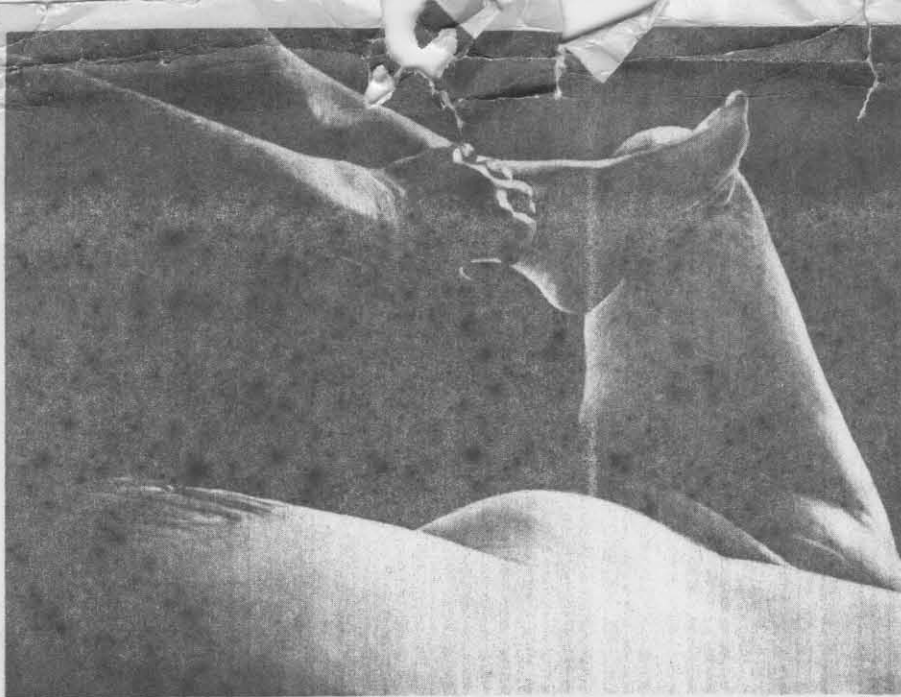


Semmel, *Out of  
ness, 1978. Oil on  
canvas, 70 x 67  
inches.*  
Lerner-Haller  
Gallery and Douglass  
College.



## JOAN SEMMEL

Two exhibitions which include a selection of Joan Semmel's paintings and drawings from the past five years provide an opportunity to assess her development in this period. In the early 1970s, Semmel began to explore the human figure as an erotic theme. From her initial paintings of couples engaged in lovemaking, Semmel has continued her conscious efforts to present women as autonomous sexual partners actively seeking sensual gratification. Reacting to the frequent portrayal of woman as the passive, victimized object of man's sexual fantasies, the artist presents a more positive view of woman as a "mover, a person who comes from herself." Later Semmel directly confronted the "sexploitation" of the female nude in *Mythologies and Me*. This triptych juxtaposes the artist's painted version of a typical magazine pin-up queen with a de Kooning *Woman*, and her own self-portrait as a reclining nude.

The autobiographical works which followed the erotic couples were the first paintings in which Semmel used her own body. Often the artist included her lover or one of her children in these canvases, for they were concerned with her daily activities and the people most intimately involved in her life. Of these first self-portraits Semmel has commented: "... I went into the idea of myself as I ex-

perience myself, my own view of myself. What I was trying to get there was first of all the self, the feeling of self and of the experience of oneself; secondly, the feeling of intimacy, of how one really relates to another individual, to another person, to another situation. The real quality of contact, of touch, of the eroticism of touch."

One of these autobiographical works is entitled *Intimacy-Autonomy*; here we see the artist lying quietly beside a nude male figure. Both bodies are observed as if from the artist's vantage point as she lies in bed. While the title here specifically alludes to Semmel's search for autonomy within her relationship with her lover, the striving for self-knowledge and autonomy motivates all of her work.

Initially Semmel used black and white photographs as preparatory "studies" for her monumental canvases. She learned to photograph herself in a reclining position while holding the camera close to her head. Always there was the intention to capture her personal viewpoint of her own body: the extreme foreshortening of the upper torso, the flattening out of the breasts, and the large hands correspond accurately to the position from which the preliminary photographs were taken.

In the past three years, the artist has worked exclusively on images on her own nude body. The breasts, stomach, and upper thighs appear in an enlarged, cropped format. Often the hands, the working

hands of an artist, are the focal point of the composition. Semmel gradually eliminated the sense of the figure extending outward into a larger spatial area, and began to represent her body from a vantage point of greater intimacy. Limited fragments of the body now appear in paintings where her involvement with geometric structuring is in greater evidence.

The most recent paintings, abstracted views of her nude body seen at very close range, appear as a special triumph for the artist. The expressionistic palette used in her earliest nudes had been supplanted by natural skin tones in recent years, and the warm colors contribute to the success of these works. But the dramatic change in the new canvases is the return to a painterly surface and the stronger effects of plasticity achieved by pronounced light and dark contrasts. Semmel appears to have reached an effective resolution of her early activity as an Abstract Expressionist with her commitment to the charged imagery of her personal search for self-discovery. Curiously, the cropped fragments of her body are sufficiently abstracted to recall the centrally focused canvases of her nonobjective years. The linear networks which formerly ranged out with centrifugal force from a central point of reference have now become portions of limbs which stretch from a central core.

The choice of self for subject has far-reaching implications. For a number of years

the artist has been involved with the idea of viewing a woman's body from a woman's viewpoint, both literally and figuratively. In addition to her concerns with self-knowledge, Semmel has considered women's acceptance of their own bodies as sensual instruments. The close-range view of torso, breasts, and thighs is intended to suggest that the viewer is observing her own body. The breasts are extremely foreshortened, and often appear as separate forms from the exquisite curves of the torso and thighs. The observer is able to recall the sensations of exploring her own body as she experiences it from a reclining position. Semmel continues to achieve her fascinating and accurate views of a nude woman at rest by holding a camera close to her head as she assumes a variety of positions. Now color slides have replaced the photographs she used previously, and color Xeroxes become the preparatory studies for the monumental canvases. Semmel has also incorporated some of the color Xeroxes of her body into drawings.

The monumental scale of her paintings encourages the consideration of these closely cropped body segments as aerial views of a landscape. The topography of human flesh becomes rolling hills, canyons, and caverns. Such titles as *Triangular Tunnels* and *Central X* give evidence of the geometric ordering intended as well as the links to landscape. Other titles (*Renoir Revisited*, *Out of Darkness*, *Sunlight*) suggest the new involvement with plastic forms, painterly textures, and lighting effects. The dramatic contrasts of light and shadow are particularly effective in the new works, not only because of the heightened sense of the sculptural form of the body, but also in consideration of the frequently nocturnal exercise of self-exploration. The sense of intimacy is always present here, despite the large-scale format, and results from the tactile surface, the skillfully framed view of the midsection of the torso, and the use of warm and vibrant colors for the flesh. (Douglass College Art Gallery, Rutgers Univ., October 2-13; Jorgensen Gallery, Univ. of Conn., October 24-November 10)

Joan Marter