

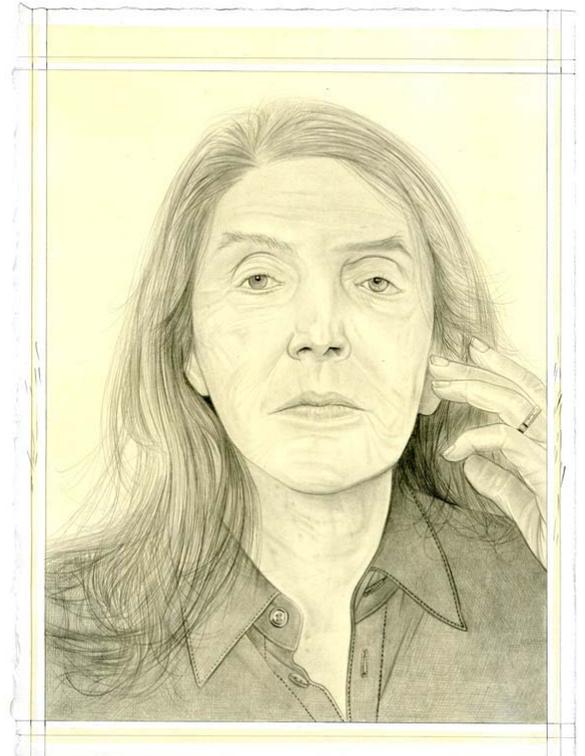
## JOAN SEMMEL with Laila Pedro

Although she started out as an abstract painter, Joan Semmel's career has come to be understood primarily in terms of the radical figurative paintings she has been creating since the 1970s. In the midst of a year of renewed visibility (with work on view in exhibitions at Alexander Gray Associates, Cheim & Reid, the Whitney, and Dallas Contemporary, among others), Semmel welcomed Laila Pedro to her New York studio to reflect on her process, her position in feminist art history, and her perspective on aging before her own painterly gaze.

**Laila Pedro (Rail):** Before coming to your studio, I was thinking a lot about the particularly freighted significance of language in talking with you and about your work. There is a lot of otherwise rigorous writing about women artists of the past two generations that is (I hope inadvertently) profoundly condescending, in that it assumes a tone of discovery or surprise. Do you feel affected by this kind of ahistorical interpretation?

**Joan Semmel:** Oh, of course. What you see so much is suddenly they've discovered women artists, and suddenly they're *old* women artists. Why do you think they didn't discover them until they were old? Not because the work wasn't there. It's because they weren't interested in promoting, or showing, or thinking about what women were doing. And it's unfortunate, but that's how it's been. I think that now there's a whole new surge of interest in women's work—and it's not the first time.

**Rail:** In your artist talk before the opening of your solo show this fall at Alexander Gray, you made the point about there being this cyclical resurgence of interest in women. After that talk I went back and read something I hadn't read in a very long time, which was Susan Faludi's book from the '90s, *Backlash*, because it is so true; there's a glimmering moment of potential liberation and then it snaps right back.



Portrait of Joan Semmel. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.  
From a photo by Elfie Semotan.

**Semmel:** It goes right back—and you start again. And a lot of what you start again with is the same thing that was there to begin with. At the same time, and even as I am happy to see how many new young women artists are out there, I am bothered by recycling the same things. It may be a bounce-back, but it's also a different situation now. In the early '70s we were having panels and discussions and asking, *What is feminist art?* There was a lot of argument about it; a lot of women stepped back from the whole movement because they didn't want to be classified that way. And we were trying to define the kinds of things that art was outside of the mainstream conceptions. I think much of what happened then did, and continues to, profoundly influence the art world. Right now it's like some of the men are doing what some of the women were doing.

**Rail:** Right, and probably getting the recognition for it.

**Semmel:** Exactly. Exactly. So, one can't walk through the world and say, "I did it first." It becomes absurd. You have to adjust and think about where you are, as a feminist, at this time, making art. As an artist, I make art just as I always do—where it comes from some kind of inner need. But in terms of where I am as a feminist, I am interested in moving the *institutions* to include us. I think that's a primary, basic thing that we need to do, and we need to work on it consciously.

**Rail:** You're very clear about this kind of self-examination—it's the literal content of your work, and also something you do very nimbly in terms of situating yourself within a cultural moment. I'm curious in the power of your gaze and where you direct it; specifically, in the ways in which you have looked at yourself over the years—for example, there are very few faces.

