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Beer with a Painter: Joan Semmel

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Joan Semmel, "Close-Up" (2001), oil on canvas, 72 x 62 inches (image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

On a July afternoon, Joan Semmel and I met at her home in the Springs, on the East End of Long Island. She asks what I'd like to drink, and I tell her I'll have what she's having. "Well. Beer is what I like to drink in the middle of the day," she says as she opens two Coronas, and starts to talk, without reservation or hesitation. Semmel is direct and cool; she knows what she's about. Nothing — not her conversational manner, the décor of her home and studio, or the paintings — is over-adorned or romanticized. It's as if all that energy is channeled into the paint itself, where she focuses on the nature of touch: the touch of skin and the touch of color.

Semmel is an icon of feminist art; young people often remember seeing her work in introductory art history classes. But in recent years her pioneering work has been "rediscovered" in an art world that historically dismissed much figurative, realist painting. In the 1970s she made her *Erotic Series* of paintings; her *Locker Room* and *Mannequin* series followed.

Semmel's constant subject has been the "self-nude" — depicting her own body as she has aged, with a direct gaze that seems to lack vanity or the impulse to beautify. In her "Overlay" paintings, she doubled a realist image of the nude with gestural brush drawings of the same figure. The color and point-of-view of Semmel's painting is compelling and odd and seductive. Figures are rendered in a realist hand but painted in sometimes lurid, sometimes ghostly oranges, gray-blues, greens, and yellows. Bodies become dunescapes as the viewer is positioned in the artist's perspective, looking down at herself.



Joan Semmel (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Born in 1932 in New York City, Joan Semmel studied at the Cooper Union and received a BFA and an MFA from Pratt Institute. Her work was shown by Mitchell Alguo Gallery in

the 1990s and 2000s. She was the subject of museum exhibitions at The Bronx Museum, New York (2013); the Wexner Center for Contemporary Art, Columbus, Ohio (2008); and The Jersey City Museum, Jersey City, NJ (2000), among others. Her work was also included in exhibitions such as *Robert Gober: The Heart is Not a Metaphor* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2015); *Face Value: Portraiture in the Age of Abstraction* at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC (2015); *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2007); and *Me, Myself, Naked* at the Paula Modersohn Becker Museum, Bremen, Germany (2004). She is Professor Emeritus of Painting at Rutgers University. Her work is represented by Alexander Gray Associates, New York, where she will show new work in 2019.



Joan Semmel, "Flip-Flop Diptych" (1971), oil on canvas, 2 panels, each 68h x 68w inches, overall: 68h x 136w inches (image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Jennifer Samet: *Do you have any memories of looking at art or artmaking as a child?*

Joan Semmel: My mother used to kid around and say they mixed up the babies at the hospital, that I couldn't possibly belong to them. There was no background in art there, except that it was a Jewish immigrant family striving for success and for education. In junior high school, I was told that I was talented. My mother said, "Oh, that's nice." So I went to Music and Art High School, and that was where I became an artist, so to speak, where I was exposed to a whole other world that I would never have had any contact with. And after that, I went to Cooper Union.

I got married and that was the end of everything for a while. I had my first child. Then I got sick with tuberculosis. I had surgery and I was in the hospital for six months, and there was a year of recovery. It was traumatic in every way, for my daughter and my family. But in the end, it's what forced certain recognitions in me. There was a separation

from family pressures, which allowed me to think about who I was and what I wanted for myself.

I saw the demands that were placed on me as a mother, and how that limited my sense of myself. When I was unable to perform those responsibilities, everybody else's life went on, but mine stopped. Whereas, if that had happened to my husband, my life would have stopped also. I understood those differences, but I did not politicize them at the time. I just acted on it personally.



Joan Semmel, "Hold" (1972), oil on canvas, 72 x 108 inches (image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

J. Samet: *It's amazing that it took a serious illness to get you back to making art. What was the next period of time like?*

J. Semmel: I went back to school to get my degree. Cooper Union, at that time, only gave you a certificate, so I got my BFA at Pratt. My husband got a job in Spain and he went there ahead of me. I finished up my degree, packed up my daughter and myself, closed the house, and went to Spain. I planned to be there one year, and I stayed for eight.

