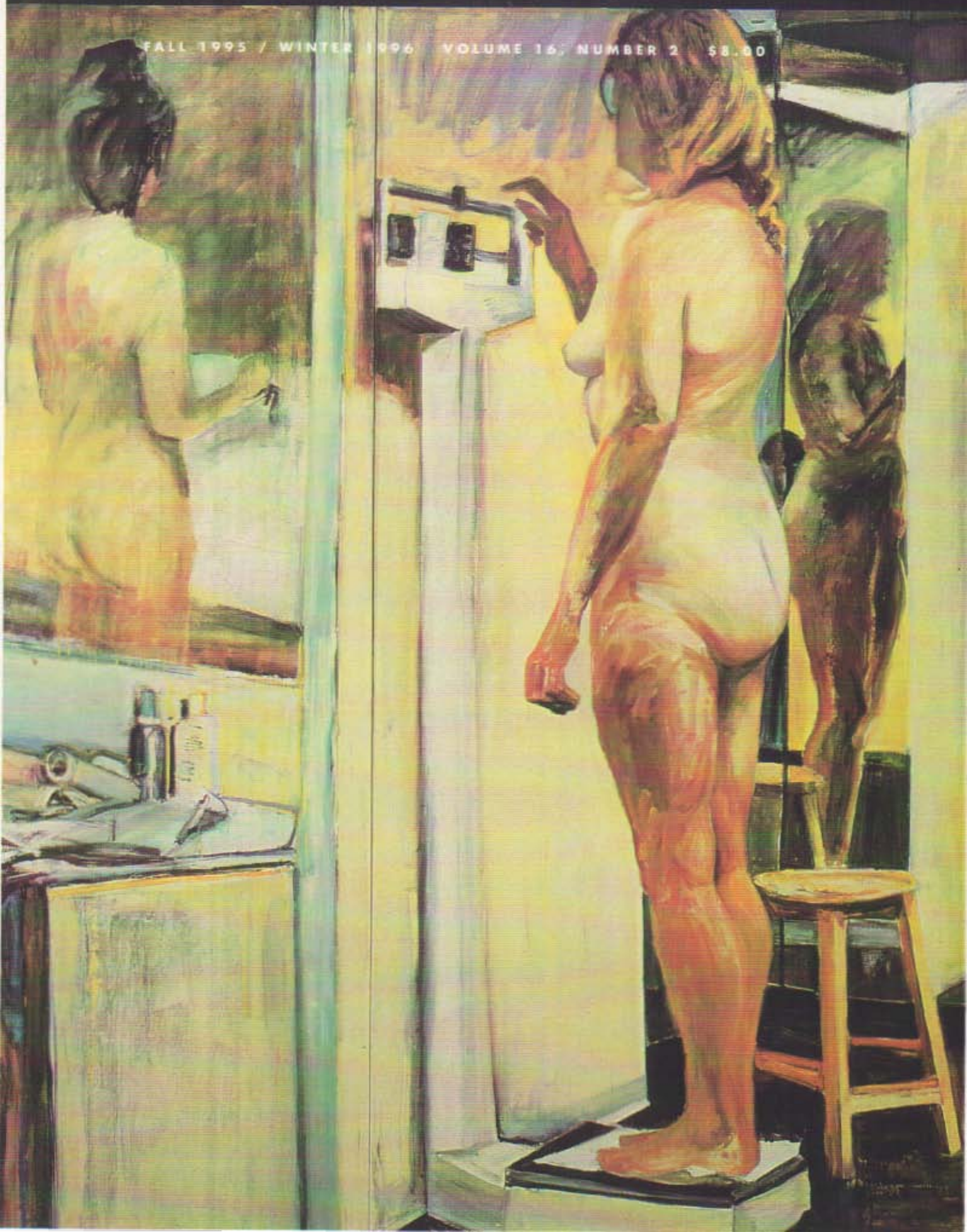


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JOAN SEMMEL'S NUDES

The Erotic Self and the Masquerade

By Joan Marter

Joan Semmel's frankly erotic images and provocative use of her own nude body in paintings of the 1970s paralleled theoretical discussions of female sexuality and the male/female "gaze" that continue to interest feminists.¹ Before women's studies theorized about the subject, Semmel had explored female sexuality in her art. Like multimedia artists Carolee Schneeman and Hannah Wilke,² Joan Semmel made explicit the sexual liberation of self. These works from the seventies evidenced women's acknowledgement of their erotic interests and willingness to present the full range of their sexual appetites through their own bodies. Semmel's more recent paintings—mostly images of women in unguarded moments—contribute to the discourse on female masquerade and the quest for gender identity.

