



*Couch Diptych*, 2019 (detail), oil on canvas, 72 x 120 in overall (182.9 x 304.8 cm overall)

### **Joan Semmel: *A Balancing Act***

New York: April 15 – May 29, 2021   Germantown: April 23 – June 6, 2021

Alexander Gray Associates presents *A Balancing Act*, a two-venue exhibition of new works by **Joan Semmel** (b. 1932) in the Gallery's New York City and Germantown, NY spaces. In these recent paintings, Semmel mines new expanses of psychology and vulnerability, bringing her half-century of technical prowess to bear in sophisticated figurative arrangements and rigorous color compositions.

The more than a dozen works on view vary in scale and palette, evincing Semmel's painterly concerns with structure and form. The artist's pose in the intimately scaled composition *Look Back* (2021) recalls that of larger canvases like *White Hair* (2020) and *Holding* (2020). By translating similar postures across different scales, Semmel emphasizes the variation in emotional and perceptual impacts of her choices as an artist. What reads as a tender or exhausted pose in a larger work can feel bolder and more mysterious at a smaller scale. Semmel parallels these structural explorations with subtle color variations. Even when her hues are bold, there is nuance in the way her palette shifts from one painting to the next.

Ultimately for Semmel, color—and, by extension, form—have always been inherently political. Inherently feminist, her practice has sought to engage with formal aspects of painting while questioning the medium's established modes of perception. "My early work was strongly motivated by feminist concerns," Semmel explains. "... My passionate wish for a change in the way we as women are seen, perceived, and imagine ourselves has been vital to me as an activist

involved in the aesthetic as well as the political debates of my time.”

Since the 1970s, when Semmel began photographing and depicting the body in intimate states, through her use of evolving photographic techniques like Photoshop to create reference images, the artist has balanced in a liminal space that interrogates the limits of painting. Capturing the dualistic nature of this space, *Couch Diptych* (2019) presents viewers with a rare double depiction of Semmel’s nearly full-length body. The couch and the black ground are the only elements in the painting that unify it—each of Semmel’s figures is painted in its own distinctive palette and each has a hermetic and individual psychology. The figures do not appear to respect a symmetry or dividing line but instead dwell in uneasy proportions within the frame. In this way, Semmel unifies the material qualities of the painting itself, the emotional effect of two bodies seemingly experiencing two different narratives while occupying a shared space, and several distinct explorations of color within a single painting. As Semmel summarizes, “I walk the tightrope between vulnerability and power, the vulnerability of the flesh and the power of my art to enable it.”

*Skin in the Game*, the first retrospective of Semmel’s work featuring sixty years of the artist’s groundbreaking paintings, opens at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA in October 2021. A comprehensive catalogue of Semmel’s work will also be published on the occasion.

Joan Semmel has been the subject of numerous one-person exhibitions, including The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (2013); Jersey City Museum, NJ (2000); Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY (1998); Pratt Manhattan Gallery, New York (1993); State University of New York, Oswego, NY, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY, and State University of New York, Albany, NY (1992); University of Virginia, Richmond, VA (1992); Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC (1991); East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art, East Hampton, NY (1989); University of Missouri, St. Louis, MO (1986); State University of New York, Plattsburgh, NY, Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, PA, and Kutztown State College, Kutztown, PA (1980); and University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT (1978). Her work has also been featured in group exhibitions, including the Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken, Germany (2018); Brooklyn Museum, New York (2018 and 2016); Jewish Museum, New York (2018 and 2010); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); Dallas Contemporary, TX (2016); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014); National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC (2014); Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen, Germany (2013); 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 in the permanent collections of the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA; Dallas Museum of Art, TX; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; Jewish Museum, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; Rose Art Museum, Waltham, MA; Tate, London, UK; and Whitney Museum of American Art, 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.

Alexander Gray Associates is a contemporary art gallery in New York City and Germantown NY. Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, the Gallery spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is an organization committed to anti-racist and feminist principles. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.  
New York: Tuesday–Saturday, 10:00 AM – 6:00 PM.  
Germantown: Friday–Sunday, 12:00 PM – 6:00 PM.