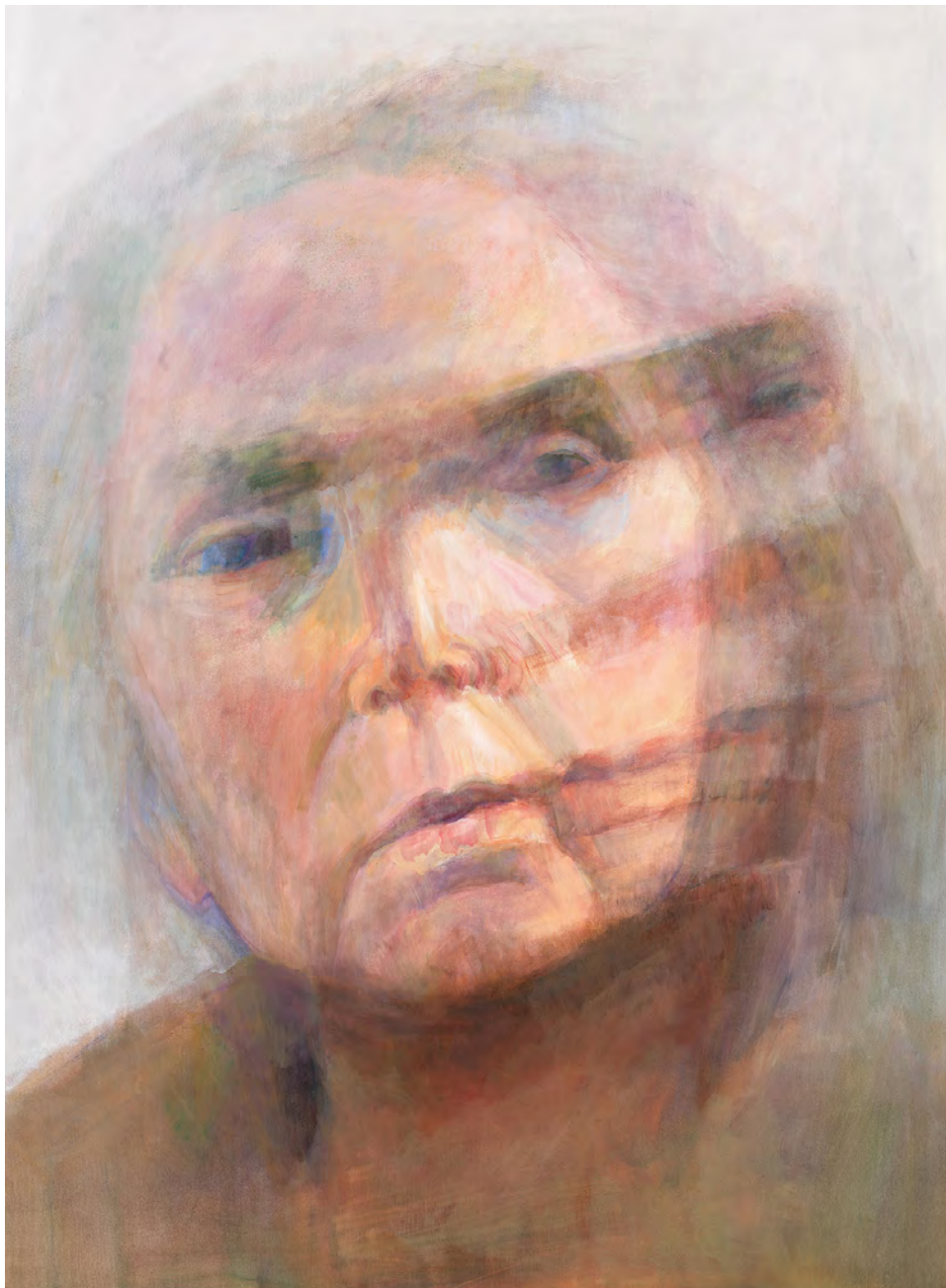


HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

On Sexual Paintings and Shifting Images: An Interview with Joan Semmel

by [Susan Silas](#) on May 6, 2015



Joan Semmel, "Self-Portrait #4" (2010) (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

I have known about [Joan Semmel](#) for a long time. But recently I began thinking about the parallel concerns between my own practice and the work of this artist 20 or so years my senior. I know the conditions for making art were far more difficult for women when Semmel's career began, and that she has been important both for her work and for her attitude toward working. The positions she staked out were far more radical, disruptive, and bold in the context of the early '70s than they were when, for example, I began working on my photography series [love in the ruins: sex over 50](#) in 2003. And she was brave enough not only to stick to her guns, but to go against the grain, making figurative work when it was most out of fashion in the art world.

