

Painter Joan Semmel Remains a Master of the Human Nude

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Portrait of Joan Semmel by Elfie Semotan. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Across her newest paintings, Joan Semmel's aging body crouches, reclines, bends, and twists, often extending beyond the limits of the composition. The artist, who turns 86 this month, is best known for her nude self-portraits, which she began making in the early 1970s. She builds up her paint in thick, creamy strokes and unexpected hues: Patches of green appear on knees and arms, while a shin becomes a swirl of pink, purple, orange, and blue. There's a bruised quality to the skin, suggesting both struggle and toughness.

Semmel maintains a studio along a SoHo street lined with high-end shoe stores. She's had it since 1970, when the neighborhood was still a bohemian mecca. During a visit this past September, the space was filled with female figures. On a plant-filled ledge by the window, an unclothed, one-armed mannequin gazed out toward the Lower

Manhattan bustle. Paintings from previous series lined the walls—nude self-portraits overlaid in a single work. At this point in her career, Semmel is unabashed about all the bodies. On a nearby table, a series of recent nude photographs of herself were casually arrayed—source imagery that she uses for paintings. This January, she'll debut her newest canvases at Alexander Gray Associates in Chelsea.



Joan Semmel, *Seated in Red*, 2018. © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.



Joan Semmel, *Fleshed Out*, 2018. © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

For over four decades, Semmel has looked closely and honestly at the shapes of her own flesh and rendered them, larger-than-life, in vibrant oils. Not an easy task. But to adhere to her own feminist and artistic ideals, Semmel doesn't have much choice. Her subject matter grows out of her bold aesthetic and ethical vision. If the personal is political, her intimate depictions of her own skin add up to a rallying cry for change: gender equality, in particular. In works such as *Mythologies and Me* (1976) and series such as "Self Images" (1974–79), Semmel considers the way the public views and regulates women's bodies: promoting restrictive sexual mores, objectifying the female form via mass media, and privileging youth. Throughout her entire oeuvre, she's painted flab and wrinkles with honesty and gusto, refuting the persistent narrative that women's flesh should look a certain way.

The artist began painting the female body after she herself experienced everyday discrimination against women. In 1963, Semmel relocated to Madrid with her two children and her husband, who had an engineering job in the city. They initially planned to live in Spain for a year, but they loved the country and stayed for over seven years. Semmel was, at the time, painting in an Abstract Expressionist mode—colorful, blocky canvases that vaguely recall the work of Grace Hartigan—and enjoyed widespread positive reception. A South American critic, Ernesto Heine, promoted her work and helped her land shows in Buenos Aires and Montevideo.



Yet alongside her success, Semmel also experienced sexism. In Spain, women couldn't sign a lease or keep their own bank accounts. One of Semmel's single friends wanted to rent an apartment; Semmel's husband had to sign for her. On the street, men peppered women with *piropos*, or catcalls. "That was supposed to be a compliment, right?" Semmel recalls, thinking back on her experiences. "You were an attractive woman. It was just a whole different way of seeing the world."

Semmel was willing to make certain sacrifices—and accept certain treatment—for her life in Spain. She faced more significant trouble, however, when she tried to divorce her husband. Military dictator Francisco Franco was still alive, and divorces were outlawed. Semmel returned to New York to formally end her marriage. "I didn't call myself a feminist at that time, but I was already there," she says. "I was already involved in the idea of changing the way women were seen in the world and what they're able to do."

Back in the States, Semmel found herself as a single mother who needed to prove herself as an artist all over again. Her practice itself radically changed as she embraced feminist politics. She joined organizations such as the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, which demanded greater representation of women in museums. "That made me feel more than anything that I needed to be able to do something besides abstraction," she says, "to use the work to express some of the ideas I was working with in my life."



