

WORKS IN PROGRESS

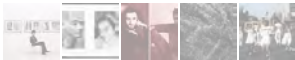
BY PHOEBE HOBAN; PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEFAN RUIZ



A very small sampling of the female artists now in their 80s and 90s we should have known about decades ago.

[CARMEN HERRERA](#) • [AGNES DENES](#) • [DOROTHEA ROCKBURN](#) • [MONIR SHAHROUDY FARMANFARMAIAN](#) • [LORRAINE O'GRADY](#) •
[ETEL ADNAN](#) • [JOAN SEMMEL](#) • [FAITH RINGGOLD](#) • [JUDITH BERNSTEIN](#) • [MICHELLE STUART](#) • [ROSALYN DREXLER](#)

On History and Identity



Midway through her career, at age 45, Lorraine O'Grady changed her profession from rock critic to artist. Born in Boston to West Indian parents, she also worked as an intelligence analyst for the U.S. government and as a translator before making her art-world entrée in 1980, with the attention-getting invention of a persona, Mlle Bourgeois Noire. Wearing a dress made of 180 white thrift-shop gloves and carrying a whip embellished with white chrysanthemums, she staged guerilla performances, delivering impassioned tirades about race relations at the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Just Above Midtown gallery, a space devoted to black avant-garde art.

O'Grady's 1983 performance "Art Is . . ." featured a 9-by-15-foot antique-style gold frame mounted on a parade float that traveled up Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard during Harlem's African-American Day Parade, framing passersby and neighborhood sights as it went. O'Grady is also known for her "Miscegenated Family Album," in which she juxtaposed images of her sister, Devonia Evangeline, who died at 37, with images of the Egyptian queen Nefertiti. Her iconic 1992 essay, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," is still widely referenced and taught, and her photographic piece, "The First and the Last of the Modernists," was included in the 2010 Whitney Biennial. Recent exhibitions by Alexander Gray, a gallerist committed to artists identified with the feminist and multicultural concerns of the AIDS era, have brought her work to a wider audience. "I am not being re-recognized," O'Grady, who is 80, says. "I am in the period of initial recognition."

An exhibition of Lorraine O'Grady's work, featuring 48 photographs documenting an autobiographical 1982 performance piece in Central Park, "Rivers, First Draft," will be on view at Alexander Gray Associates in New York from May 28 through June 27.



