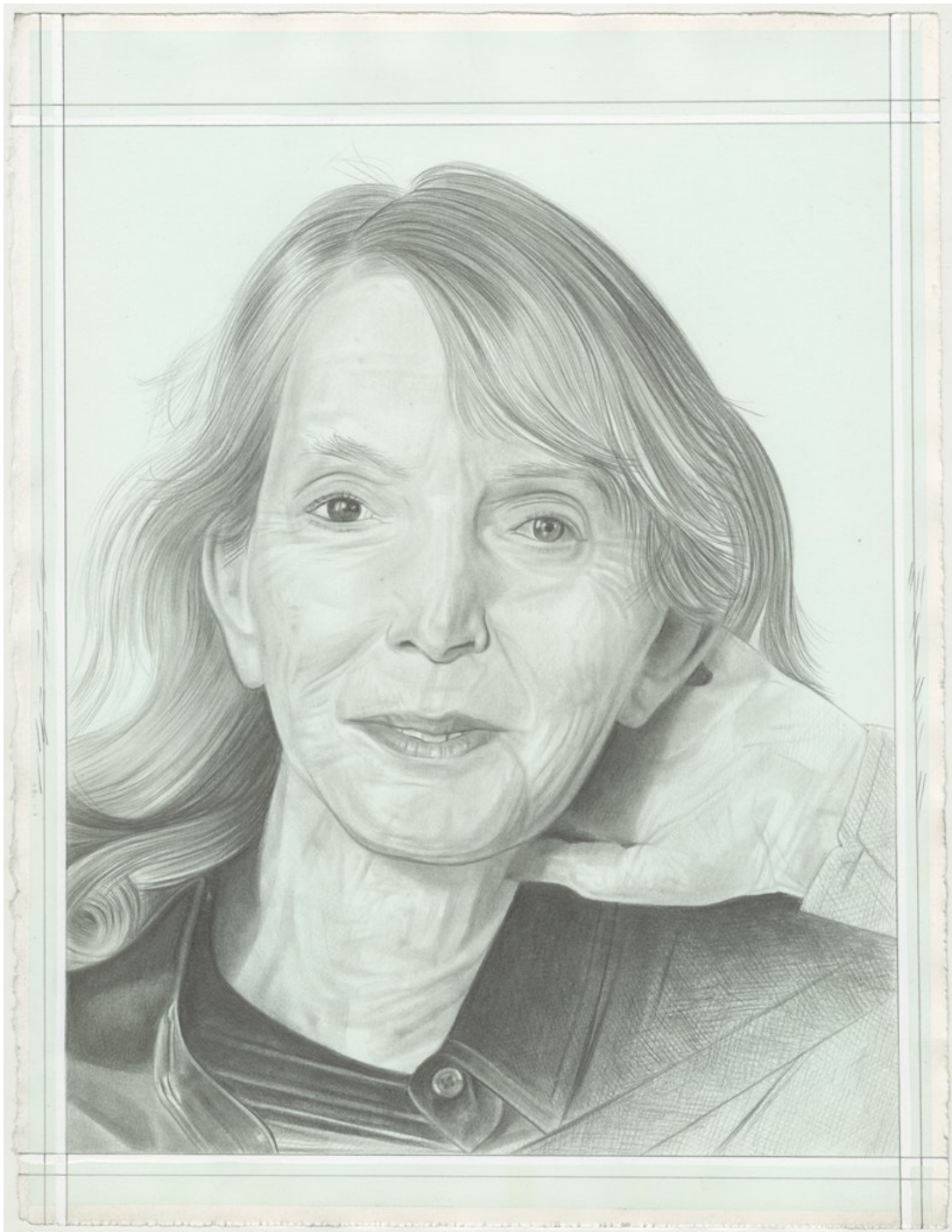


Joan Semmel with Amelia Jones

“What was interesting for me was the content of the work, where the work was centered, what the incentive of the work was.”

