



Left: Joan Semmel, *Knees Together*, 2003, oil on canvas, 60 x 48". From the series "With Camera," 2001–2006.

Opposite page: Joan Semmel, *Red White and Blue*, 1973, oil on canvas, 48 x 58". From "Second Erotic Series," 1972–73.

Camera Eye

RICHARD MEYER ON THE ART OF JOAN SEMMEL

OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY, JOAN SEMMEL has pursued a painterly enterprise that brings extraordinary wit and acumen to representations of the body—most often the artist's own. And this oeuvre has grown increasingly visible in recent years, thanks to a series of institutional exhibitions such as Semmel's solo show at the Bronx Museum of the Arts this past spring. Yet a key moment in the artist's early work, marked by a complex engagement with photography and sexuality, remains relatively little known. Here, art historian RICHARD MEYER considers this period in Semmel's career and traces its importance for her ongoing output as a painter and self-portraitist.



A COLOR PHOTOGRAPH shows a young woman peering through a camera to snap a shot of two naked bodies—one male, one female—intertwined. Horizontally aligned such that neither is on top, the nude figures are severely cropped by the edges of the frame. We see only torsos, legs, and a single, embracing arm. Behind the photographer, a giant painting of another naked couple looms. Mostly what we see of that picture is a woman's imposing thigh, arm, and breast, all rendered, improbably, in shades of baby blue.

This photograph of the artist Joan Semmel appeared in the January 1974 issue of *Viva*, a publication that billed itself as the “world’s most sophisticated erotic magazine for women” and that is barely remembered today, except perhaps as the professional launching pad of a young fashion editor named Anna Wintour. Published by *Penthouse* founder Bob Guccione, the magazine carried articles by and about prominent women (ranging from Simone de Beauvoir to Bianca Jagger) and soft-core photo spreads of naked men, often in pastoral surroundings such as meadows or haylofts. Though easy to ridicule, in retrospect, as equal-opportunity objectification, *Viva* represented both a genuine response to the feminist movement of the early to mid-1970s and a profit-minded co-optation of it.

Semmel was photographed and interviewed by *Viva* for a feature article titled “Women in the Erotic Arts,” which boldly proclaimed that “for the first time in the history of art . . . women artists are expressing sexuality on their own terms, reflecting and discovering their own perceptions stripped of traditional mythologies, unfettered by accepted imagery.” The article focused on the members of a loose-knit collective of female artists in New York called Fight Censorship. Founded by the audacious painter and collage artist Anita Steckel, the group included Semmel, Judith Bernstein, Louise Bourgeois, and Hannah Wilke, as well as now lesser-known artists such as Martha Edelheit, Eunice Golden, Juanita McNeely, and Barbara Nessim.

The appearance of Fight Censorship in the pages of *Viva* reflected the group’s insistence on the right of female artists to grapple with sexually explicit subject matter. A second photograph from the magazine, in which Semmel stands amid eight paintings from what she called her “Second Erotic Series,” 1972–73 (so named because a more expressionist group of sexually forthright canvases preceded it), underscores this attitude. The artist’s composed and fully clothed presence in the photograph provides a contrast to the painterly orgy that surrounds her. It also furnishes a means by which to measure the relative scale of the amorously engaged bodies on display. Crowding the foreground of their respective compositions,

Semmel’s slightly larger than life-size figures seem nearly to protrude from the surface of their canvases.

In paintings from the series such as *Red White and Blue* and *Erotic Yellow* (both works 1973), Semmel’s palette is anything but naturalistic, with purple, green, or blue flesh set against saturated monochromatic backgrounds. As the artist said at the time, “The images are handled in an objective, cool way, with non-realistic space, with a sense of being removed from the world. But there is feeling in the gestures, passion in the color.” The heat generated by these works sparked an alternative, rather less official, name for the series: “fuck paintings.”

