



AMERICAN WOMEN ON THE MOVE

First National Women's Conference / Sponsored by
The United States Commission on the Observance of
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR
HOUSTON, TEXAS / NOV. 18-21, 1977

A design by Houston artist Dottie Erwin is featured on the official poster for the International Women's Year conference here, Nov. 18-21.

Show highlights feminist spirit

BY CHARLOTTE MOSER,
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It's a month before the International Women's Year (IWY) conference brings 1,500 delegates to Houston from around the world. But already a trickle of its feminist spirit is on the Houston scene.

The first of a flood of art exhibitions related to the IWY conference has opened at Potham-Von Stoffler Gallery. A joint show of work by New York artist Joan Semmel and Houston artist Roberta Harris, it doubtless will encapsulate the mood of IWY art events.

Semmel, who has worked her way through styles and fads over the years, has landed on a bold Super Realist painting format that will knock your socks off. Long established, she is now on her way to a major artistic reputation.

Harris is a local artist who has shown her work around town, with this small exhibition of works on paper representing her first one-person show. It's work on its way to resolution.

But the differences in the work by these two artists go beyond differences in age and experience. They have more to do with different consciousnesses and what art is supposed to mean.

Semmel's paintings are closeups of nude human bodies, seen usually lying at rest. While there are no obscene activities in these paintings, their proportions are so huge and close that, on first view, they are sure-fire shockers. As much as anything it's the shock of intimacy with the human body.

After the initial shock, however, another sort of awareness is produced. These huge rounded forms, sculpted carefully with soft and subtle painting, take on the serenity and privacy one finds in a special hideout in a forest glen. Indeed, one series of Semmel's paintings has been called "Fleshscapes."

Still, there is none of the sentimental folderol that might be associated with this state of mind. Semmel has disguised none of her feelings with easy stereotypes. Her colors are pure and clear; her shadows are bold and smooth; her shapes are true to life and arranged in ordinary poses.

Harris, on the other hand, is giving us a tough interpretation of intimacy. A more popular format among feminist artists than Semmel's courageous vulnerability, Harris' toughness has also taken on the cliches of feminist imagery. Her wall totems of hardened, candy-colored materials have the phony bravado of female machismo and the same degree of personalization that that state of mind — male or female — allows. She also seems to have confused images of intimacy with genitalia.

Harris' new works on paper, however, are visual and conceptual breakthroughs for her. Again, she uses the overworked symbols of feminist art — the fabrics, cosmetics and funky romanticism developed by California feminist artists during the early '70s.

While Harris still relies heavily on the metaphorical associations of these symbols, she has combined them with colors, a chaotic design format, luxuriant textures and a peculiar childlikeness in the works on paper that