

JOAN SEMMEL'S PORTRAITS: PERSONAL CONFRONTATIONS

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Joan Semmel's recent portraits attempt to capture the truth about specific individuals. They address not only the concerns of the body, but of the whole being.

Joan Semmel, *Motorist and Child*, 1982. Oil on canvas, 76 x 67".

Joan Semmel, *Patty*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 48 x 40".



Joan Semmel's portraits in her current exhibition at 112 Greene Street¹ bring to mind certain aspects of her work during the past five or six years, but they also represent startling changes both technically and contextually. Before the present show, Semmel was primarily identified with self-nudes: studies of her reclining body that frankly addressed the artist's sexuality. Of these autobiographical paintings Semmel commented: "What I was trying to get was first of all the self: the feeling of self and of the experience of oneself; secondly, the feeling of intimacy, of how one really relates to another individual, to another person, to another situation. The real quality of contact, of touch, of the eroticism of touch."² In order to capture this personal viewpoint of her body, the artist learned to photograph herself while in a reclining position, and then to make color Xeroxes of the slides that resulted from this photography. Collages of these Xeroxes became the preparatory studies for her monumental canvases.

In these self-nudes, breasts, torso, upper thighs, and hands appear in an enlarged, cropped format. Multiple images of body parts range in style from photographic realism to highly impressionistic strokes of color. Often the hands became the focal point as Semmel considered the acceptance of her body as a sensual instrument. The painterly surface, bold colors, and pronounced light and dark contrasts dramatized these examples of a personal search for self-discovery.

Self-Portrait on the Couch (1983) signals a new range of interests in Semmel's self-analysis. While Alice Neel has recently produced a nude self-image of the artist painting at age 84, Semmel has turned

to a fully clothed (and thus more conventional) self-portrait that still allows for a feminist reading. As a study of a sensitive yet determined woman, Semmel's new image emphasizes face and accompanying accoutrements over the close-up depiction of limbs and breasts as a vehicle of self-revelation. When the artist declares of the recent painting, "I tried to show myself as I sense myself,"³ she also acknowledges that the physical presence, the open introduction of the previously taboo subject of a woman's sexual drives and auto-eroticism, has been joined with other issues that are a part of her being. Semmel wished to include "those things that have affected me: family expectations, sexual needs, the struggle to remain one's own person."

In this self-likeness, the artist candidly includes references to the "patriarchal situation" under which she operates while attempting to take charge of her life. Semmel's right hand holds artist's brushes while it also clutches a photograph of her father. Behind her couch, the standing nude portrait of her lover concludes the allusion to the men in her life whom she seeks to please while remaining her own person. The manner of execution gives an urgency to the content.

century Holland for her genre studies and portraits; her self-likeness bespeaks the artist's control of her own destiny. Marie Louise Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun, painter to Marie Antoinette, is also relevant here. The French artist depicted herself working joyfully at her easel, but with the fierce determination that enabled her to survive the downfall of her aristocratic patrons. One wonders whether these vivacious, overly flattering self-portraits were honest about the plight of these women artists. Other artists of the early twentieth century who can be compared to Joan Semmel in their creation of self-images are Suzanne Valadon and Paula Modersohn-Becker. Both women were straightforward in their presentation of themselves.

The dilemma for contemporary women artists seems to be candidly expressed in Semmel's self-image. One senses the personal conflicts. The severity of the face bespeaks determination and ambition, while the hands holding eyeglasses, brushes, and photograph signal the various demands and conflicting loyalties that comprise a woman's life. While this painting is easily accessible to women who have faced similar conflicts in their professional and personal lives, Semmel wishes her self-portrait and other confrontational portraits to reach both a male and female audience. She realizes that the previous self-nudes were particularly addressed to women in their feminist approach to the nude in art and their interest in presenting female sexuality. In her recent portraits, however, the artist has declared a different motive: "I am interested in psychoanalysis as it relates to a power analysis."

A survey of some of the images included in the current show confirms this stated purpose. Group portraits often include female and male figures in juxtaposition, encouraging the exploration of the relationship between the sexes. Thus far Semmel has used members of her family in these canvases, and therefore the "specific nature of the individual" (which she has determined is one of her principal interests) is well known to her. Her feminist sensibility is applied to a range of issues in these works. For example, Semmel tries to reveal the underpinnings of the structures under which we live. Often she is critical of these structures or institutions.

In *Together* (1983) Semmel shows a married couple who are joined in a "life-long commitment to struggle against each other." For both parties in this marriage the inner tensions and resentments join with self-doubts, and the artist attempts to record all of these emotions on her large-scale canvas.

In *Motorist and Child* (1982) Semmel chooses to present a subject that is part of the new consciousness of the mutual responsibility of parenting. Here Dan Newman, a faculty member at Rutgers University (where Semmel also teaches), is shown with his young son. The artist intends not only the image of a nurturing father, but also the consideration of differences in the definition of women and men in their roles as parents. Throughout history an image of a woman with her youngster has been titled "Mother and Child," while males are seldom identified through their roles as parents. *Motorist and Child* is a deliberate transposition of the Madonna and Child theme, suggesting that even the innocuous title that makes reference to the man's current activity is preferable to society than his definition as a father.

