

Bronx-born artist Joan Semmel heads to the Bronx for her first solo museum show; tackles aging and beauty

"A Lucid Eye" on exhibit at Bronx Museum of the Arts through June

By Tanyanika Samuels / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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"Light on Glass" by Joan Semmel

In a society obsessed with youth, where women in magazines are air-brushed to perfection, artist Joan Semmel revels in reality.

The 80-year-old Bronx-born painter will open her first solo museum show, "Joan Semmel - A Lucid Eye," at the Bronx Museum of the Arts on Thursday.

Semmel is known for her feminist erotic tableaux and nude self-portraits. The 27 works on display are recent self-depictions painted between 2002 and 2012 that capture the artist aging through her 70s.

"One starts thinking about aging when one hits 60 and you're no longer dealing in the seductive mode so to speak," she said. "You start thinking about your mortality and how your body and face changes. I wanted it to be treated in a way that was respectful and not sentimentalized."

“Nowadays, people of my age are still producing creative work and doing all kinds of things,” she continued. “I wanted to put out images of an older person that showed that person in full command and functioning in a way that was both creative and intelligent, and not simply pitiful and vulnerable.”

These latest self-portraits came about quite organically. As Semmel sought to branch out from her iconic nudes by taking clothed pictures of herself in the mirror, she discovered a new dimension to her work.

“The camera and mirror became part of the picture. It is not only me looking at myself in the mirror but the camera is pointed at the viewer,” Semmel said. “So then you start thinking about who is looking at who. And I like that whole conundrum.”

The exhibit, which includes a series of paintings showing Semmel taking a picture of herself, is designed to reveal this aspect of the process.

“For the first time, it will become clear to the viewer the role of photography in her work,” said Sergio Bessa, of the Bronx Museum of the Arts. “A lot of people never realized her work was photography-based. So it is a revelation of sorts.”

Semmel grew up just blocks away from the current museum site. She fondly recalls long walks down the Grand Concourse with her mother pushing her younger brother in a stroller.

“To suddenly be back in that childhood environment is great fun for me,” she laughed. “I’m so happy to be back in the Bronx.”

Semmel lived in Spain in the 1960s and first began showing her paintings there.

She returned to New York in the early 1970s suddenly confronted with a sexual revolution but troubled by mainstream ideas of femininity that all stemmed from a male point of view.

Semmel abandoned abstracts and turned to figurative paintings, emphasizing erotic themes but with from a distinctive female perspective.

For years, Semmel chose to exclude faces, choosing instead to focus on the body.

But in more recent years, as she experimented with her craft, Semmel has found a new way to express her point of view.

“I am interested in how women, especially, try to make themselves look like the models, and that if they don’t look like that, they feel like they’re not good enough,” she said. “That seriously undermines

the way women feel about themselves. I am trying to put into the culture, images of myself as a real person to show that people can accept themselves the way they are.”

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Joan Semmel untitled self-portrait