



Joan Semmel, *A Balancing Act*

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Alexander Gray Associates



## **Joan Semmel: *A Balancing Act***

New York: April 15 – May 29, 2021

Germantown: April 23 – June 6, 2021

Alexander Gray Associates





*Spaced Out*, 2019, detail



## ***A Balancing Act***

by Joan Semmel

In my studio, I walk the tightrope between vulnerability and power; the vulnerability of the flesh and the power of my art to enable it. My work utilizes the body as symbolic and iconic as well as intimate and sensually communicative—both personal and political in its functions. My interest in the flesh lies in its dichotomies: its formal and conceptual implications aesthetically and its past centrality to the definition of women's role in the culture.

Feminist concerns were a powerful motivation for me in my early work, which was usually received and written about from that point of view. My passionate wish for change in the way women were seen and how we perceived and could imagine ourselves has been vital to me as an activist involved in both the aesthetic and political debates of my time. My use of the self-body image has exemplified my insistence on taking control of my subjectivity and agency.

From the beginning, I learned to work from the nude model. The human form was the architecture upon which my art came into being. The flesh—constantly morphing into new formations—presented a stimulus of infinite structures and variations. Close cropping of images gave me both the intense intimacy and the transformation that distanced the flesh and connected the image to abstraction. The signature ring often depicted emphasizes the nakedness of the flesh and symbolically confers the authority of the artist's hand.

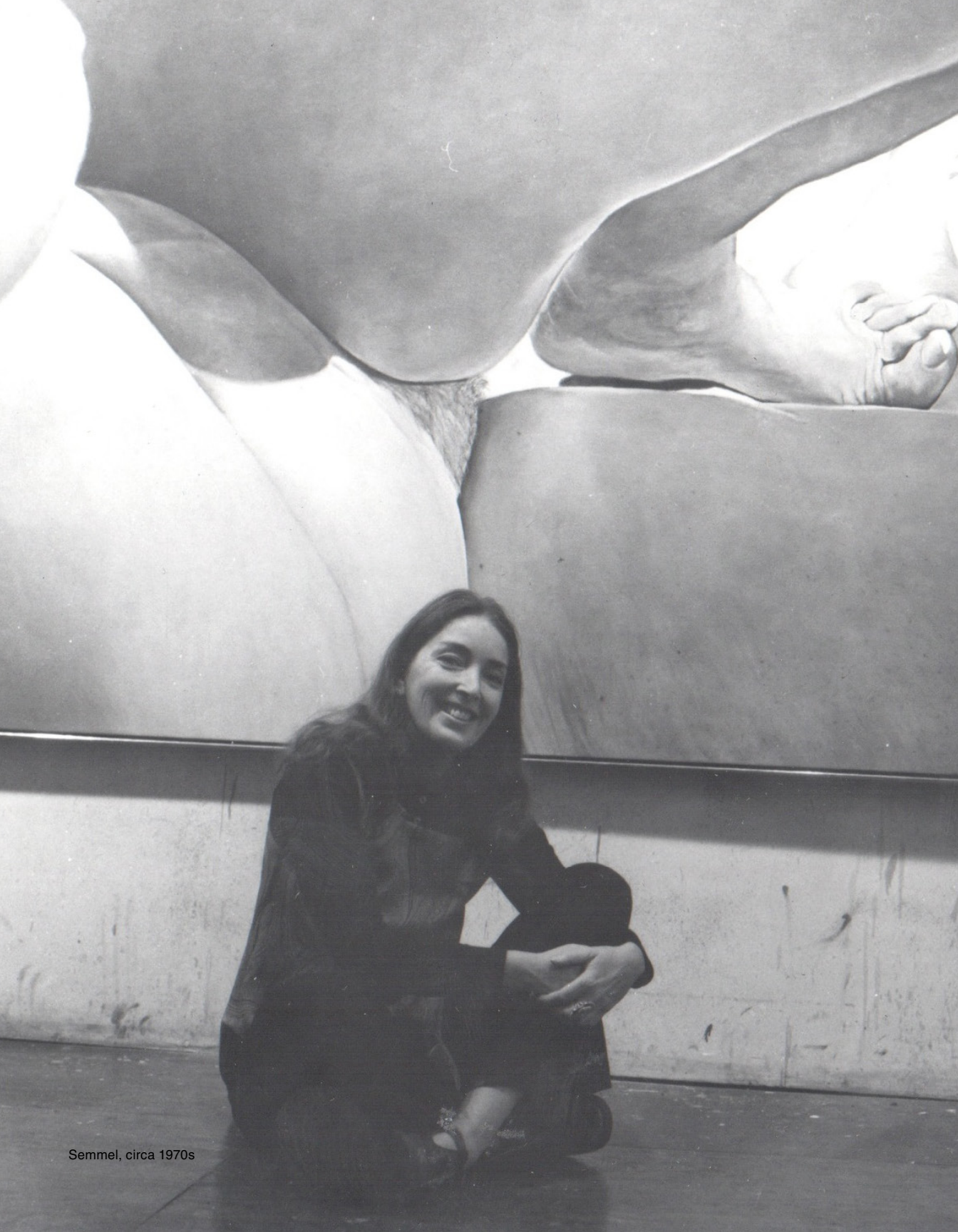
My own image has been a convenient instrument with which to project my concerns. However, I never thought of the work as self-portraiture and have always been surprised to see it received as such. The implications

and issues are distinctly different from those of basically neck-down body images where there is no probing of psychology or environment, elements that are typically hallmarks in portraiture. Instead, I have approached the flesh as primary, suspended in unidentifiable baths of color. The unclothed body, alone, unadorned, classless, is as the baby newly born, defenseless, except for its cry. The specificity of a non-idealized body that ages over the years raises the specter of mortality, that ever-present and timeless reality.

I never seemed to fit comfortably into any of the ism's and was never interested in doing so; my compulsion to work has existed outside of the strategic necessities of any trend or program. Over the years, I have moved back and forth from performative gesture to realistic representation, at times using both in the same painting. Consistency of style never seemed necessary for me, not even within a single piece. The seductive pull of high color and the physical painterly gesture has been addictive, and I would return to it for emotional gratification and emphasis. Simultaneously, the dimensionality of modeled form on the flat surface has always seemed magical and important. Much of my work reveals the search to find a way to use both.

