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Artful Volumes

The season's outstanding art books

BOOKFORUM CONTRIBUTORS



Joan Semmel, *Red Line*, 2018, oil on canvas, 72 × 60". © Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Joan Semmel, along with other women artists who shifted from abstraction to more representational painting in the 1960s and 1970s, faced a challenge: Could they overthrow the centuries-old tradition of male artists objectifying female nudes? **JOAN SEMMEL: SKIN IN THE GAME** (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, \$40), an illustrated collection of

three essays that accompanies the eighty-eight-year-old Semmel's first-ever retrospective, demonstrates that Semmel faced this challenge by painting, literally, from her own perspective.

For her “fuck paintings” series of 1972–73, she took photographs of heterosexual couples having sex and created paintings that showed women as “participating equals.” She also painted nudes of herself, obliterating the artist-model distinction. *Standing Up Looking Down*, 1979, drawing on the distortions that photography makes possible, puts us in the position of her own gaze; the canvas is filled by her drastically foreshortened naked body, so close that it becomes abstract and, as contributor Rachel Middleman argues, cannot “be fully objectified through sight.”

In the 1980s and '90s, Semmel continued to blend abstraction and figuration in her depiction of female nudes in intimate spaces like locker rooms. Her “Overlays” series combines naturalistic figures with outlines of bodies in non-naturalistic colors. She also continued to play with perspective in nudes depicting her own aging body. In *Centered*, 2002, and *Recline*, 2005, Semmel renders herself solidly and fleshily, but obscures her face with a camera pointed directly back at us; other nude self-portraits are fragmented by mirrors or show multiple Semmels in motion— like the large-format 2019 painting that gives the book its title—and give the lie to the 2006 painting *Disappearing*, in which Semmel paints herself fading into the background. —F. B.