

Unexpected Poses in Joan Semmel's Chelsea Exhibition

New Paintings

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Well into her 80s, Joan Semmel continues to evolve as an artist, always growing and modifying how she presents what has been her primary subject for decades, the female form, most typically hers.

Even those familiar with her work, however, might still be unsure of what they are witnessing in the galleries of Alexander Gray Associates in Chelsea. She has always employed unusual vantage points, foreshortening, and, at times, an expressionistic palette. Here, in an exhibition called "A Necessary Elaboration," the Springs resident again works in self-portraiture but returns to a high-keyed palette most associated with her 1970s work.

She has said of these paintings, made between 2017 and now, that the sexuality from her earlier series remains, "but it's not about seduction. . . . The colors are the seduction here."

These are up-front images, both literally and figuratively, in which the subject matter fills the picture plane, leaving no point of entry. The body parts are recognizable, but they easily dissolve into forms and geometry in space with their depiction. Knees and backs, hands and thighs, breasts from every angle, she presents the body cantilevered, upside down, on its side, and in myriad combinations.

The aging process is clear in the slack skin and suspended flesh on display, and that can't help but be part of the content. Yet it barely registers. There is too much else going on here.

Although the gallery's downstairs offers hints of what is to come with its two pendant works, both of which depict the artist/subject supine on a golden-colored surface, these paintings seem subdued once the works upstairs have been absorbed.

Set apart on its own wall, "Seated in Red" is a showstopper in crimson, with both body and background alight with flaming intensity. Ms. Semmel sits with her back to us, reminiscent of early modern photographers such as Man Ray and Edward Weston, who played up the abstract qualities of organic subjects. Her body could be a stand-in for so many things — a musical instrument, surely, as in Man Ray, or a vase, an animal's head, a gourd, even a Janus head.

Something about the intensity of the brushstrokes on the upper back are reminiscent of the lines on the masklike faces on the right of Picasso's "Demoiselles D'Avignon." Just as in that masterpiece, here they also seem to indicate a point of departure.

The cropping at the bottom half of her head, with the silver-gray hair treated summarily, is another captivating choice. The marks and patches of brown, pink, and white that make up the hair find echoes in the brushwork on the back, allowing viewers to lose themselves once more. Is this a head or a snowy mountain? What is it flowing down the valley that becomes the upper back once you pull back again?

Even the background is rich with variations of hue, light, and shadow. The light comes from the right and highlights the right shoulder, ribs, and top of the thighs. It forms a semicircle or crescent moon shape from shoulder to hip.

The treatment of the backside here is also unexpected. There is a long expanse of flatness between what seems to be the end of the spine and the beginning of the buttocks. This exaggerated elongation and flatness causes another bit of vertigo, which may



An installation view of the exhibition "Joan Semmel: A Necessary Elaboration."
Alexander Gray Associates, New York, Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

raise the question, “What am I looking at again?”

In most of the other works, one of the most noticeable elements is the artist’s hands. Rarely are they at her sides and neutral. In almost all of the poses, she holds them together, grips her limbs, or grasps an object such as the stool on which she is seated. Sometimes her hands and arms seem carved from wood; other times veined like marble.

In “Turning,” the painting where she is gripping the stool, her arm looks as if it’s been dissected, as in an anatomy study, with veins and arteries exposed. Her upper arm is finished in hues of peach, purple, and beige, and the back with tones of green and gray.

And the series continues like that, each work offering its own powerful journey across the canvas with these voids and great expanses of form and color. They distract us and may cause us to forget that we are looking at a figure in an advanced state of aging. We take them in with full interest and intent, not turning away in unease or pity, but drawn in by their presentation, just as Ms. Semmel intended.

The exhibition remains on view through Feb. 16.



Joan Semmel's "Crossed Arms" is one of several large-format self-portraits of the artist on view in Chelsea. Alexander Gray Associates, New York, Joan

Alexander Gray Associates, New York, Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photos

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