MARCH 2022



Portrait of Joan Semmel, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art

Joan Semmel: Skin in the Game

October 28, 2021 – April 3, 2022

Philadelphia

Joan Semmel's work activates what painting can do to produce different ways of seeing, and thus different ways of thinking, that shift the position of certain bodies in the social sphere. I get the conversation started by asking Semmel some questions about her earliest work, her experience as an artist, and her turn to painting, before weaving in more complex questions about the relationship of her work to specific experiences she's had in the world. These questions are all oriented towards understanding how Joan Semmel's methods and subject matter produce images that interact with her audience. The following conversation was held on the New Social Environment, Episode #474, and has been edited for the reader's pleasure.

Amelia Jones (Rail): What has it been like to have a major retrospective of your work up at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts?

Joan Semmel: It's absolutely wonderful. I've been thrilled to see the exhibition, it's beautifully hung, and beautifully thought through. It's also been exciting for me to see a lot of the early works, which I haven't seen for many years because they were in different collections.

Rail: Can you talk a little bit about *Perfil Infinito* from 1966?

Semmel: The abstract work is hardly known in this country, but it was exhibited widely in Spain. I lived there for almost eight years and during that time I was working and showing professionally at major galleries there and in South America. My work at that time went through a whole period of development. The exhibition shows only two of those pieces because we had to deal with the limitations of what one space could accommodate. I think that some of the early abstraction was probably influenced by Spanish work at the time, which really came out of European surrealism. And so the broad expressive gesture that I started out with as an abstract expressionist gradually closed into a more structured abstraction. From there I moved back to the States, and getting back to the States brought me into a whole different environment, a different time of my life. From there I moved into representation again.

Rail: The amazing thing about your painting is the way it's always toggling between representation and abstraction. What's it like for you to spend time with these early paintings?

Semmel: Well, I still love them. I was a passionate abstractionist. I went to school at a time when doing anything representational was considered old-fashioned and academic. To be on the cusp of what was contemporary at the time one felt one had to be doing abstraction.

Rail: There was very interesting information in the catalogue that I hadn't thought about, that you were in a country that was still under Franco's regime and women were second class citizens—to say the least—and that just living in that environment raised your consciousness so that when you came back to the States, and you were in New York and the nascent feminist art movement was getting going, you kind of just stepped right into it.



Joan Semmel, *Perfil Infinito*, 1966, oil on linen, 74 7/8 x 69 1/4 inches.
Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Semmel: In Spain all of my feelings about not having access to the broader culture as a young woman in America were clarified, because in Spain it was so much more rigid. Women couldn't have their own bank accounts. They had them but their husbands had access to them. You could not take a child out of the country without your husband's permission; you could not lease an apartment without the signature of either your father or your husband; a woman herself could not do that. So these things made it very clear that structurally, the woman was limited in how she could function. Whereas in this country, it wasn't quite that obvious.

I had always felt as a young woman that I wanted to do things; I wanted to change the world, I wanted to make my mark on the world, and I was always told by my father who adored me—and whom I loved very much—I couldn't do that as a woman. The only thing I could do was have babies. That's what I was told over and over again. When I went to Spain I saw that in a much clearer way. The social structure was limiting, and it politically pre-determined what people could do. It was a revelation for me. I came back to America just at the stirrings of the women's movement, the second wave was heating up. It was a wonderful liberation for me.

Rail: That's such an amazing story. What gave you the conviction to stick with painting? As you said, even painting itself was being questioned by a lot of the artists of your generation in New York. Maybe you could also talk about how, as a woman artist, you feel that painting gives you a certain kind of agency that you wouldn't necessarily have with other media?

Semmel: Well, I think the first thing is love. I love to paint. It was something that was always my pleasure and joy. And I wasn't willing to give up love, not for anything. I was trying to break down restrictions; not put on more restrictions. So I just continued to paint, because that's where I felt comfortable. Intellectually I understood, respected, and supported those artists who were doing other things. Because what was interesting for me was the content of the work, where the work was centered, what the incentive of the work was—all of those elements were what made art interesting to me. It wasn't which technique was being used.

