

HUFFPOST ARTS

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[Alexander Adler](#)

Writer

Joan Semmel Paintings

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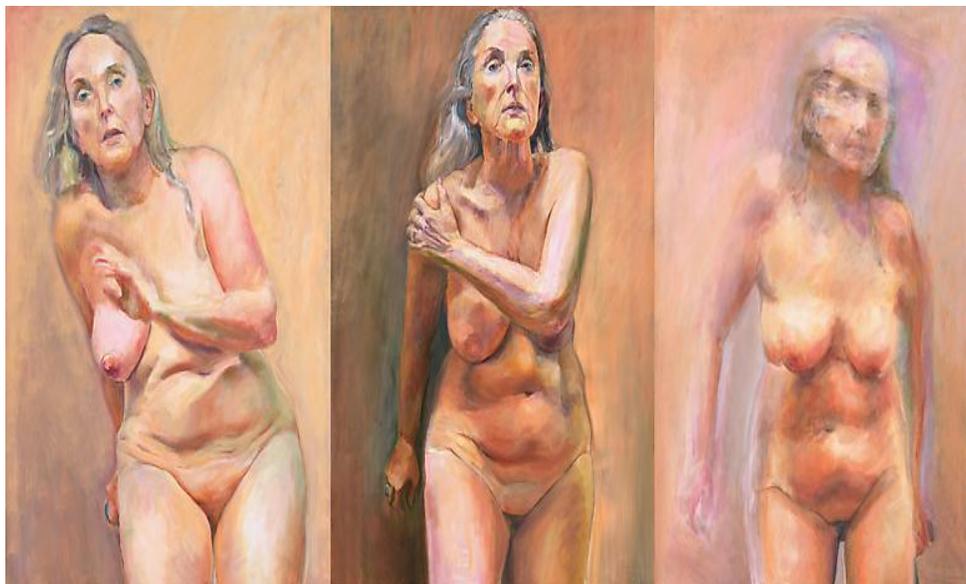
Joan Semmel
April 13-May 21, 2011
Alexander Gray Associates (508 West 26 Street #215)



Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

In an exhibition of new works on canvas, veteran Joan Semmel strips down and bears herself for all to see. This selection of honest self-portraits seeks to revive a lesser-known artist, lost in a flurry after the 1970s Feminist art movement. Semmel's place in the history of post-war figurative painting remains unclear but, at age 79, her latest works suggest a substantial deviation from the Freudian, pseudo-pornographic paintings executed a decade ago and certainly, advance beyond her semi-static, desperately provocative gestures from the '70s.

It's not to say that Semmel's work from this early period does not impress, rather that they lack the depth and fluidity of the paintings now at Alexander Gray Associates. Pictures from the '70s and early '80s expose a certain naivety and evoke a sense of nostalgia easily identifiable in Fischl's early nudes. The oft-morose figures and intimate angles employed by Semmel obscure figures while the lackadaisical landscapes prevent much of the work from effectively coalescing.



Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

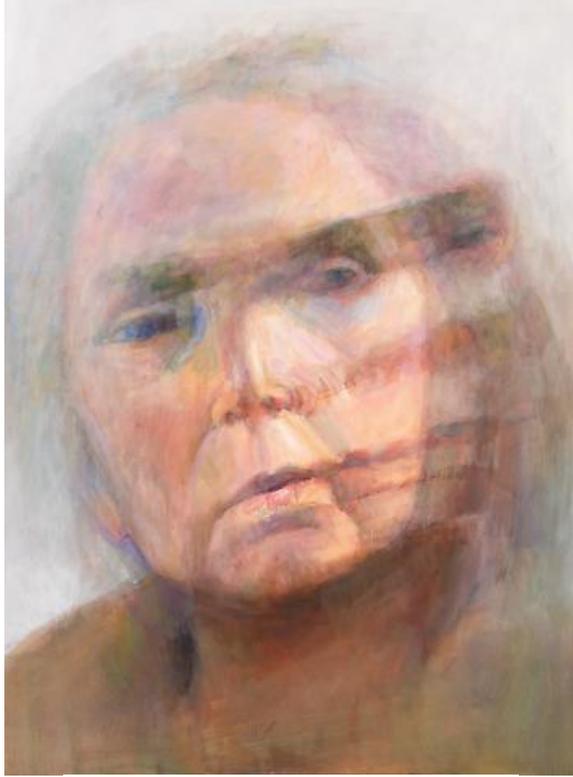
Gray's selection of paintings re-asserts Semmel's technical mastery of the medium. These works, rendered in iridescent, impressionistic hues do not reflect the work of a conscious observer, rather an active participant. Semmel portrays herself contorted, slowly writhing in paintings that illustrate a series of subtle movements and expressive gestures. "Crossed Legs" (2011) borders on abstraction, outlining the lower half of a female nude with a series of limb-like constructions extending outwards. Another triptych presents three individual impressions of Semmel herself in three-quarter view. Painted from photographs and mirror images, these pictorial musings on self thrust upon the viewer a complete portrait of a woman, stoic and assured.



Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

Semmel states that her intention is to "subvert the tradition of passive female nudes" but in pursuit of this goal, she invokes female identity and fashions images that recall stop-action photography. Nothing about these pictures remain passive. Two self-portraits most aptly exhibit the incredible tonal structure of Semmel's oeuvre. These blurred, washy portraits display the

memories and fragments of an aging woman, weathered certainly and withering before our eyes. In "Self-Portrait #4" (2010), Semmel stares forwards, seemingly hypnotized and face partially concealed by a thin veil of paint. The woman looks with conviction but leaves the viewer with a powerful sense of insecurity. The efficacy of Semmel's work lies in this disquieting quality.



Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

Semmel's work requires time and effort, both well worthwhile. While the subject matter might not be universally appealing, the candid nature of the work is discomfitingly admirable and that, itself, is enough.

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