

Through the Object's Eye: Paintings by

Joan
Semmel

University Art Gallery
University at Albany
State University of New York
March 3 - April 12, 1992

Schick Art Gallery
Skidmore College
Saratoga Springs, NY
July 16 - September 20, 1992

Tyler Art Gallery
State University of New York at
Oswego, NY
October 23 - November 22, 1992

Through the Object's Eye

It is no simple matter to be a painter of nudes at this point in the 20th century, especially if one happens to be a woman. Art world progressives declare the nude a dead issue, religious fundamentalists condemn the subject as pornographic, and iconoclastic feminists argue that representations of the female body always result in the objectification of women.

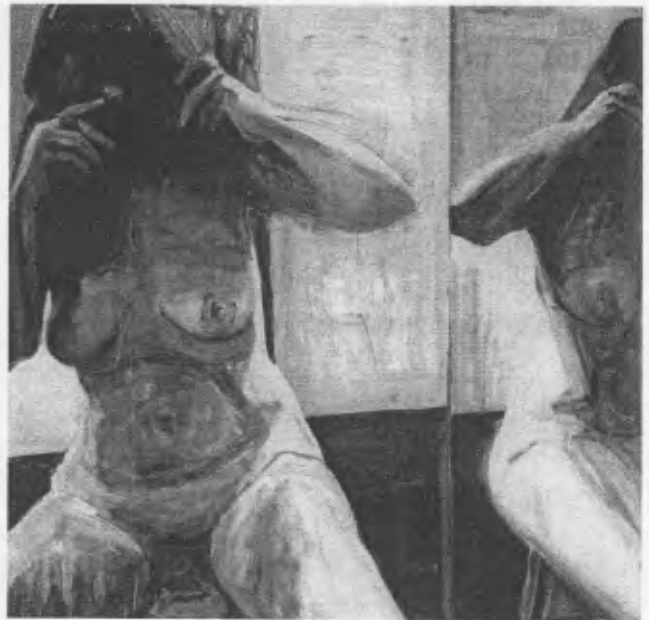
Unfazed by such static, Joan Semmel has been involved since the early 1970s in an exploration of the possibilities and paradoxes of the female nude. Admittedly, hers are nudes with a difference. For, although they have taken a variety of forms over the last twenty years, all of Semmel's female figure studies reflect her conviction that women can regain control of their lives, their bodies and, finally, the ways in which these are represented in the larger world.

Thus, in her earliest nudes, Semmel eschews the intermediaries which normally come between a woman's self and her self image. No cameras, no reflections, no male artist reinterpreting her body — just, as she describes it in the title of one painting, *Me Without Mirrors*. These paintings present for us the view of the female body as it appears to its owner, looking down the length of her body from chest to toes. In a remarkable collapse of distinctions, observer and observed, subject and object, become one.

These works were followed by a series of paintings which explored the tensions between autonomy and connection through the addition of a male figure. Like the female, the male figure in these paintings is represented nude and headless, in poses which suggest sexual intimacy. Here, even more than in the representations of the woman alone, the viewer is deflected from an aesthetic or sexual

contemplation of the naked woman toward a consideration of her existence as a whole and fully conscious individual.

Semmel's next studies of the nude revolved around an exploration of various modes of representing the figure.



Looking Glasses, 1988, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches

Mixing collaged drawings of realistic nudes with expressionistically painted versions of the same image, she created a series of doubled figures which seem to metamorphosize at times into surrealistic landscapes. The play here between realistically and expressionistically rendered flesh has an unsettling quality that reappears in later work.

By the mid eighties, Semmel had returned to an apparently more traditional form of figuration, this time placing the nude in fully realized contexts. These self regarding female figures now appeared in crowded beaches, a backdrop which allowed Semmel to suggest the complex interactions which result when the



Red Spread, 1985, oil on canvas, 78 x 108 inches

individual is thrust into the larger social world.

Finally, toward the end of the decade, Semmel discovered a setting which allowed her to address all these issues simultaneously. In an ongoing series of works set in the women's locker room of a health club, she explores the peculiar position of the woman gazing at women, the disparity between the ideal nude and a variety of real, but imperfect female bodies, and the artist's ability to manipulate the

place of the viewer. Picturing a fractured space in which mirrors fragment and multiply the bodies they reflect while occasionally offering us a glimpse of the usually invisible artist aiming her camera at the scene, all the while switching effortlessly from carefully detailed realism to broad, almost abstract gestural brushstrokes, Semmel undermines all the devices by which traditional realism maintains its illusion of coherence and truth. We become acutely aware of our ambiguous status as viewers.

Thus the artist swings full circle back to the concerns of her earliest nude paintings. If, in those works she wanted to undermine conventional representations of women by both figuratively and literally going "without mirrors", here she supplies mirrors in abundance toward the same end of breaking down the stereotypical image of the female nude.

In the process, she has demonstrated the folly of declaring any artistic genre or subject matter obsolete. To an artist of vision and imagination, there is always room for the reinvention of tradition in ways that make it live for us anew.

Eleanor Heartney