The confidence of these late years has permitted me to take advantage of the sheer pleasure of painting. Saturated color plunging over a brush-marked canvas, residue traces of both brush and knife, the fluidity and thickening of paint expanding the frozen moment of the image, and of time generated by gesture. The surprises of invented color and precision of line, the illusion of space on a flat surface, and volume that jumps out from the picture plane into the room





Semmel, circa 1970s

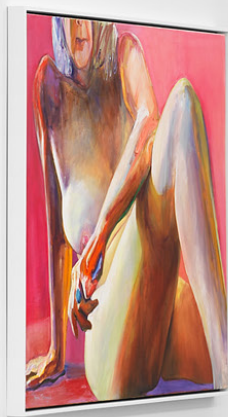
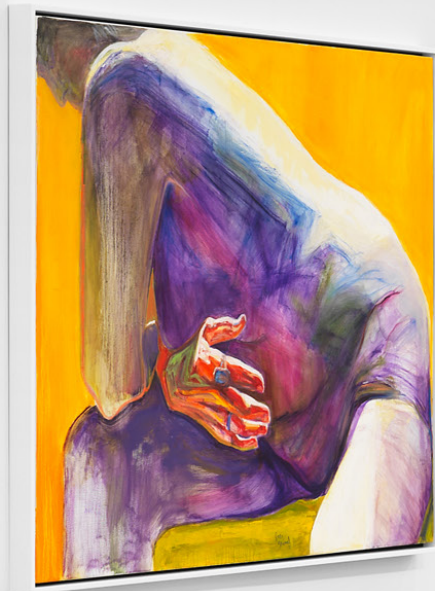
create a cacophony of elements that seem unreconcilable. The balancing act of holding it all together is the ongoing challenge.

Painting during the necessary isolation of the still virulent pandemic is not as strange for me as it might be for some—isolation, whether actual or psychological, seems to be a decisive factor in forming the creative impulse. I like to be alone when I work. I like time alone to think. I am not terribly social, although I enjoy people and outside stimulation from time to time. I don't think my work has changed because of this compulsory isolation. Still, the anxiety of our political moment has its effects and becomes endemic. The world keeps changing, not always enough and not always for the better, but continuously altered. Art must be able to resonate and disrupt despite those changes.

For 70 years, each time I finished a painting, I have always asked myself the same questions:

