



"Joan Semmel," installation view at Alexander Gray Associates, New York, April 2011



Joan Semmel, *Erotic Yellow*, 1973, courtesy Alexander Gray Associates



Joan Semmel, *Crossed Legs*, 2011, Alexander Gray Associates, New York



Joan Semmel, *Triptych*, 2009, Alexander Gray Associates, New York



Joan Semmel *Self-Portraits* (both 2010) at Alexander Gray Associates, New York, April 2011



Joan Semmel with her painting *Transformation* (2010) at Alexander Gray Associates, New York, April 2011

Joan Semmel THE FEMINIST NUDE

by Barbara Pollack

Most feminist artists from the 1970s have been trapped in a kind of time capsule by the art world, one which preserves their past successes and ignores their more recent endeavors. So kudos to Chelsea art dealer Alexander Gray for featuring the latest paintings by veteran artist Joan Semmel (b. 1932), a pioneer of feminist figuration.

This show reveals that Semmel has still got it. Her most recent paintings are fascinating works about her own body, which incarnate the antidote to narcissism, unflinching and incisive. In *Triptych* (2009), which hangs above the gallery's desk, we see the artist in three fully nude poses. The look on her face is provocatively proud even as she exposes her older -- rather, "more experienced," and still attractive -- form.

Semmel has no reason to be afraid to act or look her age, as two paintings that focus on her face make clear. While they are sensuous, they each reveal the kind of streaks and blurs that occur during a long exposure on film -- and in life. In the 2010 painting *Transformation*, she creates the effect of a double exposure -- it is difficult to ignore that it might be twice as difficult to make this kind of work after you reach a certain station in life.

While this series begs comparisons to John Coplans' iconic photographs of his aging body, it is more useful to appreciate Semmel's paintings not as a commentary on aging but rather as an extension of the arc of her work over the last 30 years. One of her classic works from the 1970s, high-key in color and defiantly erotic, is installed in a back room: in it, we see her own hand as it reaches for her pubic hair, represented from her own vantage point.

Now, in 2011, we have *Crossed Legs*, in which that same hand -- now gently marked by veins -- caresses her thigh. Both the older and the new work are simultaneously confrontational and vulnerable, forcing viewers, and subject, into a kind of intimacy that may not be entirely comfortable.

Three decades ago, critics would have said that Semmel's work "reverses the gaze." As her new exhibition makes clear, she has been pushing the boundaries of the traditional depiction of the female body consistently, opening doors for such diverse artists as Marilyn Minter and Lisa Yuskavage.

"Joan Semmel," Apr. 13-May 21, 2011, at Alexander Gray Associates, 508 West 26th Street, #215, New York, N.Y. 10001.

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