

In her view

Joan Semmel painted her own body from an entirely new perspective. Her own,

By Sebastian Smee
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Joan Semmel (b. 1932). Sunlight, 1978. On view at the Jewish Museum in New York (The Jewish Museum, New York)

Joan Semmel kicked off the 1970s with two series of brightly colored paintings depicting heterosexual couples having sex. No commercial gallery would show them, so Semmel rented a space in SoHo to display them.

By the end of that decade, which saw the cresting of feminism's second wave, with its rallying cry, "the personal is political," Semmel's work was still focused on the body and it continued to carry an erotic charge. But the style was more photographic, the colors more realistic (brown skin tones rather than screeching pinks and greens) and the overall atmosphere a little less hot-and-heavy.

This beautiful, large-scale 1978 work, “Sunlight,” at the Jewish Museum in New York, is a prime example. Born in 1932, Semmel was (and is) a feminist. She wanted to make work about “being inside the experience of femaleness,” as she put it, “and taking possession of it.”

But how do you do that, exactly?

First, she seems to have decided, you wash away the encrustations of cliché and idealization that, over centuries of male image-making, have obscured or distorted women’s felt reality, their experiences of their own bodies. You try to see with fresh eyes.

Semmel worked with a camera, learning from modernist photographers whose use of fresh vantage points (subjects seen from above, from below, from odd angles) opened doors onto new sensations of reality. Here, the vantage point is both strange and deeply familiar. It is, quite literally, her own. That’s to say, the painting puts the viewer more or less in Semmel’s position as she looks down on her own body. It’s surprising to have to acknowledge that there’s something genuinely novel about this.

But Semmel brings more to “Sunlight” than novelty. The composition is a miracle of taut, contending energies held in gorgeous equilibrium. The two parallel diagonals of her arms work at cross purposes to the light-drenched zigzag of her jack-knifed thighs and calves.

The meeting of foot and wrinkled hand in the picture’s top right corner is brilliant. Each extremity extends toward the other through a different spatial plane. But somehow, through the mechanical miracle of rotating joints, their soft meeting — palm touching sole — feels like a fated union.

In the picture’s lower half, breasts, hair and nipple fold and swell in a bosky zone of shadow-casting shapes. Nothing is illegible or obscured — that is clearly a thigh, this is hair, those are breasts — but everything in the picture is made to feel at once authentically frank and genuinely foreign.

Or, if you are a woman, perhaps, intensely familiar. And that’s just it. As a man, I feel the oddity in Semmel’s “Sunlight” — the strangeness of seeing a woman’s body from such an unfamiliar perspective. But I, too, am a human animal, with folds and nipples and wrinkles; I have looked down on my own body; I have felt sunlight on my skin.

Love and desire are always navigating unpredictable riptides where the familiar meets the strange, and where self-love mingles with our yearning for others. I suppose we can thank art, and painters like Joan Semmel, for continually intensifying this invigorating churn.