*Is what I do still relevant? Does it have the same urgency?  
How to continue?*





Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2021





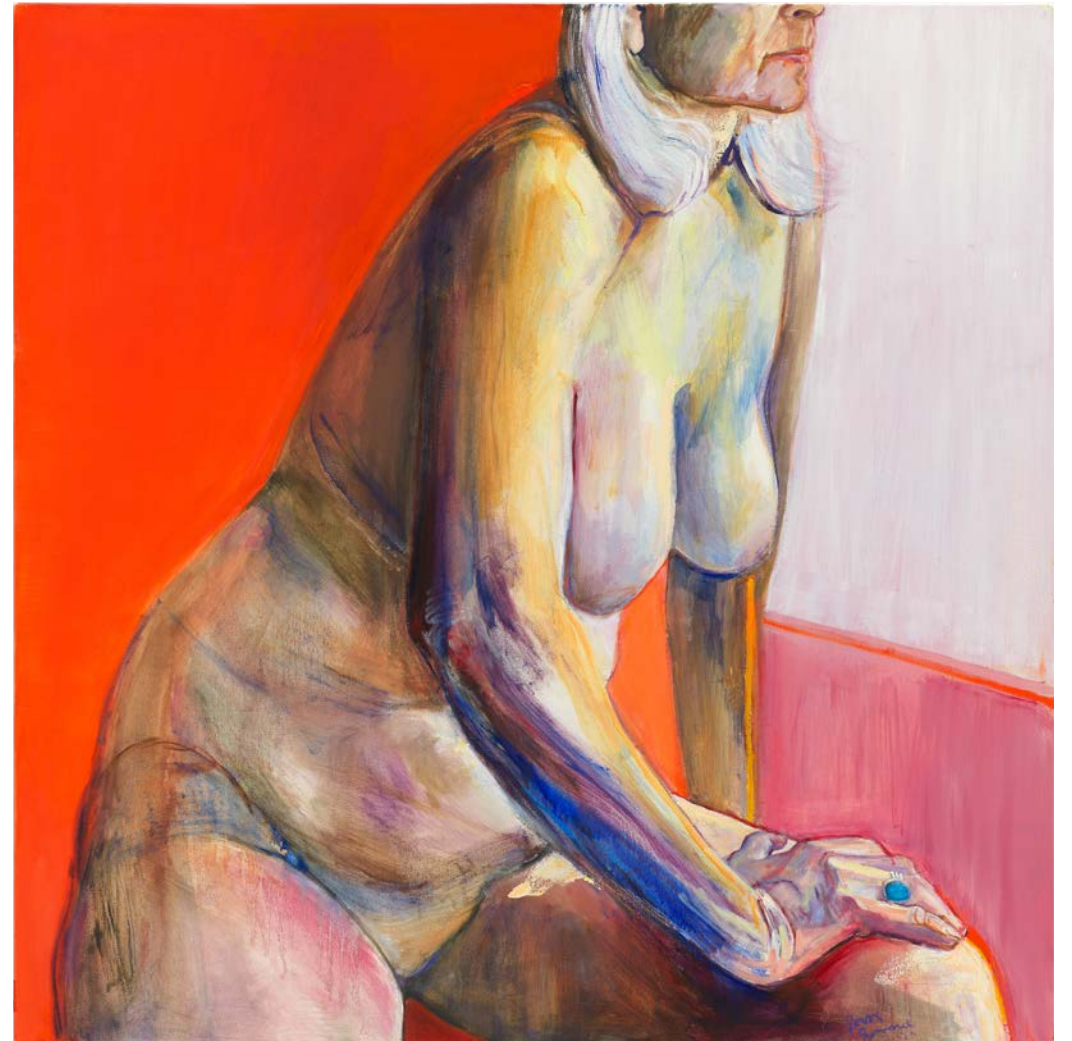
Couch Diptych, 2019

Peter Sumner '19



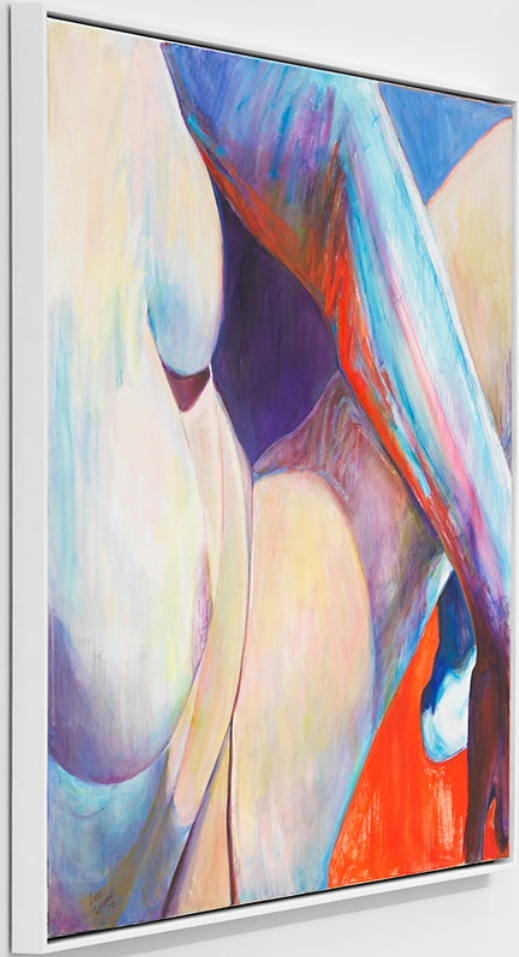






*Waiting, 2020*

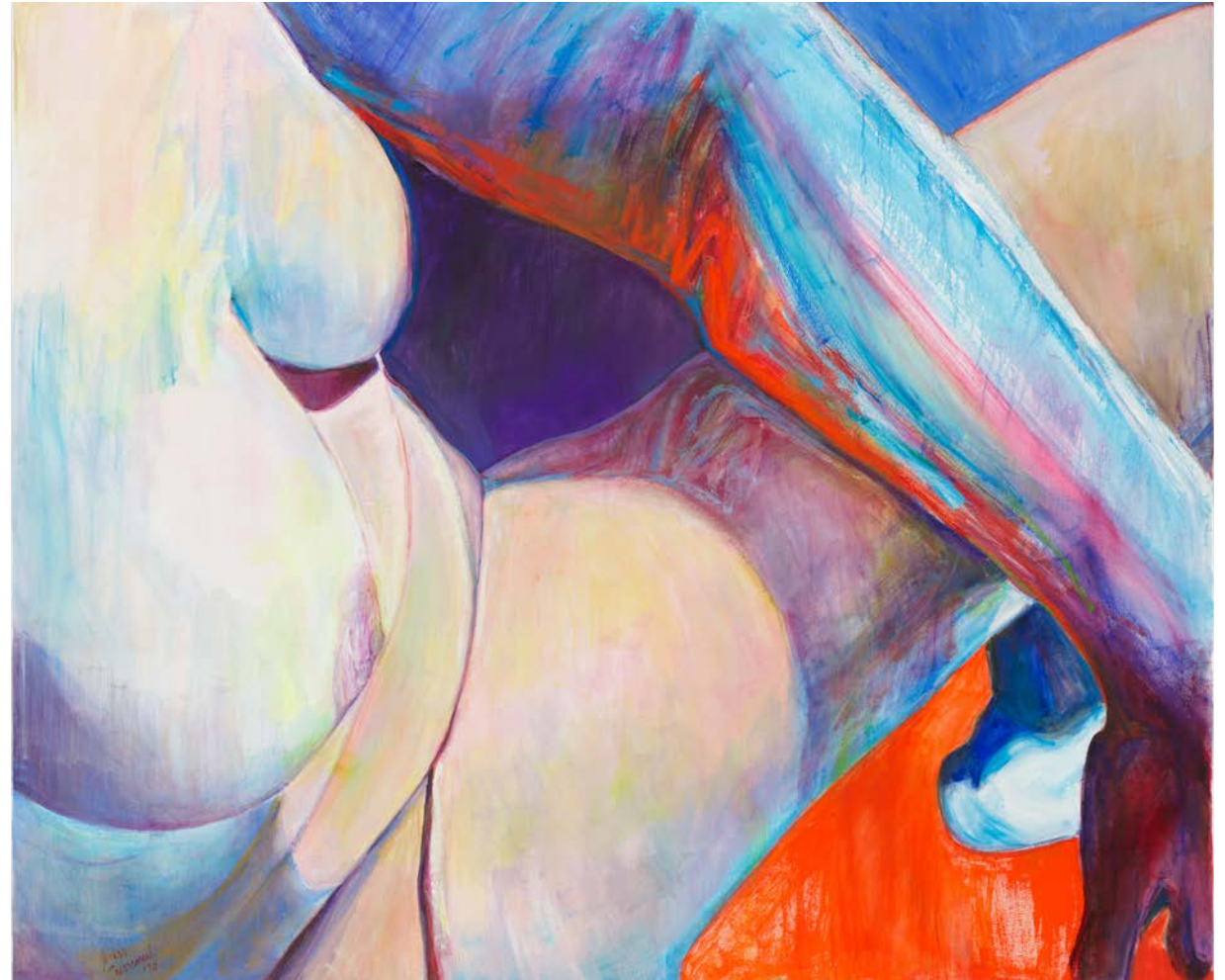




Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2021



*Red Floor, 2020*

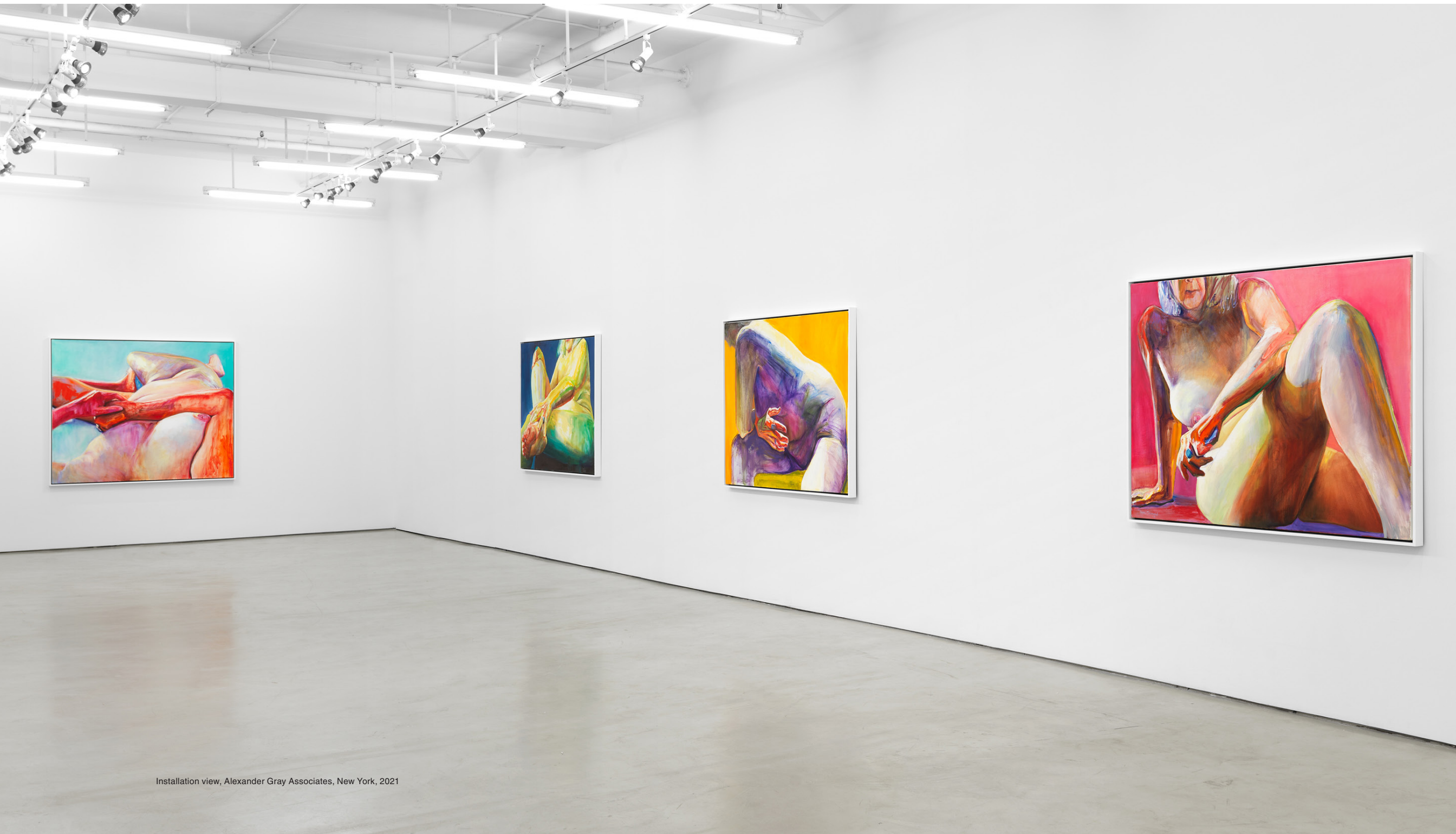






*Spaced Out*, 2019





Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2021





*Red Hand, 2019*





*Red Hand, 2019, detail*





*Pink Lean*, 2019

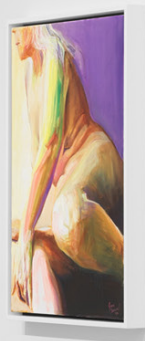




Touching Toes, 2019

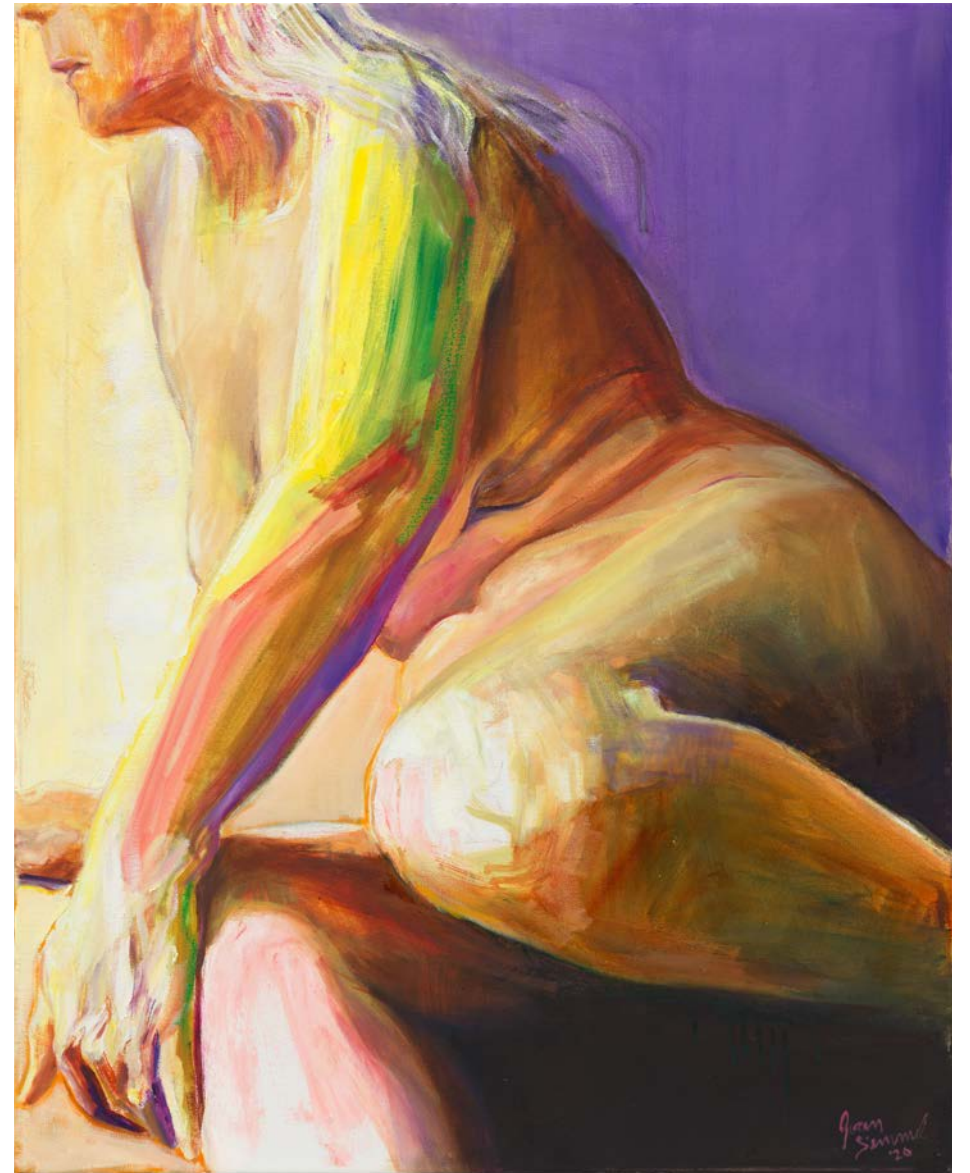


Joan Semmel  
*A Balancing Act*





*Side Light*, 2020





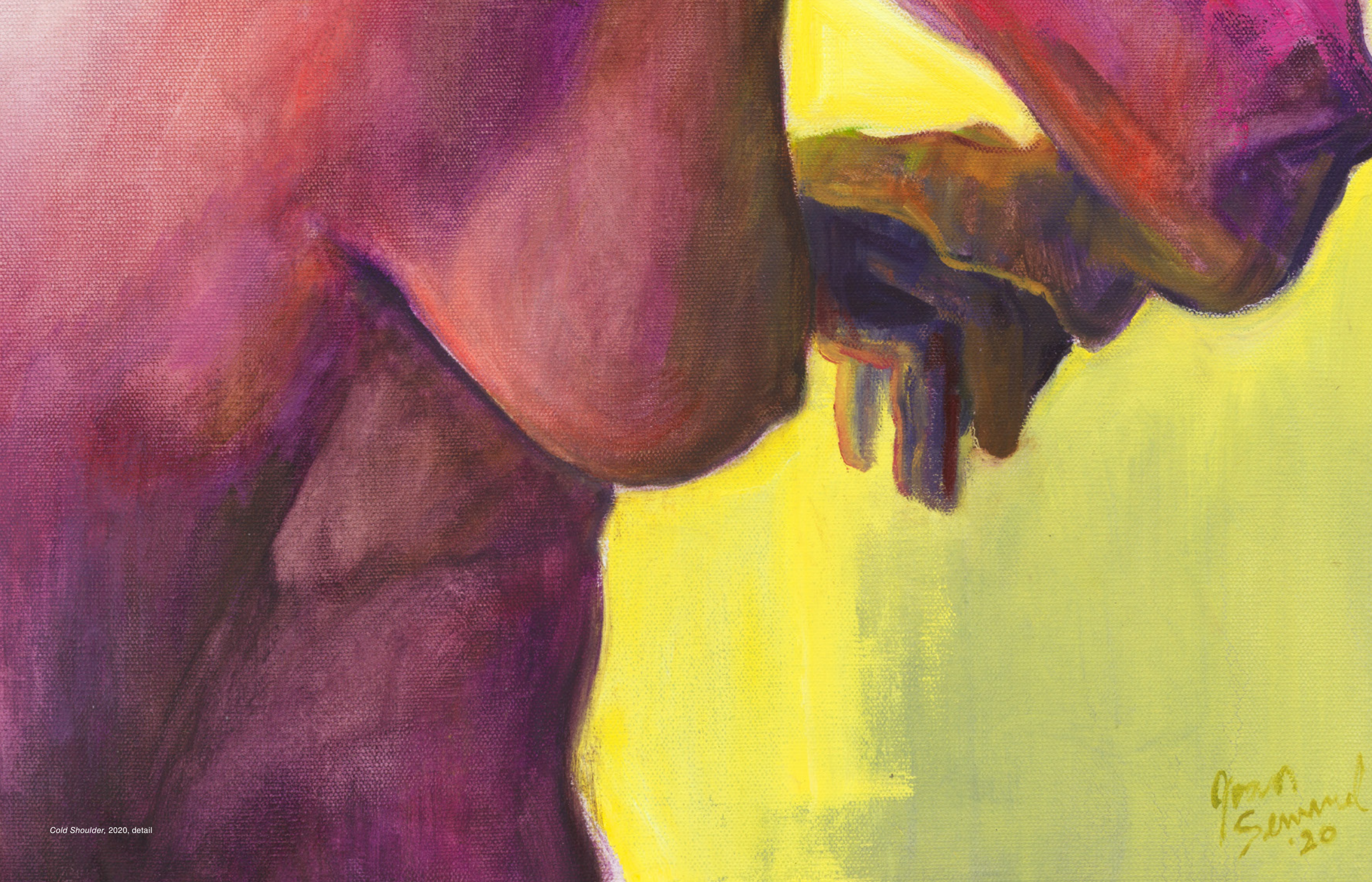


*Cold Shoulder*, 2020



*Double Breasted*, 2020

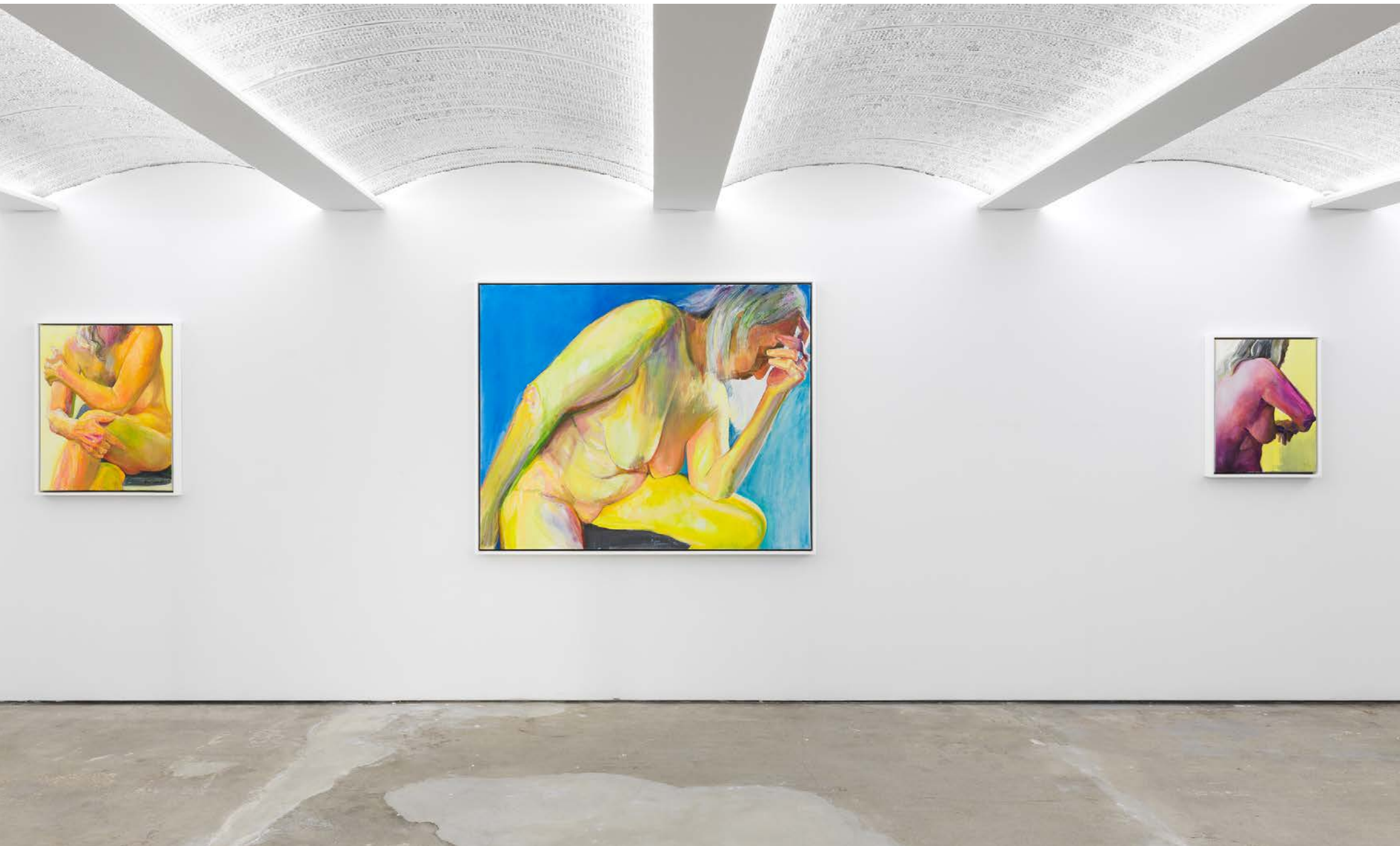




Cold Shoulder, 2020, detail

John  
Semmel  
20





Installation view, Alexander Gray  
Associates, Germantown, NY, 2021

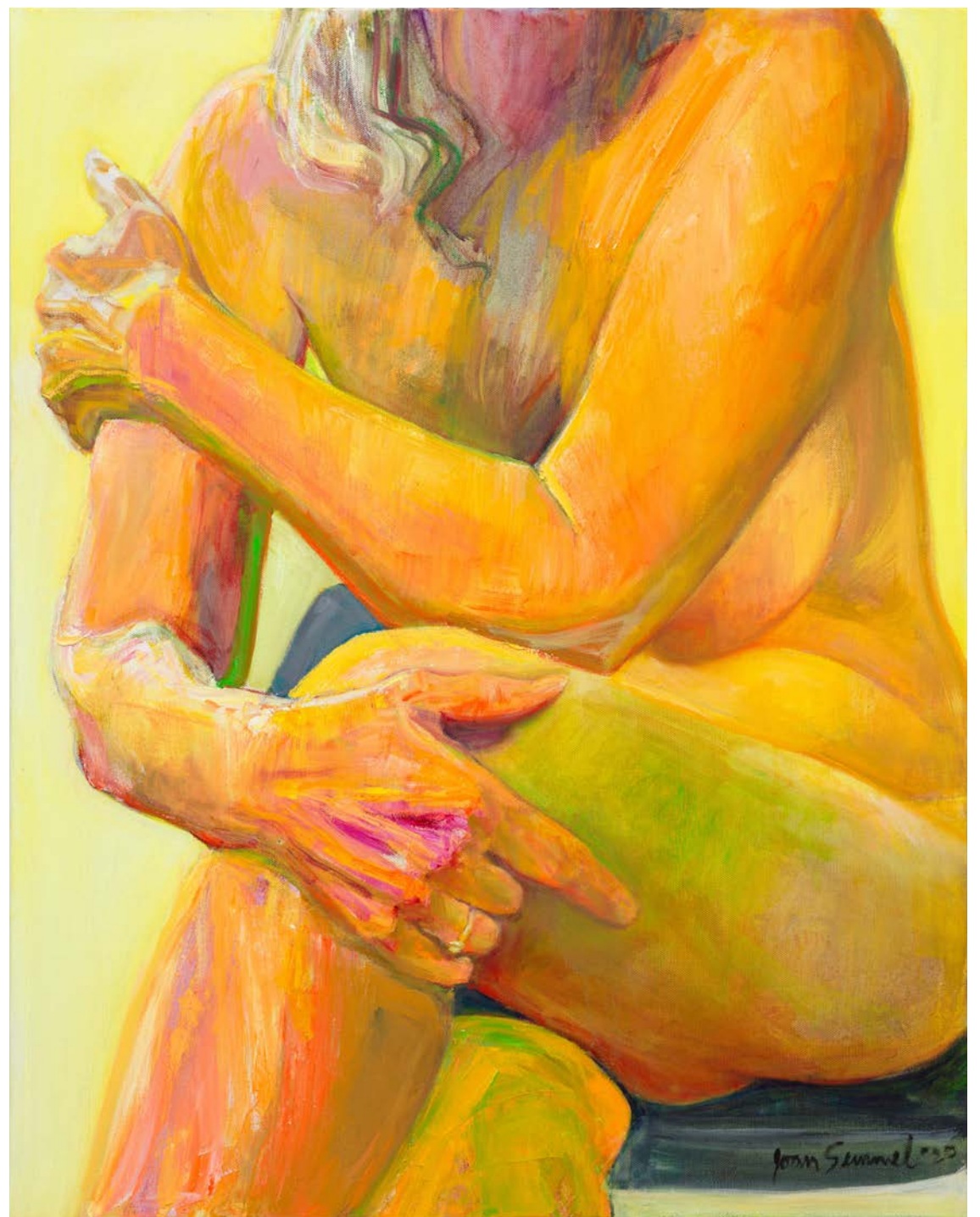




*White Hair, 2020*



*Holding, 2020*

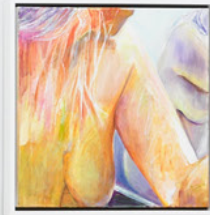




*Leg Up, 2020*

