



Joan Semmel

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Alexander Gray Associates

Joan Semmel: *New Work*

September 8–October 15, 2016

Alexander Gray Associates

My work of the last year appropriately embodies the tension of abstract and representational elements within my history. It speaks to my passion as a Feminist to present female images that undercut the prevailing models, and to use paint as an instrument of joy and revelation.

I was always interested in making a radical intervention in the history of the genre of the nude, but was uncomfortable being described as either a realist or a figure painter. I have avoided the strictly narrative aspects of figuration opting for a more iconic image. Background objects are dropped out, and the image is suspended in imaginary baths of color, as in my first representational paintings from the early 70s which were primarily gestural and expressionistic. In these recent paintings both non-naturalistic color and linear overlays of complementary or contrasting images, again recall abstract elements, but also provoke a suggestion of time, motion, or memory.

The linear rendering of another female figure superimposed over a three-dimensional body sometimes causes unexpected correlations and disjunctions to occur. At times the ground surface, a space which may be totally flat and cool, can shift and seem to come forward and pierce the picture plane, or a figure may move way back in the flat space. There are no rules of color or composition which apply. Surprise is the reward for a lack of formula. The image is always the self-image, a repetitious and persistent actor, weaving in and out of the surface, searching for a position that holds in the ever shifting sands of text and context. The repetitive positions of the body, facing oneself, or being seen, a knee up or down, overlapping breasts, the body in repose or action sets up innumerable dialogues within each painting and entices the viewer to engage. At times there is just one figure or fragment thereof, as if the self perceived is quite complete without further comment.

Our connection to the flesh is, for better or worse, always with us. Our primary emotions emanate from that source and drive most other pursuits, art and politics among them. The flesh permits us to fully experience our common humanity. The body morphing again and again, the serpent within shedding its skin. The coming together of memory and motion, of what was and what can no longer be. The compression of past and present by the constant retelling of tales of past events, which have left those indelible marks on that flesh. The exchange of losses in smoothness of surface, for the gains of knowledge, permeates the experience of age. Yet, the unknowable is ever more present.

The loss of an authentic self in contemporary life has been replaced by innumerable images; photos of every action taken, every place visited, every moment, all of them engraved, not in our minds but in our cell

phones, proving that yes we are really here, we have really existed. We are so busy recording every moment that we never fully experience anything more than the act of recording.

A woman's body has been experienced for so long as a burden to be borne, and age as a disease to be feared. At this time when so many strides in medicine and health have taken place, these same cultural attitudes still seem to prevail and are cultivated by many diverse commercial self interests. The constant exploitation of the image of the female body of a certain age and predetermined shape as that most coveted object of desire leaves us divided from our own selves. We have learned to desire that very same image and try to cajole and squeeze ourselves into its outlines.

We have traveled on the road to modernity by abandoning religion's obsession with shame (thank god) but have accepted the media's insistence on shamelessness. Pornography enters our living rooms on the TV and is accepted as simply another expression of our sexuality however flawed. There are no longer distinctions between sex as paid labour or not, so long as the results equal profit, and everyone pays their taxes. Art in our time follows a similar route of lost distinctions. The dividing lines between commercial and "high" art no longer hold as Mickey Mouse and Snoop Dog take their place in the pantheon of heroes. Investment replaces connoisseurship as a motivating force and the primary consideration is profitability. Does democracy necessarily extort such costly tribute?

