

## Joan Semmel Casts ‘A Lucid Eye’

*Her increased interest in self-portraits dovetailed with her own observations of the aging process*

By Jennifer Landes | January 22, 2013 - 10:41am

Joan Semmel, a longtime resident of Springs, will have a solo at the Bronx Museum beginning today, with a reception on Saturday.

“Joan Semmel: A Lucid Eye” will include 27 recent self-portraits in which she explores the process of aging and reveals some of her working methods. A group of four paintings will illustrate how the artist takes pictures of herself in mirrors and then uses the photograph as the basis for the painting.

Ms. Semmel, who was born in the Bronx, was one of the organizers of a famous feminist art show at Ashawagh Hall in 1975, “Women Here and Now,” at which in one performance, Carolee Schneeman read from a scroll she gradually extracted from her vagina. The image of this work has been illustrated in countless art history books that examine the subjects of both performance art and feminist art.

Ms. Semmel studied at the Cooper Union, Pratt Institute, and the Art Students League of New York. She began exhibiting her work while she was living in Spain in the 1960s and then returned in the early 1970s to New York, where she became inspired to paint erotically-charged figures with an eye on mainstream feminine ideals. Her work also involves classic feminist art themes such as the viewer’s gaze on the subject/object of the painting. But she also examines other themes such as the relationship between reality and fabrication and age and beauty. Her increased interest in self-portraits dovetailed with her own observations of the aging process and she uses as her subject her body or face as reflected back to her in a mirror.

The curator of the exhibition, Antonio Sergio Bessa, said in a press release “Semmel’s self-portraits are at their most lucid as she works through her 80s and reveals the realities of an aging body.”

Yet, in a New York Times review of her 2011 solo show at Alexander Gray Associates, Ken Tucker said, “In her new works Ms. Semmel has painted herself standing against blank walls with a caressing, Impressionistic touch, creating a soft-focus, Renoir-esque realism that erases the wrinkles, blemishes, veins, and other signs of ordinary aging. If, when you are old, your lover sees you this way — whether because of myopia or undiluted affection — you will be very lucky.”

Of her earlier works of nude couples portrayed from oblique angles and dramatically foreshortened in the spirit of Mantegna’s classic early Renaissance “Lamentation of Christ,” Mr. Tucker noted that the “male gaze did not own the field of desirous looking,” a significant contribution to feminist art history.

She has exhibited in numerous group shows in museums in New York, Los Angeles, the Netherlands, and Washington, D.C. Her work is also in the permanent collections of Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Blanton Museum, Austin, in Texas, Newport Beach Art Museum in California, Chrysler Museum, in Norfolk, Va.; National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., the Parrish Art Museum, and the Brooklyn Museum, among others. She is also professor emeritus of painting at Rutgers University.

The Bronx Museum exhibition will be on view through June 9. A reception will be held Saturday from 3 to 5 p.m.