



Joan Semmel: *New Work*, Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates (2016)

Joan Semmel: *New Work*

September 8 – October 15, 2016

Alexander Gray Associates presents Joan Semmel: *New Work*, an exhibition of recent paintings and drawings. In this body of work, Semmel explores a central motif in her practice: her own likeness as a site to consider the state of the aging female body as an active, potent vessel for life and art; or in her words, “used as a powerful expression of the artist’s political or emotional intentions.”

Since 1974, Semmel has focused on her body as subject, beginning with her “Self-Images” series, in which she radically shifted the perspective of her compositions to capture an enhanced sense of intimacy. In her new work, she combines conceptual and formal concerns echoing many of her previous investigations. In her recent paintings she applies saturated abstract colors in a variety of styles; sometimes in linear strokes, others in flat swathes of pigment. Her command of a broad painterly language and predilection for vibrant hues emerges from her early training in abstract expressionism.

Rooted in her belief that “a unified style is not preordained,” Semmel pushes beyond traditional notions of scale, as well as color, as shown in *Crossed Limbs* (2016), in which she depicts her figure in naturalistic tones, and crops the composition to the point that the forms of her body become a landscape. In *Blue Embrace* (2016), her depiction of close-up images and active use of foreground space emphasize the freckles and wrinkles of her own flesh, suggesting skin as both evidence and metaphor for age, but also as a decorative patterned surface which firmly situates the object as painting. She continues to use the camera as a tool in her studio process. In *Flesh Ground* (2016), Semmel layers in vivid green and pink two separate images of herself, both adapted from photographs. The superimposed images visually interact, often appearing to envelop each other, creating what Semmel describes as “dialogues within each painting [which] entices the viewer to engage.” In her new works, the visual embrace of self communicates protection as well as an intimate comfort with her own body and identity. In *Step Out* (2016), Semmel doubles the image as a means of expanding both the background and foreground of her compositions so that her figures appear to simultaneously enter and draw back from the viewer’s space.

Over five decades, Semmel’s evolving practice has been characterized by a deep conviction in the possibility of expanding painting traditions to manifest her “passion as a feminist to present female images that undercut the prevailing models, and to use paint as an instrument of joy and revelation.” In the works on view, she synthesizes her longstanding engagement with content and form to render aging and memory through the act of painting, insisting through her chosen subject that “the flesh permits us to fully experience our common humanity.”

Joan Semmel's work has been featured in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); Brooklyn Museum, New York (2016); Dallas Contemporary, TX (2015); 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 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; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; 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; the Jocelyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE; the Jewish 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.