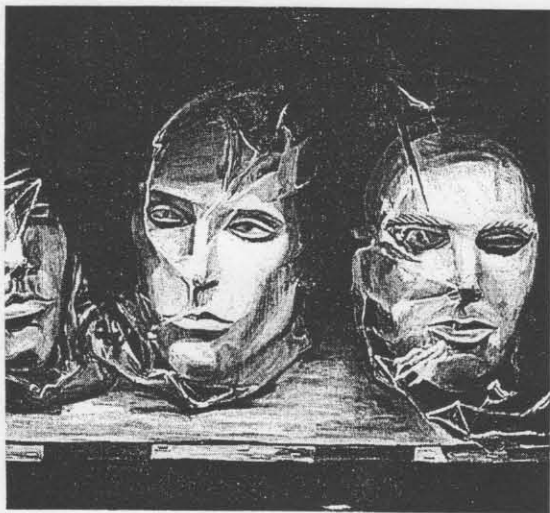
JERSEY CITY  
 IN the 1970's, Joan Semmel achieved some prominence for her big, ambitious figurative paintings, which were seen as part of a new wave of feminist art. In her best-known works, the artist's nude body was seen from her own viewpoint, with her feet back near the vanishing point of the pictures' perspective. The idea was to show that the female nude need not be portrayed only from the viewpoint of the desiring or appraising male but also according to a woman's own subjectivity — and then to put the viewer in the position of the self-witnessing artist.

More recently, Ms. Semmel's career has been proceeding with much less of the attention it had received in the heyday of feminist art, although her work came in for renewed notice last year when one of her early paintings was included in an exhibition curated by the influential younger artist Robert Gober. That exhibition was followed by a one-person show at a small New York gallery, but the Jersey City Museum is offering the best opportunity in some time to catch up on her work.

The 20 paintings on view here, dating from 1996 to the present, show that Ms. Semmel is still as fascinated by the body as ever, but she's approaching the subject in a more indirect way these days: by using mannequins as stand-ins.

The idea is not exactly unprecedented. Around 1914 the Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico began using tailors' dummies and plaster statues as surrogate figures to give his paintings some of their eerie, enigmatic atmosphere. The device has been a surrealist staple ever since. But the stolid naturalism of Ms. Semmel's style allows her to give a distinct, personal bent to this familiar device. Here, it brings out the artificiality of our ideas of beauty and glamour — and, because the mannequins are often broken or fragmented, as in "Spare Parts," 1998, the fragility of those ideas as well.

The earliest of these paintings, "SoHo Display," 1996, is quite different from the ones that followed.



"Spare Parts," by Joan Semmel, in an exhibition in Jersey City.

**THE MANNEQUIN SERIES:  
 Recent Work by Joan Semmel**

Jersey City Museum, 472 Jersey Avenue, Jersey City.

Through June 3. Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Wednesday, 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. (201) 547-5655.

In it, a group of unclothed mannequins are seen bunched together on the other side of a store's display window. Here Ms. Semmel seems less interested in the dummies themselves than in the glass that separates them from the outside world, but which also undermines, through the play of reflections, the viewer's ability to identify inside and outside.

If "SoHo Display" is working with an idea of surrogacy, it is not of the mannequin as a stand-in for the human figure, but of the store window as a surrogate for the modernist ideal of the flat, unified picture plane.

In the rest of the paintings, the mannequins are depicted from a viewpoint located within the same clearly depicted space — a space that is classical, not modernist. Furthermore, the mannequins in

"SoHo Display" were themselves highly abstracted — they follow the shape of the torso without attempting to depict its surface, and lacked legs, hands, eyes and mouths. The mannequins Ms. Semmel depicts in the subsequent paintings are relatively realistic depictions of women (and, less often, of men). Furthermore, having articulated limbs and moveable torsos, they can be posed, allowing for hints of narrative.

Posted outside the gallery in which these paintings hang is a small sign that cautions: "This exhibition contains nudity. Parental guidance is suggested." There's something comical about the fact that an unclothed mannequin is considered a perilous instance of nudity — but at best, Ms. Semmel's paintings earn their warning.



"Busted Butt," by Joan Semmel, on view at the Jersey City Museum.