Joan Semmel, *Hold*, 1972. © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

In 1970, Semmel enrolled in the Pratt Institute's MFA program so that she'd be able to support her young family via teaching. She began making figurative work, using her art to flesh out her new ideological preoccupations. Semmel took advantage of the sexual experimentation pervading New York bohemia: Swingers were swinging, and AIDS was

still on the distant horizon. Semmel and two other artists watched a male exhibitionist and his partner du jour have sex in front of them with his partner-of-the-moment. She made drawings during the sessions, then worked from them to create her “Second Erotic Series” (1972–73)—she’s now hesitant about that fraught designation, however, as her paintings aren’t made to stimulate.

The resulting works look like what the Fauvists might have made if they were more explicit about carnality. On Semmel’s canvases, bodies in both bright and more muted shades of red, blue, purple, and green couple and contort. In *Flip-Flop Diptych* (1971), for example, two panels depict brightly hued bodies from behind, caught mid-coitus. Semmel truncates the figures so that the legs and heads are cut off; the act of penetration itself becomes the focus of the composition. Semmel, of course, wasn’t the only artist at the time to engage with such subject matter. Philip Pearlstein was rendering the nude figure with acute detail, though without Semmel’s charged political content. Betty Tompkins was also creating her “fuck paintings” (black-and-white close-ups of explicit intercourse) around the same time.



Joan Semmel, *Flip-Flop Diptych*, 1971. © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Semmel’s works attempted to challenge culturally perpetuated taboos about sex and the body. As such, they were both daring and difficult to market. Even the day’s most radical galleries wouldn’t accept Semmel’s graphic work. “I don’t know if it was [because it was] erotic,” she says, “or because it was done by a woman. The two things together made it impossible to show.” Undeterred by the rejections and eager to establish herself in New York, Semmel temporarily rented her own gallery space on Prince Street.

Andy Warhol, gallerist Allan Stone, and critics such as Lawrence Alloway, Donald Kuspit, and John Perrault all visited. Feedback was good: Semmel had successfully launched her own subversive, high-profile entry into the city's art ecosystem.

What set Semmel apart, says Hammer Museum chief curator Connie Butler, was her “depiction of heterosexual sex and coupling through languid, flaccid bodies. A specific kind of anti-heroic, anti-monumental portrayal of sexuality and bodies.” Semmel's paintings took all the Hollywood romance out of sex, making it imperfect and ordinary, though still charged with color, vitality, and feeling.



For her next series, Semmel turned her focus from other bodies to her own. “I started using myself as a model because I didn’t want to objectify anyone else,” she says. She wanted to veer from fetishized and ideal depictions of the female body, instead aiming at specificity and truth. For her “Self Images” (1974–79), she often created paintings based on photographs of herself, as well as images of various men. (I wrote her to follow up, asking who these men were, and she responded with characteristic verve: “None of your business.”) Using her own body as source material, says Butler, “was a radical thing to do at the time.” Semmel wasn’t the first— Joan Snyder, Butler noted, had painted herself nude in the early 1960s—but her near-photorealism and psychedelic hues made the work feel strikingly new.

Perhaps Semmel’s most famous work from the series, *Mythologies and Me* (1976), is a triptych that depicts a *Playboy* model, the artist’s own body, and a parody of one of Willem de Kooning’s “Women” paintings. In both working from photography and appropriating other artists and mass media, Semmel foreshadowed the work that Pictures Generation artists would make throughout the next decade. In particular, David Salle’s eerie paintings based on photographs of women and sex magazine images owe a significant debt to Semmel’s work from the 1970s.



Joan Semmel, *Mythologies and Me*, 1976. © 2018 Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Using photography as a tool for painting was novel during the decade: Before, painters had mostly worked from drawings to create their compositions. Butler connects Semmel’s work to the paintings of Eric Fischl, who also explored the “psychological charge of the naked figure in the interior.” If artists had long situated their nudes in regal private chambers or posed outdoors, Fischl and Semmel brought them into mundane domestic spaces.

Throughout the 1980s, Semmel began to incorporate her camera more explicitly into her practice. Now in her fifties, she was thinking less about sex, apparently, than about aging. She had back problems (“most artists do,” she admits) and was facing menopause. Semmel frequented a gym that catered to artists and dancers, and the scene there intrigued her. “People barely spoke to each other,” she remembers.

