

JOAN SEMMEL

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ALEXANDER GRAY

by julian kreimer

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Ever since relinquishing an Abstract Expressionist style in the early '70s, Joan Semmel has taken as her subject the nude—mostly herself, seen as if she is looking down at her own body. The new works at Gray are based on digital self-portrait photos. In the paintings, Semmel usually faces the viewer, and is shown blurred or in multiple exposures.

Among Semmel's classic images of the '70s are erotic scenes that, unlike the pornography she was critiquing, capture a range of impulses, not just lust. Ironically, the very technology she's now using (a computer's blue gleam is reflected in her eyes in *Self-Portrait #2* and *#4*, both 2010) has allowed an exponential growth in pornography, so that it is possible to easily find images of nudes of all ages and in huge numbers.

These new paintings invoke a variety of allusions and moods, often enmeshed within a single work. *Transformation* (2011) presents two overlapping exposures. In one, Semmel is greenish and holds both hands to her hair, recalling an ancient Greek gesture of grief; in the other she is pinkish and touches her hair with only one hand, looking out at us with a come-hither look.

Triptych (2009), with its trio of women, more explicitly posits the aging body as a motif capable of carrying multiple meanings. The leftmost figure leans back, the blended brushstrokes and thin washes giving her flesh a soft-focus look. The middle figure leans forward assertively and is painted in higher contrast colors. Dark olive greens and purplish siennas in the shadows give way to cool bright pinks and lemon yellows. The figure on the right is blurred, her moving arms and head almost disappearing in washed and daubed brushstrokes of soft violets and oranges that echo Bonnard's ghostly late views in a bathroom mirror.

It's this duality of erotic charge and aging that Semmel seems interested in not so much interrogating as playing with, alternately softening and hardening the focus to emphasize smooth skin or signs of advancing years. The many ways she deploys paint—here carefully delineating a wrinkle, there broadly laying down a light translucent wash to allow a figure to melt into the background—lend these paintings a quality of extended reverie, of shifting thoughts and moods. The paintings assert, firmly but without undue vehemence, the artist's freedom to experience and express many selves.

Photo: Joan Semmel: Transformation, 2011, oil on canvas, 60 by 48 inches; at Alexander Gray.