**Semmel:** There are hardly any, except for the series I did that is *only* heads.

**Rail:** Is there a conceptual drive behind the focus on the body, or is it purely a function of how you set yourself up to paint? Typically, you are in a position where you're looking down at your own body.

**Semmel:** Yeah, that was the original beginning of doing the self-images, where I was looking down at my own body. In all the literature on the work there's a lot of confusions. In the sexual pictures, for example, people think that is also me—they get confused between me and Carolee Schneemann.

[*Laughter.*] When I went over to the self-image I did those two pictures with a partner, but they were sort of post-coital. It was fudged. I used a photograph from each partner separately, and then I put them together, so they each had their own disappearing point. I like that because of what it signifies in

terms of autonomy. For my generation that was an important, really important thing for a woman, to not lose herself in a sexual engagement completely—that you can enjoy and everything but not give over to the point where you're just working on his desires and none of your own. So that was one of the subtleties of what I was doing there.



Joan Semmel, *Centered*, 2002. Oil on canvas. 48 × 53 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates. © 2016 Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**Rail:** Maintaining agency for each subject.

**Semmel:** Exactly. My own intent in doing the sexual images to begin with was about making an erotic image that women could relate to and enjoy, rather than always seeing themselves in this passive, exploited position. That's very early work. But you mentioned the show at Alexander Gray—

**Rail:** Yes, because the works have this luminous color and nuanced composition that inspired me to think more deeply about your training and technique, and the ways in which they have evolved over the years. As is obvious from this conversation, the political and cultural content of your work, especially when the work is written about or discussed, can tend to occlude its more technical, formal, or material aspects.

**Semmel:** I talk about these issues because they're motivational. But I want the work to be seen as my painting, and the painting has been an essential and complete involvement for me, all the way through. I started as an Abstract Expressionist. I had a whole career as an Abstract Expressionist. That was my first joy: working abstractly with just pure paint. The pure paint gradually evolved to more closed forms and I gradually went back more and more toward different kinds of structure in paintings.

When I came back to New York, and came into the feminist movement, that was the change that triggered the figurative work. It wasn't because I was a figurative painter or because I needed to make figures. It was because what was so complete in my life at that point was to be able to express certain ideas that had to do with my involvement politically, and I have maintained that ever since. But I was exploring painting itself, so that it was also about the unity of style and content.

**Rail:** Did you have technical guidance, or a mentor figure?

**Semmel:** No, I was pretty self-sufficient. I never really adored any particular artist or felt that I was learning that way. Because I came through the New York art schools at the time that I did, I was trained in abstraction—I would flatten out everything, distort everything. So when I came to use the figure I pretty well had to teach myself to do photographs. First I made drawings, and then I worked from photos. So those differences, of course, changed the way I work. The first figurative paintings are expressionistic, still coming out of the abstraction, and I gradually got more and more confident to take it to that other place and work towards a more realistic image. It was always derived from photographs—which, at that time, was considered cheating.

**Rail:** You were sort of parallel to the Pictures Generation, this moment that required validation for photography to be shown as artwork, but also as an acceptable reference for a painter, as opposed to using a live model.

**Semmel:** Exactly, and that was the development of the way I was working. I worked in that style for a long time—the whole self-image period—and then I started doing some portraits and some other themes connected. I did a whole series on the gymnasium: I was interested in the whole idea of narcissism, how that works in the culture and how the idea of how women are supposed to look is developed. There was a local gym here that a lot of dancers and writers and art people used, and they let me take photos. That was the first time that I took the pictures in the mirror. The reason I took the pictures in the mirror was because I didn't want the women to pose or be conscious of me working there. The solution was taking the picture

in the mirror. Of course, when you point the camera into the mirror, you get a photo of yourself. Thus in the painting, the subject is taking a photo of the viewer.

**Rail:** Did you ever participate, when you went there, in anything that was going on?

**Semmel:** Oh, sure I did. People knew me and that's why I was able to do it.

**Rail:** The presence of the camera creates an interesting effect; it's almost Cubistic in the way it fragments the picture plane.

**Semmel:** That's what was interesting to me, that fragmentation and all those kinds of crazy things. And I was able to play around because the image in the mirror didn't have to be realistic. Then I could take all kinds of liberties.

**Rail:** Is fragmenting the image, sometimes by having the camera and your hand visible, another way of affirming the agency you created in the post-coital shots by giving each partner their own perspective?