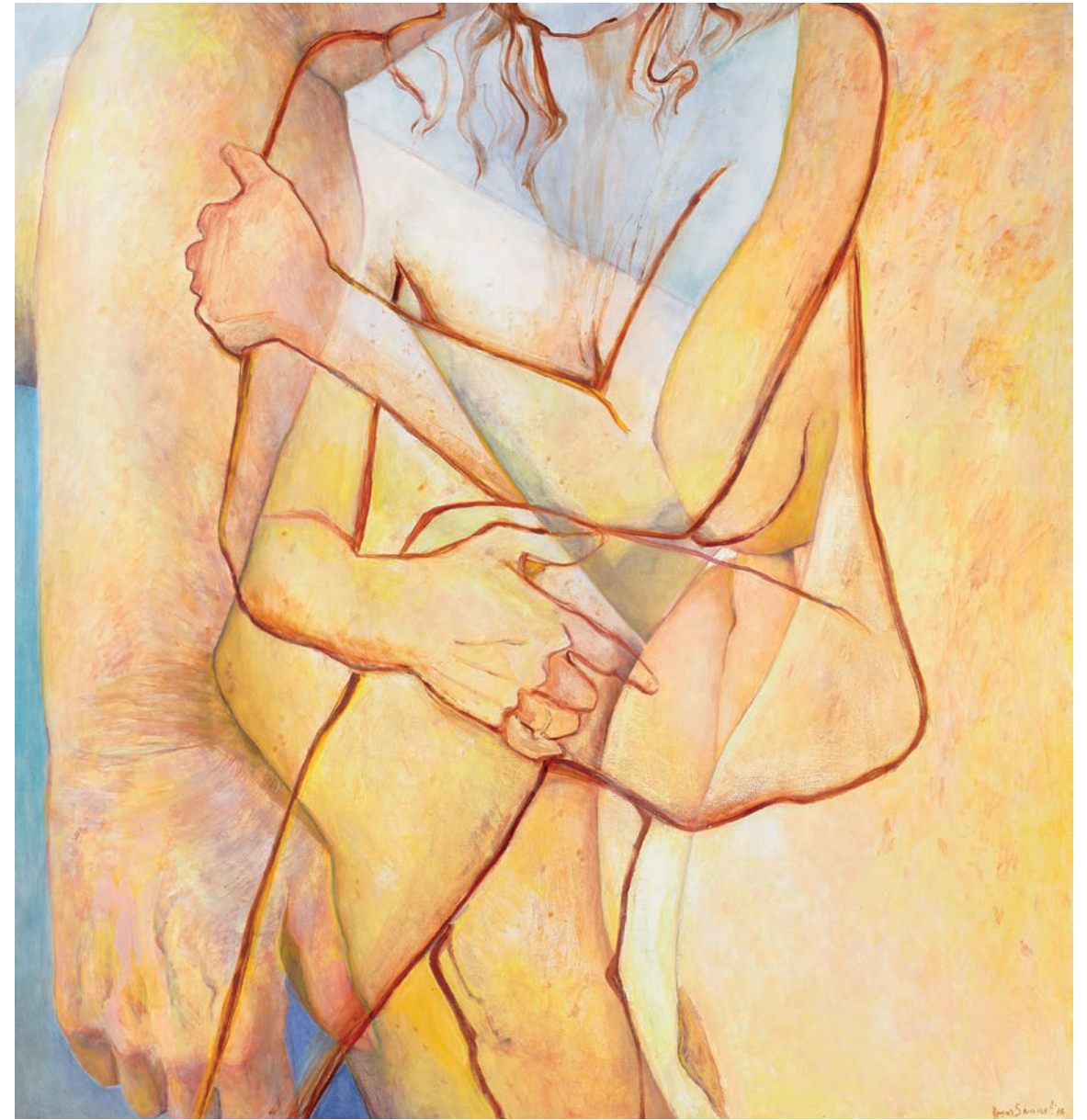
As a Feminist, living in New York City I appreciate some of the changes for women that have taken place under pressure, and continue to change at least in this country if not in the wider world. However, correcting a few of the omissions of the past do not make the corruptions of the present more forgivable. I have continued to paint despite backlash and through replays because in that old romantic tradition, to do so makes me happy, and so I indulge myself. It is an addiction like most highs but less destructive than many.

The affirmation my work has received in recent years has been most gratifying especially when young artists tell me how important my work has been for them. Young people, despite all their distractions and critiques of them to the contrary, still love, still paint, still write, still care, and are even starting to vote. Aging people like me, still love, still paint, still write, still care, and still hope. The canvas becomes the tender skin of fragile thoughts.

