



Joan Semmel: *Faculty Frieze*, 1982, oil on canvas 34 by 320 inches overall; at 112 Greene Street.

Joan Semmel at 112 Greene Street

Joan Semmel is probably the most extravagant Realist painter on the contemporary scene. This hasn't always been the case: a few years back, she was showing navel-gazing — literally — semiabstract paintings of her own body from her point of view, breast and stomach and limbs akimbo as she took in the territory close up.

Semmel now has an eye for a good deal more, and if you can imagine a kind of transtemporal cross between de Kooning and Degas, you may have Semmel. The de Kooning part is in the way she'll leave whole parts of her sitters' bodies in glorious painterly disarray, convening slashes,

slashes and color, often decidedly non-flesh-toned, for the sheer hue of it. The Degas part is in the (semi-) psychological acuity with which Semmel records her subjects' faces. In *Florida Interior* a balding man with sparse moustache and eternally cocked eyebrows is caught in endless reflections between two mirrors and a chandelier, while a woman, presumably his wife, stands in a doorway to the right, a little overweight, very made-up, and every gray hair of her silvery flip in place. The viewer is left to wonder just what Semmel is getting at—caricature of a milieu, homage to it, or, uneasily, both?

More open-faced are the portraits of six academics in *Faculty Frieze*, a painting that would be pure insult to academia were it not the very picture of every type of professor we've known, or gotten to know too well, at, say, a cocktail party. These six sit—one fully bearded, one with a van Dyck, one with glasses back on his head, another handsome-but-running-to-fat—as supremely above their convocation as they are above those cocktail conversations on Bronzino or Joan Didion which can end, of course, in fistfights. The frieze goes around

the corner of two walls, making the boredom epic (to say the least) and supremely ironic (to point out the obvious).

Indeed, it is the extravagant and the obvious that Semmel is so good at painting, whether expressionistically, through stroke and color, or naturalistically, as with the world-weary mien of the academics. *Middle-aged Siblings*, three of them, a brother and two sisters, have grown up into lives of their own. They barely reflect, and certainly are not reflecting on, their shared parentage. In *David* a man stands nude in mock approximation of Michelangelo's work of the same name. Subtlety is not one of Semmel's strong points.

Drop the comparison to the markedly subtle Degas, then, and substitute such contemporaries as Sidney Goodman and Joseph Shannon. Semmel is up to her eye teeth in hard-as-nails reportage, a deeply American social commentary, almost a social comedy. She can even have it out with animals: a stick-ribbed *Steed* would be ready for the glue factory by any other name. Semmel is a painter—forget Photo-Realism; this is Tabloid-Realism. And it's Semmel's show all the garish way.

—Gerrit Henry