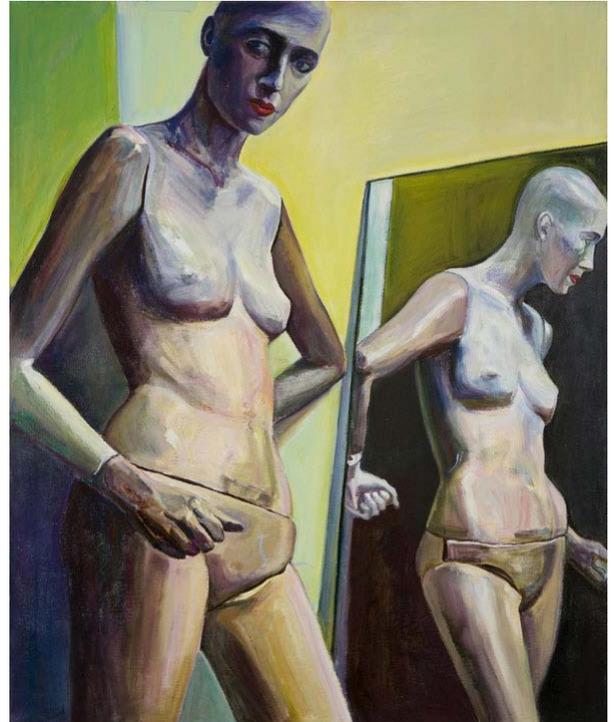
**Semmel:** In a different way, but that is what I was always thinking about. It was what appealed to me about selecting the image to begin with. In the gym series, I worked pretty realistically for a while, and some of the images I got from photographs. I always tried to take the photos by myself. Sometimes I used a timer and I would get blurred images—I liked the whole idea of the blur. The way I started doing the heads was by taking those pictures in the mirror, and even though I didn't usually use the heads I got it in the mirror because I'd hold the camera at waist level. Not always, but sometimes, so I got the face. Then I would take the heads off that picture—I didn't shoot for the head, but I like the head that I got.

**Rail:** So you are intentional about remaining open to what emerges in the process.

**Semmel:** Always. Always. You have to be open to what happens. That's the fun of painting, that there's always things that happen that you don't expect. And when they happen you have to know how to say, *Okay I want that*. So, that was the development of the blurred pictures, which I called the "Shifting Images." While working on the "Shifting Images," I gradually came to doing the transparent ones.

**Rail:** How did the transparent ones develop?

**Semmel:** I believe in using the technical tools available at any time. With the computer, I was able to make the images transparent and overlay them in order to create the reference image. First, I would lay the photographs one on top of the other on my light table and make a collage to make it happen. That's how the "Transparencies" developed. And then came, *Well, why do I have to make each image totally developed three-dimensionally?* So I started flattening out again, and using a linear kind of description of the top



Joan Semmel, *Multiples*, 1998. Oil on canvas. 58 × 48 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates. © 2016 Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

image. That's how I came to doing the drawing image over the three-dimensional image. But, as you can see from that much-earlier painting, it was an idea I had explored, somewhat, in other ways earlier on.

**Rail:** You have a painting from the gym series on your living-room wall, where we can actually see that process.

**Semmel:** Exactly. The process has been evolving a long while, and I worked on each part of it for a long time. I feel totally confident when I go to the paint, because I've had experience in paint-handling from both realistic and abstract points of view. I still very much enjoy just the gesture, but I also understand what happens with three-dimensional form, and the impact of that kind of image is different from the impact of a drawing image.

There was another series, the "Echoing Images," where I had the image both realistically and abstractly repeated, so that's where the "echoing" comes from. I was always interested in being able to work without that kind of stylistic conformity where everything has to be done in one style. I think that's come through in a lot of the work, the idea of not conforming to one particular style. It's almost, in a certain way, postmodernism, that we use anything that's there, we don't need to conform. But this was way before postmodernism.

**Rail:** This was 1980. And the relationship between style and content is kind of fluid, rather than doctrinaire.

**Semmel:** Exactly. I do the paintings and that's why I sometimes resist talking—because I don't want to tell you what to think. I want you to look at the painting and think what you want. We're so verbal. Everything's about words. But we're also very visual. You do have to learn how to look.

