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Joan Semmel, *Purple Passion*, 1973, oil on canvas, 48 × 80". From "Second Erotic Series," 1972–73.

Joan Semmel

THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS MUSEUM

Joan Semmel’s “Skin in the Game” at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts—her first retrospective—evinced a sustained, fearless, and lively studio practice, which the artist has maintained for more than six decades. She joyously examines the body, and often her own. Hung chronologically, the exhibition included fifty-one paintings, all oil on canvas, as well as several works on paper. Despite the modest selection, the show covered a great portion of Semmel’s career.

The presentation began with an Abstract Expressionist painting, *Perfil Infinito* (Infinite Profile), 1966. Her unabashed use of color in this work, which we see throughout the exhibition, is on full display: Irregularly sized fields of bold, saturated hues—verdant green, taupe, mustard yellow, indigo, dark orange, and creamy white—fill the roughly seventy-two-by-sixty-six-inch canvas. Yet her treatment of form becomes increasingly tighter by the early 1970s in series such as “Sex Paintings,” 1971, when she turned to figuration and kinkier subject matter.

She doesn’t, however, fully drop the frenetic AbEx gesturalism until her “Second Erotic Series,” 1972–73. Based on photographs Semmel took of various heterosexual couples having sex, the extreme close-ups of genitals and cropped bodies sans heads in these images are reminiscent of straight mainstream porn. Yet their titles, such as *Purple Passion*, 1972, make explicit her continuing emphasis on color. In this piece, two people seemingly float before a deep-violet ground; the man’s bright-orange skin contrasts sharply against the sickly yellow flesh of the woman riding him. But the artist seems to be critiquing this scene of normative boy-on-girl intercourse: With her garish palette, Semmel transforms an ordinary fuck into a moment that is comically weird, ersatz—even grotesque.

The artist turns the camera on herself in the “Self Image” series, 1974–79. While some of the pieces from this grouping, such as *Me Without Mirrors*, 1974, are based on photographs, others are connected to collages made from photos as well as drawings done in pastel, oil, and crayon, a number of which, as previously mentioned, were on display. With the exception of the pink undersides of Semmel’s feet, *Me Without Mirrors* is largely composed of various fleshy browns. Since artist and model are one and the same in this work, subject and object are blurred. Indeed, the artist portrays her body not as a form of spectacle, but as something she humbly offers up to us.

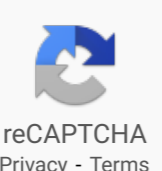
In contrast are the paintings from the “Mannequin Series,” 1996–2000, which depict the titular objects, but usually missing an appendage. Here, Semmel transforms these broken idealizations of the female form into symbols of cruel objectification, showing us how women are discarded when they get old. In the canvas *Disappearing*, 2006, Semmel renders herself holding a camera while looking into a mirror. The title is telling: The artist, in her early seventies at the time this work was made, fractures and fades into the background, becoming blurred, abstract—virtually unrecognizable. Yet this image seems like a bit of an outlier, as most of her work after 2000 unflinchingly examines the aging body. Take the cluster of self-portraits from the neck up that are part of *Untitled*, 2007, in which the artist straightforwardly depicts her unadorned self, gazing directly at the viewer. In this work, she turns her vulnerability into a form of generosity—as she seemed to do everywhere in this exhibition.

The most monumental piece here (and the show’s namesake), *Skin in the Game*, 2019, was a four-panel painting that is eight feet high and an astonishing twenty-four feet wide. In this work, Semmel depicts a multiplicity of aged bodies—all her own—in different sizes and placed at various angles, colored in an array of pinks, golds, greens, tangerines, and plums. That the figures appear to be in a perpetual state of becoming relates not only to the artist and the developments of her own life, but also to her rich protean vision as a painter. Even as she enters her ninth decade, Semmel never fails to shock, surprise, and utterly delight.

— Alpesh Kantilal Patel

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