



Beauty

# Beauty and imperfections: The pleasures of painting skin

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The first time I really understood the appeal of making a figurative painting, I was at Joan Semmel's exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates last winter. In each of the nine works, Semmel had painted her own nude body from photographs. Despite this significant constraint of subject, each picture was radically different from the next: By changing her color palette, perspective, and brushstrokes, Semmel turned the body into a site of infinite reinvention.



"Bella Sonte" by Amoako Bofo (2019)

One canvas in particular, titled "Turning" (2018), caught my eye. Semmel had painted the central figure turning away from the viewer, her right thigh propped on a stool and her blurred face mostly cropped out of the frame. As she torques at the waist, the subject grips the seat with her right hand. An electric green line zings from her pinky to her elbow, which resembles a cross section of a tree trunk or a small pond rippling with swirls of peach, yellow, and cobalt at the shaded edge. That green line -- so surprising and somehow just right -- gave me a jolt. What fun, I thought, to paint the skin of an arm.

Semmel is a consummate pro who's been painting bodies for over four decades. Yet she's hardly alone in her explorations of the body's outer layer. A new generation of figurative artists is indulging in the pleasures of painting skin, forgoing realism for a sense of playfulness and experimentation. With unique approaches to gesture and material, these artists evoke desire and the inner life as they paint the body's surface.

In Doron Langberg's paintings, skin and environment play off each other as his pictures come into focus. A raised orange leg first appears as a smudge in a pink horizon. Kneecaps capture the fluorescent hues of a



sunset. A landscape's deep blues and purples seep through and darken a man's torso. Every patch of skin is an opportunity for Langberg to apply radiant brushstrokes with a vibrating intensity: A shaky camera effect permeates his work.

"Grabby 2" by Katarina Riesing (2019)

Langberg noted that viewing Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's "Grande Odalisque" (1814) at the Louvre changed how he thought about rendering skin.

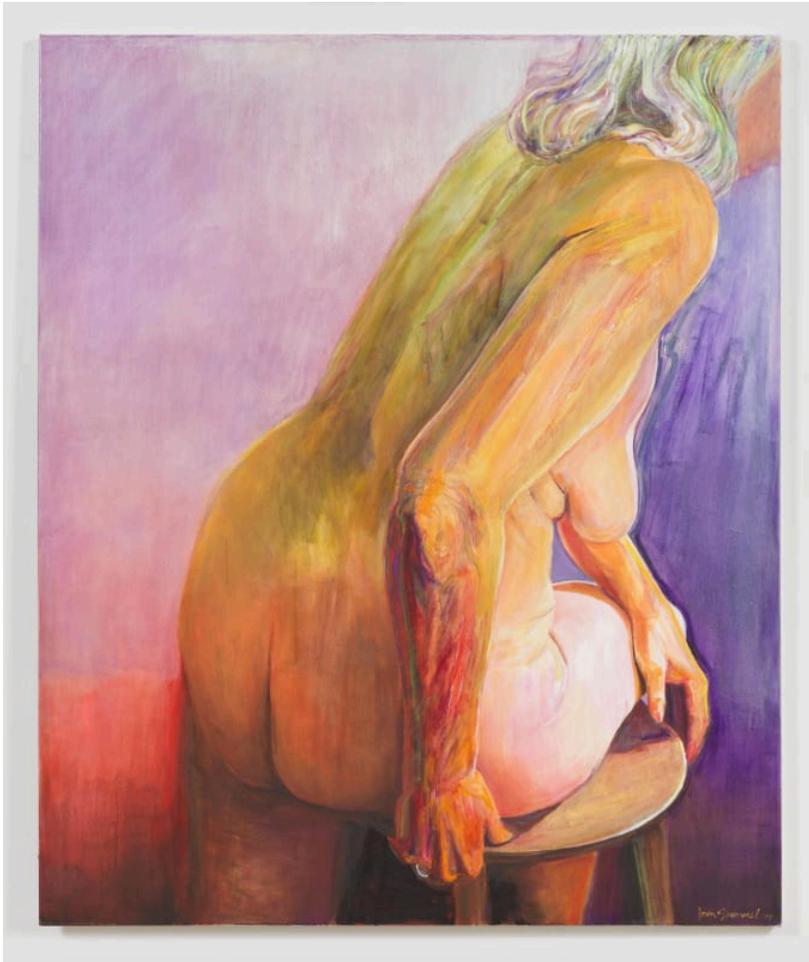
"It's about touching," he said. "The fur, feathers, satin, and, above all, the skin of the figure were so fetishized -- Ingres's desire for his subject came through." Langberg understood that sexuality and pleasure are embedded in artists' handling of paint and the brush.



"OK" by Katarina Riesing (2018). Riesing's work highlights seeming imperfections in skin -- acne, scratches and even scars.

For Langberg, a painter who aspires to both depict queerness and "make queer sexuality represent things other than itself," revelations about Ingres's work opened new creative pathways. Langerg's lurid canvases continue to record his own fervor, whether he's capturing the contours of a single face or the merging and separating skin of two bodies entwined in a sex act on Fire Island.

Skin itself is a tool in Amoako Boafo's work. The portraitist paints with his fingers, creating light and dark squiggles that approximate the shading of his subjects' faces. Such a texture immediately conjures touch itself, as the viewer thinks about how the artist's hands might have smoothed over a forehead or a jaw.



"Turning" by Joan Semmel (2018)

Boafo has explored many methods for depicting skin tone and movement for his Black subjects (surprising palettes can complicate our ideas of "skin color" itself). He realized that his process is "best embellished" when he paints with his fingers, Boafo said.

"The lack of control, of motion, brings a certain contour that is both unrestrained and articulate in gesture," he added.

While Langberg's subjects glisten with youthful, carnal energy and Boafo's portraits pulse with intensity, Katarina Riesing's enlarged cross sections of skin evoke discomfort. On surfaces of silk and embroidery -- reminiscent of the intimate garments women use to cover their bodies -- Riesing renders acne, scratches, and scars on butts, thighs, and chests. Spots of dye become blemishes, conflating epidermal imperfections with the pattern and texture that give painting its vibrancy. How boring, Riesing's work suggests, to have perfect skin.



"Kyle, Robert, and James" by Doron Langberg (2019)

"When I apply pigment, the dyes bleed and spill into the surface -- it's simultaneously gorgeous and gross, inherently visceral," Riesing said. While she views skin as its own kind of canvas, with its "tattoos, moles, rashes, formal abstractions that occur within the frame of the figure," Semmel offered the opposite analogy.

"The canvas is the skin of the painting," she said. "Color floods that skin and becomes flesh."

Though paint can "lose itself in the sensuousness of the subject," she continued, "it always returns to the integrity of its own nature."

In other words, a viewer first encountering any figurative painting might first see the skin of the subject. Yet close, repeated glimpses provide insight into how the painting was made, stroke by stroke, by a single artist in the studio. Such careful looking ultimately exposes what might be considered the opposite of a fixed outer layer: a dynamic, creative consciousness at work.

*Top image caption: "Knee Up" by Joan Semmel (2017)*