Rail: I love that you're in love with painting. I wanted to talk about your turn to figuration, the moxie of that choice! To turn to figuration at a time when that was just not done, especially by younger artists who had ambitious aesthetic ideas. And not only did you turn to naked bodies, but bodies having sex, and then to your own body. The way that you depict your own body really is just beyond the canon, nobody else had really done that. Can you talk about this shift? Is it just that you insisted on doing what you wanted to do? Or were there other political motivations?

Semmel: I always worked, and I like to draw from the figure. I always started my abstract paintings with a figure drawing, and then I would break it apart. So I came back to trying to move from abstraction into a more politically centered image by going back to those figure drawings. But instead of trying to break it apart, I was trying to bring the figure into a context where it had some relevance for me, and I was a young woman who was sexually involved and interested.

Sexuality, when I was in Spain, was seen as a liberation because it was so repressed. When I came back to New York that kind of liberation was very confusing, because what I saw was a kind of sexual commercialization. Women were still objectified and used as a fetish-objects rather than being treated as people with their own agency. What I felt was important was for women to have their own sense of sexual agency, and not to be in service to whatever the male person desires in that situation.

It was a time of high experimentation in New York. There were swinging parties and all kinds of things going on. I had a friend who suggested that if I wanted to do that kind of work, I needed to draw from it to be able to make them feel right. And so there was a person who was a bit of an exhibitionist and he would come with a woman who was also eager to do that. We would have several artists and we'd work while they did their thing. It was very interesting. I worked with it with a magic marker so that I could move quickly, and move around the setup in order to get different kinds of views.

I wanted to be able to do work that would be interesting for women sexually, so that women could also participate in that whole revolution, from their own sense of what they desired rather than what they were told they should want. That was the impetus for the work. I have many of these kinds of drawings. There were many sessions, and the first paintings came from the drawings. You could see the relationship between the painting, and the original drawings that they were made from. It was an important transition for me. I wanted to go back to the content in the work, but I didn't want it to be academic. I wanted to find how I could make it contemporary, and carry the message that I was looking for in terms of what liberation would be for a woman.

Rail: You definitely succeeded in exploding the academic.

Semmel: No, they were never called academic.

Rail: One of the incredibly interesting things is your choice of color. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Semmel: Well, I still thought abstractly, so that was the reason the colors in the paintings are so strong. Even though I was working with the idea of representation, it was still about the formal structure. That was what interested me—the act. How would I use the abstraction, and make it alive in terms of representing what I was interested in communicating? The whole impetus for my use of color, for my use of form, was to make abstraction serve representation, rather than break down representation.



Joan Semmel, *Intimacy-Autonomy*, 1974, oil on canvas, 50 x 98 in (127 x 248.92 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Rail: Wow, that's a great thought to transition to another set of amazing paintings, which I completely project into; for example, your painting *Intimacy Autonomy* (1974). I always imagined that was you and you were depicting your own post-coital moment. Well, that's just me, but that's what you're offering to us as viewers. You put us in the position of those two bodies.

Semmel: I think the first figurative paintings that I did work from a gestural point of view, but I gradually moved into taking photographs of models, and then into photographs of myself. The reason to use myself was not so much to represent me, I wanted to move the painting into the space of the viewer, rather than pull the viewer into the space of the painting. One of the things that I did was to use the camera in a way that it seemed as if the viewer was in the painting, was part of the head, so to speak, of the painting that was left out.

Rail: Yeah, it's very profound. And it does something politically because it makes a powerful point about what a woman is allowed to see and experience.

Semmel: Well, I wanted it to be very clear that the painting was made by a woman, that I was the artist. And I was also the woman. And then I was also trying to speak to the feelings of what a woman feels about her own body, different than if she is portrayed by somebody else. For instance, in *Intimacy Autonomy*, you see a man and a woman lying next to each other. One of the things that I felt, about how women felt about themselves sexually, was always to be in service of the needs of the man. How does one achieve intimacy and still have autonomy?

