

SHOWS THAT MATTER: Joan Semmel's Complex Nude Self-Portraits at Bronx Museum



Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York
Joan Semmel, "Untitled," 2007, oil on canvas

:

by Alanna Martinez

Published: February 4, 2013



"Unveiling," 2011, oil on canvas/Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

WHAT: Joan Semmel, "A Lucid Eye"

WHEN: January 24 – June 9

WHERE: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, Bronx, New York

WHY THIS SHOW MATTERS: [Joan Semmel](#)'s influential career has traversed the subjects of eroticism, traditions in painting, the female form, and feminist discourse since she began focusing on the figure in 1970s New York. Known for her paintings of couples engaged in sexual acts, untraditional portrayals of the female nude, and brazen depictions of beauty and aging, Semmel's work has been highlighted in major exhibitions like **LA MOCA**'s watershed "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution." But the artist is now on view in her first museum solo show in her home borough with the [Bronx Museum of the Arts exhibition, "A Lucid Eye."](#) The show includes 27 recent self-portraits focusing on Semmel's personal process of aging and corporeal transformation.

Semmel delves here into little-explored territory; though certainly no stranger to self-portraiture, her newest works (all painted from 2002 – 2012) are delicate investigations of the mature female body. The asymmetrical canvases are nearly all fragmented by the extra layer provided by the camera she uses to document herself in front of the mirror, often positioning the instrument strategically during her full-body poses to obscure her face or genitalia. That choice becomes a direct intervention with the tradition of the female nude, often reclining, where the face and genitalia are often the inadvertent focal points.

The paintings of her face, while seemingly simple and introspective, have timely significance. Having photographed herself as part of her work for four decades, Semmel's current use of the camera adds new meaning in the age of Facebook self-portraiture. The way that she bounces the light of the flash off her face, barely catching herself in focus, becomes more striking and raw from one canvas to the next. The lens and the camera document every angle of self-discovery and self-revelation in the process of her own aging – where she remains ever-comfortable and curious of her own form.