

ArtSeen

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JOAN SEMMEL Across Five Decades

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One step into Alexander Gray gallery and you know that Joan Semmel is a fearless woman. Semmel chose to work with the nude female figure during an era dominated by male minimalists; a time when figuration was a very poor choice for artists seeking recognition. An early feminist activist, she searched for her own voice, then used it to contemporize the female form. Dislodging it from the intractable woman-as-object niche it occupied in mid-20th-century pornography and commercial advertising, she explored sexuality from a woman's point of view. She was among the first to use photography rather than drawing as a tool, photographing couples engaged in explicit sexual acts, and photographing then painting her own body as it aged through the years. Looking as fresh as the day they were painted, the works on view can still provoke. But the excitement in this show, featuring many seldom seen paintings, has much to do with the abstraction driving Semmel's figuration and the way she uses it to peel away the myths and stereotypes undermining the female self from youth through advanced age.

Semmel painted "Perfil Infinito" (1966) while living in Spain with her husband and young children. Spain, then under the fist of Francisco Franco, granted few if any legal rights to women, something Semmel would remember when she battled years later for women's rights back home. Reflecting the influence of "Informalismo," Spain's version of Abstract Expressionism, "Perfil Infinito" holds figure/ground relationships with contrasting blocks of saturated color providing a backdrop for a procession of irregular gestural shapes, lines, and scratchy scribbles. These elements congregate at the edges of what becomes the painting's tense dynamic center. It faces another boldly colored figure/ground work, "Untitled," from the *Sex Paintings* (1971), a semi-abstract study of cropped figures, sexually engaged, its dynamic center lodged where a man's head is buried between a woman's outstretched legs. A bold group of untitled black outline drawings, rough and Goyaesque, briefly but intensely summarize Semmel's consummate handling of abstraction, expressionism, and figuration, and her intuitive ability to continually reinvent these relationships.



Joan Semmel, "Centered" (2002). Oil on canvas, 48 x 53". Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates. Copyright 2015 Joan Semmel / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Joan Semmel, "Untitled" (2014). Oil on canvas, 48 x 36". Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates. Copyright 2015 Joan Semmel / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

This strategic grouping prefaces the mini-retrospective of works spanning the years 1973 to 2014 dispersed in the main gallery. "Centered" (2002) features a nude Semmel peering through a camera. A fragile mannequin figure, posed on a table behind the artist, recalls the classical ideal that spawned today's emaciated runway types. Its lifeless limbs contrast with the artist's own strong arms and thighs, and her dominating presence within the canvas. The painting's placement at the far end of the gallery implies she is taking a long view of her oeuvre, and those viewing it. It also acts as a visual metaphor for Semmel's signature depictions (well represented in this show) of the nude figure—usually cropped at the shoulders—arguably gazing down the length of her own body. The viewer, experiencing the torso from the same trajectory, effectively completes the unfinished form, merging the space between the observer and the observed. "Centered" faces "Purple Diagonal" (1980), a large complex work from the artist's series, *Echoing Images*, in which Semmel layered and overlapped the representational figure with its abstract variation. Here the two merge within a charged psychic swirl of gestural brushstrokes: electric blues, throbbing purples, and de Kooning pinks. Semmel, in her wonderfully concise, frank, and poignant catalog essay describes such combined figurative and abstract forms as "internal and external views of the self that combine a perceptual image with the ambition and striving in the emotive ego."

Similar intense color contrasts also function symbolically in Semmel's expressionist *Sex* and *Erotic* series of the '70s. In "Erotic Yellow" (1973), an unabashed portrayal of entwined lovers, the female figure appears as a throbbing fuchsia form, assuming, in both gesture and color, as active a lover's role as her male partner. In other works Semmel confronts the physical body as an outer extension of inner strength using natural color and subtle shadings. For example, "On the Grass" (1978), a beautiful study of physical geometries and textures in the form of breasts, pudendum, bent legs, and

overlapping layers of flesh, conveys an acceptance of self, as-is.

Semmel's most recent works confront the difficult reality of facing the aging self. The complexity of the early works—the cacophonies of color colliding through scatological syncopations, representational and abstract—are here subtler and more intriguing for their careful layering of translucent pigments. Strident bursts of sexuality, all hot pink and urgent purple, give way; the fog of memory begs the softer, muted hues Semmel chose for “Transparent Mask”(2014). In this painting she holds up a translucent veil. Her features blur. This extraordinarily beautiful series of paintings embracing the aging nude evoke sadness, resignation, and vulnerability—facts of life we must all face. Truth is, we don't know what Semmel is thinking as she gazes through that veil. But she does leave us with this: a body of work that has, for five decades, addressed the feminine consciousness with unprecedented candor; a body of work that remains in the subjects and styles it tackles, consistently inventive, fresh, and fearless.



Joan Semmel, "Purple Diagonal" (1980). Oil on canvas, 78 x 104". Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates. Copyright 2015 Joan Semmel / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.