Rail: You've completely justified my projection. So thank you! That's exactly how I always viewed it. And this is right about the moment where feminists in the UK were theorizing the male gaze, and this is just the most brilliant, like totally opposite way of thinking about it, which is just to assert the female gaze.

Semmel: Right?!? I mean, that's when I worked for, but we didn't have the words when I was doing it. I had never heard "male gaze" or "female gaze," but that was what I was involved with. And I remember at the time there was an art critic, John Berger, who wrote *Ways of Seeing*, a book about how men were judged by what they do, what they did in the world, and women were judged by how they looked in the world. That encapsulated the limitations that were put upon us, and I was trying to break that down.

Rail: That's amazing. In that regard, can you talk about your 1974 painting, *Me without Mirrors*? Because in this case, the intimacy is really with yourself.

Semmel: Exactly. I felt that women were limited in life by their bodies, what they could do had to do with their physical attributes, and not only how they look, but how they performed "mother child," that whole kind of biological determination. And that in order for us to move ahead, we had to first come to terms with our bodies, accept our own bodies, what they were, what they could do for us, that both pain and pleasure came from the body. And how do we resolve those issues?

Rail: When we chatted a bit last week you talked about how important it is that these paintings are of their time and place, that all of them relate to where you were at the time and how you were thinking, but also to these bigger issues. When you look at these works now, does it put you back in that political and social moment?

Semmel: Well, it doesn't. I kept moving. But I thought at the time that they were paintings of the moment, of the issues of the moment. But I think that they still resonate today, and that surprises me sometimes, that young people write to me to tell me how important they are for them. So they're not just issues of the moment, really, they're also more broadly about a person's space and place in the world, which is something that both men and women have to deal with.

Rail: They speak to what is now so ubiquitous, almost aggressive, which is the self-image in culture and social media. I enjoy teaching these to my students because you can see how a whole history of self-imaging—all the way back to the early modern period of self-portraits in European history—goes through a practice like yours, where you're specifically breaking from that early modern tradition of the artist looking in a mirror.

Semmel: I was very determined that the image would be formed through my own eyes, in the sense that it wouldn't be a reflected image. You were always looking to find yourself in that mirror, and I wanted to stop looking at the reflected image. I wanted the sensual feeling of how one experiences the body, rather than just how one sees it in the mirror. Those were kind of the underlying motives in the work. And then later on, once I had done many of these, I started asking, how do I extend this? And what does looking in the mirror mean? And how is that a narcissistic thing? And how is that narcissism part of our culture? So I extended all of that, and moved to some images in the mirror, and myself taking photos of myself in the mirror, but also of other people in the mirror, and in an environment like the locker room, which is all mirrors.

Rail: Before we talk about those works, I want to ask one more thing about this moment, which is the way that you talk about painting as a bodily mode of creativity. There is a way in which your insistence on painting—for me—is about your love of painting, but also that this kind of materiality of the body emerges through gesture. Maybe you could comment on that?

Semmel: One of the reasons I like painting is because it engages you totally. I mean, you don't sit still when you paint. You walk back and forth; you're touching things; you're using your hands; you're using your eyes; you're using your head; you're totally engaged in every sense of the word. And that's part of the joy. Sitting at a computer and making whatever is very different. I wanted total engagement, and I think that creates a carnal kind of sensibility. I like that carnality of the flesh in connection with the carnality of the paint.

Rail: That's beautiful. And now, kind of a tangent, I wonder about this moment where, as I understand, you were specifically responding, you were angry about something—



Joan Semmel, *Mythologies and Me*, 1976. Oil and collage on canvas, 60 x 148 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Semmel: There was a political show at the gallery that I was with at the time, it was called a patriotic show. It was all artists who were politically involved. And I was politically involved, I was a feminist. At first, I wasn't invited because the dealer did not think a nude would be seen as political, and I said, "Okay, I'll paint you a diagram." And so what I did was this three-panel piece. The centerpiece is one of my self-images. I did a parody of a de Kooning painting on the right, and I glued a nursing nipple on the breast. And on the left image there were feathers glued on the Playboy image. I called it "Mythologies And Me."