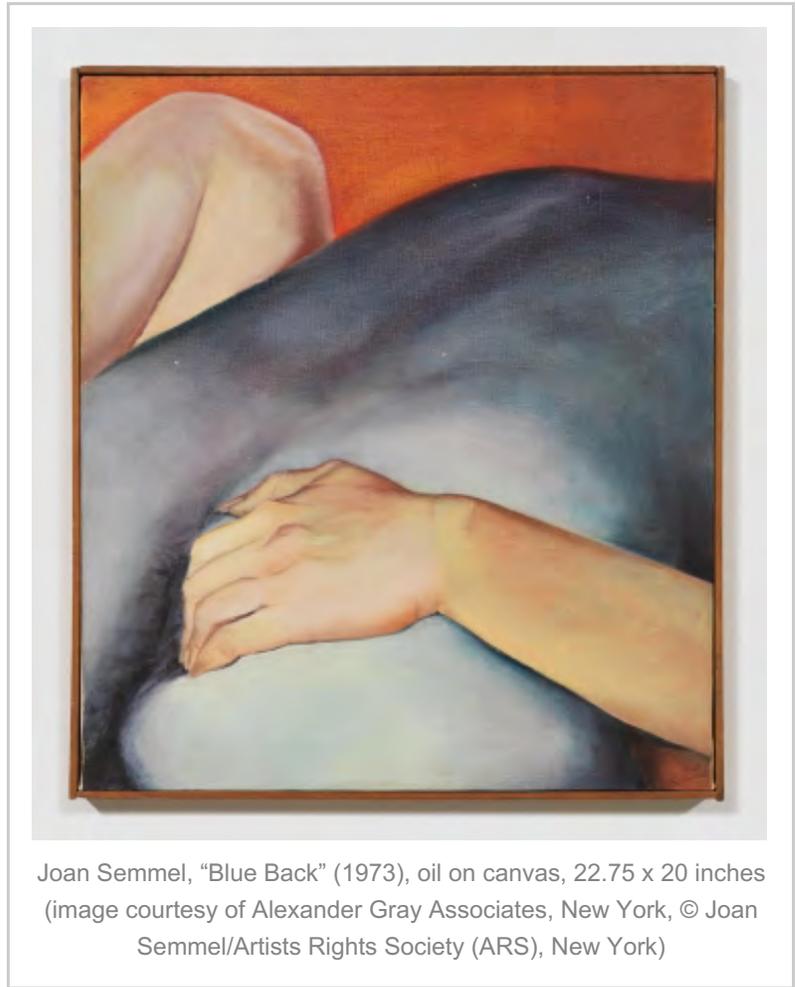
My husband and I split after our son was born. My husband went to South America, and I stayed in Spain for several years on my own. He supported me during that time, and I had enough to live in a high style there with very minimal money. I had help, so I was able to work.

I was working as an Abstract Expressionist painter. I was shown in the top gallery in the country, and met people on very high levels — diplomats, actors, all kinds of people — which was a life-changing experience. I had a great place in Madrid. As a foreigner, a woman alone in Madrid was not subject to the same kinds of judgments and expectations that Spanish nationals were. So it was an interesting time.

However, I couldn't get a divorce in Spain. There were a lot of things a woman couldn't get in Spain. You couldn't get a lease for an apartment without either your husband or your father signing for it. It felt

like a throwback to another period, and it gave me a very clear picture of how the social construct really limited what you could do as a woman.

Once I was divorced, I realized that what I had thought of as my own personal neuroses, in terms of not being able to function within the categories I was given, was structurally built into society. I also realized that I wanted to work towards changing it as best I could. When I got back to New York I was primed for the women's movement. I jumped right in.





Joan Semmel, "For Foot Fetishists" (1977), oil on canvas, 36 x 50 inches (image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

J. Samet: *How did this affect your work?*

J. Semmel: I had a lot of success in Spain, but the way I worked was out of sync with what was happening in New York. I could not relate to Color Field and spray painting. My paintings evolved over a long period of time, and they had heavy impasto.

