

HYPERALLERGIC

The Painter Who Directed Her Resolute Gaze at Herself

The emphasis in Joan Semmel's retrospective *Skin in the Game* is on the various points of view she has taken on herself — and, briefly, on others too.

by Nancy Princenthal



Joan Semmel, "Centered" (2002), oil on canvas (courtesy the Green Family Art Foundation and Adam Green Art Advisory; photo courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

ITHACA, NY — There’s something hypnotically mortifying about Joan Semmel’s “Touch” (1975), on view in her revelatory retrospective, *Skin in the Game*, at the Johnson Museum at Cornell University. As with other paintings in Semmel’s *Self-Images* series, which are among her best known, the artist’s prostrate, naked body and a male partner’s are depicted as if seen through her eyes, which become ours. Reflecting the photos on which they rely, the perspective in these paintings is exaggerated: Huge torsos and thighs in the foreground dwindle toward dwarfed calves and tiny feet. There is little in the way of background space — of breathable air. In “Touch,” intertwined limbs, a spreading breast, and a bit of hairy chest balloon across the bottom; a sliver of rumpled bedsheet appears above. To depict yourself (and your lover) this way, from the inside out, is to make yourself enormously vulnerable. And to suck viewers inside your head. The exposure, and the intrusion, feel acute.

Despite their provocations, a great deal of tenderness, and thought, is in these images. Early in her career, Semmel (who was born in the Bronx in 1932) was temporarily sidelined by illness and parenthood, and spent eight years in Spain, at first with her husband and then on her own. While there, she enjoyed a successful career as an Abstract Expressionist painter; a single, vigorous painting from that period is on view. But after returning to New York in 1970, she jumped into the deep end of second-wave feminism. As a member of a loose collective called Fight Censorship, founded by Anita Steckel and including such disparate artists as Judith Bernstein, Louise Bourgeois, and Hannah Wilke, Semmel launched a series of *Sex* and *Erotic* paintings. For the latter, she rather boldly engaged a man who, she told Jennifer Samet in a 2018 [interview](#), was “a bit of an exhibitionist” and “liked to have sex with people watching”; other artworks drew from print images of softcore porn. Using electric Kool-aid acid shades of red, purple, and green, the *Sex* paintings included such images as “Hot Seat” (1971), in which a woman straddles a man sitting on a toilet. Mostly, we see his turquoise thighs beneath her pinkish ones, her torso, and active intercourse: The painting’s focus is the point of penetration; her pubis a fiery red.



Joan Semmel, "Hot Seat" (1971), oil on canvas (photo courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York)



Joan Semmel, "Toes to Toes" (2001), oil on canvas (photo courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

The question of how best to represent sex is not easily answered pictorially. The internal places where much of the pleasure occurs are necessarily occluded, and the act itself, favoring the tactile, has fairly little to do with vision. Nor is the purpose of such depictions uncomplicated. "I wanted it to be erotic stimuli for a woman, not just for a man," Semmel told Samet. In that, she wasn't alone. On one hand, there

was *Viva*, a magazine in which Semmel appeared in 1974, along with other Fight Censorship members; describing itself as the “world’s most sophisticated erotic magazine for women,” *Viva* was published by *Penthouse* founder Bob Guccione (Anna Wintour was its fashion editor). On the other, women young and old were being told, as by the authors of the brand new manual *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, to glory in their own bodies, for fun and enlightenment. Use a mirror! it exhorted. See for yourselves! If Semmel’s message was firmly in favor of such affirmation, there is also, in her more sexually explicit paintings, a measure of self-estrangement — of imagining herself outside her own body.

But in this exhibition, which originated at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts in 2021, curated by Jodi Throckmorton, the emphasis — at least in the abbreviated version at the Johnson Museum, organized by Andrea Inselmann — is on the various points of view Semmel has taken on herself — and, briefly, on others too. Mirrors entered her imagery with the *Locker Room* paintings of 1988 to ’91 (not shown here), which capture women tending to themselves. In subsequent, solo portraits, mirrors often reflect the camera in Semmel’s hand, wielded as both weapon and defense. We see Semmel playing footsies with herself in the spry little “Toes to Toes” (2001), in which her outstretched legs touch the mirror image she is painting. In “Centered” (2002), her mirrored face is completely obscured by the camera she holds in one hand, balancing it on a forearm; reaching toward her from behind is a rather menacing mannequin, one of several that appear in work of this period, in another play of artifice against reality. The 2005 “Double X” — the title seems in part a reference to audience-advice ratings for movies — shows the artist clothed and sitting in a chair whose cross-pieces form the titular X’s; she looks down dispassionately, through glasses, at a camera placed between her spread legs. Its flash blooms white. The frame of the mirror she faces is also partly captured in the image. It is a kind of lexicon of her visual vocabulary: camera and mirror, the explosive luminosity of sex, and the slightly melancholy distance she’s assumed from all that. Writes critic Richard Meyer in *Artforum*, this painting shows her as both “object and agent of vision.”