**Rail:** It's a vastly different kind of processing.

**Semmel:** The whole idea of looking, of making art and having it, is that it gives you a different kind of experience, which isn't verbal. Even here, for instance, you can see that parts are developed fully and other parts are quite painterly. Back to the figure: I was interested in all kinds of bodies. I even did a series of mannequins, rather than human models.

**Rail:** I love the mannequins. I think they're very interesting from an art-historical perspective: when I first saw them they made me think of the Hans Bellmer mannequins, which are quite possibly the most misogynistic figures ever, though still aesthetically significant and resonant. Your mannequins are quite the opposite of that. They're uncanny and unsettling in the same way, because they're humanoid, but they're agentic.



Joan Semmel, *Aura*, 2016. Oil on canvas. 72 × 60 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates. © 2016 Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**Semmel:** They're confrontational. That's what makes people say, *What are you doing?* The association might be with the seductive mode, but I go back to the realistic.

**Rail:** And here, in "Centered" (2002), the camera is very realistic—the camera and the ring feel very precisely rendered.

**Semmel:** I wanted something hard against all the flesh.

**Rail:** It does anchor the image.

**Semmel:** It's important, you need it, and it's also very cool with all the heat. So then the images with the camera are here, and in this one I included one of the mannequins so that you had the payoff with what I was doing with the camera, with the woman, and what the culture gave us.

**Rail:** And how did this doubling of the image happen, this little slip?

**Semmel:** Because on the mirror that I have there's a beveled edge, so I got that in the photo and I loved it. That play is, for me, a kind of allusion to Cubism. So I'm playing with culture in one way, and I'm playing with figuration in another way, and I'm playing with the picture plane in another way. I wanted the frame in it because what I was talking about was the construction of identity. I frame using the frame, which tells you about how many things, including identity, are constructed.

**Rail:** For me, content-wise, or narratively, this optical slip that the beveled edge causes works beautifully as a moment of cognitive dissonance; we're haunted by the idea of the mannequin, by relating to ourselves and other objects and the representation and self-representation of both.

**Semmel:** Like how one has to measure oneself always.

**Rail:** It doesn't work; there's a disconnect. Speaking of connections, I'm interested in the choice to dress or undress, and what those choices signify. How did you feel about being dressed? Do you feel like it substantively changed the work?

**Semmel:** For me, the reason for using the nude was to deal with sensuality, and also to deal with self-image in a more basic form. That's why I wanted the nude, and also because the nude is a genre throughout art history. The genre throughout art history has been appropriated by the girly magazines and by all the kind of ideals of what woman is supposed to be. If I'm using clothing, that comes in to other things of class, location, costume, and so on, which is a whole other bag to deal with. For me, it sort of interferes with the very basic thing that I'm trying to get to.

I also sometimes substitute the camera for the body: the camera is its own kind of trap, against all the old sort of *vagina dentata* things. It's a gesture I like a lot.

**Rail:** Can we talk about that gesture a bit more? Because when I see it appear in your work it takes me aback a little bit because it seems more protective—

**Semmel:** —It's more about vulnerability—

**Rail:** —than you usually are.

**Semmel:** Right, and I'm older now. To deny vulnerability is to deny reality. Vulnerability is there. You can't totally deny it. I mean, I can't insist that I'm as powerful as I was: I'm not, physically. And even just in terms of dismissal, as an older woman, you're dismissed in so many different areas. I try to speak that truth. It's one of the aspects of getting older, that one has to, in some way, adjust to and encompass. I don't think "acceptance" is exactly the word, but perhaps "acknowledge"—you have to acknowledge it. So I think that comes up in these late pictures. But I really like it, also, because, again, it hides the face, but then again it serves my purpose.

**Rail:** Right, it's coherent with your practice both functionally and narratively. And this blurring or hiding has another aspect in your paintings—the theme of the veil.

