

## Painter Joan Semmel on Why She Sees Art as a Compulsion, Not a Career

The native New Yorker discusses making work for an audience of one, and why she's spent five decades mining the nude figure and its formal possibilities.

By Ella Martin-Gachot

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Joan Semmel in 2012. All images courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates.

Joan Semmel's exploration of one of art history's longest figurative traditions—the nude—has made her a flagpole of feminist art for the past five decades.

From her unflinchingly coital "Sex Paintings" to her recent dissections of the aging female form—which will be featured in her first exhibition with Xavier Hufkens this April—the native New Yorker, now 91, is unrelenting in her dedication to distilling the experience of occupying a body.

**CULTURED: When did you start making art?**

**Joan Semmel:** I began working as a child, essentially. I was a sickly child, and I did it to amuse myself. It was just making images with whatever was at hand. My mother was told by a teacher that I was talented and should apply to the High School of Music and Art. So that's where I entered my "career" as an artist.

**CULTURED: Do you remember some of the things you were interested in making at the time?**

**Semmel:** I did what most children do: I copied things. I copied the comics. I made these doodles all over my notebooks all the time. It was just an obsessive creation of imagery of one kind or another. There wasn't anything particular. I didn't think of myself as an artist. It was just something that I did.

**CULTURED: After high school, you decided to attend Cooper Union. How did those years affect how you understood art and the art world?**

**Semmel:** That was the point where I decided I wanted to be an artist. Cooper Union at that point did not even give a degree. It was a three-year course. Whereas if I had gone to school at one of the city colleges, I would have been getting a degree, perhaps in teaching or art history even. It would not have been primary training as an artist.

**CULTURED: What were the challenges of that experience?**