Joan Semmel, East Hampton, New York, July 2016



Embrace, 2016



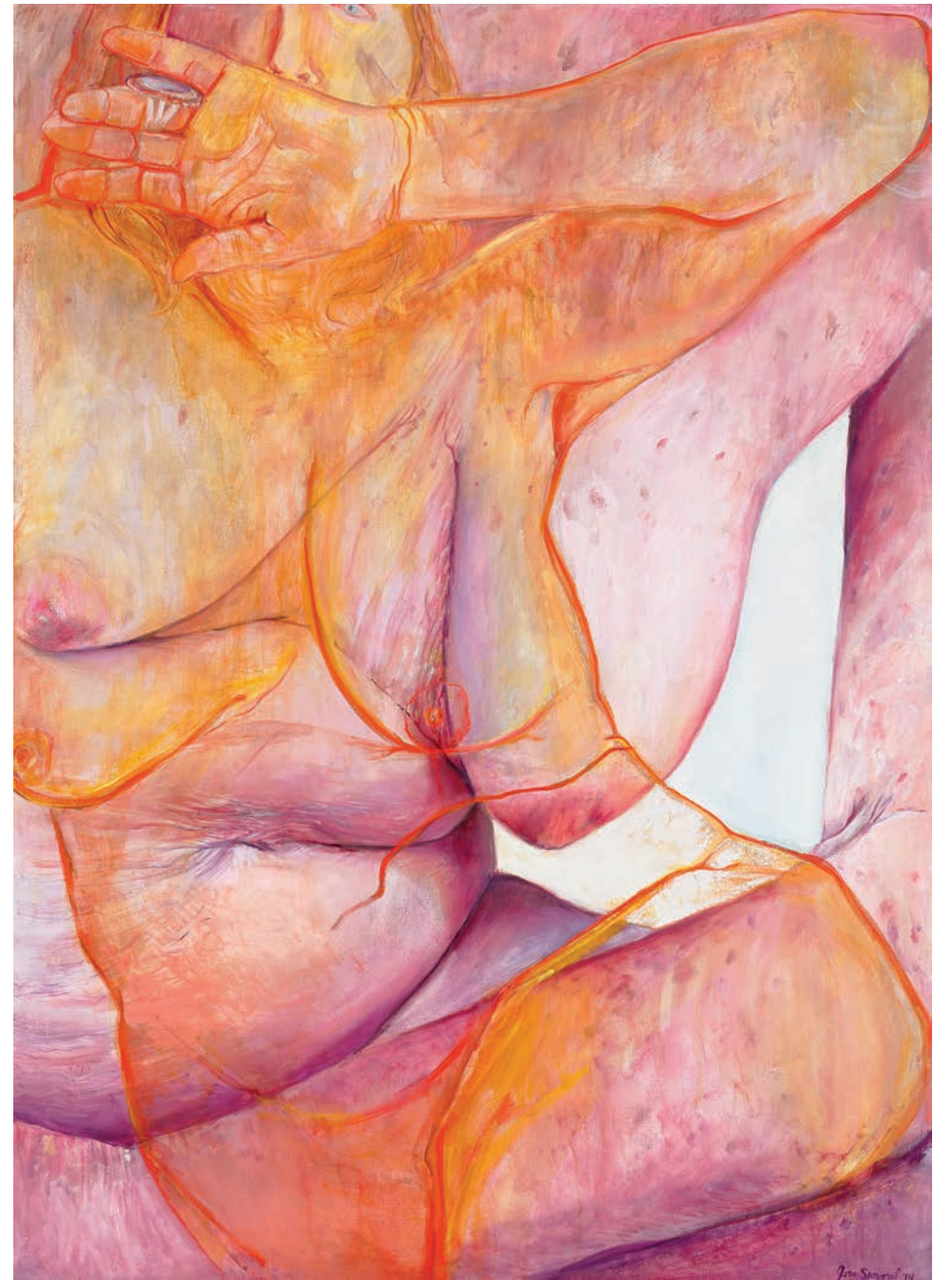
Double Embrace, 2016



