

Joan Semmel's Naked Truths

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This year has been a busy one for Joan Semmel. She had a solo exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in the spring, solo shows at both Alexander Gray Associates, her New York dealer, and Art Basel, exhibited at Frieze New York, and now has two paintings at the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum in Bremen, Germany, in the group exhibition "Sie. Selbst. Nackt." The title, which translates as "She. Herself. Naked," could be applied to much of Ms. Semmel's career as a painter.

For more than 40 years, Ms. Semmel has chosen as her subject the "normal," rather than idealized, human body, and offered a radical departure from the traditional self-portrait as a complete image of the person painting it. Her paintings also posit an alternative to what Laura Mulvey, a feminist critic, called the "male gaze."



Joan Semmel with her 2005 painting "Mirrored Screen" from the "Framed" series.
Mark Segal

John Berger, an art critic and novelist, wrote in his influential 1972 book "Ways of Seeing": "According to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned . . . men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. . . . Women are depicted in a different way to men, because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male."

As if in direct response, Ms. Semmel has written, "I have tried to find a contemporary language in which I could retain my delight in the sensuality and pleasure of painting, and still confront the particulars of my own personal experience as a woman. My intention has been to subvert the tradition of the passive female nude. The issues of the body from desire to aging, as well as those of identity and cultural imprinting, have been at the core of my concerns."

"I feel as if I've had several lives," Ms. Semmel said during a recent conversation at her SoHo loft. She was born and raised in the Bronx in a working-class household where art and culture played no role. "The turning point was when one of my public school art teachers told my mother I was talented and that she should encourage that. So my parents sent me to the High School of Music and Art. For the first time I was exposed to people of all races and backgrounds, and it was there I first began to think seriously about being an artist."

After high school she went to Cooper Union, where she met her husband. "We lived for a short time in Queens. We really didn't like suburban life, but Manhattan was prohibitively expensive. So to get out of the suburbs we went to Madrid," where her husband had secured a job. Their plan was to stay for a year, but they remained for eight.

"Madrid was a completely different experience — a rebirth," Ms. Semmel recalled. "I became friends with many Spanish artists. The art community was smaller than in New York, and easier to enter. I was an abstract painter at the time, and I developed an entire career in Spain." She had many gallery shows in Madrid and traveled to South

America, where she exhibited in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, Uruguay.

Her experience in Spain had a big impact on her. “I became a feminist there. I came to understand the difference between being male and female in the art world. A woman at that time in Spain couldn’t sign a lease on an apartment or take her children out of the country without her husband’s permission. You could have a bank account, but your husband could take money from it. So when I came back, I was primed. I didn’t need to have my consciousness raised, it was already there.”

Ms. Semmel returned to New York in 1970. “I had to come back since I wanted a divorce, and I couldn’t get one in Spain. It was tough. I had no money, two kids, and 35 really big paintings.” Within a year she found the Spring Street loft where she still lives. “SoHo was marvelous then. My real life began when I came back to New York.”

She became part of a loose collective of female artists called Fight Censorship, which also included Louise Bourgeois, Anita Steckel, and Hannah Wilke. The first paintings she produced in New York were figurative portraits of couples having sex while she sketched them. The resulting paintings retained the gestural and painterly qualities of her earlier abstract work.

After completing that series, which was derived from the “action drawings” she made of her subjects, she decided she needed better information to get the impact she wanted, so she began taking photographs. The photographs were black and white, the resulting paintings were more hard-edged and less gestural than those of the first series, but the colors were abstract.

Galleries were reluctant to show the work from the erotic series. “My work wasn’t pornography, but was really a critique of pornography. I wanted to deal with the body and desire and sexuality without the kind of fetishism and power relationships usually represented in pornography. I was interested in getting into the public space a woman’s idea of what was sexually interesting.”

From 1974 to 1979 Ms. Semmel produced what she calls the “self images,” which encapsulate many of the ideas that have informed her work since then. Rather than creating self-portraits from her image in a mirror, she photographed her body from the vantage point of her own eyes.

The resulting images, while realistically painted, are radically foreshortened landscapes of male and female bodies that are at once recognizable but disorienting, in part because the camera does not compensate for perspective the way the brain does. “When I did that kind of image, it was very abstract,” said Ms. Semmel. “I thought of them as abstractions. I was a terrible photographer, but I used the mistakes.”

Since 1979, Ms. Semmel has produced more than a dozen separate series of paintings, most of which, while moving back and forth between greater expressionism and greater realism, focus on some aspect of the human body. In 1986 she began a series of men and women working out in gymnasiums. “The mirrors were fascinating. They were a metaphor for the narcissism in the room, but they also allowed me to photograph people indirectly. Since I wasn’t pointing the camera at them, they weren’t posing.”

“Once people got used to seeing me with a camera, I began to shoot in the women’s locker room — always with the subjects’ permission. That was when I started appearing in my paintings with the camera. I wanted it to be clear you’re seeing an image of me in a mirror. It’s flat, reversed — neither the painting nor the photograph is ‘reality.’” This led to “With Camera,” a series of paintings of Ms. Semmel photographing herself in a mirror from different, often awkward, perspectives. She also created several series that involve “echoing” or “shifting” images, which portray the artist in multiple positions, fragmented and in motion.

Ms. Semmel has been coming to East Hampton since 1971, renting a different place each summer, usually in Springs. “I decided I wanted to buy a house, but each time I thought I had enough for a down payment, prices had risen beyond my means. I finally put down a deposit on my house in 1987.” She paused and laughed. “Then the

market crashed.” But she proceeded, and later added a studio to her house in Springs, where she spends every summer with John Hardy, who is also a painter.



Joan Semmel's "Triple Play," from 2011, shows the artist in multiple positions, each thinly overlaid by the next.

Alexander Gray Associates