The candid eroticism of her paintings and the use of her nude body must be related to the conventional lifestyle Semmel repudiated by becoming an artist. She lives in New York City, where she was born in 1932, and attended the famed High School of Music and Art. Her gifts as a painter were encouraged there, and her parents agreed to send her to art school, although they did not intend for her to pursue an art career. At Cooper Union in the early 1950s, she studied painting with Nicholas Marsicano and Morris Kantor.³ Reflecting back, Semmel claims to have struggled to unlearn this early training in order to find her own way as an artist.⁴

Semmel's art instruction was interrupted in 1952 by marriage to a civil engineering student at Cooper Union. Daughter Patricia was born in 1955, and Semmel settled into a conventional married life in Queens, New York. Serious illness intervened, however; Semmel contracted tuberculosis and was confined to a hospital for six months. Isolated from her 18-month-old daughter, with hours of involuntary solitude, she reflected on her troubled marriage and her identity as a wife/mother and resolved to return to her art. Her studio became her refuge, the only place where she was "in control." While taking classes at the Art Students League, Semmel became involved with a community of artists that supported her work. Realizing that she probably would have to teach to support herself, at age 29 she enrolled at Pratt Institute; she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1963.

From 1963 to 1970 Semmel lived in Spain. Her husband had obtained an engineering position there, but she spent only the first two years with him (he left shortly after the birth of their son Andrew in 1965). As a foreigner she was treated with suspicion, and as a woman with two children and no husband to "escort" her, she was not accepted socially. During these difficult years Semmel's life and art took new directions.

Removed geographically from her intrusive family, she defied social conventions (she took a young Spanish lover), established her economic independence, and began to show her work both in Spain and in South America. Her estranged husband never supported their children. Even before their 1972 divorce, Semmel was their sole provider.

Although experiencing personal freedom on one level, Semmel

was living in a country where women were thwarted at every turn. Semmel's frustrations were "acted out" in her work. Whereas she previously had painted with the large, open brushwork of Abstract Expressionism, her forms now became "closed up" and more tightly rendered, her images like those found in Paul Klee. Her painting also became more figurative:

I still used the gesture very strongly....The kind of forms that evolved had certain psychological overtones. And for lack of any other word, I call it a certain kind of surrealist influence, in Spain and Europe. By the time I came back to this country, I had established a definite look that was particularly my own. When I came back [to New York in 1970], though, my whole life changed.⁵

Responding to the new social activism in American society, Semmel became involved in the burgeoning women's movement. She returned to Pratt, receiving her M.F.A. in 1972, and began teaching at the Maryland Institute of Art and the Brooklyn Museum Art School. Her awareness of women's issues was stimulated by contact with other feminists. As she recalled, "the excitement of having other women to communicate with, to be able to really express those feelings, to have them understood and to relate to other women was for me very, very important and very exciting."⁶

Attitudes toward sexuality had changed drastically during Semmel's seven-year hiatus in Spain, and in this new, permissive atmosphere she felt free to focus on the female nude, but not as it had been depicted in the history of art. Her paintings became a means to speak to other women about her experiences, to reach out to other feminists.

My return to the figure in 1970, from an Abstract Expressionist background, was prompted by a need to work from a more personal viewpoint, and was charged by my then-emerging consciousness as a feminist. The search for a plastic means with which to express personal and social concerns has led me to the most literal possible interpretations of female self-determination, a first person definition of self.⁷

The nudes were more frankly sexual than most conventional figure studies by male artists, although among women painters of the early 1970s Semmel was not alone in creating erotic imagery. As issues of obscenity were debated by the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Warren Burger, new magazines were being published with ever more explicit sexual content. In a 1974 article entitled "Women in the Erotic Arts," Semmel, along with Hannah Wilke, Martha Edelheit, and Anita Steckel were cited as women who broke new artistic ground with their openly sexual art.⁸ Accompanying photographs showed Semmel wielding a camera, taking pictures of a nude couple lying together on a small bed in various coital positions. Other photographs showed models in Semmel's studio assuming the positions of lovers found in her paint-

ings. Surrounding the nude models were large-scale canvases of a similar couple rendered in a smooth, Photorealist style. The paintings had been made from her photographs of a couple actually engaged in sexual activity before an audience of artists, who drew, photographed, or made films of their coupling.