Joan Semmel was always articulate about what she intended. She was breaking the rules. She was trying to create visual material that spoke to women and to female desire. And she inhabits her skin in a remarkable and comfortable way. You can see that in every self-portrait she paints, and you can see it when you meet her in person. The [current survey of her work](#) at Alexander Gray Associates — moving through abstract works from the late '60s, her early drawings, and her figurative works spanning nearly 45 years — seemed like the right occasion to request an interview. I had never met Joan before, and I knew that an interview would afford me an afternoon in her company.

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Installation view, 'Joan Semmel: Across Five Decades' at Alexander Gray Associates (2015) (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

Susan Silas: *I want to start with something you say in the catalogue essay for the current*

survey of your work at Alexander Gray Associates, which you actually wrote in 1973: “I was convinced that the repression of women began in the sexual arena, and this would need to be addressed at the source.” In the present, I tend to think about the right to equal access to the public sphere when I think about the repression of women. Do you still think of the sexual arena as the primary source?

Joan Semmel: You have to realize that was written back in the early '70s, and things were very different then. Sexuality now is an open book. The conditions today are quite different. That's why I say that younger women have to get on board, because I can't project myself into where they are and I can't speak for them. If you are talking about whether it is still that way, it is in more subtle ways. For instance, [Alice Neel](#) and [Louise Bourgeois](#) were both being shown early on. They were there, but they didn't get much attention until they got a lot older. I used to say, at that time, that you had to be at an age when you were no longer threatening sexually to get any kind of validation from the culture. I think that is still valid, but at this point the fact that women have desire is obvious to everybody, not just to feminists. Shame about the body is not the same kind of thing as it was back then. A lot of those aspects of sexuality are very different now. But the underlying fear is still there. The problems so many men have, in terms of being potent, are enormous. Now that women are competing with men economically and are more aggressive sexually, men are that much more fearful. Rape is prevalent in the military and colleges. Repression takes many forms.

SS: *So, given that women in the art world tended not to get serious attention until late in their careers, in the generation you are from and, I would argue, to a lesser degree but also in the generation that I am from, how do you think women and you personally managed to persevere when there was no attention on you and your work? Because I think that women need to work without validation from the outside much more than men do.*



Joan Semmel, “Untitled (figure study)” (c. 1972)
(courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, ©
2015 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society [ARS],
New York) (click to enlarge)

JS: A lot of artists have this problem — it is across the board for both men and women. But I do think that for women it is much more extreme. When you are young you get some attention just because of that, and then the curtain falls and you have to wait until you are no longer threatening.

SS: *And you have to live that long. Imagine if Louise Bourgeois had died at 60 instead of nearly 90?*

JS: Her work had been exhibited and drawn some notice, but she was not really out there until much later. So, I think it's different; it's difficult to work when you get no exposure. When you get a lot of attention, there is one set of problems, and when you don't get any, there's another set. So, if you are getting a lot of attention, you have the pressure of always topping yourself, so to speak, of having to perform and to be sure that what you do is as good, if not better, each time. If you are ignored, you are free to fail, but the failing can possibly knock you out completely. So you have to have a very strong sense of commitment to the kind of work that you are doing to survive.

SS: *Did you ever feel that you should give up?*

JS: No. My whole sense of myself is about doing my work — it's when I feel complete. I need to be doing it, whether I get attention or not. My refuge is the art making, so I don't think that I would ever have given up. And I didn't.

SS: *I know the women's movement played a big part as a support structure, but I am wondering if there were any particular artists in the '70s that you thought of not just as your peers but as a support network.*

JS: The support network was the women's movement. Most of good friends are from that period.

SS: *Women in general, or were they artists?*

JS: All artists. When your life is so completely involved in the arts, it's hard to have really good friends that are not also involved.

SS: *I want to ask about your sexual images. In the catalogue essay you talk about the use of color in your erotic images as a way of separating them from the source material that you also created.*

JS: Not from the source material that I created, but from pornography.