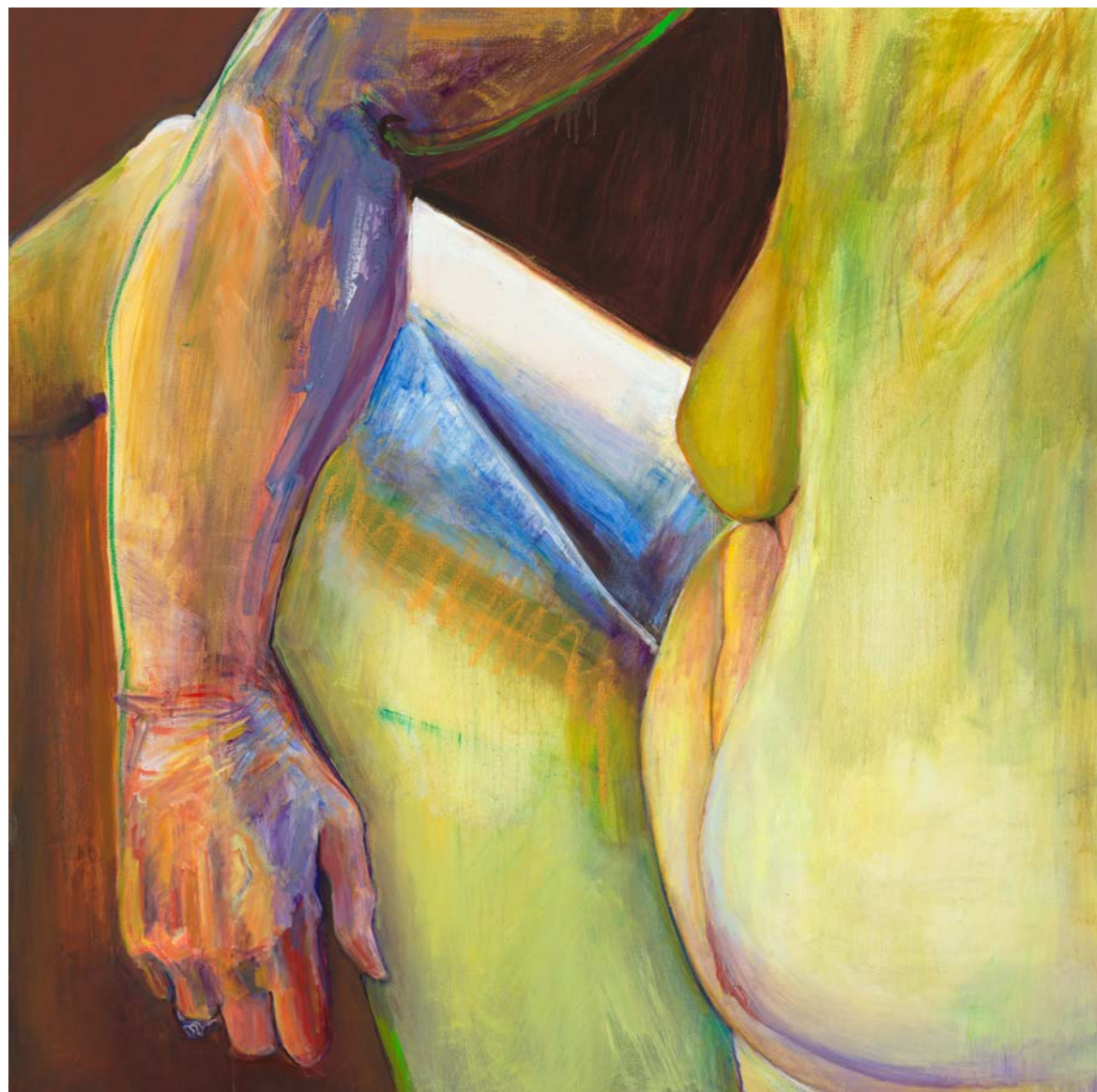






Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY, 2021



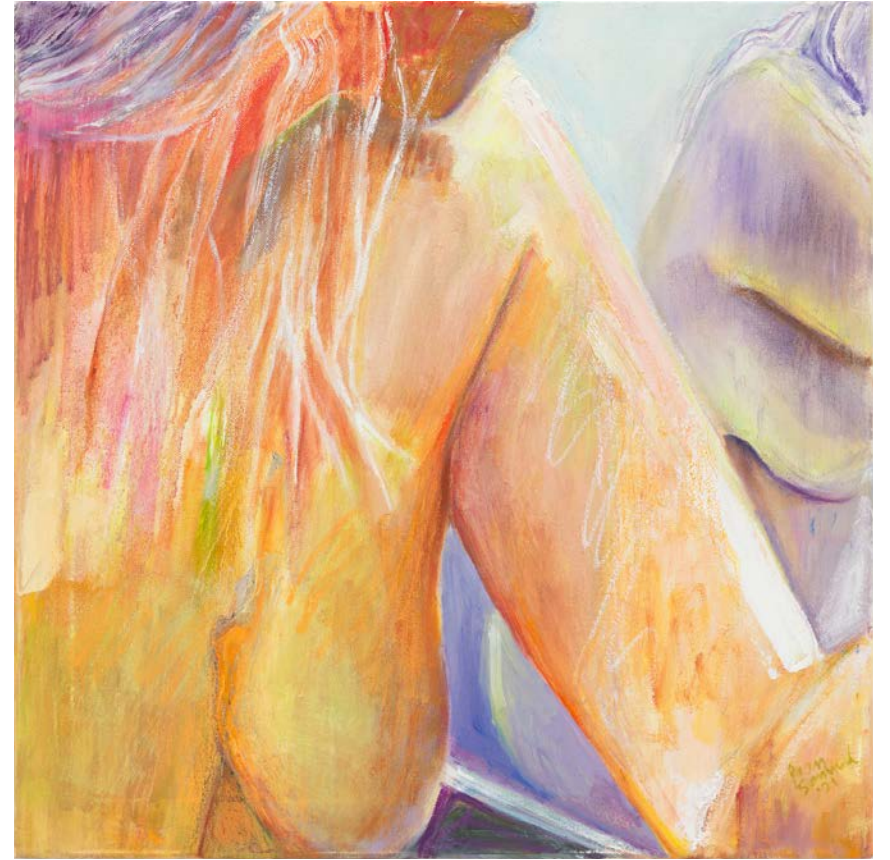


*Armed*, 2020





*Triangles*, 2021



*Lock Back*, 2021





Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY, 2021





Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates,  
Germantown, NY, 2021



Joan Semmel in her New York City studio, 2019





**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. She studied at the Cooper Union, Pratt Institute, and the Art Student's League of New York. In the 1960s, Semmel began her painting career in Spain and South America, where she experimented with abstraction. Returning to New York in the early 1970s, she turned toward figurative paintings, constructing compositions in response to pornography, popular culture, and concerns around 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 images of sexual encounters. In these works, Semmel employs expressive color and loose, gestural brush strokes to depict couples entwined in various intimate positions. Produced in a cultural landscape shaped by second-wave feminism, the two series celebrate female sexuality, heralding a feminist approach to painting