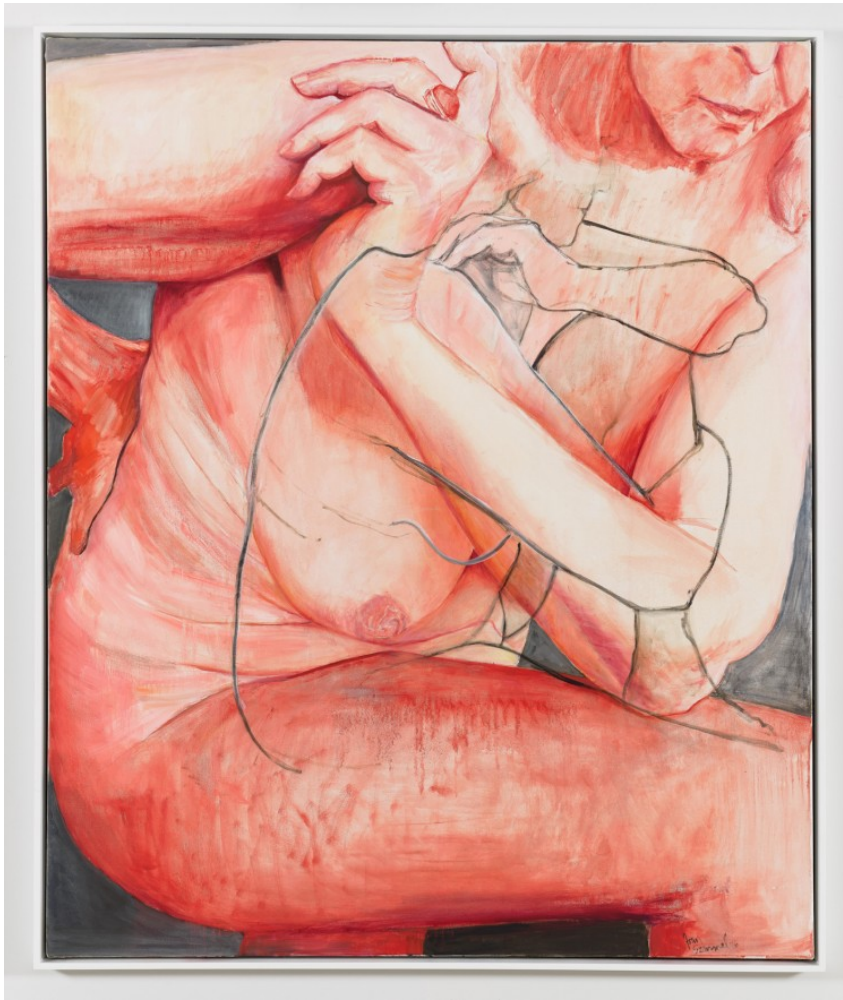


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Q&A WITH JOAN SEMMEL

*An intimate interview with the painter and
activist-artist*

Joan Semmel is an icon of feminist art alongside Judy Chicago, Marilyn Minter, and the Guerrilla Girls, but she (like her activist colleagues) is foremost a virtuosic painter. Her nude self-portraits celebrate not only the unedited female body, but also Semmel's painterly acumen and nuanced historical awareness. In this way, we might compare Semmel's work to the stunning nudes of the Impressionists, but in the same breath, also see her concern for color and composition to be reminiscent of Agnes Martin's lyrical minimalist works. Semmel provides an opportunity to think about the paint, the canvas, and the brush—the building blocks of activist work—instead of just relying on a cursory

Associates in New York. Her work is also included in “Coming to Power” at Maccarone Gallery, New York.

There has been much discussion of your work alongside Judith Bernstein, Betty Tompkins, and Marilyn Minter as sex-positive feminist artists. Of course you all were pioneers, but the focus on the past makes it seem like the work has already been done, and that you are not working now. How do we talk about these historical issues while acknowledging the fact that you are still making fabulous work?

There is a moment when there is a surge of a particular movement and after that moment is gone those artists always keep working. You never see any of the new work, or we see only those early pieces that broke the ground. Women retain the vitality and the conviction and the ability to keep working. But there has never been any support for most of us. We've almost all earned our way by teaching.

I always used to say that with women artists we have to wait until we are 80 years old and no longer sexually threatening before any kind of real validation comes in. I do think that my work was especially threatening back then. Now it's kinda cool, right? But back then it wasn't cool. It was just plain shocking. Women also were very threatened by it. There was a whole faction of feminist artists that who said you couldn't do the nude, and another faction that said you couldn't do the penis. Now not only can you do it, but if you do it everybody notices it. I don't know if that's good or not.

