

Art Roundup: New York City

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Winter 2018 Highlights

By Emilia Dubicki, WTP Art Correspondent

Four times a year, WTP art correspondents from around the country will report back on the pre-vious season, with images from exhibitions you otherwise might have missed, and their own in-sights into these varied venues.

This winter in the northeast, where life quiets down a bit in the landscape, I was thinking about the relationship we have with our surroundings. The distance between place and self often blurs. We can be so integrated with a place, knowing it inside and out, until something changes either externally or within ourselves, and we take notice. In the exhibits I write about here, I consider the artists' experiences of self in time and space. Walking around Chelsea on a brisk winter day, I was very much aware of the weather, the teasing sun a welcome companion as I tucked into galleries.



Alexander Gray Associates hosted a particularly vibrant exhibition, *A Necessary Elaboration*, of new works by Joan Semmel (b.1932). Walking into the main gallery space can feel like entering a temple or chapel with illuminated stained-glass windows. Semmel's figures fill each 72" x 60" canvas, and where there's a cropped leg or arm, the mind's eye imagines its continuation with-out boundaries. This series of large nude self-portraits were painted in the last two years, but Semmel has been painting her own body since the 1970s. In the early '70s she used vivid col-ors in portraying erotically paired bodies, then later in that decade, she began depicting herself alone or with a partner. About the latest work, Semmel says, "You're still dealing with sexuality, but it's not about seduction... The colors are the seduction here."

Semmel, who painted abstractly in the 1960s, brings abstract elements into this recent show through twists and turns of the body, through lines of color, shadows, and backgrounds in reds, violets, aqua, and lime-green. In the figures' contours, volume, and broad areas of color, one can see beyond the subject matter into the expression elicited by color and form. Brushstrokes of dazzling blue outline an arm and shoulder, the hips. A shadow of dusky mauve falls under a breast in "Fleshed Out." The hot reds, various flesh tones, or vibrant blues imbue each painting with its own mood. In "Seated in Red," the artist's back in sunburned-like flesh tones is set against crimson. "In the Green" imparts a cooler feel, with the seated figure and limbs serving to separate areas of aqua, lime-green, and purple. From across the gallery, a turquoise ring seems to radiate from the painting "Crossed Arms." As the colors repeat here and there among the works, Semmel seems to be in conversation with herself. The source of light shifts, in some, seeming to be cast from the left, from the right in others. And how the light is reflected off the figure in turn reflects an inner life—Semmel's face turned toward the light suggests confidence, but when turned away as she hugs herself, the more vulnerable. In these works, Semmel combines her various styles of painting over the years and masters composition, paint handling, scale, and light.



Joan Semmel, *In the Green*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 72" x 60"
Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York
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