“Everybody was very involved in themselves and the mirror.” She wanted to render the narcissism she found exemplified in that setting.

Semmel’s “Gymnasium” series (1986–87) depicts gym-goers stretching and weight lifting, echoed by their mirrored reflections. In *Abeyance* (1986), a woman stretches her arms toward a mirror, her legs spread on the floor; she looks as though she’s bowing to her own reflection. Semmel moved into more intimate territory for her “Locker Room” series (1988–91), basing her compositions on photos she took in the mirrors of the gym’s changing area. Since the mirror itself was her subject, people didn’t feel as though they had to pose. Semmel, like the bodies she captured, was often unclothed—and vulnerable herself—when she made these source images. In translating them to canvas, multiple gazes were at play: a subject’s glimpse into the mirror; the photographer’s gaze at the subject; and the painter’s studied look at a photograph.



Joan Semmel, *Abeyance*, 1986. © 2018 Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Into the next decade, Semmel briefly substituted mannequins for people. She painted the lifeless forms divorced from their typical commercial contexts, shadowed and in corners. The results are eerie and hollow; dark critiques of consumer culture. Semmel found the mannequins abandoned on New York's curbs. She liked their surreal quality and the fact that they'd been discarded. "They have parts missing, they're broken," she says. "When you have a body, a mannequin, and there's an arm missing—that talks about a loss of power."

Semmel returned to her engagement with photography in her series entitled "With Camera" (2001–06). To make these paintings, Semmel photographed herself, close-up, in the mirror, then translated the photographs to canvas. "The mirror gave me permission in a funny way," she says. "I didn't need to make [the work] as realistic. I could play around with the paint more." Semmel created these paintings when she was in her late sixties and early seventies—the series celebrates the aging body, in a society that typically glorifies youth.



Indeed, looking back, Semmel's oeuvre has progressed seamlessly, with subtle leaps between related ideas and subject matter. If she's never made significant departures from the initial feminist vision she established for herself in 1970, it's not for a lack of things to say. Instead, her strong viewpoint considers the embodied female experience from many angles, and addresses the evolution of feminist concerns (from sexual liberation to the ethics of pornography to society's rejection of aging bodies).

That said, artists such as Semmel have, at times, faced criticism for perpetuating too narrow a definition of feminism—one limited to white, heterosexual women. "I do not pretend to address the problems of all women in the world," Semmel offers. "My work is personal and I speak for myself. Women artists have to speak for themselves and then unite to fight the political fight." She notes that it's easy to blame feminists for systemic inequities, and that she and her circles always remained open to anyone who wanted to join their fight (and gay women, as well as women of color, did). She sees progress, in addition to new, more active efforts for inclusivity.

Semmel isn't particularly interested in linking her artwork to any particular movement, either. She believes that classifications are often artificial and "created by writers." She notes, however, that the Pictures Generation developed at a time when the art world dismissed feminism. According to her, it's only really become okay to identify as a feminist in recent years.



Semmel thanks Butler, and her 2007 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, in part, for the shift. Entitled “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution,” the show featured feminist artwork made between 1965 and 1980, including pieces by Semmel and a roster of her international peers: Lynda Benglis, Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Ana Mendieta, and Cindy Sherman. Semmel believes that the show validated the included work as art, and not just feminism. Prior to the mid-2000s, Butler says, “there was very little information about these artists’ work, and it was nearly impossible to see it in person. Their work was not owned institutionally, it wasn’t reproduced in textbooks, art history books, and so on.” If it’s disheartening to think that Semmel has been responding to issues that, after four decades, remained unsolved, the artist herself remains hopeful. “I think the first real change has been #MeToo,” she says. “Women are starting to speak up for themselves and to take their own fate into their own hands. Young women are much more assertive than they were.” Progress—both artistic and political—takes decades of practice.

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