To create them, Semmel arranged sessions with a man and woman who agreed to have sex (without compensation) in her presence while she took photographs. Also in attendance at these sessions, by mutual agreement of all involved, was the experimental filmmaker Rosalind Schneider, who shot 16-mm footage of the couple. Thus the process that generated the fuck paintings—a series of “live sex acts” performed gratis for female artists—flouted the transactional logic of porn and its presumptively male gaze.

The fuck paintings were the first works that Semmel based on photographs. Prior to this moment, she had worked primarily in an abstract vein. (She had, in fact, enjoyed a successful career as an Abstract Expressionist painter while living in Spain from 1963 to 1970.) The use of photography as a source was a way of making the sexual body present in all its corporeal particularity and force. The monumental figures of the painted couples confront us on physical terms even as the identifying features of the models’ faces and the contextual details of the room—the bed, for example, on which these acts unfolded—have been screened out or transformed. (Semmel had promised the participants they would not be recognizable in the final works.) Even as the members of each couple turn toward and touch each other, they turn away from us. With their unexpected angles of vision and severe croppings, the pictures recall the scene and syntax of photography even as their monumental size and full-tilt color delight in painterliness. They refuse to cede sex to pornography, even as they retain something of the carnal immediacy that pornography promises. Semmel was attempting, in her own words, “to find an erotic language to which women could respond, one which did not reiterate the male power positions and prevalent fetishization in conventional pornography and art.” Ultimately, she hoped “to develop a language whereby a woman could express her own desires, whatever they might be, without shame or sentimentality.”

The paintings were hardly welcomed by the art world in 1973. When the artist could not find a gallery that would agree to exhibit the series, she

Semmel’s paintings refuse to cede sex to pornography, even as they retain something of the carnal immediacy that pornography promises.

Joan Semmel photographing models. From “Women in the Erotic Arts” by Lynda Crawford, *Viva* (January 1974). Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni-Liaison.





Left: Joan Semmel, reference photograph for *Me Without Mirrors*, 1974, gelatin silver print, 8 x 10".

Right: Joan Semmel, *Me Without Mirrors*, 1974, oil on canvas, 50 1/2 x 68 1/4". From the series "Self Images," 1974–79.



showed them in a space she rented herself and in which she was able to drum up only one sale. She subsequently rejected offers from both *Penthouse* and *Playboy* to publish the "Second Erotic Series," even though at the time she could have used the money each magazine offered.

Why return to Semmel's fuck paintings today, some four decades after the fact? One reason may be that the issues they pose about female desire and heterosexuality remain largely unresolved within contemporary art. The sexually explicit works of John Currin and Jeff Koons, for example, seem to delight in porn (and the male privilege it assumes) rather than offer meaningful alternatives to it. Given the scarcity of thoughtful art about sex—especially straight sex—Semmel's fuck paintings still have much to tell us about the potential of art to offer alternative models of desire and embodiment. To hear what these paintings have to say, however, we need to understand their place within Semmel's broader painterly output.

AFTER COMPLETING the "Second Erotic Series," Semmel turned to a highly unusual form of self-portraiture in which she worked without mirrors. In contrast to the more conventional imagery of self-portraiture—an artist pensively confronting the viewer, who becomes a sort of proxy for the painter's reflection—Semmel's series of "Self Images," 1974–79, offers dramatically foreshortened topographies of breasts, belly, knees, and feet. Like the "Second Erotic Series," the self-portraits were based on photographs taken by the artist. The camera's propensity to compress some volumes and attenuate others has been intensified, rather than corrected, in the transposition from photo to canvas, so that, consciously or not, the viewer senses the photographic nature of

these images when confronting the painting. At the same time, the works place the naked body irrefutably before us while their unexpected perspectival format ("looking down" from an unseen head) reshuffles our sense of how and from where we are looking. The paintings signal the paradox of apperception—of experiencing oneself simultaneously as observable form and sentient body, object and agent of vision.