Using her camera to replace preliminary sketches, Semmel made her own versions of Photorealist paintings. Her subjects, though, were more explicitly sexual than those of say, Philip Pearlstein, who was also using male and female nudes posed together in these years. Semmel's painted compositions seemed deliberately to challenge accepted artworld practice. Aware that her work might not find a gallery, she nevertheless created paintings that dealt with the "mutuality of sexual pleasure, unencumbered by the specific environment or any type of prop. Just two people enjoying one another."⁹ In actuality, Semmel did show her reclining nudes in several New York galleries during the 1970s.¹⁰

The sharp focus on these couples, with bodies entangled and rendered in heightened color, proved to be a transition to the next series, devoted exclusively to her own nude body. Semmel became aware of the power of the self-image, but hers is not the traditional mirror-likeness. Her work is closer in spirit to that of Paula Modersohn-Becker, who observed herself nude but also used her self-portraits to explore psychic states and gender identity. Semmel, however, reclines in her self-images. She does not show her face, but represents her body as she herself experienced it—not as a mirror image but through direct observation.

One of her last paintings from the love-making couple series, *Intimacy-Autonomy* (1974; Fig. 1), represents Semmel and a lover. In contrast to the active sexual engagement of the previous couples, these lovers lie side-by-side in a seemingly postcoital state. The chasm between the two bodies is charged with visual excitement, and the title suggests the artist's quest for empowerment while enjoying the pleasures of an intimate relationship. Semmel has always been concerned with formal principles, and in this composition the use of repeated triangles and interplay of solids and voids contributes to the painting's energy. *Intimacy-Autonomy* was exhibited in "Nothing but Nudes," a 1979 group show at the Whitney Museum. Critic Carter Ratcliff caught Semmel's meaning:

Given the dominance of men in the history of Western art, and given the feminist determination to change this, Semmel's image must be taken as an argument by example. In it, the male has attained to a traditional intimacy with the female, yet her view of human bodies—their symbolic freight—wins out. The very enactment of this viewpoint is presumed to have ideological force, and I think it does.¹¹

Mythologies and Me (1976; Fig. 2) was a response to the commodification of women in "gicle" magazines. Semmel was surprised by the number of publications exploiting women that she found on American newsstands after returning from politically conservative Spain. (Generalissimo Franco had banned all representations of sexuality.) Although Semmel did not oppose pornography, she found imagery depicting women as victims offensive. In her oversized triptych—each panel is five feet high—Semmel defies the mythology of gender as imposed by males. Situating an image of her nude body between a pin-up girl with spread legs and full breasts and an image adapted from Willem de Kooning's Woman Series, Semmel empowers herself by appropriating Modernism's "macho" bias. The pin-up is an enlargement of a *Playboy* magazine image to which the artist added a real stocking and feathers to enliven the provocative but scanty attire. In the generic de Kooning Woman Series painting, she accentuated the enlarged

breast by attaching a rubber nursing nipple to it.

Semmel has positioned herself between two gross distortions that degrade women and bespeak their unequal status. But while both the de Kooning female and the "porno queen" are meant to tantalize the viewer with their spread legs, Semmel turns herself away from the spectator: her thighs open in the opposite direction, for this is a woman gazing on her own nude body.

Semmel anticipated by 13 years Carol Duncan's discourse about gender identity in "The MoMa's Hot Mamas." Duncan spoke of pornographic images of women: "Like some ancient and primitive objects forbidden to the female gaze, the ability of pornography to give its users a feeling of superior male status depends on its being owned or controlled by men and forbidden to, shunned by, or hidden from women."¹² When Semmel appropriates an erotic image intended for the male gaze—literally turning it around—she defuses its impact, wrests it from male control. But even more provocative is Semmel's challenge to her spiritual "father" Willem de Kooning. Reared as she was in the Abstract Expressionist style (from which she continues to derive her gestural brushwork and brilliant palette), she was fully aware of the part played by images such as de Kooning's in projecting the Abstract Expressionists' "macho" persona.