Crossed Limbs, 2016



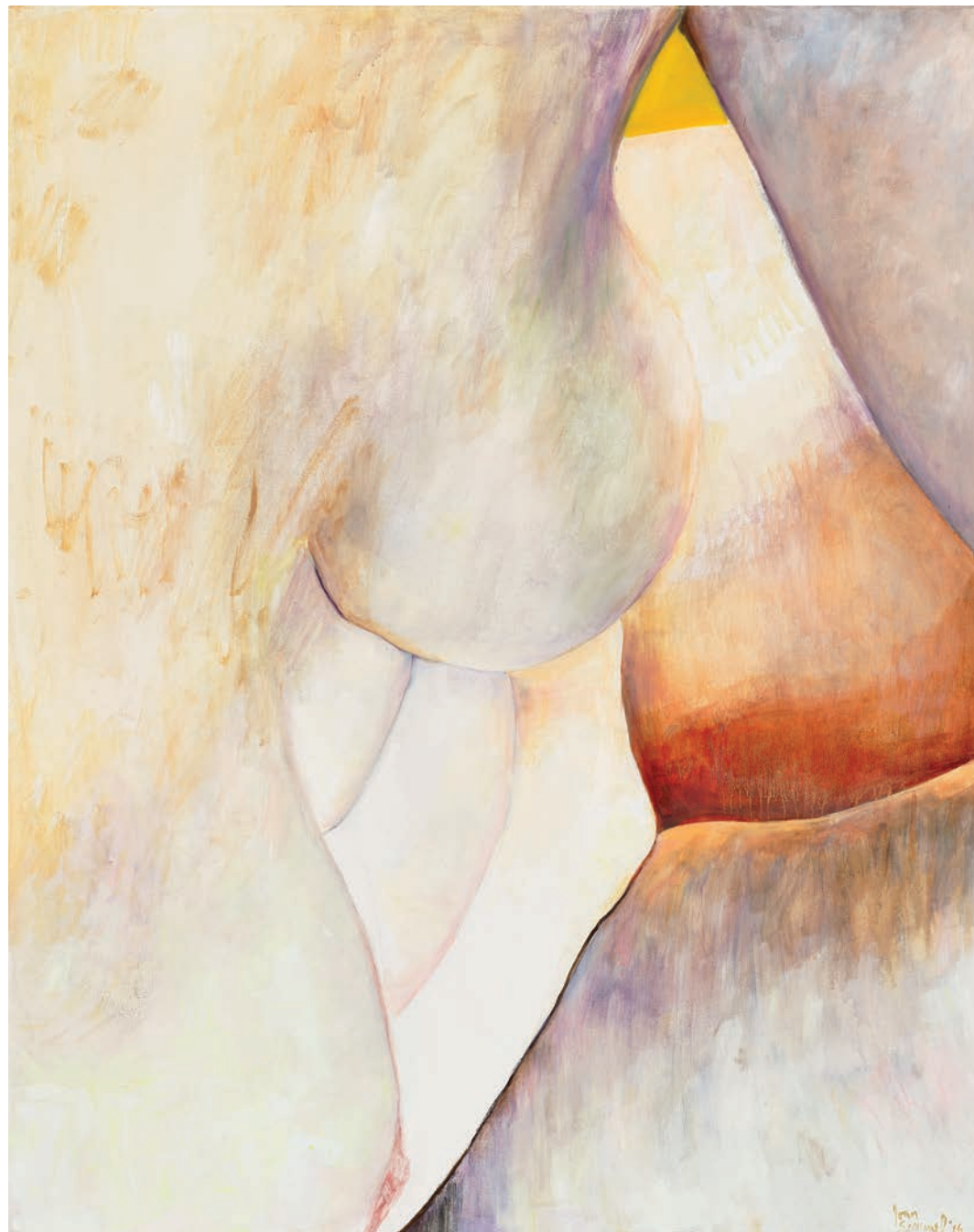
Above: Untitled, 2016
Facing left: Untitled, 2016
Facing right: Untitled, 2016



