ART

Nude as object

Retrospective on the interfaces of body, artist, art

By Thomas Lail
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ALBANY — Joan Semmel's show currently on view at the State University at Albany gallery focuses on the representation of the female nude.

This, of course, has been a subject of frequent debate over the course of recent years as arguments regarding male gaze and the objectification of the female body have arisen time and again — usually in regard to male artists.

Here the issue is further problematized in the rendering of the female body by a female artist. In some cases this rather limited context is an unfortunate trend, leading to the ghettoization of any work done by a woman through its labeling "feminist" (as if no other issue might be of concern to a female).

Here, however, it is of central importance to wrestle with some of these issues, as they are the relevant context for Semmel's work.

The earliest works in the show are executed in a highly precise realist mode. The gaze of the viewer manifrests itself within these (and much of the work as a whole) as the view of the artist gazing downward at her own body. Take "Me Without Mirrors," where the body of the artist is shown from the chest down as if we, the collective viewer, are staring down at our own person. The rendering of these works carries unembelished realistic harshness. These are not idealized nymphs but plain fact.

Clearly, as the title of the work suggests, Semmel is attempting to access an unmediated view of her self. Eleanor Heartney alludes to this in her accompanying essay when she states that Semmel "echews the intermediaries that normally come between a woman's self and her self image." However, the self represented here is unquestionably mediated.

The cropping of the chest and limbs suggests the derivation of the image from a photograph. Thus the unseen camera becomes the mediating eye of the artist/viewer.

Oddly, this carries a disturbing implication. Semmel demonstrates the conundrum of contemporaory culture: Despite attempting to break outside the traditional gaze of objectivity, she plants herself firmly within it, subjectifying her own body.

In the late 20th century, we have come to know the world (and ourselves) primarily through the media and, specifically, through photography. Whether Semmel from photos is less imporotant than the fact that she employs all the conventional croppings of photos. It looks like a photo, it acts like a photo and for all intents and purposes it carries the associaiton of finding reality secondhand in a photograph.

In the work of the '80s, Semmel moved to a less realistically oriented style of painting that calls to mind the work of Eric Fischl. Here, the meanderings of the paint are given freer rein, with the depicted forms often becoming interwoven with looser brushwork and runs. In "Looking Glasses," a piece from the late '80s, the female figure is shown photographing herself in a mirror. The implication of the earlier work is here made literal as the pictured self is repeatedly mediated as objective photographer, mirrored reflection appearing to the right side of the canvas and as the reflected image that has become the image of the painting.

Perhaps the product of an increasing sophisticatio, it seems that at least the mediating structures, in affect a byproduct of cultural experience, are here acknowledged. The pictures of this period have become less an attempt to step beyond, less a declaration of "that way is wrong, this way is right" and more a (growing) unconcious manner in which such issues function. These are then something like a pressurized depiction of the problem.

During this same time and since then Semmel has engaged in a number of works that place the depicted figure, still typically viewed from the position of the figure herself, in more complex cultural settings. Here images take place on the sun-drenched beach and in the women's locker room — two arenas of gaze.

Like "Looking Glasses," what is interesting here is the addressing of the problem. The gaze in these works is not only the artist's, the subject is not only herself but a complex network of viewer and viewed has been instituted from which the artist cannot detach herself. She is observing others and in turn they observe her.

The object and the objectifier are wound more and more tightly together with the resulting confusion all but eliminating the high moral ground that Heartney's characterization of the early work holds. In these works we find an ever more twisting trail of gaze. ■

REVIEW

"THROUGH THE OBJECT'S EYES: PAINTINGS BY JOAN SEMMEL." Nude studies, portraits and tableaux. Through April 12. University Art Gallery, State University at Albany. 442-4035.