Duncan and others have explained the connection between de Kooning's images of women and the male identity of Modernism, and Semmel presaged this discussion by showing the affinity between de Kooning's savage, bare-breasted harpy and sexually explicit images from popular culture.¹³ Only the active brushwork in the lower half of *Mythologies and Me* separates de Kooning's smiling, jagged-toothed earth mother from the more openly sexual posture of her sister from the magazine rack. In this triptych Semmel confronts the erotic core of works by a modern master and stimulates consciousness of the deep-seated anxieties women experience about gender identity and difference. The artist comments:

The de Kooning parody also has a rubber nursing nipple collaged on the breast with target circles painted around it. This was done before the articles on his relationship with his mother were published. I was commenting on the relationship to the porno queen, but also on the fear of the mother, and the male anxieties of female sexual power and their ways of coping with it by targeting and fetishizing women.¹⁴

Semmel continued to explore the erotic self in paintings of her reclining nude body. In *Pink Fingertips* (1977), for example, she reacts to the conventional portrayal of woman as the object of male sexual fantasies, challenging John Berger's assertion:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.¹⁵

Semmel has, however, co-opted the male gaze. Her female nudes represent sensual gratification through self-exploration. As she explained: "I went into the idea of myself as I experience myself, my own view of myself. What I was trying to get there was first of all the self, the feeling of self and of the experience of oneself."¹⁶

Initially Semmel used black-and-white photographs as preparatory studies for her monumental canvases. By photographing herself in a reclining position while holding the camera close to her head, she captured an intimate portrayal of her own body. The ex-



Fig. 1. Joan Semmel, *Intimacy-Autonomy* (1974), oil on canvas, 50" x 98". Artist's Collection.

treme foreshortening of the upper torso, flattening of the breasts, and enlargement of hands correspond to the position from which the preliminary photographs were taken.

With *Pink Fingertips* and other works from the seventies, Semmel established a recognizable format—a portrayal of her own nude body, breasts, abdomen, and upper thighs enlarged and cropped. Often the hands are the focal point of the composition. In *Pink Fingertips*, for example, an explicit autoeroticism results from the placement of the left hand between the spread legs, with the forefinger pointing toward the vagina. The artist alludes to the earliest sexual experience—the exploration of one's own flesh. These figures are without background or sense of place and are viewed with great intimacy. Warm skin tones, pronounced light and dark contrasts, and sharp-focus realism characterize these self-images. A female critic viewing her paintings at the Lerner-Heller Gallery in 1977 compared them to Monet's *Nymphs* in Paris, saying that they

*gave the impression that behind the white walls interspersing the painting was a continuous world of sensuous flesh. The installation is exquisite....Viewing one of her paintings is like looking down at your own body, which accounts in large measure for their compelling quality. They are also very sensual paintings; your eye passes over the undulating hills and furrows of flesh the way a hand does and the way her paintbrush did.*²⁷

By the early 1980s Semmel had returned to a high-keyed palette and painterly surfaces. She began to repeat parts of the body in ever more expressionist strokes—varying color, texture, and forms. Semmel reached an effective synthesis of her earlier involvement with Abstract Expressionism and the charged imagery of her personal search for self. Cropped fragments of the body painted in brilliant hues furthered her anticanonical approach to the choice of self as subject. At times Semmel combined collaged drawings with gestural paintings of the same body parts. The acceptance of the

body as a sensual instrument continues in these expressionistic works. The large scale of these paintings suggests cropped body segments as aerial landscapes: the topography of convex and concave forms become rolling hills, canyons, and caverns.

Semmel continued to develop the theme of the erotic self during the 1980s. In "Sexual Imagery in Women's Art," in the first issue of *Woman's Art Journal*, Semmel and April Kingsley described Semmel's paintings as "woman exulting in the pleasure and strength of her body, whether alone or with a partner,"²⁸ defying feminists who claimed that any representation of the nude female was destined for objectification.²⁹ Contradicting Postmodernist calls for the "death of painting," she remained committed to this conventional medium while subverting the notion that it was a "masculine" activity intended for a male audience.³⁰ With performance artist Karen Finley giving new resonance to the use of the nude body in art, and photographer Cindy Sherman employing plastic genitalia and breasts in erotic acts, Semmel found renewed relevance in her painted nude female protagonists.