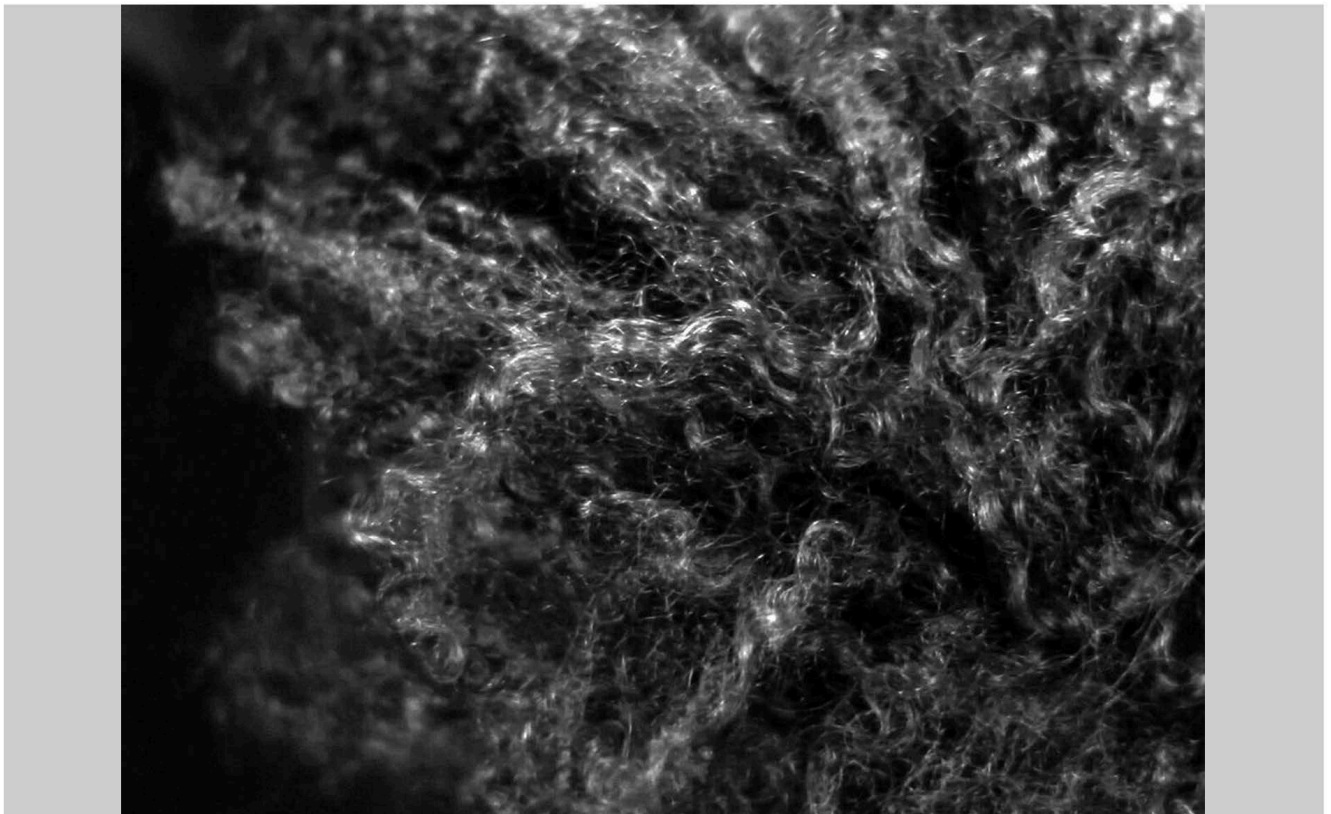
"I am not being re-recognized," she says, seated at the Alexander Gray Associates gallery in Chelsea. "I am in the period of initial recognition."



"Miscegenated Family Album (Young Queens), L: Nefertiti, Age 24; R: Devonian, Age 24," 1980/1994.



"Diptych 1 Red: Charles and Michael," 2010



A still from "Landscape (Western Hemisphere)," 2010



"Art Is. . . (Troupe Front)," 1983-2009.

Our Bodies, Ourselves



The 82-year-old artist Joan Semmel.



Joan Semmel has never shied away from the graphic scrutiny of her own naked body — even now, at age 82. In recent paintings, she depicts herself as aging and nude: “As an older person, I want to be respected,” she says. “I want to still feel that I am a vital person. I want to be seen, not disappeared.”

In 1970, Semmel left abstraction for figuration, beginning the first of a series of explicitly sexual works: portraits of copulating couples. By mid-decade, she had switched the focus to herself, painting from photographs of her own nude body. “We all have some difficulty in confronting our aging physical selves,” she says, “so when you are painting yourself in that position, it really means that you have to say, ‘I’m doing this and I’m not going to make it pretty. I’m not going to hide it, disguise it, no face-lifts. It’s going to be really the way I see it.’ This is not a disease that’s happening. It’s the natural evolution of a person.”

Semmel has always been an outspoken feminist. But while she benefited from the support of her peers in the feminist movement, being labeled as a “breakthrough feminist artist,” she says, was also “a kiss of death.” “I think we were punished for being feminists by not being included in any of the mainstream kinds of trends that could have included us,” she says. Even when the ’80s brought about a return to figuration and Expressionism, her work continued to be overlooked by many critics.

