

EXPOSURES

WOMEN & THEIR ART

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"I was an abstract painter in the abstract expressionist mode until 1970, when I returned to this country after eight years in Spain," explains Joan Semmel. "My whole life changed. Feminism brought me back to the figure." Semmel's figurative paintings begin from the most literal interpretation of female self-determination—the representation of her own body. Some of her most striking canvases depict a nude or semi-nude woman—larger than life, cropped at the neck, foreshortened in the extreme—as if each viewer were its occupant, looking down upon oneself.

"I began to draw and paint when I was 11 years old, but I didn't commit myself to art until my mid-20s," recalls Semmel. She attended the High School of Music and Art, and Cooper Union in New York City. "After Cooper, I got married and had a child," she adds. "Ten years later, I returned to school, attending Pratt Institute. I was a working artist, but I wanted to get a degree so that I could teach." Today, Semmel holds a full professorship in the art department at Rutgers University, with considerable authority as a professor and exhibiting artist. However, she points out that middle-aged women are at a disadvantage: "There are few mid-career women in gallery rosters."

Semmel's paintings reveal her training in rendering the human body as well as her assimilation of the traditions of Post-Renaissance and Mannerist Italian figurative painting of the 16th and 17th centuries. "When I allowed the nude to reappear in my paintings, it wasn't simply a studio nude," explains Semmel. "My erotic nudes of the early 1970s were my part of the sexual revolution and they were erotic from a woman's point of view." Semmel's erotic nudes were also revolutionary for an art audience accustomed to seeing female nudes painted by men for men. For her self-portraits, Semmel learned to take slides of herself while in a reclining pose. She made color copies of the slides and used these to construct collages as preparatory studies for her large paintings. "At that time the figure was a no-no, taboo, yet also considered passé and academic. But I had to do it," states Semmel. "This work was empowerment—women taking on their own sexual power." Even when Semmel's style evolved into a cool, super-real realism, her nudes still retained their eroticism. Her figures were aggressive because of their size, yet often passive in their poses; intimate in their closeness to the picture planes and the edges of her canvases, though threatening in their rejection of "feminine modesty." These painted women eloquently state the modern dilemma for female creators—are creative women desired objects or bold, powerful initiators? "Nude self-imagery was my most conscious and direct attempt to deal with my sexual- and self-definition," notes Semmel.

Self-analysis took a new bent for Semmel in the early 1980s when she created clothed self-portraits. Family expectations and the struggle to remain true to herself became cardinal issues for Semmel. In her "Self-Portrait on the Couch" (1983), Semmel's focus shifted from body to mind, from exposure of the flesh as disclosure to exploration of the psyche (even in psychotherapy on the couch) to build self-awareness and free the spirit. In the artist-subject's right hand are artist's brushes, along with a photograph of her father. Behind the couch is a standing nude portrait of her male lover. These factors draw the dilemma for Semmel between living in a patriarchal context and pleasing the men in her life on the one hand, and creating her work from a whole self on the other.

"Today things are more complex," Semmel observes. "I'm also a different age and my concerns have shifted." In Semmel's paintings of the past several years, she says, "I've moved off sexuality as the center of my subject matter. Although there has been a retrenchment in regard to sexuality—and I'm not in favor of it—there is some wisdom in no longer thinking that a free and open sexuality will solve everything." She adds, "I want my work to move people to feel what I have felt." Semmel's figures equate paint with flesh in a primary relationship, traveling between Eros and the self, the feminine spirit in the world. As a portraitist, she has been compared to Native American "soul catchers" and turn-of-the-century Western photographers preoccupied with capturing personal auras. Even in her most recent clothed figures, seen at a greater distance from her picture edges and in contemporary social situations such as exercise classes, Semmel courts empathy and identification rather than voyeurism or pictorial confrontation. At the same time, there is a challenge: "My new work explores isolation and narcissism as the social malaise of this time."—A.R.

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