



Joan Semmel: *Across Five Decades*, Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates (2015)

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Alexander Gray Associates presents a survey of work by Joan Semmel, featuring paintings across five decades, from abstraction to figurative. Semmel's artistic practice has consistently questioned female representation and subjectivity, emphasizing the possibility for female autonomy through the body.

A graduate of Cooper Union, Pratt Institute, and the Art Student's League of New York, Semmel moved to Madrid, Spain in the early 1960s, where she developed a substantial body of work mostly focused on abstraction, which was exhibited in Europe and South America. The exhibition includes two paintings from this period, shown in New York for the first time showcasing her early practice of abstract expressionism, a visual foundation that would continue throughout her career. The political context of Francisco Franco's regime in Spain, and its restricted legal rights for women, impacted Semmel's consciousness, and upon her return to New York in 1970 her artistic practice and involvement with the growing feminist community of artists would define her art making and activism.

Upon Semmel's return to her native New York, a moment when, as she states, "I found that my way of working and my ideas shifted radically." Shown for the first time, the exhibition includes early figurative drawings that mark Semmel's departure from abstraction into figuration. In her paintings, which were rendered with expressive gesture, Semmel continued to employ the rich, vibrant colors—evocative of her training as an abstract painter—for her figures. Subject matter, however, would take a dramatic shift, resulting in her emblematic series "Sex Paintings" and "Erotic Series." Works from this period feature large scale depictions of sexual encounters that underscore a female approach to eroticism, evident in works such as *Erotic Yellow* (1973). Her choice of an erotic theme responded directly, and unflinchingly, to the topical concerns of female representation and sexual liberation.

1974 marked a pivotal moment in Semmel's artistic development and her interest in unseating the male gaze of Western painting and popular culture. Turning the perspective of her compositions to her own body as subject, she began painting the nude female figure, shifting the point of view from outside of the canvas as the viewer, to a simultaneous observer and subject. Semmel explains this key transition as an attempt to capture "the feeling of self, and the experience of oneself." Employing photography as the first step of her process, she positioned the camera lens towards her own body, framing her figure below her head. Painted in a realist style, the resulting compositions are notable for their formal complexity, such as *On the Grass* (1978), in which Semmel positions her body's limbs and contours into a cornered landscape.

Through the 1980s, Semmel explicitly fused figuration with her background in Abstract Expressionism, challenging the notion of a unified style. The large-scale painting *Purple Diagonal* (1980), from the “Echoing Images” series, is painted with broad, expressive brushstrokes in vivid colors; the encompassing echoed image lends the artists’ body a sense of movement against the deep purple background. As time progressed, Semmel shifted from abstracted backgrounds to recognizable settings. Working from her studio in Easthampton, NY, which she has maintained since 1971, Semmel painted bodies on display at beaches, again from her visual perspective, but with other figures in observation on the periphery, as shown in *Beachbody* (1985).

Semmel began investigating the aging process in 1988 with her “Locker-Room” series, which observed various beautification rituals performed among an all-female domain, often featuring accurate portraits of middle-aged bodies. This exploration deepened in the 1990s through the “Overlays” series. For this body of work, Semmel used figurative images from her “Erotic Series” and overlaid the composition with gestural images of nude middle-aged female bodies taken from her prior “Locker-Room” paintings. Art historian, curator, and critic Arlene Raven wrote about this series, “The new women who populate Semmel’s *Overlays* are practiced, sophisticated adults of middle age who shimmer with potential vigor yet relax in repose.” The painting *Overlays Series “Twins”* (1992) firmly insists on the sexuality of older women and challenges the notion of an idealized female body. The “Overlays” also represented a fertile moment of formal experimentation as Semmel began exploring coloring and transparencies, compositional elements that she would continue to refine into her present day work.

Throughout the 2000s, Semmel has continued to meditate on the aging female physique. Works such as *Ghost* (2009) and her most recent *Transparent Mask* (2014), show the artist’s body, doubled, fragmented, in-motion, and hidden. Dissolving the space between artist and model, viewer and subject, the paintings are notable for their investigation of intimacy, color, light, and layering. As Semmel explains, “The issues of the body from desire to aging, as well as those of identity and cultural imprinting, have been at the core of my concerns. The carnal nature of paint has seemed to me a perfect metaphor, the specifics of image, a necessary elaboration.” Semmel’s work over the past five decades firmly situates the female body as a place for autonomy and a vehicle to challenge the objectification and fetishization of female sexuality and the invisibility of the female aging body. Through her subjects and formal explorations, her work has greatly contributed to the history of painting and feminist debates by confronting and subverting the dominant cultural narratives in Art History and Western society.

Joan Semmel’s work has been featured in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014); National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC (2014); Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen, Germany (2013); Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (2013); Jewish Museum, New York (2010); Museum of Modern Art Arnhem, The Netherlands (2009); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH (2008); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2007); National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (2007); and The Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX (2006); among others. Semmel’s paintings are part of the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Orange County Museum of Art, CA; Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; Jocelyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE; Jewish Museum, New York; The Museum of Fine Art Boston, MA; Brooklyn Museum, New York; among others. She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including the Women’s Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award (2013), Anonymous Was a Woman (2008), and National Endowment for the Arts awards (1985 and 1980). She is Professor Emeritus of Painting at Rutgers University.