SS: *This is interesting for me, because I shoot sexual images of myself with my husband and I am often asked whether I consider those images to be pornography. My response is that it depends on what people are using my images for.*



Joan Semmel, "Red Ground" (1969) (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York) (click to enlarge)

JS: The use of color for me was, first of all, just part of the way I make art. I had come into doing any kind of figuration or representation from abstraction. I had always had free range of any color I wanted. If you look at the abstract paintings in the show, you will see that.

I was working with high color, with totally saturated color, and I wasn't willing to give it up even though I was moving into modeled form. Part of it was simply what I liked to do as an artist, and you have to remember that back then the word "pornography" had all kinds of horrible connotations, not in the way it does today. You can't think of it the same way. If you said "pornography," you immediately imagined the dirtiest, most horrible thing, whereas today it's an industry, it's a product, and it's on every television screen, and it's coming into every household. It has a very different connotation than it did back then, so I was terrified of being called a pornographer. And, that being the case, I thought about how I can make it different from pornography, because people asked me, 'Isn't it pornography?' just as they asked you that question. It could be challenged, but with the saturated color, it was harder to challenge it. The color brought it into the art realm of aesthetic experience.



Joan Semmel, "Erotic Yellow" (1973) (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

SS: *Were the source photographs of you?*

JS: No. Richard Meyer wrote about it. There was a couple back then — well there was a man, and he was an exhibitionist. There were several artists, the filmmaker Roz Schneider was a part of that group, and we used to meet to draw and take photos, and he would come with whatever woman he was with.

SS: *And they would model?*

JS: It wasn't modeling. They would actually have sex.

SS: *And they would do this with the intention of just being watched?*

JS: Yes, but they weren't posing. Back then there were a lot of these swinging clubs, and people were experimenting with all kinds of stuff. So, for us, it was an opportunity. Actually, I had first started doing the sex pictures out of my head, just imagining, and a friend said, "You should probably draw," and I said, "How am I going to draw this?" Then one of my friends said, "Well, I know somebody who would be just right." I have reams of action drawings from that period. When I wanted to use the camera, we knew each other by then, and they knew I wasn't going to be publishing any of it as sex photographs — that I was using it for paintings — and so I was able to take the photos myself.

SS: *That brings me neatly to my next question. I am curious about the decision to go from sketching to the photograph as a source, and if you would address how that changed what you were doing.*

JS: It was a long time ago. I think that I had exhausted what I could do with speed drawings, and also, it didn't give me enough information. I worked expressionistically from those drawings — the drawings were gestural, and the paintings were gestural. I wanted the images to become more iconic rather than so much about paint, and that's why I made the change and moved to the photographs. I remember also that on one of the paintings there were areas in the paint that started to feel more modeled, more three dimensional, and I felt that I got more impact than I did from the gesture of the brush. At that point, I started thinking about how I could get the information to get well-developed modeled form, and that's when I started to take the photos.



Joan Semmel, "Purple Diagonal" (1980) (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

SS: *You went from being an abstract painter to doing something much more figurative, but there are paintings in which the work is figural but there are swathes of abstract passages. I found that interesting because you talk at one point about a split between the external and the internal, and I have friends who talk about abstract painting as a form of inner freedom. Yet I think from the outside an abstract painting can look arbitrary or decorative to some. You made the decision to go toward something more figural, which in some way is more legible to an audience. Do you see the abstract as internal and the figural as somehow external?*

JS: There are several issues embedded there. I never thought of myself, when I switched over, as a "figurative painter." Never. I never made the break. I was never figural. What I was looking for were images that were iconic. I was looking for ways of making images that women would see as sexual for them, and so I wanted those images to register, and that is part of why I left the abstraction behind — because the abstract images are more diffuse. So, that is part of why I moved and why I looked to the photograph for information. Once I got there, I really longed to be able to open up — to not only paint in the way that required that slow build-up of a modeled form, especially since I had never been trained or educated to do that. I had to find my way into how to do that. I am virtually self-taught in terms of modeled form, and the photograph helped me. I was looking for a way that I would be able to use the abstraction and the modeled form together. And I spoke of it afterwards as an inner and outer experience, but I didn't think of it that way when I did it. You mentioned earlier that it wasn't "cool" at that time to be using the figure, and it wasn't. I knew that in taking that step I was isolating myself more and more from the mainstream of painting, and I was trying to find the bridge to connect to the mainstream also. So, by using both ways of working, I was hoping to establish that bridge. So for me, the abstraction was the external.