My political involvement was primary. I started thinking about how could I make work that would carry political ideas. But it was a period when painting was despised in terms of feminist theory. You were not supposed to depict the nude. That was "colonized territory." Painting in itself was male dominated. If you were a feminist, you were supposed to make collaborative work, and work derived from women's labor. I never bought into that. I loved to paint, and I wasn't about to give it up.

There was so much feminist activity at that time. There were hundreds of us at meetings and panel discussions, and all kinds of factions within the discussion of what constituted feminist art. It was very interesting and I didn't worry about it terribly. I just did what I did. There were groups that were doing sexual work. At the time, I started putting together a book about sexual imagery in women's art, because I was seeing it all around, and I was interested in its significance. So, to suddenly find that doing sexual art made me not politically correct seemed absurd. I ignored it. But I paid a price, in terms of being left out

of certain shows.



Joan Semmel, "Cross-Over" (1979), oil on canvas, 64 x 90 inches (image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

J. Samet: *Yes, it seems as if a lot of feminist painters are being appreciated only now, in retrospect. What were you thinking about in terms of taking on this tradition and medium?*

J. Semmel: I wanted to find a way to use the nude that was not academic, and not about the model on a pedestal. How could I make work that was sexual from a woman's point of view, that would not turn a woman off, as so much of pornography did? I wanted it to be erotic stimuli for a woman, not just for a man.

The first group of sexual work was expressionistic with high gesture and high color. Then, I realized I needed more information and couldn't work only out of my head. There was a man I was steered to; a friend told me he was a bit of an exhibitionist. It was an experimental time about sex, and it was before AIDS, so it was a very different time.

This guy liked to have sex with people watching. He would bring a woman he was involved with, or not — whoever was willing. They would perform and I would draw from it. A few other people were working alongside me. One was a filmmaker, another was a painter. We would draw from them while they were doing what they did.

I was interested in doing that because it wouldn't be framed by a pornographic photographer. I would be doing the framing. I had reams of quick magic marker drawings that were done as action drawings. Then I felt like I needed better information, so I started taking photographs. The work changed and became more realist.

After I did two sets of paintings, I realized I didn't want to make a career of it. I joked that I wasn't making "position papers." I started taking photographs of myself. I did a couple of paintings with a male partner, where I took my picture first, and then his picture, and then collaged the pieces together to make the composition. Then I let go of the male figure completely and just started painting the female figure.



Joan Semmel, "Side Pull" (1979), oil on canvas, 78 x 108 inches (image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

J. Samet: *You made a series of paintings of women's locker rooms. What motivated this work?*

J. Semmel: I was interested in the narcissism that permeates the culture. When you walk into a gym or locker room, people are fixated on their own image and they barely talk or acknowledge one another. They are involved with themselves and the mirror. I



Joan Semmel, "Four Rings" (2003), oil on canvas, 54 x 44 inches (image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

went to a gym in SoHo where there were a lot of artists and dancers, so they knew me and I knew them, and I asked permission to take photographs. I took photographs in the mirror so the people weren't posing. My reflection was in the photographs also, which led to a series of paintings of myself naked with the camera.

There were all kinds of people in the gym. So the paintings started incorporating older women, naked. It raised issues of how that is dealt with in our culture. My painting ideas are not preconceived and they are not political strategies. They come out of my experience. One thing leads into another organically, and it feels right for me, because it's part of who I am. I know the word is very unfashionable, but it adds authenticity.

J. Samet: *Some of your paintings combine loose, gestural depictions of the figure with more realistic ones. What interested you about these juxtapositions?*

J. Semmel: I don't see why I can't do it all. I like to play around with things that are realist and not realist; things that are very painterly and high gesture, and things that are very tight. I like combining all of them. When I get bored with one way, then I'll go to the next. In one group of paintings I worked with transparencies. I would lay images over one another on the light table, and then an assistant might help with Photoshop to get the compositions that I want.



