

ART REVIEW: Joan Semmel Self-Portraits Offer Vibrant Affirmation of Aging

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by Charles A. Riley II

Joan Semmel is a towering figure in the second-wave feminist movement. With work currently on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Brooklyn Museum (a stronghold of feminist art), and art held in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2014), the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, the Jewish Museum, and a long list of other major public collections, her importance is hard to debate.

I recognized I was encountering a major exhibition of her art the moment I walked through the door of the [Alexander Gray Associates](#) gallery in Chelsea and surrendered to [Joan Semmel's](#) *Embrace* installed on the first floor of a two-floor solo exhibition "Joan Semmel: New Work."

The monumental nude self-portrait is theatrically cropped at the bridge of her nose so that her eyes (implicitly downcast) are left out but wisps of silver hair descend to alert the viewer to some of the human drama of what is to follow. The acidic yellow background—the elbows are not quite tangent to the edge of the canvas, suspending the figure precariously—sharpens the contours of the voluptuous figure and turns up the heat on the magenta and scarlet strokes descending into the intimate center of the figure, the glowing groin between two knees highlighted in white.



"Embrace" by Joan Semmel, 2016. Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

Yet even this degree of technical and emotional depth does not reveal the layers of drama to come on the upper level of the gallery, where most of the exhibition unfolds in colossal splendor.

There is a substantial backstory to this momentous show that involves not just chapters in Semmel's biography but many significant episodes in the history of women in art. Born in the Bronx, Semmel married and spent her early career as an Abstract Expressionist in Spain and South America, after studying at the Cooper Union, Pratt Institute and the Art Student's League. Frustrated by sexism, she returned to New York single, unleashing a spate of erotic paintings, sometimes of herself and her lover, in a tantric range of positions.

The man and woman are often color-coded for contrast in these paintings, like opposing teams in a contact sport, and the radioactive tonalities of these works (like the palette of the Brucke or Cobra artists at the beginning of the 20th century) are as torrid as the scenes of copulation. In 1973 she drafted the introduction to a book that was never published. Thankfully, the typescript is reproduced in a catalogue, "Through the Object's Eye," about the representation of women in art.

In that introduction, she wrote: "The artist's constant search for self merges with the woman's need for self-definition." When she wrote those words they were closer to a manifesto than an artist's statement, foretelling the surging power of women in art, a development for which she can take a

certain degree of credit as an activist. Now the same words suggest the difficulty of balancing of style and content, a feat she magnificently accomplishes in the works on view at Alexander Gray Associates.



Installation view of "Joan Semmel: New Work" at Alexander Gray Associates, 2016. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

In the late '70s, Semmel became infuriated with the exploitation of women in pornography and her career took a brisk turn, essential to recognize in order to understand the current exhibition. She shifted to paintings only of the female body, usually solo although the dialectical dance of two figures in the earlier erotic works is continued in one of the most intriguing conceptual devices in the current show, the layering of an open-outline figure across fully rendered figures, sometimes at the same scale, sometimes in a different scale, as in *Double Embrace*.



“Double Embrace” by Joan Semmel, 2016. Oil on canvas, 72 x 68 inches. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

The linear layers of the oil crayon drawings, many on the lower level, diagram the palimpsest effect of what she calls the “overlays” perfectly. Were it not to be taken as an insult, given [David Salle’s](#) boyish reliance on pornography, the technique could be compared to that artist’s naughty paintings. A better comparison for the ghostly outlines in Semmel’s nudes would be the work of [Francis Picabia](#), especially his [Hera](#).

During the late 1980s, Semmel’s self-portraits turned into a gutsy, pervasively erotic examination of the transformation of the body through aging, bucking the societal suppression of older figures, conferring visibility where invisibility is all too often the rule. As she wrote in her East Hampton studio this past July for the exhibition catalogue: “Aging people like me still love, still paint, still write, still care, and still hope. The canvas becomes the tender skin of fragile thoughts.”

The Olympian power of such works as *Blue Embrace*, which marries realism and graphic punch, or *Cool Light*, which opens an aperture as cavernous as the negative spaces of a [Barbara Hepworth](#) sculpture even as it tiptoes on the line of abstraction, elevated the exhibition to its painterly heights. Color and the lavishly applied paint lift the body from being a burden to becoming a banquet of pinks, greens, and the luscious gold of a ripe mango. “The carnal nature of paint has seemed to me a perfect metaphor, the specifics of image a necessary elaboration,” she observed in the catalogue to an earlier show.



“Blue Embrace” by Joan Semmel, 2016. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches.
Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.



“Cool Light” by Joan Semmel, 2016. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

Semmel does not try to defy or hide the effects of gravity or the creeping metamorphoses of a body in its 80s. When wrinkles and blemishes take on this level of heroic significance, as in the plunging folds of the abdomen on the lower left section of *Open Hand*, we enter the fleshly territory of those candid celebrants of skin and senescence, [Rembrandt](#) and Lucian Freud.

The spectrum of tones and the oddity of the hand gesture in *Open Hand* may be closer to Freud’s English modernism, but I found myself thinking of the mingling of grandeur and decay in the self-portraits and paintings of older women by Rembrandt. In his beautifully written book *Rembrandt’s Eyes*, Simon Schama rhapsodizes over the honesty of these works: “Rembrandt’s deep-set black eyes, the brows raised a little as if accustomed to discomfort, ringed round and round again with puffy circles, wheels within wheels that speak of nights without sleep, of sorrows without end, of the crushing weight of life’s travail.”



“Open Hand” by Joan Semmel, 2015. Oil on canvas, 66 x 48 inches. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

In many ways, that description is too full of self-pity for the intimate and vibrant paintings of Joan Semmel. Just outside Alexander Gray Associates where they hang, the staircase to the High Line offered the constant ascent and descent of women young and old, caught briefly in the dappled sunlight and framed by the massive gallery windows, [Marcel Duchamp](#)'s landmark painting set in motion. Like the doubled images of Semmel's dynamic self-portraits, the spectacle was a reminder of beauty that passed, is passing, and still to come.

BASIC FACTS: “Joan Semmel: New Work” is on view September 8 to October 15, 2016 at Alexander Gray Associates, 510 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001. www.alexandergray.com

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