

# Art in America

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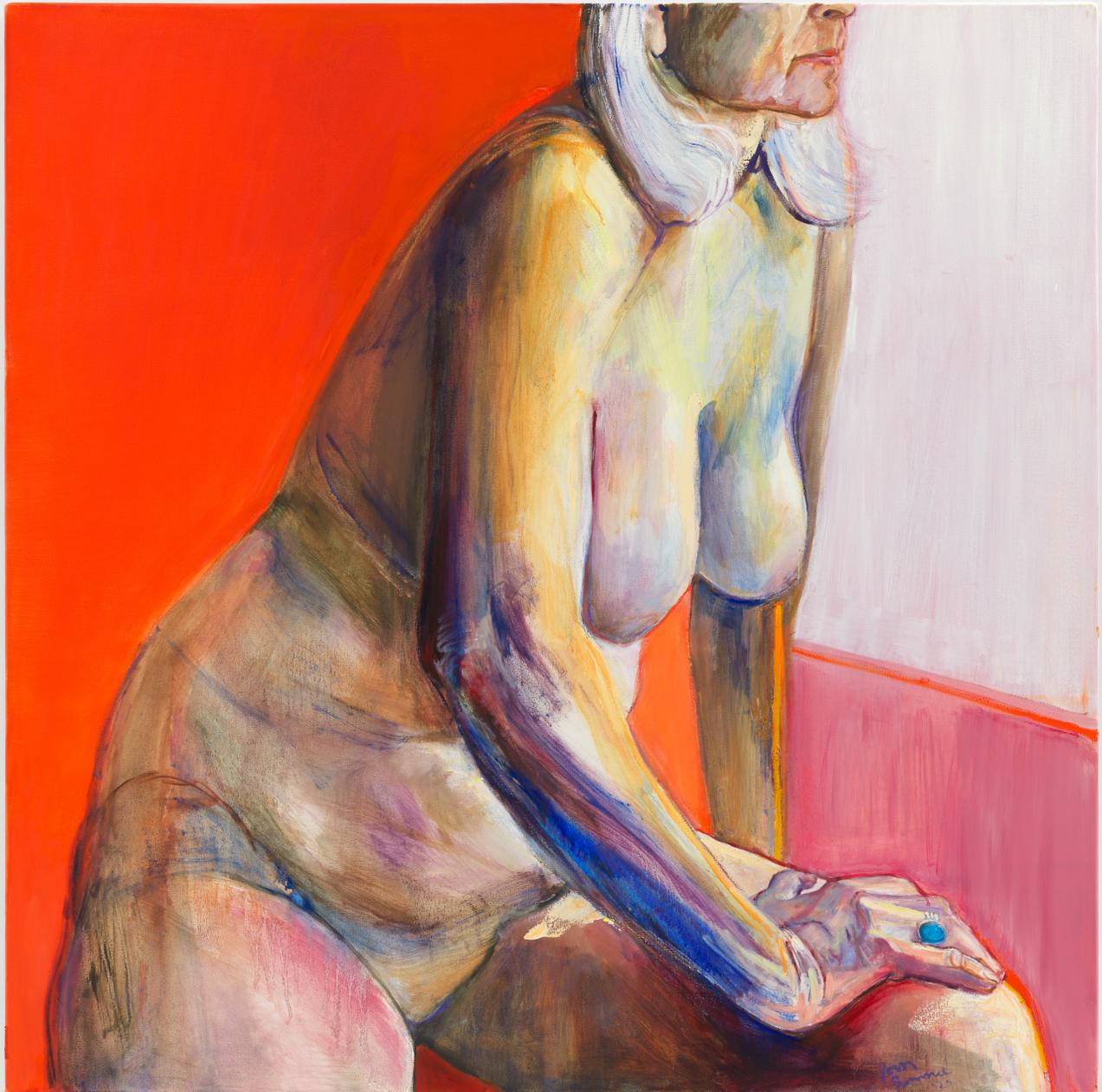
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## ONE WORK: JOAN SEMMEL'S "WAITING"

*By Hannah Stamler*

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Joan Semmel, *Waiting*, 2020, oil on canvas, 48 by 48 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2021 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The woman is nude and seated, her torso leaning forward. Her right hand rests on her left thigh, while her left arm supports her from behind. She looks out a large window, the light warming her naked flesh, streaking her breasts with creamy bands of sunshine. The title of this painting, *Waiting* (2020), informs us that the sitter is expecting something or someone—but what or whom is left unstated. Her mood is similarly inscrutable; her eyes, which might provide a glimpse into her psyche, are cropped out, hovering above the canvas's upper edge.

All one is left to interpret is the body. And as in all the self-portraits in “A Balancing Act”—an exhibition of recent work by **Joan Semmel** at both branches of Alexander Gray Associates in New York—this body speaks in a vexing language of contradictory terms. Semmel, who is in her late eighties, is opulent in her nudity. Her breasts hang full and lovely; her skin, tinged with pastel pinks, oranges, and yellows, is supple and smooth. In her pose, however, the artist appears ill at ease, uncomfortable in the same skin she has painted with such tenderness. Looking more closely, one sees that her torso is not leaning so much as contorted, her right hand not resting so much as gripping. Her left arm is so rigid that, at first, I mistook it for a wooden piece of the window frame. Can this body bear the anticipation evoked in the painting's title?

The series on view at Alexander Gray could be interpreted as Semmel's exploration of her aging body, but it reads more broadly as a reflection on corporeal vulnerability, especially resonant in a year saturated by fears of illness and infection. With *Waiting*, Semmel asks with particular flair a question articulated across the exhibition: How do you continue to appreciate a body that you mistrust, one that is no longer easy to inhabit?