



Alexander Gray Associates

Joan Semmel

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4005 Basel, Switzerland

Alexander Gray Associates | Art Basel 2019 | Booth P19

Notes

¹ Joan Semmel, "A Necessary Elaboration" in *Joan Semmel: Across Five Decades*. New York: Alexander Gray Associates, 2015, 6.

² Johanna Fateman, "Joan Semmel," *4Columns*, February 1, 2019.

³ Anna Louie Sussman, "The Challenges Female Artists Face Mid-Career," *Artsy*, January 11, 2019.

Cover detail and interior spread: *Skin in the Game*, 2019, oil on canvas, 96h x 288w in (243.84h x 731.52w cm). © Joan Semmel/

Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Portrait: Joan Semmel in her studio, 2019. Photo by Taylor Miller.

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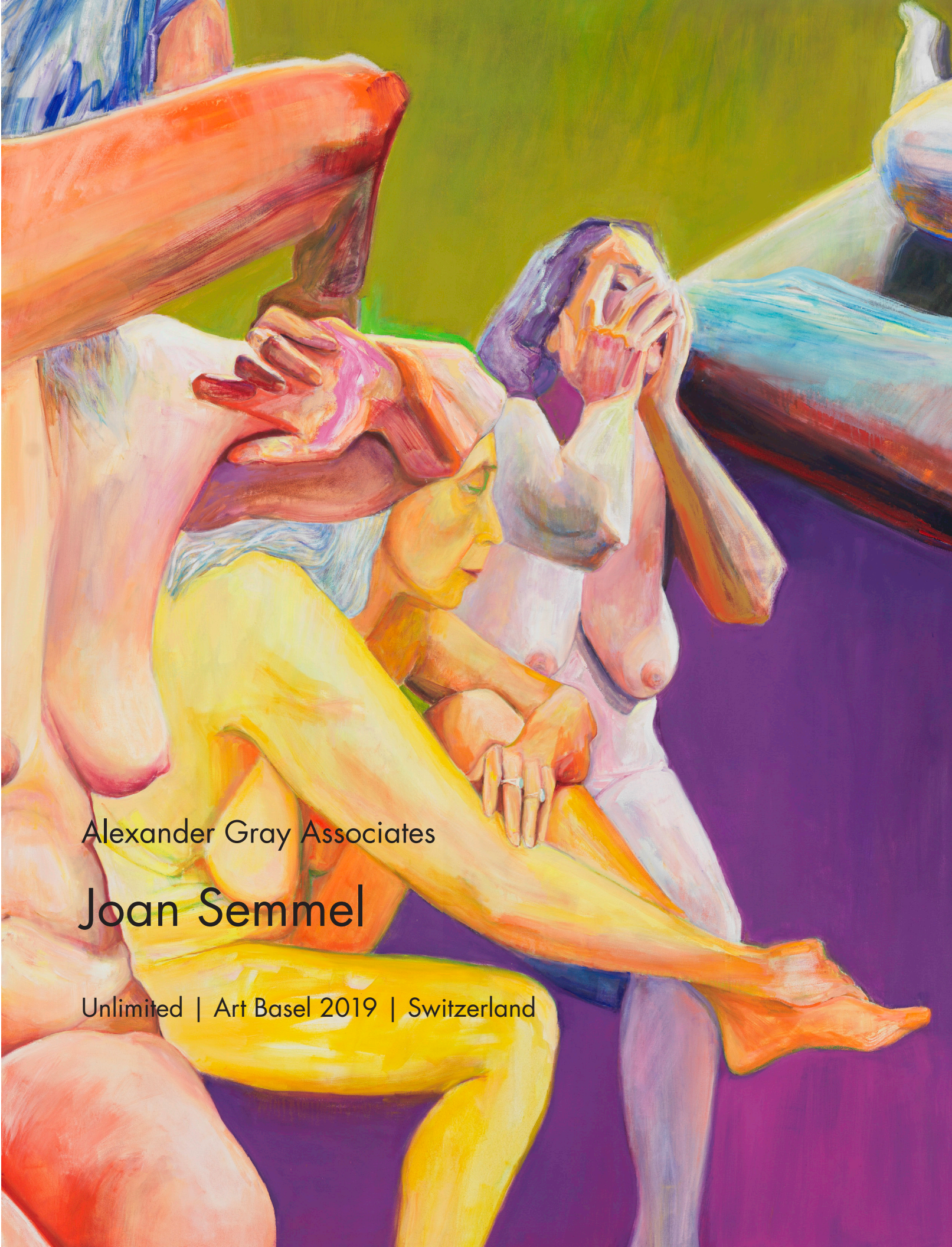
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Joan Semmel's *Skin in the Game*, 2019