Joan Semmel, "Double X" (2005), oil on canvas (photo courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York)



Joan Semmel, "Touch" (1975), oil on canvas. Collection of Jeff and Leslie Fischer (photo courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

Semmel remains engrossed by her own image, itself a kind of radical honesty. But she has shifted from feminist advocacy to the less gendered concerns of phenomenology, as scholar Amelia Jones writes in the exhibition catalogue, citing philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Jones notes Semmel's efforts toward "securing the body in a persistent present," a goal balked by that body's continual change. If

defiance of the male gaze, as theorized in 1973 by Laura Mulvey (drawing on Jacques Lacan), can be seen to underlie Semmel's work from the 1970s forward, so can Lacan's exploration of the mirror stage, in which the child recognizes herself as an independent being. Using (colloquially) another psychoanalytic term, Semmel said of the *Locker Room* paintings, "I was interested in the narcissism." She was referring to her subjects' self-care and self-scrutiny, but the term has been applied disparagingly to female painters of her generation who, like Hannah Wilke — and Semmel herself — have been seen to flaunt their beauty. One retort is that neither artist flinched at documenting that beauty's decline. Wilke did so when she was ravaged by cancer; the visible changes of Semmel's body, far gentler, have resulted only from age.

In some recent paintings Semmel's face and body multiply in overlaid montages; others are blurred in a way less common to paintings derived from color photography than those from black and white shots (as in photo-based works by Gerhard Richter, for instance, or Christian Boltanski). "Disappearing" (2006) shows the outlines of the artist's face and figure, and what may be a video camera in her hand, stuttering and slipping across the canvas in pale, prismatic shadows. These paintings engage with photography's irreversible loss of credibility as objective documentation, and also with the collapse of distance between camera and mirror. It's been roughly a dozen years since I puzzled at a teenager using a phone to photograph the back of her head from several angles, and realized she was checking her hair. Moving pictures too have become mirrors: Little as we like it, we are mirrored every time we appear on Zoom. If the freestanding camera (that is, one distinct from another digital device) now seems nearly antiquarian, it is increasingly evident that paint never grows old. Neither does consummate skill as a draftsman, amply demonstrated in a half-dozen contour drawings in this exhibition, both early and late.



Joan Semmel, "Disappearing" (2006), oil on canvas (photo courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

While the avalanche of mirrored aging selves we all regularly face can be a touch harrowing, Semmel's most recent paintings manage, rather magically, to meld despair with exaltation. Over the years, she has had many companions in nude self-portraiture, ranging from Martha Edelheit and Maria Lassnig to Cecily Brown and Jenny Saville — that is, from shared declarations of independence to festivals of flesh. Now nearly 90, Semmel is working pretty much on her own, and this survey's most ravishing works are its most recent. Alice Neel's unsparing self-portrait at 80 is a lone point of comparison; a signal difference is that Semmel doesn't show herself, as Neel does, with a paintbrush in hand. Other props Semmel used earlier — mirror, camera — are absent too. But nothing else is held back. The scale is huge, geological, the color rapturous.

The exhibition's epic centerpiece (and title work) is "Skin in the Game" (2019), a four-panel frieze in which the artist is seen standing, seated, lying down, and covering her eyes as if being expelled from the Garden. But to my mind the standouts are "My Saskia" (2018) and "Red Hand" (2020). In these works, the paint has gotten thinner, as has the skin it depicts. The pull of gravity on heavy limbs and pendulous breasts is defied by blasting, vaporizing light. Paint cascades like rain on stone down a columnar upper arm and then electrifies a vivid hand; a fall of hair and

the slope of a monumental back are dazzled by what looks like direct sunlight. Semmel's early paintings burrowed inside; these are radiantly, gloriously open.



Joan Semmel, "Red Hand" (2020), oil on canvas (collection of the Aishti Foundation, Beirut, Lebanon; photo courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)



Joan Semmel, "My Saskia" (2018), oil on canvas (photo courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

Joan Semmel: Skin in the Game continues at the Johnson Museum of Art (114 Central Ave, Ithaca, New York) through August 21. The exhibition was curated by Jodi

Throckmorton and organized by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The Johnson Museum presentation was curated by Andrea Inselmann, curator of modern and contemporary art.