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Joan Semmel: A Necessary Elaboration

FEBRUARY 1, 2019 BY PHOEBE HOBAN — LEAVE A COMMENT

at Alexander Gray and Associates, NYC (through February 16)

Reviewed by Phoebe Hoban

Joan Semmel is the master of the anti-Selfie. For decades she has turned the camera on herself, using candid photographs as references for her large-scale nudes, which are both sumptuous and unsettlingly intimate. For an age obsessed with instant, miniature self-branding imagery, pervasively produced by iPhones and through Instagram, her large, flawed, vulnerable figures open a nearly forgotten door onto the pure pleasure of painted flesh.

Alice Neel famously painted herself nude at age 80, and Lucian Freud depicted himself naked at 52, but few artists have chosen to make their aging naked bodies their main subject matter. Semmel, trained in abstraction, originally began doing figurative work during the Feminist wave of the 1970s, becoming known for a series of sexual paintings (*The Erotic* series), which by the mid-70s focused primarily on herself (*The Self-Image* series), sometimes coupled with a male figure, and constructed of complex images from skewed perspectives, both of her own single body or of a duo's entwined, partial body parts.



Fleshed Out

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Interestingly, as the artist has grown older, the images, now focused solely on herself, have ultimately become, in some ways, more revealing. Even in her last show, in 2016, which featured paintings in which the artist, as she has before, played with multiple overlays, a blurring device that amplified herself as the central figure, but also obscured her naked form, Semmel — as her own complete subject matter — was visible from head to toe. Now, at 86, she has torn away those veils to show her body up close and personal — in luminous, glowing, almost neon colors.

But far from being shocking, these paintings exude sheer beauty. Evoking both the voyeuristic intimacy and lustrous palette of Bonnard and something of the formal grace of Degas' bathers, they remain

completely contemporary in their bold and graphic exploration of aging female flesh. Rather than mourning the demise the corporeal self, Semmel, who retains more than a little of her own youthful beauty, finds it a fascinating subject to examine.



In the Green

She does so in nine beautifully composed images, that zoom in on strikingly angled poses, painted in saturated, gem-like hues. Two of the standouts in *A Necessary Elaboration*, the stunning show at Alexander Gray and Associates, are *Fleshed Out* (2018) and *In the Green* (2017). In *Fleshed Out*, Semmel's body is cropped from neck to knee, depicting one arm, a pair of pendulous breasts, a folded belly and two modestly closed knees. Her skin is rendered in tones that range from beige to amber to a rich violet; the background is a luminous indigo blue. One hand grips a leg, tightly pressed to a glimpse

of a stool. It is the scale, composition and palette of the piece that impresses; the brushwork, though visible, is not emphasized. This is the body as still-life; a contemplative study of old age.

With *In the Green*, Semmel comes the closest to a classic self-portrait; this is one of the only paintings that shows her whole face (although the crown of her head is cropped). The artist is shown in profile, gaze down, legs bent and slightly akimbo. The background, acid green and baby blue, sheds some of its lambent light onto the figure; the arms are green-tinged and the lower body is swathed in violet. Semmel's pale head and face, just detailed enough, hits the very top of the canvas, which is otherwise dominated by her body and the background's compelling colors.



My Saskia

Less idealized is the self-image in *My Saskia* (2018), which also shows most of her face, but is devoid of the alluring spectrum — the turquoise, plum, green and ruby—of the other paintings in the series, vivid colors, which, in Semmel’s words, “are the seduction.”

It also features the least flattering pose, making it, perhaps, the most straightforward depiction of her 80-something-year-old self. Her white-haired head is bowed above hanging breasts, her hands are placed loosely on her thighs, she is either sitting on an unseen stool, or bent over, standing. It is a brave painting, all the braver because it is stripped of any softening effects; in it her skin doesn’t look wrinkled so much as raw or bruised.



Turning

Crossed Arms

It is in sharp contrast to the relatively demure, almost coy, full-frontal standing figure in *Crossed Arms* (2018), her arms protectively covering her breasts, the background a delicate robin’s egg blue, although her skin retains a ravaged aspect. In *Turning* (2018), Semmel is perched on a stool, pivoting to the right; her back is shadowed with a jaundiced green against a glowing lavender background. And then there is *Seated in Red* (2018), a seemingly simple image of a shapely female back, oddly reminiscent of Man Ray’s *Ingres’ Violin*. The orange and purple-tinted skin of the upper back looks almost flayed, the background is a flaming crimson; this painting conveys the conflicted sense of someone simultaneously hurt and triumphant—the emotional essence of an aging being.

As an artist's subject, there is probably nothing more dated than the female nude. Yet Semmel continues to breathe into it something new, and, in an increasingly technology-driven world, something refreshingly humanistic. By stripping and magnifying her own body, Semmel achieves the diametric opposite of objectifying it. Although played out in public view, she has turned her body and its inevitable evolution into an exquisite instrument of introspection.



Seated in Red

Featured Image: Knee Up (2017)