Which makes it all the more curious that in one of Semmel's self-portraits, *Me Without Mirrors*, 1974, both of the artist's hands are visible, raising the question: How did she hold the camera? In fact, she didn't—the source photograph was taken by a friend who made his best effort to position the camera so as to mimic the artist's vantage point. A painting most often construed as a direct transcription of the artist's self thus relied, in the most literal sense, on the presence of another. It entailed a kind of covert collaboration.

The photographic sources for the self-portraits and the "Second Erotic Series" were never shown or published in the '70s. For the artist, these photos were merely part of her preliminary process, not images that had freestanding visual interest or aesthetic meaning. And photographs of Semmel that appeared in the press, including the shots published in *Viva*, were understood by the artist as requisite publicity with little independent life or explanatory value for her work. Indeed, as she informed me, the *Viva* photograph with which I began this article was contrived by the magazine. *Viva* brought a male and female model to Semmel's studio to simulate the shoots the artist had previously convened, shoots at which no photographer from a commercial magazine would have been welcome. In preparing the present article for publication, I had to overcome Semmel's

polite resistance to reproducing her photographic studies and the picture of her that appeared in *Viva*. I did so in the belief that the artist's use of photography—and her representation as a photographer—provides a key to the working method she has pursued throughout her career.

There is a remarkable series of collages, "Echoing Images," 1978–81, that emphatically bespeaks Semmel's long-standing engagement with photography. In these collages, Semmel Xeroxed selected source photographs for her self-portraits and set them within larger oil-crayon sketches that reiterate the compositions captured by the photocopy. In one, a photocopied fragment showing the artist's arm crossing her knee and then reaching back toward her breast has been amplified and enfolded by a maroon and yellow crayon sketch of the same configuration of body parts. The photographic fragment merges with and thereby rearranges the drawing such that, for example, the sketched leg is now nestled between two different views of the breast. When seen from a distance, the collage appears nearly abstract. Up close, however, it resolves into a call-and-response between photographic imagery and drawn transcription, mechanical index and gestural trace. Yet because the photographic copy has been inserted within the oil-crayon sketch—the former at once interrupting and completing the latter—the resulting collage challenges the legibility of the female nude as much as it reveals or redoubles it.

Before their display earlier this year at Alexander Gray Associates in New York, these works had almost never been seen in public, but the related photo-based self-portraits remain some of Semmel's best-known works. And as the "Self Images" became something of a feminist calling card, Semmel's earlier, sexually explicit paintings seemed in danger of growing nearly



Joan Semmel, *Untitled*, 1978, oil crayon and collage on paper, 22 x 30". From the series "Echoing Images," 1978–81.

as obscure as the collages. In fact, the fuck paintings went unseen (and unsold) for so long that the artist "recycled" several of them in the early '90s for a new series she cleverly titled "Overlays," 1992–96. Here Semmel introduced more loosely rendered female figures into—and over—the sexually explicit scenes she had created twenty years before. The '90s figures were typically drawn from the artist's (photographic) study of women in the locker room of her local gym. In *Flash*, 1973/1992, the naked figure in the foreground, watery to the point of partial transparency, is the artist herself. Shown in the midst of taking a picture, Semmel intrudes upon, but also merges with, the scene behind her. The face of the artist—and with it, the specular ethos of the traditional self-portrait—is once again displaced, though now by the camera and its flash of liquid light. It is as though the scene of photography that rendered the fuck paintings possible in the first place has returned, twenty years later, to resurface within the finished composition. But now, in the overlay, the camera is trained not on the flesh of the copulating couple but on the artist herself, who is not "looking down" but rather capturing herself in the act of photography. The pictorial introduction of Semmel as photographer into the painted image points up the contradiction between the immediacy of the body recorded live, in real time, and its transformation in the studio into a quite different painted image.