and representation. Building on these paintings, in 1974, Semmel embraced a more realistic style, and began to use her own body as her subject, shifting the perspective from that of an observer to a more personal point of view. Using a camera to frame her body, she created images notable for their formal complexity. In the 1980s, Semmel built on this complexity, painting dynamic scenes that featured her camera and body doubled and refracted via mirrors.

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. Semmel applies saturated abstract colors in a variety of styles, merging figure and ground. Approaching her own form as a site of self-expression, in these works she challenges the objectification and fetishization of women's bodies by redefining the female nude through radical imagery that celebrates the aging process—refuting centuries of art historical idealization.

Joan Semmel's retrospective, *Skin in the Game*, opens at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA, in 2021.

Her paintings have been featured in exhibitions at the Tang Teaching Museum, Saratoga Springs, NY (2020); the Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken, Germany (2018); Jewish Museum, New York, NY (2018); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2016); Brooklyn Museum, NY (2016); Dallas Contemporary, TX (2016); Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (2014); National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC (2014); Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen, Germany (2013); Bronx Museum of the Arts, NY (2013); Jewish Museum, New York, NY (2010); Museum of Modern Art Arnhem, The Netherlands (2009); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH (2008); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (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, NY; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; The Museum of Modern Art, NY; 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 Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE; the Jewish Museum, New York, NY; 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.



**Exhibition Checklist, New York**

*Couch Diptych*, 2019  
Oil on canvas  
Diptych: 72 x 120 in overall  
(182.9 x 304.8 cm overall)  
72 x 60 in each  
(182.9 x 152.4 cm each)

*Waiting*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 48 in  
(121.9 x 121.9 cm)