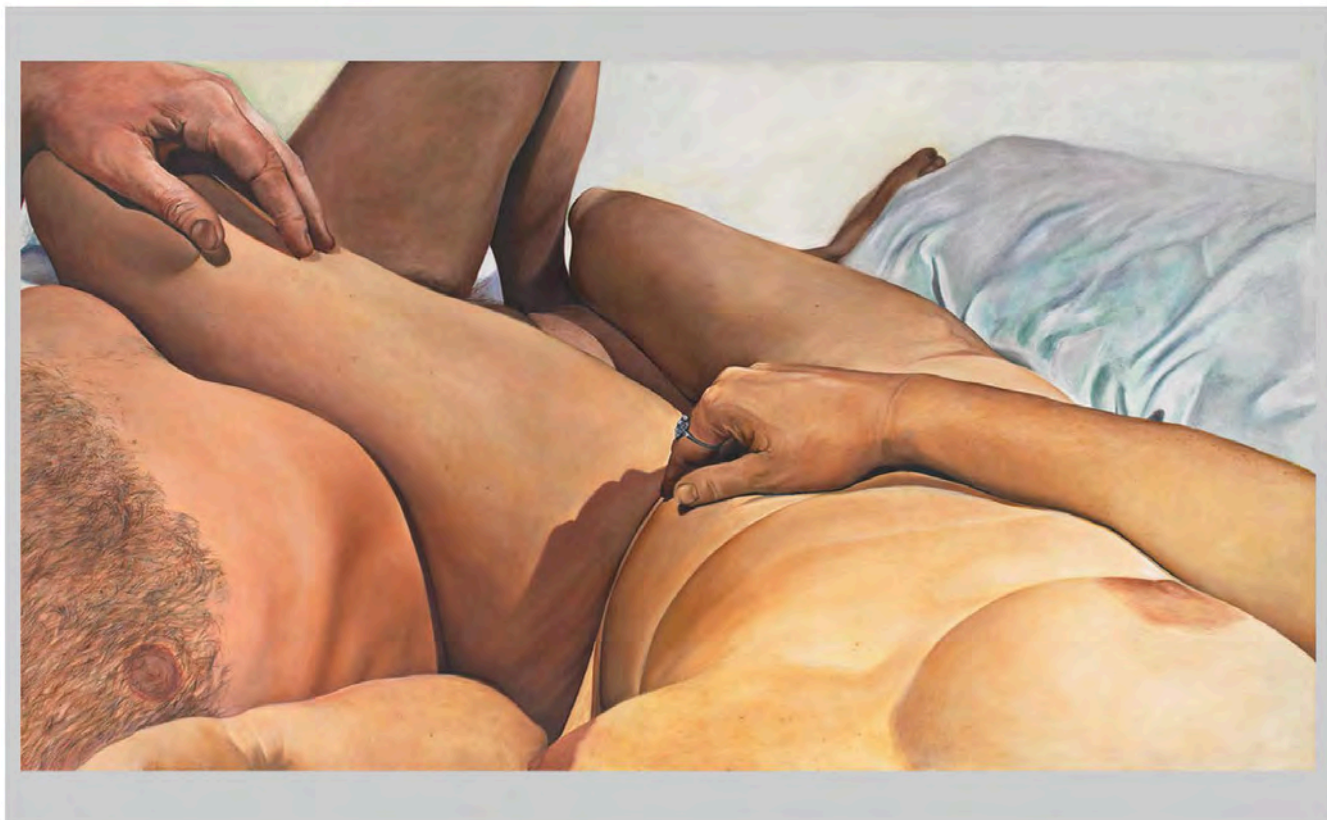
Semmel, who is also represented by Alexander Gray, is encouraged by the current interest in her — and other older female artists’ work — because, as she puts it, women “are usually buried after about 45 years of age and just disappear completely.” Moreover, she adds, she isn’t just getting older, she is getting better: “I really feel that some of my most powerful work has come in these late years.”



Semmel's paintings, seen here in her New York space, look unflinchingly at the female form, including her own aging body.



"Skin Patterns," 2013.



"Touch," 1975.



"Transitions," 2012.



"On the Grass," 1978.



"Erotic Yellow," 1973.