Open Hand, 2015



Blue Embrace, 2016



Intimate Spaces, 2016



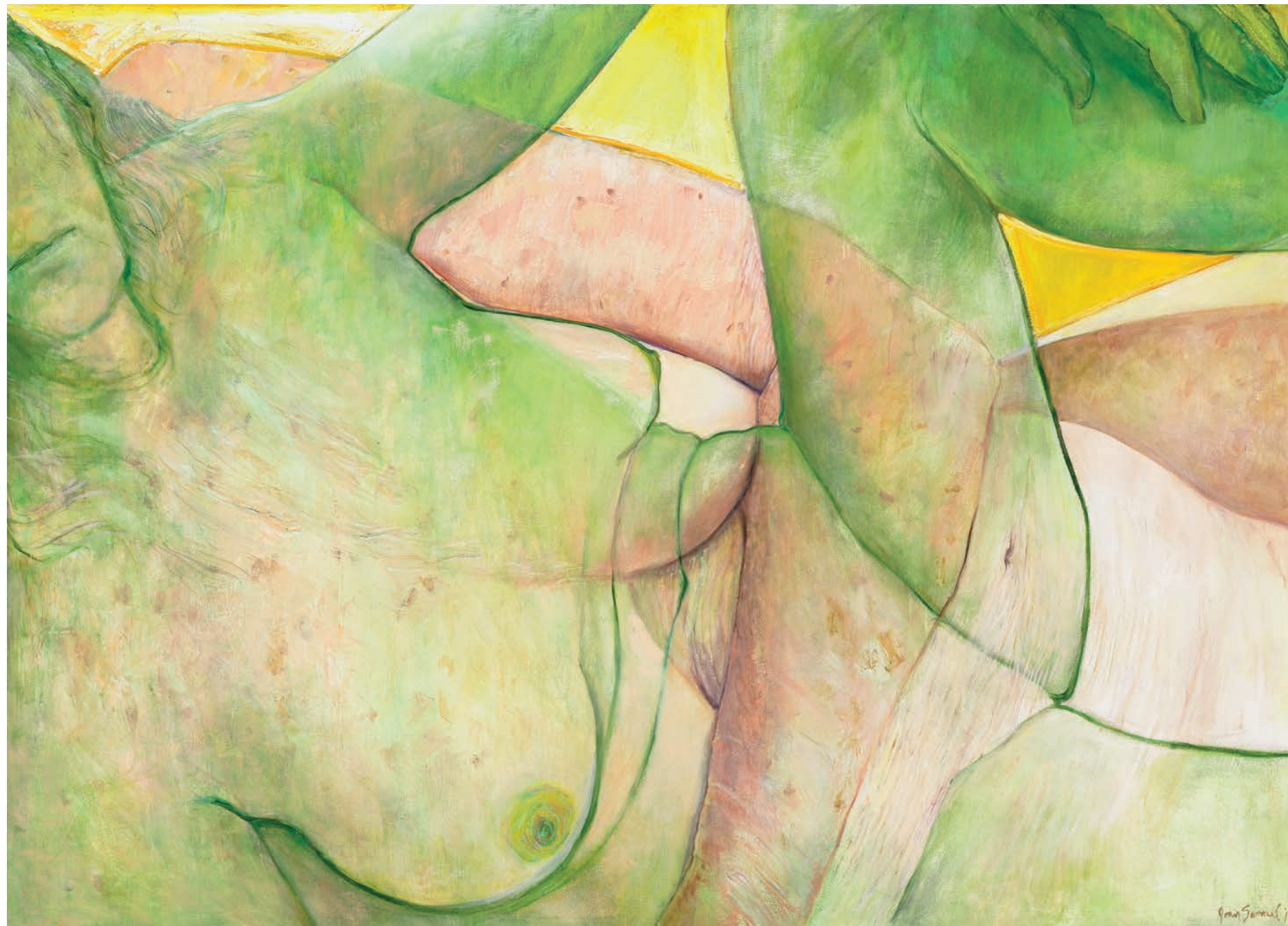
Tattoo, 2016



Untitled, 2016



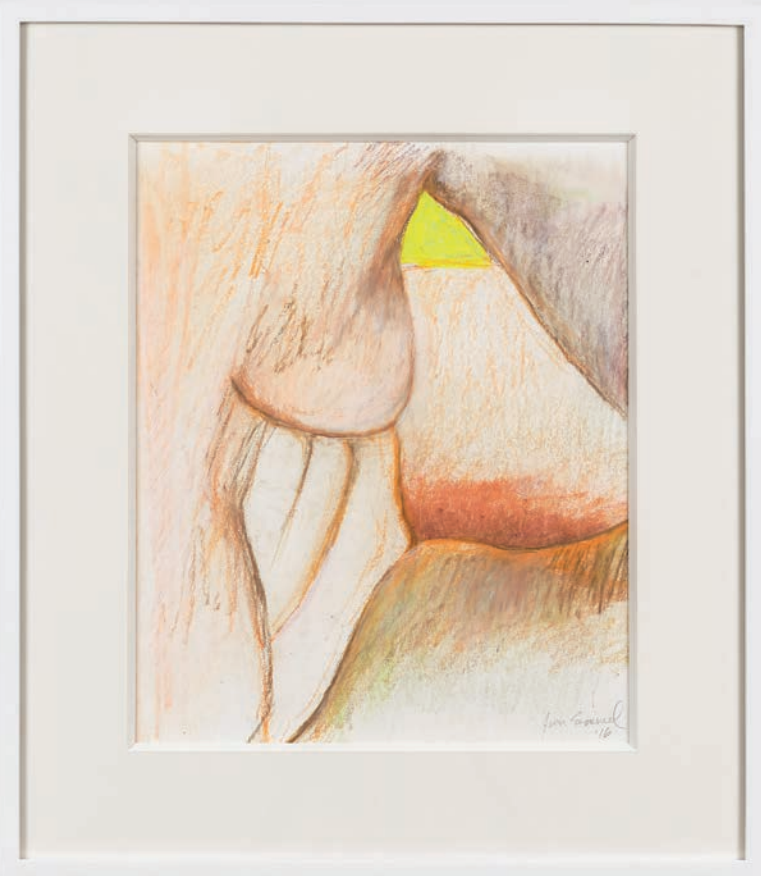
Cool Light, 2016



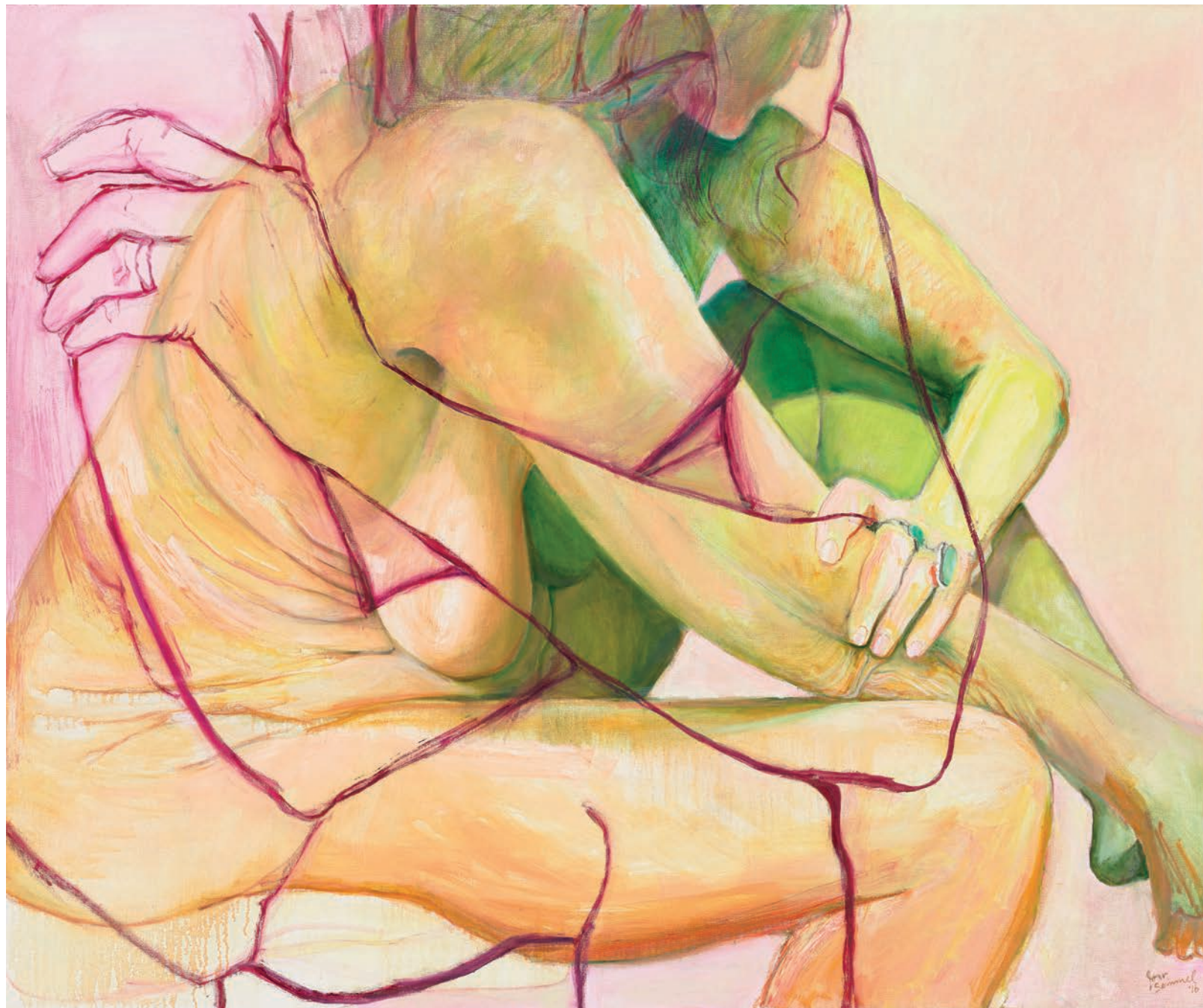
Yellow Sky, 2015



Step Out, 2016



Untitled, 2016



Flesh Ground, 2016



Aura, 2016

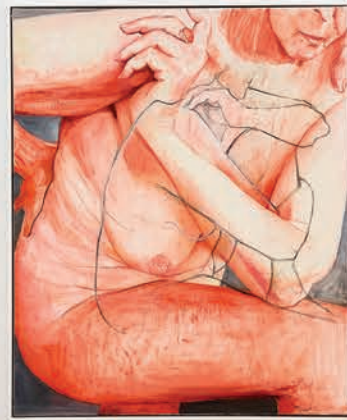
Joan Semmel
Paper Work



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2016



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2016



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2016



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2016

Joan Semmel (b.1932) has centered her painting practice around issues of the body, from desire to aging, as well as those of identity and cultural imprinting. After completing her studies at the Cooper Union, Pratt Institute and the Art Student's League of New York, Semmel moved to Spain in 1963, where she experimented with abstraction and gesturalism. She returned to New York in the early 1970s, where her practice turned towards figurative paintings, including erotic themes that responded to pornography, popular culture, and concerns around female nude representation. Her practice traces the transformation that women's sexuality has seen in the last century, and emphasizes the possibility for female autonomy through the body.

