

ART

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Joan Semmel's *Corner Elbow*

The Body Beautiful

John Perreault

Joan Semmel
Lerner-Heller
956 Madison Av. (to April 27)

Joan Semmel's recent paintings continue her theme of seeing a woman's body from a woman's point of view in both a literal and a figurative way. She makes paintings of herself, basing them upon photographs she has taken of herself. Given this method, the point of view is dramatic and logical: Extreme foreshortening and the cropped fragments of the female form make sense. The images are larger than life, creating landscapes of flesh and dynamic forms. The design shows Semmel's background in abstract expressionism, but the emotions are muted and contemplative. The

Beyond the statement that a woman's body is first and foremost her own, Semmel's current work is erotic in an unusual way. Narcissism is certainly present, but purged of the negativity that narcissism usually implies. It seems to me that Semmel is making an anti-puritanical gesture for everyone.

Most of us have been brought up to avoid our own bodies. The insanity of this is clear. Often any such natural curiosity on the part of a child is punished as cryptomasturbatory; Pleasing oneself is considered sinful. Fear of flesh and the pseudo-mystery of Otherness begins at home. The dictum to know thyself should also include knowing one's body.

These are unusual self-portraits, but once one thinks about it, they are the most natural. They are also primal; the exploration of the world begins as an exploration