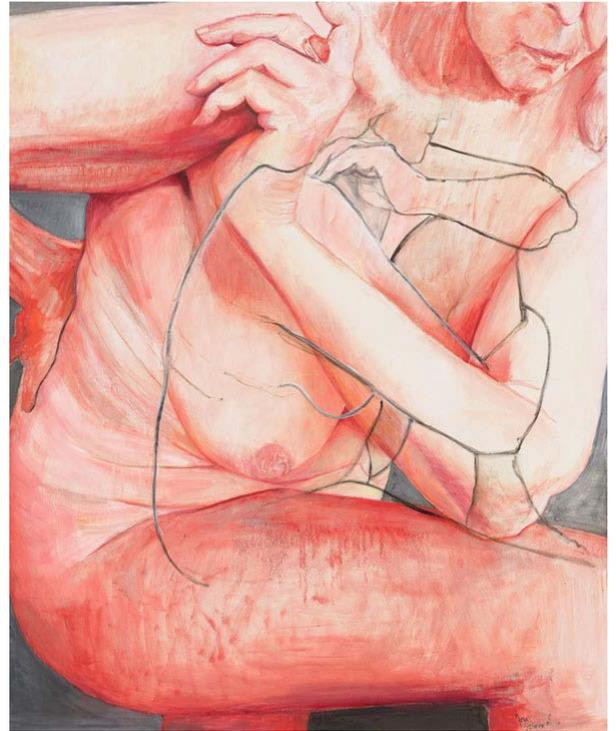
**Semmel:** I am interested in the idea of the screening of what happens and the implication of the veil. I'm interested in the veiling of women in general, both figuratively and literally. So seeing it literally, in other parts of the world, brings it up to you in terms of the implications of it in our own milieu.

**Rail:** It can also manifest in more subtle ways, in that sort of dismissal that you were talking about, the hiding away of women. Your work strongly rejects that kind of veiling. It's the opposite: you're using the body to make me, the viewer, ask what my eyes are doing, and how they process and understand information.

**Semmel:** When you look at yourself, you're not looking at the whole body, you see it in fragments. I was interested in how you experience the body rather than an image of an ideal—so, thus the experiential of the body.

Not in the last show, but in the one before, I had a few of those images. I'm painting myself and I'm eighty-four years old. That being the case, how could I deny age? The culture totally denies the aging process for women. There's a tremendous need for validating that experience, and also the fear that people have of being old. The truth is, it's not as if I don't have to deal with that; it's part of my reality in terms of who I am. I didn't come to it as a crusader, I came to it because that's my experience.

**Rail:** You've been resisting, actively, a lot of the oppressive and horrible expectations on women for basically your whole career. Do you feel that you've internalized any of those expectations? When you're doing this work is there any sort of self-critique, or any absorption of that? I think it's very difficult—no



Joan Semmel, *Tattoo*, 2016. Oil on canvas. 72 × 60 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates. © 2016 Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

matter how intelligent or critically engaged or strong-minded you are—to not absorb some of that. So I wonder if that manifests at all while you are working for yourself.

**Semmel:** Well, I've thought about it myself and I've said to myself, or even to a friend maybe, that it's hard enough to deal with aging and I'm putting it out there in this way with my own body. It's hard for me to face it, and maybe this is how I manage to deal with it. I try to not edit that out. There are different paintings where you can see that anxiety. You talked about the vulnerability that's there. I'm not immune to it, of course not, but I think it's necessary to accept it in some way: it's there, yes. It's a problem. Yeah, it shakes me up a little sometimes, putting that out there. But it's what I chose to do, so I have to go through with it.

**Rail:** You've been committed to going through with it for a long time. You were born in New York, traveled to Europe, and were part of several artistic communities, including a strong feminist community.

**Semmel:** I grew up in the Bronx. I came here finally to live in Manhattan in 1970. I went the long route from Queens, New York, to Madrid, back here to New York.

**Rail:** And you still feel that you have that strong, politically committed community of women around you?

**Semmel:** I do. Very much so. Some of my friends are still people who were involved back in the '70s, and I still feel a very strong community. And I hope younger people have that too, because I don't know if they do.

**Rail:** When do you think you first started to get taken seriously as an artist?

**Semmel:** In the '70s I started getting recognition. But the sexual pictures I couldn't get a gallery to show.

**Rail:** Because of the sex or because of the woman?

**Semmel:** Maybe both. So I rented this space down on Prince Street and showed them myself. I was really fired up and worked fast. One painting after another came really fast. I had pretty high visibility during that time, my name was known, I had a lot of reviews. It was in the niche of feminist painting. And then all the macho painting started again, and we were just swamped, literally moved out. There were years where I couldn't get a gallery at all. But I always got my work shown, somewhere, by hook or by crook. When I couldn't get it shown I rented a space and did it myself, and I made sure the work was always seen and written about. So I have always been present.

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#### CONTRIBUTOR

**Laila Pedro**

LAILA PEDRO is Managing Editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.