In the 1970s, Semmel began her exploration of female sexuality with the "Sex Paintings" and "Erotic Series," large scale depictions of highly sexual positions. Her reclaimed gaze of the female nude heralded a feminist approach to painting and representation. Produced at a pivotal moment in her practice and in the cultural landscape of the 1970s Second-wave Feminism, these series depict couples entwined in various coital positions rendered with expressive gesture, exemplifying her keen understanding of color and composition. In 1974, she made a definitive formal shift from abstraction by fully embracing figuration. Using her own body as subject, she began depicting her nudeness on canvas, shifting the perspective from that of an observer to a personal point of view. During the mid-1970s, Semmel turned to photography to capture reflections of her own body, later bringing the camera and her reflection in mirrors into the paintings in the 1980s.

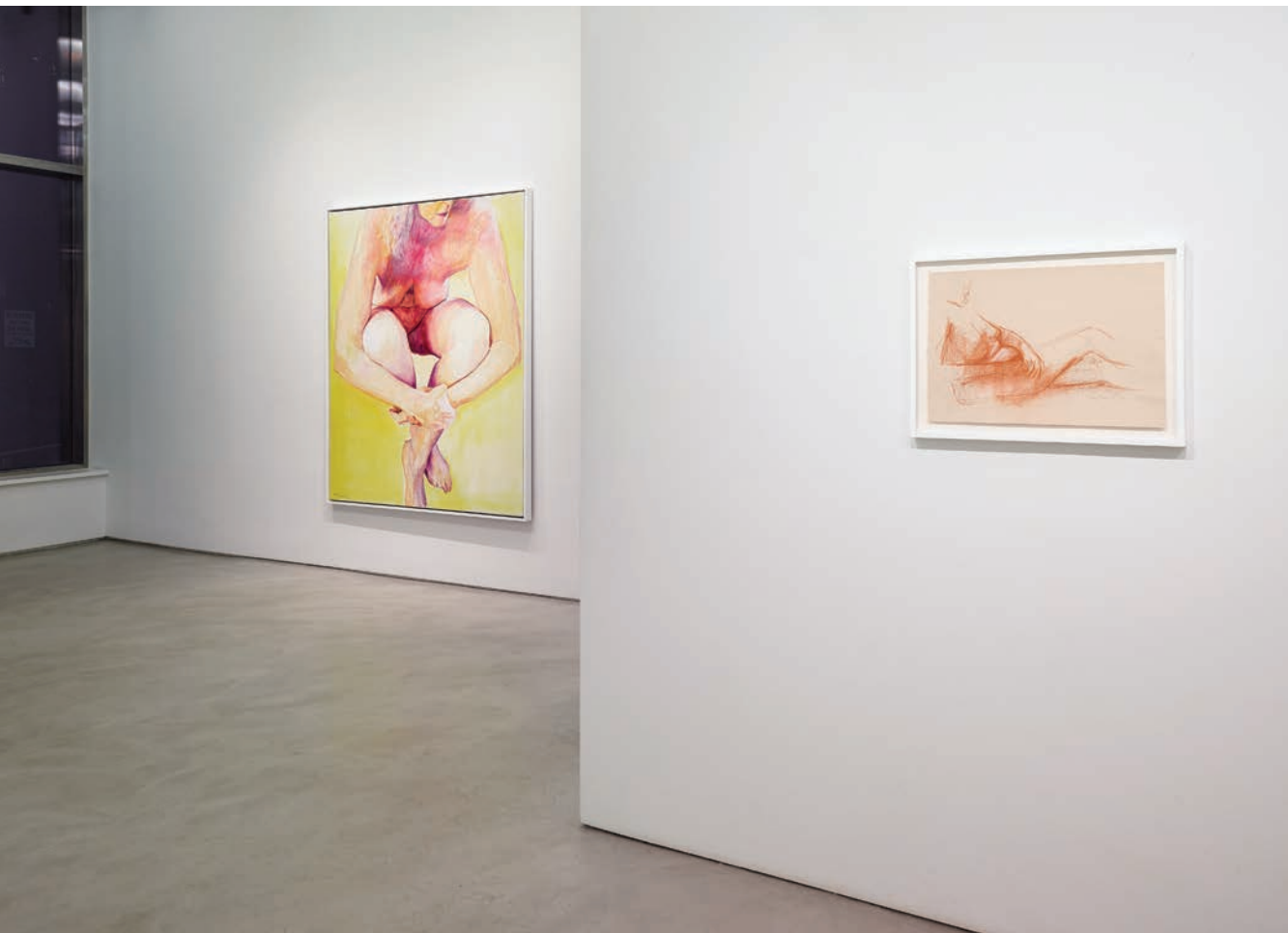
Since the late-1980s, Semmel has meditated on the aging female physique. Recent paintings continue the artist's exploration of self-portraiture and female identity, representing the artist's body, doubled, fragmented, and in-motion. Dissolving the space between artist and model, viewer and subject, the paintings are notable for their celebration of color and flesh. She applies saturated abstract colors in a variety of styles, merging figure and ground. Her command of a broad painterly language and predilection for vibrant hues emerges from her early training in abstract expressionism. In recent series, Semmel synthesizes her longstanding engagement with content and form to render aging and memory through the act of painting.