*Red Floor*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
60 x 72 in  
(152.4 x 182.9 cm)

*Spaced Out*, 2019  
Oil on canvas  
60 x 72 in  
(152.4 x 182.9 cm)

*Red Hand*, 2019  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 60 in  
(121.92 x 152.4 cm)

*Pink Lean*, 2019  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 60 in  
(121.9 x 152.4 cm)

*Touching Toes*, 2019  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 60 in  
(121.9 x 152.4 cm)

*Side Light*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 24 in  
(76.2 x 61 cm)

*Double Breasted*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 30 in  
(61 x 76.2 cm)

**Exhibition Checklist, Germantown, NY**

*Cold Shoulder*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 18 in  
(61 x 45.7 cm)

*White Hair*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 60 in  
(121.9 x 152.4 cm)

*Holding*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 24 x 1 1/2 in  
(76.2 x 61 x 3.8 cm)

*Leg Up*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
26 x 34 x 1 1/2 in  
(66 x 86.4 x 3.8 cm)

*Armed*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 48 x 1 1/2 in  
(121.9 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)

*Triangles*, 2021  
Oil on canvas  
16 x 20 in  
(40.6 x 50.8 cm)

*Look Back*, 2021  
Oil on canvas  
20 x 20 in  
(50.8 x 50.8 cm)



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown, NY, 2021



Published by Alexander Gray Associates on the occasion of the exhibition

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Contributors: Joan Semmel

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Alexander Gray Associates:

Alexander Gray, David Cabrera, John Kunemund, Victoria Pratt, Nichole Caruso, Page Benkowski, Laila Pedro, Meghan Collins, Sam Suddaby, Sukhmani Kaur, Al Svoboda, Liz Lorenz

Alexander Gray Associates is a contemporary art gallery in New York City and Germantown NY. Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, the Gallery 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 an organization committed to anti-racist and feminist principles. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

Alexander Gray Associates  
510 West 26 Street  
New York, NY 10001  
United States  
Tel: +1 212 399 2636  
www.alexandergray.com

Alexander Gray Associates, Germantown  
224 Main Street, Garden Level  
Germantown, NY 12565  
United States  
Tel: +1 518 537 2100