Rail: Does this painting feel odd to you? Because it is so different from most of your works at the time. I love the subtlety of the politics of all the other works, and then this one is just so forthright.

Semmel: It was interesting because it also gave me a way to merge abstraction with realism, and to continue considering how one does that. For me, that was the most interesting part of painting, how to make it all hold together.

Rail: And he did include it in his political art show?

Semmel: Absolutely.

Rail: Objective achieved?

Semmel: Yes.

Rail: I want to circle back to the paintings of the locker rooms. I think you're way ahead of your time to see the gym as a place of narcissism, which it definitely is, but that's something that most of us didn't really think about until more recently. Can you talk about that?

Semmel: Well, my painting, *Abeyance* (1986) says it in a certain way. I took pictures in the gymnasium, and from there I moved to the locker room. In the gymnasium, of course, the figures were dressed, not naked. But it was amazing, because everybody was looking at themselves in the mirror. There was hardly any communication between people; it was just total fascination. And in this particular piece, I call it "Abeyance." And it's the figure with its back to us, looking into the mirror and bowing down. Of course, it was exercising, but it made my point about a kind of worship of the mirror image.



Joan Semmel, *Abeyance*, 1986. Oil on canvas, 68 x 96 in (172.72 x 243.84 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Rail: How did that connect to that point in your life? Or what you saw going on in the culture? Because the '80s were largely about the rise of this self-centered tendency that eventually evolved into social media.

Semmel: I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that I lived outside the country for several years, and then came back to this country. A lot of things that people had moved into—without being so aware of what they were—were a shock to me. I was able to think about what they meant and why they were happening. A lot of my work is intuitive, rather than intellectually predetermined, so that things happen in the work that I see. And suddenly, that stimulates the idea, rather than me having an idea and then illustrating it. I think that's part of the strength of the paintings, because they give me the idea, but they also give the audience the ideas that I'm trying to communicate.

Rail: I really experience your work as giving us a space. It's generous. You're presenting an opportunity for us to connect with it.

Semmel: Yeah, but don't forget that to make these locker room pictures I take lots and lots of photos, and that selection process is my editing process. That's how something starts poking the images towards the ideas that are interesting to me. In *The Changing Room* (1988) you see the preoccupation of women with their weight, and the older person trying to look younger. That's where older bodies cropped up. I wouldn't have thought to go looking for older bodies, but there I was in the locker room, and there were people of all different sizes and shapes.



Joan Semmel, *The Changing Room*, 1988. Oil on canvas in 2 parts, 84 x 136 inches overall. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Rail: Were you thinking consciously of yourself as an aging body?

Semmel: I wasn't. I mean, of course, once I saw all of that, and as I was growing older, I realized that I had some of those same issues. And so it was logical for me to understand that as I continued to work, aging would be part of what the work was about.

Rail: Yeah, definitely. Before we move to that, I want to talk about a gorgeous group of paintings where you're deliberately doubling through the tension between abstraction and realism.

Semmel: Those paintings came right in between the realist paintings and the sexual paintings. They came around the same time. The *Mythologies and Me* piece stimulated some of that. Part of what happened was I started using color Xerox instead of photographs as information for the images. The technology at that point offered itself to me and colored Xerox became a possibility. I would make preparatory drawings where I collage a piece using the Xerox that I started from, and then open it out into a more expressionist drawing.

Rail: And that's like *Purple Diagonal* from 1980.



