

FACTS *OF* LIFE

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Traditionally an art of the Left, realism provides Joan Semmel with a means of articulating feminist issues. The 55-year-old artist lives in New York City and has been exhibiting since 1973. Semmel says she turned from abstraction to realism in the early '70s because "I needed a concrete narrative to put forward what I was interested in." Her ambitious *Changing Room* (1988) shows women gazing at their reflections in the mirrors of a locker room. According to Semmel the work "deals with the specific that connects to the sociological. The locker room painting," she explains, "presents women of different ages fighting growing old. And what's more shameful than being old in our culture?" Semmel uses realism to wrest images of women from the idealized, sentimental, and erotic contexts in which they have traditionally appeared. However, rather than presuming objectivity or "truth," Semmel's descriptive illusionism merely sets the stage for her subject—women searching for their own "truths," or identities. This harks back to 19th-century realism, which was born from Courbet's desire to talk about himself rather than history or mythology.

Semmel's work, which depicts human beings actively seeking a believable reality, states openly the message of all good realism: the view out the realist window depends on the vantage and values of the looker. The multiplicity of realist styles suggests that the "truth" of realism is not objective and universal, but subjective and personal. As opposed to the naturalism of the Renaissance, contemporary realism never asserts that by surveying appearance we can know the world. Rather, the realist image communicates private realities; the conventions and techniques of the style serve as a working vocabulary.



The concern with growing old in our society is conveyed in Joan Semmel's *Changing Room*, 1988, oil on canvas, in which women confront their own images.

Long eclipsed by a host of more fashionable styles, contemporary American realism continues and evolves. The realist painters have a passion for the concrete—the world as they see it

BY NANCY GRIMES