Joan Semmel, "Ghost" (2009), oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches (image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

J. Samet: *You mentioned that differentiating your viewpoint from that of pornography motivated your "Sex Paintings." Can you talk more about that difference, and what you are trying to express?*

J. Semmel: Pornography is fashionable now; it is considered fine, just another entertainment. But the attitudes that are expressed in most pornography are abhorrent. My sexual paintings might be very disturbing to these same people who watch pornography, because the dehumanizing aspect is no longer there. So it makes them nervous.

Am I being overly critical? I don't think so. I am hardly a prude. I have worked with open sexuality. That's what I've been about: eliminating shame from the whole sexual area. It should just be natural. But I'm against most pornography because I find it dehumanizing.

Sex is about intimacy and knowing somebody and it's about being able to both give and take. Pornography never has that. It's about domination and a certain kind of power structure. That is why it's so abhorrent to those of us who are tuned in. I always know when I see art that comes from pornography. I recognize it, and I think, "Why should I support this?" I can't.

It is about how you focus, and what you focus on. In the realistic pieces I did, I liked to focus on the woman's hand pulling the man in, because the woman wasn't passive in that situation. She is controlling. I never said that, but that's how it was. Anyone who was tuned in picked up on those things.

Unfortunately, so much of the contemporary art I see by both women and men takes right off of advertising and pornography images without investigating them. That's what I see in women who think they are doing sexual work.



Joan Semmel, "Skin Patterns" (2013), oil on canvas, 59.5 x 48 inches (image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

J. Samet: *I think maybe it has to do with a generation of women who see themselves as "post-feminist."*

J. Semmel: *Young people thought it was the kiss of death to be feminist — and it was. They rejected a lot of it. They were going to just be super cool, and badass, and use girlie pictures or pornography without inquiry into what the images signified.*

I recently wrote about Lisa Yuskavage and Jenny Saville. They are both artists who deal with the female figure. But to my eye, Saville is totally sympathetic to the flesh, whereas Yuskavage takes all the tropes of misogynistic work and utilizes them: everything from the Japanese baby doll images to the fat of Botero. I don't understand where she is coming from or why.

Sex is a part of communication, of how two people relate to each other. It's not just about getting off. How do we communicate our humanity in images? For me, the flesh has always been a central part of that humanity. One has to understand and accept one's body and the body's needs and desires. Art can do only so much. The culture is overwhelming; it is beset with all kinds of visual images.



Joan Semmel, "Grief" (2017), oil on canvas. 60 x 48 inches (image courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

J. Samet: *I'm wondering what you think about the art history that is so dominated by images of nude women painted by men, and whether you still love it.*

J. Semmel: *It's not only that they were made by men; they were tailored to a male audience. I was always cognizant of the fact that these paintings were made by men for men. Paintings of women in seductive poses were not chosen without awareness. They were chosen for those kinds of poses because they delivered an erotic charge for the audience. Mythology was an excuse to use the image of a naked woman and call it art.*

Art had either a religious connotation or an erotic one. Even the battle scenes and the history paintings had images of rapes and abductions in the middle of them. Those narratives have something to do with how men perceive sexuality, what their privileges are, and how that's been carried over.

But yes, I still love it, because I get off on the sensuality of it: not the sensuality of the narrative, but the sensuality of the paint — of how it's painted, how wonderfully it's painted. I can't say no to it because I don't like what it says. I don't mind looking at the nakedness of the women. There are plenty of naked men, and many Christ figures are sexualized for gay men, if you think about how they are portrayed.

J. Samet: *Can you talk about the paintings in your studio, and the body of work you will be showing in the next year?*

J. Semmel: I'm branded as a painter of the nude, although I've done other things. So that is where I have to stay. Otherwise, I won't get seen at all. But the nude is a problem for me at a certain age, because where do you go with it? I'm not sure exactly. That is why I recently made a painting of myself that revisits the format of work from the 1970s. I wanted to see what would happen. I have to take a chance. I don't want to get stuck in the pathology of aging; I want to do the reverse. I want to normalize age. How does one do that and still be seductive? That is what I'm thinking about.