SS: *That's interesting, because I am so inclined to think of this in reverse; this is the opposite of what I would have expected.*

JS: No. The abstraction was the connection to the culture. And the image was an internal expression of what I was feeling.

SS: *I feel a great kinship with your paintings — the self-images in the mirror — because that is something I have been doing, photographing myself in the mirror. One of the things you've spoken of is the notion of self-articulation. When I think of this process of photographing myself in the mirror, I think about self-intimacy, the idea that there is a way in which I am different with myself than I am with others. I wonder if self-articulation means that to you, or if it means something entirely different?*

JS: I don't know if that's what it means precisely. I think, to me, self-articulation probably means more about being self-created rather than accepting how one is seen by other people — the possibility of being able to become yourself without having to absorb all of the images that are given to you by the culture. As women, we are surrounded by objectification.

SS: *I also tend to think of the self as fluid, that we are different in different circumstances and with different people. So, is there really such a thing as the self?*

JS: I did a show at the Bronx Museum of heads — I call them "heads" — portraits that are

just the head, and they are all me but none of them are the same. Just catching myself at lots of different times. And so, even with yourself you are not always the same; you are different from moment to moment because you act and are being acted upon. For me, the mirror was a tool, just like the camera is a tool. It's a way of getting the image, and I couldn't always be looking down at myself, so how could I get the rest of it?



Joan Semmel, "On The Grass" (1978) (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

The catalogue essay I wrote tells how those first pictures happened, about holding the camera. The first pictures I ever took in a mirror were at the gym, and I had no intention of taking myself that way. Then I got the stuff in the mirror and I thought, 'wow, why not?' But the other part of it that I liked very much was that, holding the camera to the mirror, when the picture is taken, the camera is then pointed at the audience, so it reverses the whole idea of being looked at. You're not only being seen, but you are seeing them. I found that a very nice kind of reversal, one that I call a destabilization of the viewer and the viewed.

SS: *And of course, in polite society at one time, women were not even supposed to make eye contact. They were supposed to be demur and look down.*

JS: But the camera also does something else, the big cameras especially: when you hold the camera up to your face, the camera is also a mask, because you no longer see the face. So you are not only looking out at the viewer, but you are masking yourself.



Joan Semmel, "Knees Together" (2003) (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York) (click to enlarge)

SS: *I named my series of sex pictures love in the ruins; sex over 50, and a friend remarked, "Ah, the final frontier, ageism." Now that the baby boomers are aging, it is interesting to see the response of the culture. It seems to me that you are documenting aging at the same time that you are documenting yourself.*

JS: It wasn't as if I went out to document aging, but I did recognize it. And I recognized it even before I would have recognized it as personal, because I was in the gym and there were women of all ages, and I liked that — that you got bodies from all different perspectives. And my body was aging, that was clear. And I understood that so much of what we were working against was not only being discriminated against as women, but also being discarded as women at a very early time of life. Men come into their power years at 50, and women are discarded at 35. I understood aging as being a part of accepting one's mortality and accepting one's vulnerability, but it's also a particular problem for women because of the whole problem of being a throw-away. Like a plastic plate, you can just get rid of them once they are used. And you are considered used and finished at a certain point.

SS: *Once you became more conscious of aging, you seemed to have developed a strategy in your paintings that is almost like a time-lapse.*

JS: I called the first ones "shifting images." How does one describe all of these things that we are talking about? I am not make narrative paintings, and I am not giving a lecture. How does one deal with those issues? One has to find a visual way of implying that kind of stuff. So, I experimented with the whole idea of the shifting image, so it's not as static and there is a

sense of disappearing — the image is there and suddenly it's not there and then it's really not there. So that it moves. I was interested in that from the point of view of the disappearing of the image, but I was also interested in it from breaking down the objectiveness of the image, of it being static. The image, the body, the woman is not a static object but is somebody that moves in space and time. And then, in the more recent works, I used transparency for the same reasons: to try to get the sense of motion and the question of time and a kind of layering of memory, of how you understand yourself as you are and as you were and as you will be.



Joan Semmel, "Ghost" (2009) (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Joan Semmel / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

[Joan Semmel: Across Fives Decades](#) continues at Alexander Gray Associates (510 W 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through May 16.