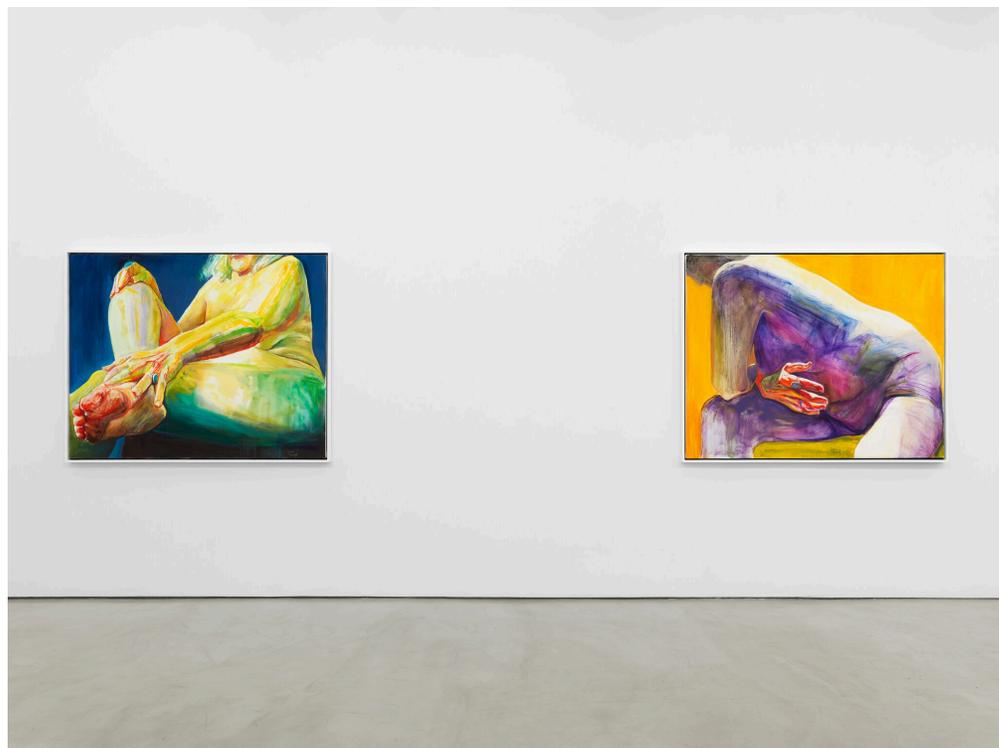


3 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Joan Semmel's unabashed self-portraits; Erin M. Riley's handwoven tapestries; and Kathleen Ryan's 'Bad Fruit' series.

June 2, 2021



Installation view of "Joan Semmel: A Balancing Act," at Alexander Gray Associates. Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and Alexander Gray Associates; Dan Bradica

Joan Semmel

Through June 12. Alexander Gray Associates, 510 West 26th Street, Manhattan. 212-399-2636; alexandergray.com.

Joan Semmel is famous for painting the body. Of course the human body has been Western painting's chief subject for most of its history, but Semmel insists on aspects that get overlooked. In the 1970s, she gained notoriety for explicit close-ups of sexual encounters. For the past few decades, it's been her own aging body — she was born in 1932 — that shocks visitors from gallery walls.

That's not to say that the body she paints is carnal, exactly. Some of the nudes in her formidable new double show, "A Balancing Act," at two Alexander Gray venues (in Manhattan and Germantown, N.Y.) are eroticized and some aren't; most have their faces hidden or cut off; all include just enough white hair and sagging flesh to establish that they're not young. But Semmel doesn't linger over their material details. In these new paintings, at least, her body is something that acts — strikes poses, casts shadows, reflects light. It's almost on the point of coming apart into pure light and energy.

In "Touching Toes" (2019), the painter is viewed from the side and below, with one leg crossed, against a midnight blue background. It's a static enough position, but the rosy ball of her foot seems to surge like a rocket from the green plane of her thigh. And the artist's ringed right hand, in "Red Hand," glows against her shadowed purple belly like a jewel.

WILL HEINRICH