

►Art

EYE OF THE BEHELD

By Mark Moffett

Through the Object's Eye: Paintings
by Joan Semmel
Swiss Poster Art from the CIBA-GEIGY Collection
The University Art Gallery, SUNYA, both shows through April 12

WEIGHED AGAINST THE WEALTH of international styles it parallels and dimly plunders, the evolution of Swiss poster art during this century is a tame adventure indeed, and this retrospective offers but a secondary history of poster graphics. Naturally, it's a handsome exhibit and there's nothing to dislike. Oddly, or perhaps not, given the current absorption rate of appropriation, this show's century's worth of poster art could pass for the tidy advertising pages of this month's *Vanity Fair*. An ad for Davos is an ad for Davos no matter the style. Political and social urgency are plainly absent from the show—bless their lucky Swiss stars—and aside from the odd environmental pitch, as in *Save Our Water*, circa 1961, there isn't much to grasp beyond the visual courtesies of general advertising. A wry cry of sanity was heard from one poster in particular: the bold red words "LESS NOISE" (in German) blasting at a harsh angle from the ears of a cringing woman. Suffering is truly relative.

A more engaging body of work is found upstairs at the University gallery, in Joan Semmel's large figurative paintings from 1974 to the present.

Ostensibly, these paintings are about the nude figure; more importantly, they are about point of view. In all but her latest works, which explore women looking at other women in a "locker room" series, the perspective Semmel presents is that of the artist looking at herself from the torso down in a variety of recumbent attitudes—just as one would see one's lower extremities. Semmel's head is thus not depicted, but is instead suggestively replaced by the entirety of the canvas, which illusively represents her singular point of view. Captured simultaneously in this point of view, and summed up nicely in a pair of early titles, *Me Without Mirrors* and *Intimacy/Autonomy*, is the notion of the observer and the observed, a self-contained and self-controlled aperture that deconstructs the typical isolation of the female nude—particularly as it has been interpreted by male artists and society in general—and that invests the candid sensuality of Semmel's nudes with an aura of autonomous mental activity. Hence the show's title, which could have been "Through the Sex Object's Eye."

This aura, of an active-objective/subjective-ingredient, is further pursued through Semmel's sure handling of contrasting styles and painting techniques. Basically, Semmel presents two traditional approaches, and then a third involving their conjunction. In her earlier work we are given a preciously glazed, closed and academic realism akin to say, Phillip Pearlstein's. In her most recent work, which is also more extroverted thematically, we are given a painterly, gestural realism in common with say, Fairfield Porter's. And in between these depictive approaches, representing more than a confused transition, are a group of works that combine the disparate approaches to form compelling hybrids. In *Turning*, for

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example, the sensual, if more "academic" view is mysteriously enveloped by a flamboyantly open-ended echo of the same figurative pose done in the gestural manner. The resulting effect is of a fairly surreal and slowly read maze of cascading limbs and internal rhythms. Not to mention that the painter also renders brilliantly the sensation of turning in one's sleep.

For the sake of discussion it seemed relevant to mention the likes of Pearlstein and Porter. For both, the former coolly and clinically, the latter warmly and expansively, have pursued their vision of the figure in a manner that approaches pure abstraction; Pearlstein's patient outlay of complex figurative arrangements makes one practically forget the figure, while Porter's bold, contiguous brushwork lets abstract passages of paint reveal the figure. Semmel, on the other hand, uses her considerable bag of skills—her delectable passages of paint and line, dramatic foreshortening, nimble perspective through the use of warm and cool colors, and her juicy sense of light in general—to illustrate not a detachment from, but the connection to, her body. As simple as it sounds, prevalent issues like the bodypolitik have a way of making abstract tendencies seem like child's play.

If there is a drawback to Semmel's method, it is in the inescapable sense that her point of view is more or less guided by a viewfinder, i.e., a photographic frame. One feels that she works from photographs (*Looking Glasses*, a locker-room painting in which she is seen photographing herself in



View from a thrill: Joan Semmel's *Red Spread* (1985, oil on canvas).

a mirror, would seem to bear this out, although there are other reasons to think so), and this brings a certain detachment back into play. One thinks, unfortunately, of the budding photographer's second conceptual breakthrough when, realizing that outer perception can be guided to include the self, a picture of feet is taken. This type of thought tends to cheapen Semmel's entire effort, reducing her painterly bravado and mind-teasing hybrids

to a contrivance meant to veil their plain point of departure. But, for all that, Semmel's paintings explore the kinds of regions only paint can find, the inexpressible regions of viruses and fragile, fugitive vision. The paintings are involving, and their "point of view" withstands scrutiny.

Passing praise for the wonderfully diverting exhibit of student work in the upstairs alcove. ■