Joan Semmel's work has been featured in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); Brooklyn Museum, New York (2016); Dallas Contemporary, TX (2015); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014); National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC (2014); Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen, Germany (2013); Bronx Museum

of the Arts, New York (2013); Jewish Museum, New York (2010); Museum of Modern Art Arnhem, The Netherlands (2009); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH (2008); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2007); National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (2007); and Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX (2006); among others. Semmel's paintings are part of the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Orange County Museum of Art, CA; Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; the Jocelyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE; the Jewish Museum, New York; among others. She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including the Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award (2013), Anonymous Was a Woman (2008), and National Endowment for the Arts awards (1985 and 1980). She is Professor Emeritus of Painting at Rutgers University.



Joan Semmel, New York, 2013
Photo: Elfie Semotan



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2016

List of Illustrated Works

- | | |
|--|---|
| <i>Yellow Sky</i> , 2015
Oil on canvas
51h x 71w in (129.54h x 180.34w cm) | *Untitled, 2016
Oil crayon on paper
23.5h x 22.25w in (59.69h x 56.52w cm) |
| * <i>Open Hand</i> , 2015
Oil on canvas
66h x 48w in (167.64h x 121.92w cm) | *Untitled, 2016
Oil crayon on paper
15h x 15w in (38.1h x 38.1w cm) |
| * <i>Cool Light</i> , 2016
Oil on canvas
60h x 48w in (152.4h x 121.92w cm) | Untitled, 2016
Oil crayon on paper
19.5h x 15.75w in (49.53h x 40.01w cm) |
| * <i>Double Embrace</i> , 2016
Oil on canvas
72h x 68w in (182.88h x 172.72w cm) | *Untitled, 2016
Oil crayon on paper
22.5h x 17.5w in (57.15h x 44.45w cm) |
| * <i>Intimate Spaces</i> , 2016
Oil on canvas
60h x 48w in (152.4h x 121.92w cm) | *Untitled, 2016
Acrylic and oil crayon on paper
22.5h x 23.5w in (57.15h x 59.69w cm) |
| * <i>Blue Embrace</i> , 2016
Oil on canvas
60h x 48w in (152.4h x 121.92w cm) | Untitled, 2016
Oil crayon on paper
14h x 14w in (35.56h x 35.56w cm) |
| <i>Step Out</i> , 2016
Oil on canvas
60h x 48w in (152.4h x 121.92w cm) | *Untitled, 2016
Oil crayon on paper
14h x 19.5w in (35.56h x 49.53w cm) |
| * <i>Flesh Ground</i> , 2016
Oil on canvas
60h x 72w in (152.4h x 182.88w cm) | *Untitled, 2016
Oil crayon on paper
11.63h x 15.63w in (29.54h x 39.7w cm) |
| * <i>Crossed Limbs</i> , 2016
Oil on canvas
60h x 72w in (152.4h x 182.88w cm) | *Included in Joan Semmel: <i>New Work</i> , Alexander Gray Associates, September 8–October 15, 2016 |
| * <i>Embrace</i> , 2016
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in (182.88h x 152.4w cm) | |
| * <i>Tattoo</i> , 2016
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in (182.88h x 152.4w cm) | |
| * <i>Aura</i> , 2016
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in (182.88h x 152.4w cm) | |

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Cover image: *Flesh Ground*, detail, 2016, oil on canvas, 60h x 72w in
(152.4h x 182.88w cm)

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Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, the Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

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