Joan Semmel, *Purple Diagonal*, 1980. Oil on canvas, 78 x 104 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Semmel: Yeah, exactly. So that was the process for those paintings. And, again, the reason for it was I hated having to lose the freedom of the expressionist paintings that I'd had, of using color, and paint in a much looser and dynamic way. But yet, I wanted to be able to have the image resonate with the message that I was trying to send about the body. So I put the two things together, and used what I called an "echoing image," the image of the body from the photo from the Xerox, and then moving to the element of the paint. There's one inside of the other. It felt like I was still connecting to the culture, which was abstraction, but with my own sense of myself, as a female body.

Rail: It's so interesting that in *Purple Diagonal*, you're doing the doubling through just the composition and the technique. And then in other works a little later, you're explicitly doubling through mirrors and cameras.

Semmel: By comparison, *Double Take* from 1991 uses both the mirror and the camera. I'm insisting that I'm the artist, the female artist, showing myself holding the camera. And yet, I'm also showing how one's sense of self is constructed, not by just experiencing oneself, but by looking in the mirror, which is doubled too. All of these elements reference the ways that we understand ourselves through these refracted images that are not real. They're not absolute. They're not flesh. They're just refracted images. What I'm doing is putting all of those things together to try to compress the complexity of how one's identity is formed. And then once that identity is formed, how is it further influenced by all those external forces to become oneself, as one experiences oneself?



Joan Semmel, *Double Take*, 1991. Oil on canvas, 68 1/8 x 60 in (173.35 x 152.4 cm). Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Rail: Joan, you're a phenomenologist! Another reason I like these works is because you made the decision to paint over other paintings.

Semmel: At that time life was not easy in terms of getting my work seen. Nobody would look. The sexual pieces were still not considered appropriate. I thought, “well, nobody will want to see these anymore,” and I started to use them as a base for some overlays of images that I was working with at the time, which were the ones with the camera, and the ones in the locker room. And so I used some of the drawings from those photographs, and threw them over some of the sexual pieces. I call them “overlays.” Luckily, I didn’t destroy all of the sexual pieces. I just did a few of them.

Rail: And the quality of paint is so interesting, because you’re creating this almost diaphanous wash, but there’s also that area where it’s just so dense.

Semmel: I always like to put different qualities of paint together in the same painting. I like to use a thin wash and then a heavily loaded brush, so that all of these elements play off of each other. I’ve discovered in the process of painting some of the illusionistic ways that form has been built, and space has been built. That one could, by using the weight of the paint itself, make an image move forward or back. And the thinness of a painting makes a transparency. That means that there are different levels and layers of paint that make different levels of space that one can enter into. All of those things are explorations of ways of painting, and also ways of thinking of memory, and how images overlap each other in our memory, and how time expands in our memories. We live not only in the moment. We also live in our projections of the future, and in our remembrances of the past—all together at the same time.



Joan Semmel, *Disappearing*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 54 x 48 1/8 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2022 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Rail: You know, that parallels what you're doing on your more recent canvases, such as *Disappearing* (2006) where you're kind of melting into the picture.

Semmel: Well, that has something to do with aging, and not being seen. The painting was partly a commentary on that. And I liked the blurring, I'm always experimenting with what happens in different ways of painting. What happened in taking some of these pictures was I would sometimes use a timer, and then move quickly to try to sit down in front of the camera before the shutter would go off, and a few were somewhat blurred. I liked what happened with that.

Rail: The mere fact of your body being both the painter and the subject is inherently disruptive to canonized forms of modernism, because the critics and artists of earlier eras never would have paid attention to a woman in this way or to an older woman. Right? So the work is quite radical, just because of that tension.

Semmel: Yes, it's radical because of that tension. But it also shows my body in moments of transition; it shows that one is never static, that there is always some kind of movement. One is not only sad, or happy, or angry, or peaceful—there's always an interlocking moment, from moment to moment. It's part of what makes us human.

Contributor

Amelia Jones

Amelia Jones is Robert A. Day Professor at Roski School of Art & Design, USC. Recent publications include the catalogue *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* (2020), co-edited with Andy Campbell (accompanying a retrospective of Athey's work, which she curated); and *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (2021). Her current work addresses the structural racism of the art world.