

the subject of Joan Semmel's vigorous new paintings is the artist's perception of herself, more specifically, the representation of what she sees of herself at intimate moments when she is alone or with someone to whom she is physically and emotionally close. Two traditions, the nude and the self-portrait, are assimilated in Semmel's unique autobiographical approach. In her paintings which we may think of as self-portraits and portraits intruding on bodies rather than faces, the viewpoints of the subject and the observer are identical.

Some of her paintings may be grouped into those that focus on a single figure, and compositions with two nude figures—one male and one female. Semmel is physically present in each canvas. In the paintings of the woman in the paintings of couples, and she is the subject of the single figure compositions or, as in the painting of her daughter, *Patty and I*, her arms and knees enter the foreground. Thus, there has been a significant shift in Semmel's role from the artist as spectator in her earlier large paintings of couples exhibited in 1973, to artist as participant in the present show. The creation of erotic imagery from a woman's point of view is one aspect of the larger

aim motivating Semmel's art: to realistically represent one woman's awareness and perception of how she communicates through touch. The way she touches, handles, and holds her own body, as well as that of a lover, child, or pet, and the emotion expressed in such physical contact constitute the dramatic content and action of each picture. For example, in paintings of couples such as *Touch* and *Three Nipples*, the figures overlap and interlock, whereas in *Intimacy-Autonomy*, emphasizing separateness and the absence of touch, the bodies are relaxed but apart.

The cropping of the monumental figures and their facelessness (in only one composition, *Patty and I*, do we see part of a face) underscore the thematic focus on the nature and quality of physical communication; and in each painting the incidents of touch are gentle but sure and controlled. Semmel's painting is about female sensuality but her new images have become less erotic, yet more intimate. She no longer has to declare her right as a woman artist to depict explicit sexual activity, and now she shows greater confidence in her ability to paint a variety of personal subjects. Her treatment and approach is cool and objective, yet not detached. The larger-than-life scale, the full

modeling of the human forms that come out at us, and the steep perspective that conversely draws us into the space of the canvas, all contribute to the sense of intimacy and the powerful immediate impact of the work.

Semmel uses the camera as a tool to capture the close-up images she sees. To get an accurate picture, it is set up exactly where her eyes are. Photographing the subjects is less disruptive to the intimacy of the situation than drawing a mirror image; and as conveyed in *Me Without Mirrors*, Semmel wants to present what she actually sees of herself, and not a reflected image which is a step removed from her direct perception. However, Semmel's methods and aims are not those of Photo Realists. She does not project or greatly enlarge the photographs; the creation of a powerful cohesive composition is always more important than strict realism. For example, in the horizontal painting *Intimacy-Autonomy*, Semmel juxtaposed two images—one of the man and one of the woman—to get the desired composition, which created subtle distortions since the foreshortened figures do not have the same perspective.

Although forms are carefully modeled and clearly defined (except in areas of overlapping

shadow, as in *Three Figures*) Semmel's background is abstract painterly comes through in a number of ways. Her brushwork is concentrated but there are many painterly areas. In particular, the treatment of the hair in *Patty and I*, the towel in *Me Without Mirrors*, and the fur and the folds of drapery in *A Cat Called Che* demonstrate a love of texture, movement, and gesture in the application of paint. Also, Semmel's use of color ranges from naturalistic flesh tones in several of the more recent paintings to arbitrary or unnaturalistic hues which may have expressionistic or symbolic value. The unnatural yellow skin tone of the woman in *A Cat Called Che* is ironically countered by the more flesh-like folds and tones of the drapery. Moreover, in *Intimacy-Autonomy* skin tones change from gray-green to blue and purple tints and the non-realistic background space is a rich blue, clearly suggestive of infinite sky above the horizon; the couple lie on a pink-beige ground that may be either a bed sheet or a sandy beach, and their bodies also suggest landscape forms—mountains, hills, and valleys.

Throughout these paintings Semmel uses strongly contrasting areas of light and shade. The clearly defined shadows function both as independent forms in an interlocking abstract composition and as logical and accurate pictorial elements. Spaces between parts of the modeled bodies work similarly; for example, in *Intimacy-Autonomy* the triangle formed by the man's arm, thigh, and trunk, or the irregular shape of the poignant gulf between the man's and woman's arms. Thus, it is through the skillful handling and complex integration of many elements, including scale, perspective, modeling, color, and shape, that Semmel achieves the powerful images that coherently represent her perceptions and express her sensibility. (Lerner-Heller, *September 30-October 18*)

Judith Tannenbaum

JOAN SEMMEL

ARTS magazine
Oct 75 Vol 5 no 2



Joan Semmel, *Patty and I*, 1975. Oil on canvas, 68 x 68".
Lerner-Heller