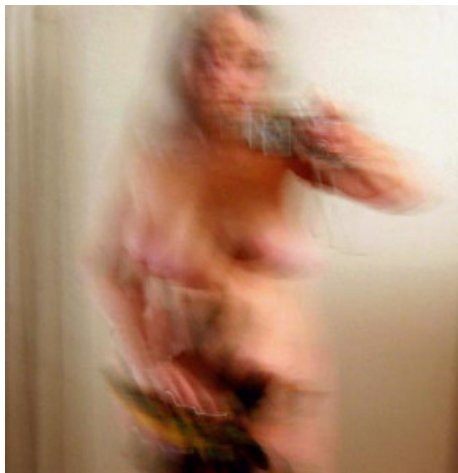


A Look, Not a Gaze: Joan Semmel, “Untitled,” 2007, from the “Femfolio”

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Professor Jennifer Borland’s *Gender in Visual Culture* seminar recently studied the Femfolio, a portfolio of prints by artists whose work was central to the feminist movement of the 1970s created at the [Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions](#). This week’s post is adapted from a paper by graduate student Roger Mullins, who investigated Joan Semmel’s 2007 untitled self-portrait.

The female nude, as painted from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century, was subjected to the “male gaze,” which objectified the female body and elicited a sexual response in the viewer (as well as feelings of power and ownership). Recently, art historian Gill Perry [has asked](#), “can an artist escape the constraints of a patriarchal culture and produce different sorts of images of women’s bodies?” Joan Semmel’s 2007 self-portrait, *Untitled*, depicts the artist not as an idealized form, but rather as “a specific body, a specific person that is not idealized, so that the culture absorbs people as they are, not as they would like them to be” [note: all quotes from Semmel in this essay are from a 2013 [Artforum video interview](#)].



Joan Semmel, “Untitled,” 2007. Digital print from “Femfolio,” Gardiner Art Collection, OSU Museum of Art. 2008.071.013.

From a distance, the viewer sees a 12” by 12” framed color print with a broad white border, a blurred image of a nude woman in motion. (As we step closer, we notice that we, too, are in motion.) The image resonates with Marcel Duchamp’s *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2*, the 1912 painting influenced both by the Cubist and Futurist movements. Like Duchamp’s work, Semmel’s photograph superimposes multiple images atop one another. As she moves through time and space, the female figure resists the static form of classical nudes.



Marcel Duchamp, "Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)," 1912. Oil on canvas, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art. 1950-134-59.

Once we're close to the image, its lack of stasis is frustrating. The broad white border distracts the viewer. The eye naturally wants to seek the lightest area and constantly drifts to the edges. The eye, then, mimics the motion in the photograph, so viewers must force themselves to look back to the central image. But to do so is uncomfortable—and perhaps that's the point. Semmel claims she's interested in that blur—the notion of “how we see ourselves in movement, not static”—because a person “can only experience oneself moment by moment.”

Semmel is interested in examining elements of our culture that she would like to see changed. In this photograph, she addresses aging. The body, constantly in motion through time, undergoes change. Semmel's self-portrait unsentimentally portrays an aging woman: her skin has lost its elasticity, her flesh sags, her face has become fissured. A line from T.S. Eliot comes to mind: “I grow old ... I grow old ... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.” The layered images and the imprecise edges that are the result of movement, in the photograph, mimic the soft focus of memory. The action of the piece implies movement from the past to the future, and it challenges our notion of the ideal form, calling into question our cultural fascination with youth.

Looking closely into the image, the viewer notes that Semmel made her self-portrait in front of a mirror. She holds in one hand a small camera. The layered image reveals that her gaze shifts. In the earliest impression, the back layer, she stares directly at the viewer, or her image in the mirror looks at the viewer in the gallery. In progressive layers her gaze shifts to the back of the camera itself as though she's looking at the viewing screen. She looks at an image of herself looking at an image of herself in motion, and this constantly moving gaze heightens our sense of “seeing” ourselves looking at the image, of being seen by the artist, of being seen by others as we view the image.

Semmel's work succeeds in its larger goal of deflecting the “male gaze” by creating an image that is grounded in specificity and that neither idealizes nor objectifies the body. She challenges the cultural norms associated with

the ideal person, replacing them with notions of the real. To look at this image, then, is to look with the eyes of a person recognizing the humanity of the person depicted, and not as a man seeking sexual pleasure, power, or ownership.



About osucurator

I am Louise Siddons, Curator of Collections at Oklahoma State University.