

Museum Show Highlights Work of Octogenarian Bronx Native

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CONCOURSE — Joan Semmel's face was once a familiar sight in the Grand Concourse neighborhood where she was born and raised in the 1930s.

More than a half-century later, her face reappears there — 27 times over — in a new exhibition of the 80-year-old painter's recent self-portraits at the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#), just blocks from where she grew up.

Whereas Semmel painted her body — nude, cropped below the head and un-idealized — in her early work as a way to thwart female objectification, her latest portraits, painted over the past decade, pan up to her face in a subtle effort to short-circuit ageism.

"All the images you see are always of young people. Older people are just like throwaways," Semmel said. "I felt it was important to make images of older people that are not sentimentalized, that just become part of how people are."

Semmel has long photographed herself, often in front of a mirror, as a reference tool for her self-images, but would always paint the cameras out of the portraits.

Now, in several of these recent paintings, the camera and mirror are suddenly visible: flash, frame, distortion and all.

"The whole idea of the camera is: who's looking at who?" Semmel explained. "It's kind of a metaphor for me looking at the culture."

Antonio Sergio Bessa, the show's curator, called Semmel "the original bad girl," and said he was impressed, but not surprised, to see her continue to innovate late in her career.

"I think it's very courageous that at this point in her life, she's still taking chances with new models and experiments," Bessa said.

Semmel lived in Madrid in the 1960s, then returned to New York City in the 1970s, where her surreal, feminist-minded paintings of figures locked in erotic embraces began to attract notice. She later taught at Rutgers University for more than 20 years.

A longtime SoHo resident, Semmel called The Bronx show a "nostalgia trip," a thrilling chance to return to her childhood neighborhood, where "there wasn't a museum or galleries or anything like that," and find today a world-class contemporary art museum.

"To come back to The Bronx after having been in the larger world is kind of reaffirming," she said. "That one can understand one's roots, and enjoy them."

Another new exhibition at the Bronx Museum, "Honey, I Rearranged the Collection," highlights works in the museum's permanent collection, which dates to 1986.

Much of the work was recently acquired using funds gifted to the museum during its 40th anniversary commemorations last year and is being displayed for the first time.



One mural-sized painting from 1984 by Tim Rollins and the Bronx teens in his art program, called Kids of Survival (KOS), presents images of an urban wasteland on a canvas made of pasted-together pages from the book "Frankenstein."

A large canvas by Roger Shimomura from 1997, called "The Rape of Nanking," depicts a violent scene from the Japanese invasion of that city in the 1930s, but superimposes on it a bright yellow Pikachu character, from the 1990s video game "Pokemon," like a giant sticker.

And a plaster cast made by John Ahearn in 1982 forms a 3-D portrait of a young Bronx girl, Selena Panasik — who, as an adult, donated her copy of the cast to the museum.

Since it began its collection, the Bronx Museum has focused on amassing the work of under-represented, minority artists with diverse viewpoints, explained Bessa, the curator.

In the process, the museum sparked cross-cultural conversations that helped "demystify the idea of the exotic," and challenged institutions the world over to reconsider their own collections, Bessa said.

"Some ideas that we created here in the 1980s," Bessa said, "are now the international model."

The exhibition, "Joan Semmel—A Lucid Eye," runs through June 9, while the exhibition, "Honey, I Rearranged the Collection," is ongoing. The Bronx Museum, at 1040 Grand Concourse, is open 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday through Sunday and is always free.