Beginning in the late eighties, after years of viewing her nude body in isolation, Semmel resituated herself in more public places: at the beach and in the locker room of a health club. In works such as *The Changing Room* (1988; front cover), she depicts women drying their hair or applying makeup. In *Masque* (1992; inside front cover), the faceless woman, clad only in bikini briefs and holding a camera, is the artist herself. A second woman, viewed from the back and in mirror image, applies lipstick. Here Semmel deconstructs the "masquerade" identified by French psychoanalysts and feminist theorists. In 1929, Joan Riviere articulated the notion of the masquerade—suggesting that women might flaunt their femininity as a reaction-formation against transsexual aspirations or identification, or against fear of reprisal for having usurped the dominant role.³¹

Semmel's locker room women are empowered by their athleticism and camaraderie. Functioning away from the male spectator, they are autonomous and active. The women are "masculinized"



Fig. 2. Joan Semmel, *Mythologies and Me* (1976), oil and collage on canvas, 60" x 44", 60" x 60", 60" x 64", Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas, Austin. Gift of Buffie Johnson. Photo: George Holmes.

by their strenuous physical activity and have shed the artifice of masquerade—of female demureness—by frankly encountering one another. These images can be viewed as a critique of Mary Ann Doane's observations:

The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely imagistic.... To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image.²¹

With *The Changing Room* and *Masque* Semmel aims a camera into the ubiquitous mirrors of the locker room and records the activity of the masquerade—women preparing to re-enter the realm of the male gaze—to compensate for their masculinized activity in the gym. They curl eyelashes, apply makeup, and examine themselves in small face mirrors. Robert Storr has described Semmel's locker room as a

hidden social labyrinth that reflects and magnifies the tensions of public reality.... To be sure the male gaze awaits these women and they know it. From that fact derives the poignancy and criticality of these pictures. What Semmel has done is to locate us in the off-stage world where the drama of seeing and being seen is prepared. There women put on the faces that they will present to the world as they matter of factly accept the de-eroticized exposure of their bodies.²²

In these paintings and others of the *Locker Room Series*, Semmel contrasts her own aging body with others that are younger and still preoccupied

with the artificiality of the masquerade. After decades in which she painted her reclining body as the erotic self, she now finds her image reflected in a mirror: more spectator than spectacle. Depicting nude females in an intimate setting, she subverts the voyeuristic possibilities of these glimpses into locker rooms and engages the continuing discourse on the female body. Lynda Nead writes:

The debates within feminism concerning the representation of the body by women performers have focused on this split between those who fear the inevitable recuperation of the female body to the patriarchal spectacle of women and those who see its potential as a way of building a new cultural presence for the female body by reversing the gaze and enabling women to become the speaking subjects of discourse.²³

Green Field (1992; Fig. 3), from her *Overlays Series*, has floating fragments of the earlier Photorealist paintings of coupling nudes overlaid by the back of an expressionistically brushed older figure—with broad hips and sagging contours—from her shower and locker interiors. Joanna Frueh credits Semmel, Schneeman, and Wilke for "their origination of a feminist erotica and their charting, over decades, of female pleasure."²⁴ With her *Overlays Series*, Semmel reintegrates the middle-aged feminine body with the discourse on female eroticism.

In Semmel's recent painting, *Elbow Room* (1994), a female nude points her flashing camera at the viewer. The snake-like tresses of the photographer identify her as Medusa, who, as one of the monstrous Gorgons in Greek mythology, turned into stone all who gazed upon her. Perseus, however, was ready for the challenge. With the help



Fig. 3. Joan Semmel, *Green Field* (1992), oil on canvas, 69" x 69", Artist's Collection.

of Athena and Hermes, Perseus severed the head of Medusa with a sword endowed with special powers.²⁶ Perseus appears in *Elbow Room* as an idealized male nude wielding a sword. The female temptress/monster is the predominant image, with overlays of mannequins, bathers, and a pre-Columbian fertility goddess. Thus Semmel expands her inquiry into the metaphor of the nude by engaging ancient mythological constructions of male/female struggles for dominance.

Diverse experiences of the female body have been problematized in the 1990s, and Semmel is attentive to overlays of feminist, artistic, and medical discourse in her paintings.²⁷ Her work can be contrasted to that of Kiki Smith, for example, whose figurative sculpture and works on paper "portray women's vulnerability. Fetal poses and lacerated or excreting bodies render women as the bearers of emotional duress."²⁸ In the fin-de-siècle mode that foregrounds disease and the metaphoric fragmentation of the body, Semmel's nudes seem healthy, whole, and fully sexual.

Artist, feminist activist, educator, Joan Semmel was at the forefront of the women's movement when it first developed in the early 1970s, and her voice resounds among women artists today. As a painter and an adviser of M.F.A. and B.F.A. students at Rutgers University since 1975, she has made a lasting impact on a generation of women. Besides her many solo shows, her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions devoted to the figure in contemporary art.

