

Joan Semmel

Greenville County Museum of Art
Greenville, South Carolina
June 4 - 30

May Stevens

July 2 - 28

Joan Semmel's and May Stevens' shows are the second and third segments of a four-part series entitled "Selves," which embraces the time-honored themes of the ages of humanity, the content of each of those ages, and the individual's search for meaning. In the context of this philosophical construct Semmel

deals with the realization of middle age and Stevens with the introspection of advancing years. The sequential format of the exhibition series as a whole (including Bob Stanley in the spring and Andres Serrano in late summer) may prove difficult for people who have missed the first segments.

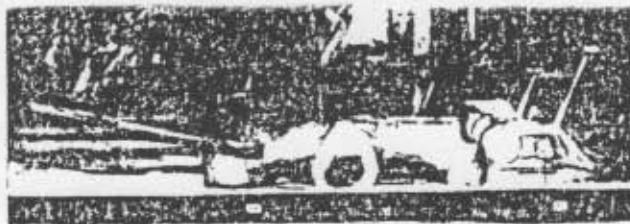
None of the Semmel or Stevens paintings are benign in concept or visual impact; instead they are involving and thought provoking. These large monochromatic paintings are disconcerting and allow the viewer very little relief. These particular pieces, chosen from larger, broader bodies of work, constitute a strong, hard look at the search for meaning in life. None speaks simply of the joy of life. All is questioning, reflection, realization.

Joan Semmel's large early works such as *Me Without Mirrors* (1974) focus on the youthful body of the artist who sits quietly nude and contemplative. The works progress from this relatively realistic view of the artist's young body to a more expressionist analysis of her aging life and body. In the later works the artist/model often looks through a camera or toward a mirror, used as devices to indicate solitude and analysis. The setting for these later works is a gymnasium or locker room where the artist is attempting to stay some of the impact of time, even while becoming increasingly aware of those effects and of the perceived distance between the current self and the other, symbolically younger woman. *Abeyance* (1986) the largest and most colorful of the paintings, shows a woman with her back to the viewer, now clothed, doing floor exercises squarely in front of a gymnasium mirror. The woman's torso and face are bent to the floor toward the mirror; we see only her back and stretched, straining legs. *Roschach Reflections* (1991) shows the artist contemplating herself in the mirror through a camera lens and evaluating what she sees. Known for her keen observation and strong painting style, Semmel is able to reveal a great deal to the viewer through an unusual angle or perspective and a momentary expression.

In *Selves* (1983-85) May Stevens is interested in portraying the loneliness of old age. Like Semmel, she, too, uses a single model, her mother, for each of four works. These paintings are not only compelling in their subject matter but painted with a forceful, intuitive hand. After the images for each piece were determined and refined compositionally, they were drawn on the canvas. At this point the artist threw herself exuberantly into the act of painting. The resulting works are overwhelming, both physically and emotionally. Because of the scale (some are almost 12 feet wide) and imagery they seem to be made for public display rather than for private living or working spaces. It is compelling to walk into the gallery and be surrounded by these severely monochromatic figurative paintings. There is no respite from the size, subject, or lack of color.

Sharon Campbell

Sharon Campbell is an artist who lives in Greenville, South Carolina.



Joan Semmel, *Abeyance*, oil on canvas, 68" x 96", 1986 (photo courtesy of Greenville County Museum of Art).

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