Joan Semmel

ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES
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One could call Joan Semmel, icon of the 1970s women's art movement, her own muse, if her ever-evolving tradition of feminist figuration did not so methodically refuse such romantic notions. Vanity is absent from her four decades of frank self-portraiture, as is introspection. Instead, Semmel's paintings give the impression that she has pragmatically chosen the naked woman closest at hand to forward her interrogation of the female nude. Her latest exhibition features recent works where her body is older, of course, and she does not apologize for this semitaboo self-exposure. Semmel describes her flesh—never in repose, with its wrinkling, dimpling, and sagging—in luminous detail. Her depicted aging represents a new defiance within her established practice of issuing challenges to the medium's customarily passive female subject.

Crossed Legs, 2011, echoes her influential "looking down" series from the '70s in which the viewer's perspective is aligned with the artist's as she regards the landscape of her own foreshortened form. An overlaid pair of legs gives the composition the kaleidoscopic effect of a photographic double exposure (all of the

Joan Semmel, *Crossed Legs***, 2011,** oil on canvas, 48 x 48".

works on view suggest motion through doubling or blurring). A silver and turquoise ring on Semmel's hand, the sole adornment in the show, anchors the painting at the center. The other objects that appear in this group of nudes include the glasses that sharpen her returning gaze in *Step-Ladder*, 2008, and the utilitarian prop for which the painting is named. Semmel's feminist argument is made through her insistence on activity and confrontation in her poses, and through her representation of a woman in her studio, but it is bolstered by the milky rendering of her form and her choice of deep lavender or canary backgrounds. The pleasure here is found in the act of painting, not in a meditation on feminine beauty.

— Johanna Fateman