

Painter Joan Semmel

“Calling yourself a feminist was a radical act”

By: Saskia Trebing



Joan Semmel "Turning", 2018

## **The painter Joan Semmel once shocked the art world with her naked self-portraits. At 91, she wants to protect the aging female body from disappearing. A virtual studio visit in New York**

The New York district of SoHo was once a run-down artists' paradise, but now the chic shopping malls dominate. But there are also places that have preserved a bygone New York like time capsules. The studio of the painter Joan Semmel, for example, who has lived and worked in the rooms since the 1970s. "I just feel comfortable here," says the now 91-year-old. "I was born in the Bronx and always dreamed of living in Manhattan. There's still a great community here. It's the most interesting place I can imagine."

As a painter, Semmel initially dedicated herself to Abstract Expressionism, but then repeatedly turned to figuration. Today she is considered a feminist pioneer of post-war modernity. She repeatedly painted her naked body from her own perspective from above and asked questions about femininity, eroticism and a self-determined gaze. She continues this series of self-examinations and thus also shows the aging female body, which often remains invisible in our youth-obsessed visual world. On April 25, Joan Semmel opens an exhibition of works spanning five decades at the Brussels gallery Xavier Hufkens . We previously visited you via Zoom.

### **Joan Semmel, this week you are opening your first exhibition at the Xavier Hufkens Gallery in Brussels. How fantastic to be able to do things for the first time at 91!**

Yes, I'm really looking forward to the trip, I've never been to Brussels before. It's always important to have new experiences, no matter how old you are. It enlarges your own life and changes your perspective. I love New York, but I have also lived in Spain and traveled a lot. That was important and also changed my perspective on my own country.

### **Does it happen to you in the studio that something seems completely new to you?**

Yes, constantly. That's the interesting thing about being an artist. You can live as long as I do and still it's new every time you come into the studio. Making art is an experience where something magical happens every time you let it. This also keeps people curious about the work.

### **You once said that as a young woman you consciously decided to become an artist. Where did you get the confidence that you could do that? There weren't nearly as many female role models back then as there are today.**

I think it came in different stages. I had a relationship with art as a child, but when I was 24 I was in the hospital for a while and couldn't do much. It was then that I decided that I wanted to live a life as an artist, that that would be my life. My place wasn't just at home with the family, I clearly felt that. It takes the dedication and drive to be an artist and I had that. My work makes me happy and that's what keeps me going. Art also connects you with people who feel the same urge, which is very valuable.

### **The exhibition in Brussels is intended to be a kind of retrospective. Do you like looking back?**

Actually, that's not my interest at all. I always worked in series and went from one to the next without looking back. But two years ago there was a retrospective in Philadelphia that featured examples of all of my creative phases. When I saw them all side by side I was pretty impressed with myself (laughs). It was great to see that this work has meaning not only for me, but also for other people.

**The pictures of your own naked body in particular look very contemporary. The idea that the female body is a cultural battlefield is not at all outdated. Is that satisfying for you or is it frustrating because people are still talking about the same things?**

You have to keep reminding yourself that a lot has changed. The world was completely different when I was young. That's why it's really special for me that young people still feel addressed by my work today. Sometimes it almost surprises me that we still talk about how we view women's bodies. But it's important. Maybe we always take two steps forward and one step back.

**Shortly before her death, her fellow artist Carolee Schneemann said that she couldn't believe that she had to take her "pussyhat" out of the closet again after Donald Trump was first elected . She thought that these kinds of men were dead. And now feminists in the USA are fighting for abortion rights again ...**

We still have to be present and fight the same battle, Carolee was very aware of that. These people who want to dominate women have always been there, even when we thought we had put that behind us. When Trump was in power, these backward forces were given permission to emerge. So we see where we need to go from here.

**When you first showed your nude pictures in the 1970s, they were met with a lot of resistance...**

They were a shock to many viewers!

