

# Art in America

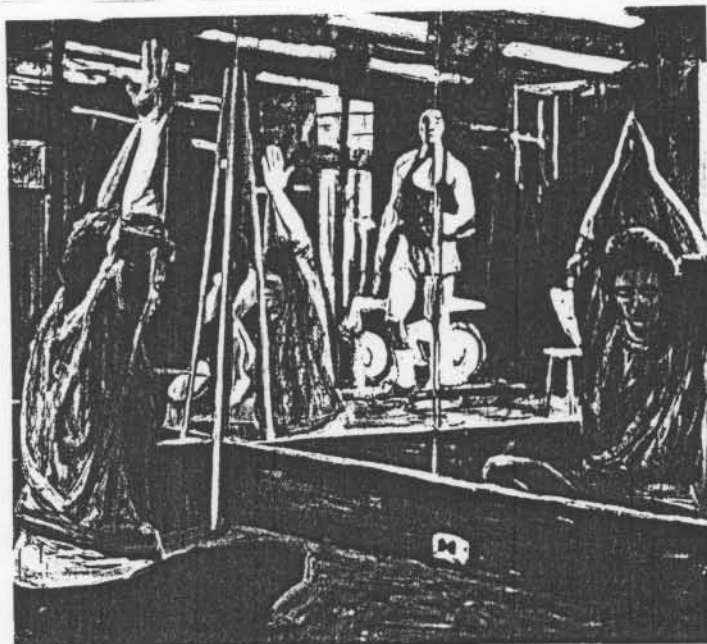
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## Joan Semmel at Gruenebaum

Joan Semmel should enjoy a much greater reputation for her startling brand of painterly realism than she does. Over the last two decades, Semmel has proved to be one of the more versatile painters working from directly observed subjects. This show surveyed her work from the '80s.

The strength of Semmel's style resides in the way it plays off tightly rendered depiction against a wide-open, Abstract-Expressionist attack—polarities often present in the same canvas. She sets up artfully offhand, glancing, unexpected angles of vision that we associate with Degas and snapshots. Two woodland landscapes from 1984, *Layers* and *On the Mountain*, make use of drastically oblique vantage points to draw the gaze from foreground shrub and shadow into sunlit depths. A series of paintings of sunbathers exerts an even stronger pull on the viewer's attention. In them, the point of view belongs to a fleshy sunbathing woman whose body often fills the entire lower half of the painting. One's gaze sweeps past huge, nearly out-of-focus breasts, across the soft undulation of the abdomen and down to feet diminished by perspective. The head is not in the picture; the viewer has, in a manner of speaking, been put in the driver's seat, taking in everything through the subject's eyes.

Semmel's sunbathers chronologically overlap with her recent paintings of exercise classes in a mirrored gym. Again, Degas comes to mind, his paintings of ballerinas at the barre an inescapable reference. Yet here a



Joan Semmel: *Triangles*, 1986, oil on canvas, 68 by 78 inches; at Gruenebaum.

critical distance is declared. Degas's dancers, for all their naturalism, remain patriarchal idealizations of feminine grace, while Semmel's figures, working out in sweats (or lolling about unclothed on the beach), strike this male writer as being more *lived in*—and, as such, prosaic retorts to Degas's lyricism. In a similar manner, the sag and roll of Semmel's beach figures, and her obtuse placement of the viewer within the head of the depicted subject, expresses a genial confrontation and acquaintanceship with the physical experience of being a woman—an experience that is woefully absent in the male-dominated pictorial tradition. Though an estimable painterly technician, Semmel looms as an even more important painter for her understated yet politically potent themes.

—Stephen Westfall