

HABITAT: JOAN SEMMEL

BY *Katherine McMahon* POSTED 10/02/15 10:24 AM

Joan Semmel photographed in her studio on October 1.
KATHERINE MCMAHON

Habitat is a weekly series that visits with artists in their workspaces.

This week's studio: Joan Semmel, SoHo, New York. "Painting uses all your faculties as a human being, because it's physical, it's tactile, and it's intellectual all at once," [Semmel](#) told me, as she motioned toward a work in progress. She is perhaps best known for unflinching paintings of nude women or couples in colors that range from naturalistic to wild and electric, but she has also painted herself for decades.

The prolific feminist painter has been active for 50 years and continues to work in her SoHo studio and home, which she's inhabited since 1970. How did she find the place? "I had just come back from Spain and was walking down the street and I saw a bearded man who looked like an artist," she said. "I asked if he knew of any open studios, and he walked me right up here. I rented the place from him for a year, and then he left and never came back. I've been here ever since."

Semmel grew up in New York City and studied at Cooper Union and the Art Students League before earning her BFA from Pratt. From 1963 to 1970, she spent time in Spain. During this period, she created Abstract Expressionist works and gained more of a sense of framework in her paintings. "American Abstract painting is highly gestural," she said. "I found that with Spanish abstract art, even though it's abstract, it's surreal and contained in a certain way. While I was there, I learned to let go of that kind of bravado brushstroke and brought things to more of a sense of resolution," which perhaps provided the framework for the figurative paintings that she continues to make today.

Two weeks shy of her 83rd birthday, Semmel is working on new paintings and will be participating in the exhibition “Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics” curated by Alison Gingeras at Dallas Contemporary, which opens January 16. This winter, she’d like to try and visit Cuba.

Recently, her paintings have incorporated more of a sense of volume, while continuing to have the thin, transparent layers of similar images that she has used for years. “The idea of overlaying images gives you a sense of memory and reflection,” she said. “At a certain age, you start thinking about how the future is finite. When you’re young, the future is infinite. I think that’s part of what stimulates the inner process of my paintings.”

ALL PHOTOS: KATHERINE MCMAHON