**... that has certainly changed.**

I don't think they're shocking anymore. There is sometimes some rejection, even from women, but acceptance prevails. Calling yourself a feminist back then was a radical act. It isn't anymore. Today it is a kind of honor to be called that and to stand up for feminist values. When I started it was more of a devaluation. I never aimed for shock in my work. But I wanted my works to have bite, is how I would put it. They should not only be beautiful, but also have something that is a little upsetting or disturbing.

**Perhaps these days it is still shocking in some ways to see an aging female body. Through social media, we mostly see perfectly filtered photos and female stars - with a few exceptions - only remain relevant if they appear to have stopped aging .**

Our visual culture still uses the female body primarily to seduce and sell. The old body does not fit these requirements , so it remains invisible. There are artists like Käthe Kollwitz who have used the old body to say something about exploitation. But I don't think it has been sufficiently seen as a means of empowerment - as is the case with young, classically beautiful bodies. And when it comes to men's bodies, too, the older body is seen as powerful. However, women disappear with age and are not appreciated. For me, the topic also developed because I saw how I was getting older and my body was the subject of my work. We're all trying to stay young and I wanted to set an example that aging isn't all negative. It's ok!

**Does your background in abstract painting help you? According to the motto: A body is just a collection of shapes and colors?**

I see every body, whether young or old, as a form and I have the power to shape it as an image. In the Renaissance, all artists tried to draw the viewer into the picture space. However, for me as a painter, the canvas has always been something flat and it is my job to make this surface dynamic and interesting. That's what the figure that moves in this area is there for.

**Has the physical act of painting changed with age?**

Not the act itself. I can't paint for that long at a time anymore, but otherwise it feels familiar. It was more important to me to never get stuck in one style. I always wanted to do both: explore the possibilities of shapes on the canvas, but still have a connection to the world. That's why I kept going from figuration to abstraction and back and it always feels different.

**Female artists of your generation, for example Judy Chicago, are getting a lot of recognition right now. You also had a big retrospective. Are you happy about it or are you asking yourself: Why now?**

Yes, I think that sometimes: What took so long? I'm happy with the attention that encompasses all works and doesn't just target one type of trend. Also a little amused. But I also think that all these pictures could have been out there a long time ago.

**What do you think: Why did it take so long?**

I believe that sometimes artists sense something long before it becomes clear to the broader public. But I can't really answer the question. That's why I'm asking them.

**Today many people, especially female and queer people, work in art with images of their own bodies. Breasts and vulvas are everywhere too. How do you see that?**

It's definitely interesting, but also confusing. My impulse to work with my body also came from coming back to the United States from Spain, right in the middle of what was called the "sexual revolution." But what I saw were naked women at kiosks and in advertising. That wasn't liberation, that was commercialization. For me, art was a means of dealing with the body outside of these contexts. And maybe it still is that way. Especially when you depict breasts and buttocks and genitals, it can be a kind of anti-image, but you still move within the well-known tropes of seduction. That's the fine line you walk on. But I believe that women have to claim the sovereignty of interpretation over themselves; that is the only way to change. I never wanted to be didactic or pedantic in my work. That's why I'm against any form of self-censorship. You should show what you think is important.

**They also taught a lot. What is the most important thing you have given to young artists?**

The most important thing is to be yourself and be honest with yourself. When you are open about who and what you are, the work will be powerful. If you only allow yourself to be influenced by trends, you are just a follower.

**But that is hard work.**

Yeah, and every time you go into the studio you work on it. You find and define yourself. But this is not a narcissistic process, you have to stay connected to the world. I have always worked from myself, but was part of a political movement.

**...which is now called "Second Wave Feminism". Many of your fellow campaigners have already died or are now in their 80s and 90s. What do you think remains of this generation of artists?**

The meaning will continue to change and grow. Future generations will look at it differently, otherwise the meaning would solidify. Maybe at some point we won't need feminism anymore! But we and our time needed it. That is central for me. The necessity that we existed will remain.