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Joan Semmel

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You would think that for a woman to paint herself in full-frontal nudity at nearly 80 would be a brave thing to do. Alice Neel's comically frank depiction of her unclothed self in all its corpulent, octogenarian splendor is a good example. In the case of Joan Semmel's recent naked self-portraits, however, viewers are more likely to admire how good she looks. With her unlined face and only slightly pendulous, full-figured body, she appears, at 78, a figure of remarkably undiminished erotic appeal.

Ms. Semmel's well-known paintings of intertwined female and male bodies viewed from oblique angles as if through the eyes of the lovers themselves were a significant contribution to feminist art history. The male gaze did not own the field of desirous looking.

In her new works Ms. Semmel has painted herself standing against blank walls with a caressing, Impressionistic touch, creating a soft-focus, Renoir-esque realism that erases the wrinkles, blemishes, veins and other signs of ordinary aging. If, when you are old, your lover sees you this way — whether because of myopia or undiluted affection — you will be very lucky.

In most paintings she layers different, semitransparent views of herself, as if in photographic double or triple exposure, so that she appears in choreographic motion. Color tends to a muted opalescence, but in "Moving," in which she appears three times at about life size, dancing across a five-foot-wide canvas, an intense yellow glow suffuses and heats the image. What is painting, after all, if not an art of seduction?