

Wake-Up Call

By Arlene Raven

Joan Semmel: "An Other View"

Bypass Gallery
578 Broadway
Through March 27

"Through the Object's Eye: Paintings by Joan Semmel"

Pratt Manhattan Gallery
295 Lafayette Street
Through March 20

The shape of flesh-and-blood female beauty during the 1980s was determined by the proportions of mannequins. Store dummies embodied the ideal images promoted by the multibillion-dollar fashion, diet, and plastic surgery industries. The new standard, of large-breasted, wasp-waisted "natural" femininity was abnormal, artificial, expensive, and, in the end, unattainable.

Artists whose works portray the body have engaged in a dialogue with these and other changes in the contemporary physique. Three recent exhibitions ("Object Lessons," Organization of Indepen-

dent Artists, the Police Building, 240 Centre Street, through March 13; "Bodily," Penne Hart Gallery, 152 Wooster Street, through March 20; and "Body Work II" by Greta Sarfaty, Foster Goldstrom Gallery, 560 Broadway, Suite 303, through March 3) offer as abundant and diverse an array of visual positions as they exhibit a wide variety of media and styles. Additionally, the new art of Joan Semmel, Mary Beth Edelson, and Nancy Fried—artists who work from their own bodies and who are veteran survivors of the feminist wars—put forth singular historical observations and synthetic understandings about the passage of the cultural as well as the physical corpus over the past two decades.

In the 20 paintings of "An Other View," Joan Semmel has given the most concrete kind of historical diary. Five "Over-Lays," her latest works, are painted on top of earlier canvases. The spare, linear brushwork creates schematic figures that transform her previous statements in representation and style. Using her own breakthrough Photo-Realistic canvases of the '70s that barely contain youthful figures having sexual intercourse, Semmel explores the physical properties of aging women.

The new women who populate Semmel's "Over-Lays" are practiced, sophisticated adults of middle age who shimmer with potential vigor yet relax in repose. These same women first appeared in her "Locker Room" series, also on view. The elders at their ease in health-club locker rooms transgress traditional male territory on the one hand, and to yield to con-

temporary criteria of perfection that require the daily alteration of the body on the other.

Unlike the spontaneous celebrations of sexual expression (the "free love" of the '60s and '70s), these women are painted in an expressionist style that bonds them directly and individually to their creator, who now knows that there is no free lunch. To witness this reality, the artist, naked and fully included in the scene, looks from the background, eye to camera lens, and takes a picture.

Seeds of the awareness of natural demise or swift slaughter of the flesh were already sewn at the beginning of the most recent feminist era. Nineteen seventy marked the flowering of omnipresent "love" set into motion in the '60s among the younger generation, but also the killings of students at Kent State and Jackson State during that era's protests.

The 20 years between Semmel's two groups of female subjects have marked their formal properties and sensual tones. Less about memory than the weighing of dreams and waking reality, "Over-Lays" presents an all-female society calmly gazing into the framing looking glass to learn something about themselves as ever-changing existential and social beings. To this end, they turn their backs in favor of showing their tits. In mythic terms, "Over-Lays" charts the passage from maiden—the younger woman—to the wiser elderly crone. Physically painting over and philosophically looking back, Semmel sees now that her real subject, and the essence of physicality (she told me recently), is mortality.