From her initial paintings of couples engaged in lovemaking, Semmel has continued her conscious efforts to present women as autonomous sexual partners actively seeking sensual gratification. Reacting to the frequent portrayal of women as the passive, exploited objects of man's sexual fantasies, the artist presents a more positive view of woman—foregrounding autocroticism and autonomy. By empowering women in her canvases, Joan Semmel denies the patriarchal association of woman's otherness with the paper or canvas—the metaphor of her nonsignification. Her presentation of the erotic self breaks open the boundaries between spectator and spectacle and stimulates a fresh discourse on the female nude. ●

NOTES

1. See, for example, Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* (Autumn 1975); Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic, Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970," *Art History* (June 1978), 236-51; Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983); Rosemary Betterton, ed., *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media* (London: Pandora, 1987); Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992).

2. See, for example, a nude Carolee Schneeman reading from *Interior Scroll*, first performed in New York City in 1975. Schneeman reads from a scroll pulled from her vagina, the text, *Cézanne: She Was a Great Painter*. For illustration, see Norma Braude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 162. In 1977 Hannah Wilke stripped and assumed various poses in her London, Ontario, performance, *Intercourse with...* See Thomas H. Kochheiser, ed., *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1989), 15, 139. See also Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art" (1976), in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* (New York: New Press, 1995), 98-113.

3. Nicholas Marsicano's (1914-91) early subjects were reclining female nudes painted in an expressionist style indebted to Chaim Soutine, Emil Nolde, and Willem de Kooning. Morris Kantor (1896-1974) worked in a variety of styles, beginning with Social Realism and ending with total abstraction.

4. Biographical information on Joan Semmel comes from an interview with the artist, East Hampton, New York, September 4, 1993.

5. Ellen Lubell, "Joan Semmel Interview," *WomanArt* (Winter 1977-78), 14.

6. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

7. Quoted in brochure for "Paintings by Joan Semmel" (Jorgensen Gallery, The University of Connecticut, Storrs, October 24-November 10, 1978), 2.

8. "Women in the Erotic Arts," *Viva: The International Magazine for Women* (January 1974), 74-83.

9. *Ibid.*, 82.

10. From 1975 to 1981, Semmel had five solo exhibitions at the Lerner-Heller Gallery in New York City, another at the Pelham-Von Stoffer Gallery in Houston, Texas, and five at college art galleries.

11. Carter Ratcliff, "Remarks on the Nude," *Art International* (March/April 1977), 60.

12. Carol Duncan, "The MoMa's Hot Mamas," *Art Journal* (Summer 1989), 177.

13. Establishing the male identity of Modernism has been a major project for feminists such as Linda Nochlin, Mary Kelly, Carol Duncan, and Griselda Pollock. See, for example, Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in her *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1988), 59-90.

14. Letter from Joan Semmel, June 14, 1993.

15. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1972), 47.

16. Lubell, "Semmel Interview," 16.

17. April Kingsley, "Joan Semmel," *The Soho Weekly News*, March 17, 1977, 21.

18. April Kingsley and Joan Semmel, "Sexual Imagery in Women's Art," *WJ* (S/S 1980), 5.

19. Lisa Tickner states, for example: "The depiction of women by women (sometimes themselves) in this quasi-sexist manner as a political statement grows potentially more powerful as it approaches actual exploitation but then, within an ace of it, collapses into ambiguity and confusion. The more attractive the women, the higher the risk, since the more closely they approach conventional stereotypes in the first place; see her "The Body Politic, Female Sexuality and Women Artists since 1970," *Art History* (June 1978), 246. See also Carol Duncan, "The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art," *Heresies* (January 1977), 46-50.

20. Joan Semmel, "Between the Censor and the Muse: Joan Semmel on Power/Sex/Fantasy," *Women Artists News* (Winter 1986-87), 5.

21. Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in Hendrik M. Rutenbeck, ed., *Psychoanalysis and Female Sexuality* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1966), 213; reprinted from *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (1929). Also see Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts, 1980), 99-106.

22. Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* (September-October 1982), 82, and "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," *Discourse* (F/W 1988-89), 42-54. See also Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986).

23. Robert Storr, "Joan Semmel, Recent Work" (East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art, New York, 1989).

24. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude*, 68.

25. Joanna Frueh, "The Erotic as Social Security," *Art Journal* (Spring 1994), 66.

26. Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York: Mentor, 1963), 142-45.

27. See Kathleen Adler and Marcia Pointon, eds., *The Body Imaged: The Human Form and Visual Culture Since the Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University, 1993).

28. Jeff Rian, "What's All This Body Art," *Flash Art* (January-February 1993), 52.

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