In her confrontational approach to real situations and actual people, Semmel hopes to infuse "a certain level of feeling" into her work. Of the individuals she depicts the artist states, "I want these people to be specific and timeless." She hopes that her subjects will function symbolically, and that "people will read their own experiences into the work."

Patty (1981), the artist's portrait of her daughter, shows Semmel's empathy for this young woman who communicates a strong female presence. There is nothing demure or self-effacing in this image of a young aspiring artist. Semmel herself now recognizes that her portrait parallels a portrait of a young woman artist attributed to Con-

stance Charpentier (1767-1849). The image of *Charlotte du Valnes* (Metropolitan Museum of Art) had been attributed to David 1951, and is now considered an outstanding work by a woman of the early nineteenth century. Charpentier's charming image of a young woman at work, leaning forward in her chair, her face by ringlets of hair, is strikingly similar to *Patty*, both visually and thematically. The self-determination and energy of both women lies the more romantic, languorous images of women often found in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Semmel's portrait conforms to the feminist sensibilities of the 1970s. *Patty's* size and alert pose suggest that younger women will not have to struggle as desperately as their mothers for self-determination.

Power struggles, both in work situations and family relationships, also find expression in Semmel's recent portraits. The largest in the exhibition is *Faculty Frieze*, a study of some of the members of the Art Department at Rutgers University as they appear seated at a long table for a meeting. The attitude of each figure represents something about group dynamics is revealed. Curiously, although there are several women on the faculty at Rutgers, Semmel depicts only one woman present at this meeting. It is still the male artists who set the policy for the department and are the senior members of the faculty. Semmel's personal relationship with her colleagues in her professional situation is also implied in this gigantic painting.

Among family members, a similar struggle for leadership or domination is indicated by the artist's painting *Siblings* (1982). While the sisters are depicted reading and talking with their brother, the brother is clearly the dominant figure. Bearded, almost patriarchal in his appearance, the brother raises his hand in an authoritative gesture that finds no parallel in the posturing of the two women. Tending a biblical association in the inclusion of a book and the gesture of reading aloud, Semmel comments on the Judeo-Christian tradition that sets out male and female roles.

None of these portraits are ingratiating or sentimental. They confront us with situations that are a part of human experience. The artist concludes that resentments, hostilities, and desire for power within the family unit can be broadened to encompass power struggles among nations. Therefore, by understanding the basic level of human interaction, we can learn about the destiny of many.

As for her self-nudes, Semmel uses color Xeroxes taken from her own slides as preparatory studies for the large canvases. Scale is an important consideration in creating these images. She hopes to capture the viewer's attention and to draw her audience into the confrontational situations depicted. The brilliant colors chosen to surround the spectator to her images can also be related to the artist's abstract-Expressionist background. By selecting shockingly bright yellows and reds, Semmel not only commands the undivided attention of her audience but also separates her paintings from traditional portraiture. Abstraction also remains a principal concern with her compositions, and her painterly surfaces, choices of hues, and simplified forms attempt to balance formalist concerns with figurative content.

Some may identify with the individuals depicted in Joan Semmel's paintings, while other viewers may be disturbed by the candid confrontational presentation of life's painful experiences. Through these images Semmel encourages her audience to ponder the present and the future of interpersonal and international relations. Her traits attempt to capture the truth about specific individuals—their drives, their fears—while also exploring issues that are a part of human relationships.

1. Joan Semmel's new portraits and other recent paintings are on view at 112 Canal Street from May 1 to 27. A catalogue introduction was written by Lowery Sims.

2. Interview with Joan Semmel, September 7, 1978.

3. This and all following quotations are taken from an interview with Joan Semmel, March 17, 1984.

Joan Semmel,
Abings, 1982. *Oil on
canvas, 56 x 120"*.



Joan Semmel, *Together*,
1983. *Oil on canvas, 52 x 68"*.



Joan Semmel,
Self-Portrait on the Couch, 1983. *Oil on canvas, 68 x 72"*.

while the face is rendered in a sharp photo-realism, the expressive brushwork and brilliant colors enhance the artist's statements. *Self-Portrait on the Couch* implies a psychoanalytical correlative to the search for self-definition, making this portrait one of a contemporary woman who explores all means—therapeutic and otherwise—to gain self-awareness and resolve personal conflicts. Yet the image also has intriguing precedents in the production of women artists of the past. In recent decades, art historians have unearthed a number of these works for scrutiny, as such self-likeness might provide insight into the attitudes of women working in a field overwhelmingly dominated by men. Adelaide Labille-Guiard, active in France during the eighteenth century, is an example. She depicts herself resplendent in a satin gown and plumed hat, seated confidently at her easel while two female students stand behind her to observe her progress. Although she was one of only four women to be admitted to the French Academy in this period, a cer-