Joan Semmel has been dedicated to reclaiming the representation of women's bodies from a female point of view since her 1970 return to New York following seven years abroad. Initially focused on subjects of heterosexual couples in sexual play, she turned in 1974 to using primarily her own body, which was always available and would solve the problem of taking the other as subject. In the development of a painting practice dedicated to questions of power and agency, self-representation became an answer to what Semmel has described as "the fundamental problem of subject and object."¹

Skin in the Game, 2019, measures eight feet high and twenty-four feet across, and is a summation on a monumental scale of a painting career extending over five decades. It features six figures of varying size, and draws on painting styles and techniques from the encyclopedia of Semmel's work to date. Semmel began this project immediately following her most recent exhibition of new work in New York in January 2019. In reviewing that show, critic Johanna Fateman championed, "These fresh examples of [Semmel's] signature approach to self-portraiture are suffused with euphoric resolve and executed with cool bravado, as [she] ... handily reprises or references key moments of her radical career."² *Skin in the Game* marks a continuation of this show of solitary figures rendered over-life-size in scale, and at the same time initiates a significant move into new territory.

While Semmel is known for her groundbreaking approach to the figure, she has always foregrounded the qualities of abstraction that underlie her techniques. Trained in Abstract Expressionism during the 1950s and exhibited as an abstract painter in Europe and South America prior to resettling in New York, she has adopted abstraction's formal vocabulary for the representation of human form. In *Skin in the Game*, Semmel's bodies are realized with loose brushwork and expressive color, and with close attention to line, particularly defining the outlines of figures. The brilliant saturated color that fills the background traces back to Semmel's *Sex Paintings* of the early 1970s, while the compositional device of multiple figures stretched across the canvas connects to Semmel's more recent *Shifting Images* series, in which she employed montage in the construction of both narrative and emotional arcs.

The essential influence of Second-Wave Feminism on Semmel's early development, which has continued to be her fundamental framework, has led to the central position of women's bodies—foremost her own—in her exploration of the human figure. In 1976, Semmel used a twelve-foot horizontal format to firmly position herself in relationship to other representations of the female body in contemporary culture and art history. In *Mythologies and Me*, 1976, she wryly situated the image of her own figure between painted renderings of a pornographic pinup and a version of a Willem de Kooning "Woman." Over four decades later, and on twice the scale, Semmel has again created a composition intended to be read serially, combining figures fashioned in multiple styles—some more realistic and some less—but now claiming the whole of the canvas for her own interpretation. In challenging the male gaze and cultural assumptions about male authorship, and in developing a formal vocabulary to represent female sexuality from a female perspective, Semmel's work bears close relation to that of artists like Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke, who took related approaches in the fields of performance and photography. At the same time, and with particular reference to this painting, her employment of an immersive scale, extended horizontal format, and marriage of figurative and political content, puts *Skin in the Game* in conversation with 1930s-era mural painting. As monumental works such as Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry Murals*, 1932-33, told narratives of industry with an emphasis on the description of laboring male bodies, Semmel's painting makes the realistic depiction of the female figure the basis for a career-long argument centered on both self-representation and attention to the struggle of women painters.

The title of *Skin in the Game* evidences Semmel's wit at the same time that it summarizes the stakes of her long career. It foregrounds both her position as a woman painter and her struggle for recognition in a field long dominated by men. As Semmel explained recently, "The whole structure of the art world is built on getting a certain kind of commercial and institutional support that has been denied to women. In the beginning of a career, one can fight against it and get by on just the sheer novelty of them having a woman, that has, quote, 'talent' and ability...and but the problem is, how do you get the institutions to support that career?"³ Now looking back, even as she shows little sign of slowing down, Semmel continues to examine and probe the position of the woman artist in the international art world, recognizing the rewards of having remained committed to "the game," while at the same time reminding us how much there is still to do.