We were grouped as feminist artists, which we wanted because we needed that cohesion, but stylistically we were all different. We came from different places. Nobody ever discusses the various styles in which we were working, our connections to various stylistic traits in the mainstream. For instance if a show on figuration was being done, I would never get included. Many artists are separated into a feminist context and they are not drawn into the mainstream in terms of everything else that the work is about. So there is that kind of discrimination, that the work is not included in other groupings when it certainly fits. And for all of us that's what we need; that's what we want. We want to be seen as feminists, but we want the work to be mainstreamed in the end. Otherwise it just becomes relegated to a place outside history and it disappears after a while.

I'm trying to think of a way to describe your new work. I don't want to say “painterly” because that is not a useful term.

Well, if that's what you are looking at let me put it this way. I was educated at the time when abstract expressionism was the greatest, newest thing and I went to Cooper Union, where they were always up to what the latest avant-garde stuff was. All the emphasis was on paint. That was my background but then I came to the figure through the content. When I came back to New York after living in Spain, I came right into the surge of the women's movement in the early 70s. I was primed for it because I had lived in Spain for

eight years, and Spain was at least 50 years behind. In terms of sexuality, women's rights, and any kind of political dissention, it was truly repressive.

So I came to figuration because of its content, because I can say things with figuration that I can't say abstractly. I can get the impact that I need. But my love is still the paint; it's always about paint for me. And I tried in many different ways to work the paint in a way that I could combine both the realist aspects of making paintings and the abstract aspects. With my first figurative paintings, the abstraction was very gestural. Then I went to photos for information. That changed the way I used abstraction. I pushed the figures up to the picture plane and had them fill it so that they almost jumped into the room with the viewer. All of those things meant that much of my work did not fit into any stylistic context. I wasn't a pure realist so I couldn't be classified with them. I didn't like smeary, painterly figuration. I just found my own ways to use the material.

How do you incorporate all of this amazing historical material into what you are thinking about right now in 2016?

In my current show at Alexander Gray Associates, the work was all done in 2016. In that work I am very satisfied with finally finding a way that I think incorporates history and the contemporary in a way that feel right to me, where I am able to use saturated color, not just flesh modeling tones. There are areas in it where the form is modeled, and in other areas it surges out of the brush. So it feels very integrated for me in those paintings. And I like the fact that I am still dealing with the issues and the content that are the closest to me. Of course I am 83. I will be 84 in two weeks. I think the whole idea being old is very disconcerting, shall we say.

To you or to the world?

To me, to me. Not to the world. The world, they simply dismiss you. How do you deal with it? I deal with it by continuing to do what I do. That's how I deal with it. I am still me. And the paintings refer to the past and the present because of the layering, how I've laid one image over the other. They are about memory and time. I maintain my position about not idealizing the figure but rather using a non-idealized image of a specific person—myself.

I do not make the changes that make a person look perfect and plastic. I want one to see the age—with all the imperfections. There aren't any images in the culture of older people, and we are a very large proportion of the population now, so what do we relate to in that culture? And how does that culture relate to us except to be dismissive? I feel that the work at the end does a certain job politically, in terms of asserting that this is who we are, and we are still here and we are still productive and we still should not be dismissed. I hope that older people themselves accept and embrace this very part of their lives that should be important and not only feel vulnerable. Vulnerability is there of course, and you have to admit it. You have to acknowledge it just like you have to acknowledge age.

denying age. There was a time when you were grateful to be old. If you are not old, if you don't get to be old, you are really in trouble.

So how does one acknowledge all of that? None of my work is didactic. I don't write a title or something across it that tells you what you've seen, that tells you what you should think. However, the implications are there and each person will take what they want from the painting. It doesn't mean everybody will get it, but that is my intention in doing this work.

However I'm always interested in finding the aesthetic translation of content into form. For me it's always been the paint. Nothing else gives me that same surge.

How can art history deal with these issues in such a way that its acknowledging your contributions in 2016 as well as those of the past?

I don't know. I am very skeptical. The writers and the museums play a major role.

What is something that you have experienced either now or in the past that you feel has been misunderstood?

One writer told me, anything that's been written about you always sounds like a self-help book for women. And he was right. I used to get furious with it. Those are the issues that drive the work maybe, but you have to look at the work itself. I always talk about the carnality of paint. It's a wonderful medium for dealing with flesh.

One cannot talk about liberation without thinking about the flesh, because the flesh is essential in terms of who we are. It just is; it's there. It's not that biology is destiny.

That's what kept people away from flesh because they were afraid of that association, but flesh defines who we are and how we think and what we do. Everything in our lives starts out with that very primal response and we have to understand that that is not something that limits our freedom, but that expresses our freedom. It expresses our connectedness also, the ways we are connected to each other. Empathy comes from knowing that if I stick something into my arm, I feel pain, and if I stick something into your arm, you feel pain. And it's that empathy that makes us human.

Written by William J. Simmons