

Joan Semmel

(Lerner-Heller Gallery, March 5-31) Eight paintings and seven drawings showed nine months of Joan Semmel's work on female nude imagery. The gallery space seemed transformed into a shrine honoring the female nude in all its sincerity and sensuality. The calm atmosphere of the gallery supported the sensitivity radiating from the pictures.

Semmel's work has a lyric quality and shows a positive attitude toward the female body, a very personal view of the female nude, a liberated view without stereotyped imagery. It seems to be a statement of the artist's feminism and an appraisal of the women's movement in general.

In all her pieces, the body is seen in a reclining position from beyond the head, in the way one looks down on one's own body. For some time now, Semmel has been working from photographs she took of herself. She uses them in her compositions as a point of departure. In this show, for the first time, she uses xerox prints from color slides.

Although her subject matter is figurative, Semmel's compositions are quite abstract, indicative of her long commitment as an abstractionist. A pattern of lines and surfaces, departing from a foot or hand in or off the center, stretches to the corners of the canvas. The colors are evenly applied within the sharp contours which divide the surfaces.

The lyric quality of her work is aided by an exquisite coloring, especially in the bigger oil paintings *Centerhand* and *Tri-*

angular Tunnels. They reveal a Vermeer-like, pale, grayish flesh color in the "touchable" skin parts and a bluish shade in the background. Her latest, often smaller, paintings tend toward a brighter color scheme, especially in the pink flesh tones.

Though the torsos and parts of arms and legs are the subjects as a whole, Semmel emphasizes a hand or a foot. She characterizes those features as sensitive portraits, as clearly recognizable as faces.

For the first time since the calligraphic pen drawings of her abstract days, Semmel is drawing again. In some of the drawings (those I like best) she tries to imitate the smoothness of the paintings as if they were pastels. In others she exploits more of the bluntness and colorfulness of oil crayons.

So far, Semmel's oil paintings have been shown only on this continent and in Spain. It is time for them to be seen in Europe.

—Rosa Lindenburg



Joan Semmel, *Triangular Tunnels*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 42x98".