FOLLOWING THE "OVERLAYS," Semmel increasingly turned from analog to digital photography. In doing so, she often incorporated the camera itself, and thus the pictorial scene of photography, into her paintings. In works such as *Knees Together*, 2003, which is part of the "With Camera" series, 2001–2006, the photographic apparatus and the mature body of the artist are simultaneously revealed. Neatly reversing the apparent logic of *Me Without Mirrors*, Semmel renders explicit her dependence on the camera as a tool for self-representation. The mirror, too, is acknowledged, though not as a vehicle for a return

to a more conventional mode of self-portraiture, but as a vector for new negotiations of self and image, mediation and representation. In the face of a culture that all but disavows the desirability of women over sixty, Semmel focuses upon a female body—her own—that has not been surgically tucked, tightened, or suctioned. Her paintings neither airbrush physical imperfection nor apologize for it. Instead, they simply push every other body (whether male or female) out of the way so that this one physique emerges as a pictorial world of its own.

Some of the strongest works in the "With Camera" series, however, depict the artist clothed, almost as if the exposure of the body of the camera had permitted the artist to cover her own. In *Double X*, 2005, on display earlier this year in the Bronx Museum's exhibition "Joan Semmel: A Lucid Eye," the artist parodies pornography by having the camera appear at the level of, and indeed overlaying, her crotch. The painting playfully proposes that the sexual, rather than optical, organ has become the aperture through which the self is apprehended. (Its title picks up the visual pun of the double *x* formed by the crossbars of the chair on which both artist and camera rest.) Semmel renews the link between photography and libidinal pleasure that underwrote her fuck paintings of the early '70s. And yet, in defiance of pornography, there is no explicitly sexual scene or fully exposed body on offer to the camera in *Double X*.

In a number of her most recent paintings, Semmel risks a certain conventional subjectivity—even as she continues to thwart our expectations of the female nude by showing us an older woman's body and by insisting on the framing of that body by the artist herself. Her downcast gaze and sober mien in *Skin Patterns*, 2013, seem to be responding, a bit ruefully, to the physical effects of decades of life upon her body. But here again Semmel functions as a photographer, if somewhat covertly. She is, in fact, not looking down at her naked flesh but rather casting her gaze sideways; though her right hand is cropped

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from view by the edge of the painting, the viewer can deduce that she is holding a camera at arm's length. Far from assuming a melancholic pose or reflecting upon her own mortality, the artist works to fix the desired image of herself, the image that will become the source for the composition before us.

This photographic capture would also open onto a kind of movement or animation. Take, for example, a recent publicity photograph in which she stands before one of her most ethereal self-portraits. The photo shows Semmel posing in front of *Transitions*, 2012, a massive painting that captures five views of the artist superimposed on one another with varying degrees of density and transparency. Shown in her recent exhibiton at Alexander Gray Associates, the work clearly plays on the tradition of stop-motion and time-lapse photography, though the superbly nuanced shifts among and overlaps between the bodies is uniquely painterly, as is the wash of ocher and layers of sienna and avocado green that form the backdrop. The painting is based on five different digital photographs of the artist as she turned from left profile to nearly full frontal to a concluding view of back and shoulders. She then reworked and interwove the five shots digitally as the basis for this view of the artist in dreamlike motion.

Where *Viva* magazine staged Semmel as a photographer sandwiched between one of her erotic paintings and a naked couple in 1974, now she reappears, an older artist surrounded by multiple, nearly celestial, views of her own painted body. Semmel's clasped arms (note the turquoise ring that appears three times in *Transitions*) and her black-clad torso intertwine with her painted legs and belly in an especially intricate manner. Indeed, we could almost be looking at a detail from one of the hybrid collages (part photographic, part crayon sketch) that were on view elsewhere in the gallery. Now eighty, Semmel is still finding new ways to appear at once before and beyond the camera's lens. □

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Left: Joan Semmel, *Skin Patterns*, 2013, oil on canvas, 59½ x 48".

Right: Joan Semmel, *Flash*, 1973/1992, oil on canvas, 68 x 78". From the series "Overlays," 1992–96.



Left: Joan Semmel with *Transitions*, 2012, New York, March 7, 2013. Photo: Elfie Semotan.

Right: Joan Semmel, *Double X*, 2005, oil on canvas, 56 x 58". From the series "With Camera," 2001–2006.

