

Tuesday, May 19th, 2015

## Exposed: Shows by June Leaf and Joan Semmel

by Jessica Holmes

### **June Leaf: Recent Works at Edward Thorp Gallery**

April 23 to June 6, 2015

210 11th Avenue #601 (at West 25th Street)

New York, 212 691 6565

### **Joan Semmel: Across Five Decades at Alexander Gray Associates**

April 2 to May 21, 2015

510 West 26<sup>th</sup> Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)

New York, 212 399 2636



June Leaf, Pages #1, 2013-2014. Acrylic and chalk on canvas, 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Edward Thorp Gallery.

The human body is incumbent in the work of artists June Leaf and Joan Semmel, who are subjects of recent shows in Chelsea at Edward Thorp Gallery and Alexander Gray Associates, respectively. Walking into “June Leaf: Recent Works” feels like stumbling upon a secret. Leaf, who has been practicing since the late 1940s, has frequently likened her working process to dance, and something of her physical body indeed feels present in the objects and paintings.

Much of the work included here examines the act of creation. As making anything is an individual experience for each person, perhaps it is not surprising that Leaf’s work puts vulnerability on open display. You can feel it as soon as you walk into the gallery, and are faced with *Woman Drawing Man* (2014), a sculpture that sets the tone for the remainder of the show. A concave piece of sheet metal stands atop a second piece, forming a sort of proscenium. On the vertical, a painted, nude, male figure stands with his arms outstretched. Kneeling before him and clutching a paintbrush, a female figure, also nude, applies paint to his body. Unlike the two-dimensional man, the woman is a true body in space, made from scraps of sheet metal stitched together with wire. The naturalistic position of her body — one leg cocked back for support, the outstretched arm — conveys a powerful sense of surrender. Of course, a woman’s surrender before a man is uneasy, because it is always loaded with a more disquieting significance. That Leaf’s work is deliberately primitive adds to the sense that this gesture of female subjugation is a timeless quandary.

A meditation on this link between work and submission continues throughout the show. In *Figure Running on the Seam* (2014) Leaf has appropriated the skeleton of an old sewing machine stand, suspending a curled wire encased in mesh between the two vertical spindles. At the end of the wire is the eponymous figure, which looks as if she is not so much running as she is collapsed from exhaustion. Beside it hangs a canvas, *Making #1* (2013-2014), which depicts the sculpture in an incomplete state. The colors consist mostly of muted browns and grays, except for an emanation of crimson that seems to drip from the table of the base into a shocking puddle at the center right of the canvas. It’s a



June Leaf, *Woman Drawing Man*, 2014. Tin, wire and acrylic, 26 x 19 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Edward Thorp Gallery.

physical manifestation of the blood that is involved, figuratively or metaphorically, with putting oneself fully into a piece of work. The object is made from the remnants of a machine traditionally relegated to a woman's domain, and a sly, feminist subtext is once again at play here, as the viewer is asked to confront what it means to have a sagging body caught between its gears.



June Leaf, *Figure Running on the Seam*, 2014. Cast iron, tin, Plexiglas, mesh, acrylic, leather, 50 x 26 x 20 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Edward Thorp Gallery.

Elsewhere, Leaf grapples with work and the surrender of the body as it relates to the most private realms. In acrylic painted on tin, *Woman Carrying Child Up the Stairs* (2011) depicts the female figure ascending a staircase, with a child slumped over her shoulder in deep sleep, while in *Turning Pages* (2012-2015), done in the same medium, an abstracted couple is caught in the act of intercourse. The woman lays facedown, an arm and a leg trail off in quivery wakes of paint that melt into the background and she offers no struggle, while the male figure kneels atop and astride her body. Both paintings afford the viewer a voyeuristic perspective — as though we are peeping through a doorway undetected, spying upon these private moments between intimates and witnessing their momentarily exposed vulnerabilities. In her ability to lay bare these fraught moments of humanity, one is hard pressed to think of a braver artist than June Leaf.

As Leaf's work is quiet, and slowly unfolds its meaning, Joan Semmel's paintings are explicit and confrontational. "Across Five Decades," her recent career survey at Alexander Gray Associates, made clear that Semmel more definitively embraced the tenets of second-wave feminism. However, like Leaf, Semmel has made a priority of the female body. As she has said of her work, "I wanted to find an erotic visual language that would speak to women. I was convinced that the repression of women began in the sexual arena, and this would need to be addressed at the source." This desire is unmistakable in her paintings from the 1970s, like the knockout *Erotic Yellow* (1973). In a vibrant palette of yellows, greens, and pinks, Semmel captures a nude and entwined couple in the middle of vigorous foreplay. Both of their faces are obscured by the man's arm, and between his spread

legs the woman has one hand clamped firmly beneath his balls.



Joan Semmel, *Erotic Yellow*, 1973. Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates.

This is especially pertinent in some of the later paintings, where the artist makes herself the subject. In *Centered* (2002) Semmel has rendered herself nude before a mirror, sitting in a relaxed pose with one arm curled casually around her bent knee, neither obviously flaunting nor hiding her middle-aged body. With her other hand, she holds a camera up to her eye; like in *Erotic Yellow* (and several other paintings in the show), the face is obscured. The obstruction of her face is not only arch however, but also emancipating. While she purports to an examination of the self, Semmel simultaneously subverts the viewer's gaze by turning it back upon them with the use of the camera and mirror. The energy of Semmel's work is triumphal and celebratory. Where Leaf plumbs feminine experience for its ambivalence, Semmel embraces its power.

June Leaf and Joan Semmel hail from a generation that was peculiar for female artists. Leaf, who was born in 1929 and Semmel, born three years later, came of age when work by women artists infrequently garnered attention, but who both nonetheless established steady working practices which saw them into the Women's Liberation movement of the late 1960s and beyond. Is it too hopeful to believe that the work of these two veterans, who anticipated later twentieth century feminism, now entering the dialogue, is a harbinger of a shift away from that tired, long-established prejudice towards women's art? For through their heightened sense of the corporeal, both Leaf and Semmel in different ways are unflinching in their ability to strip bare fragilities shared by all humankind. Looking at their work, we realize we have all been exposed.

