



Joan Semmel: A Necessary Elaboration

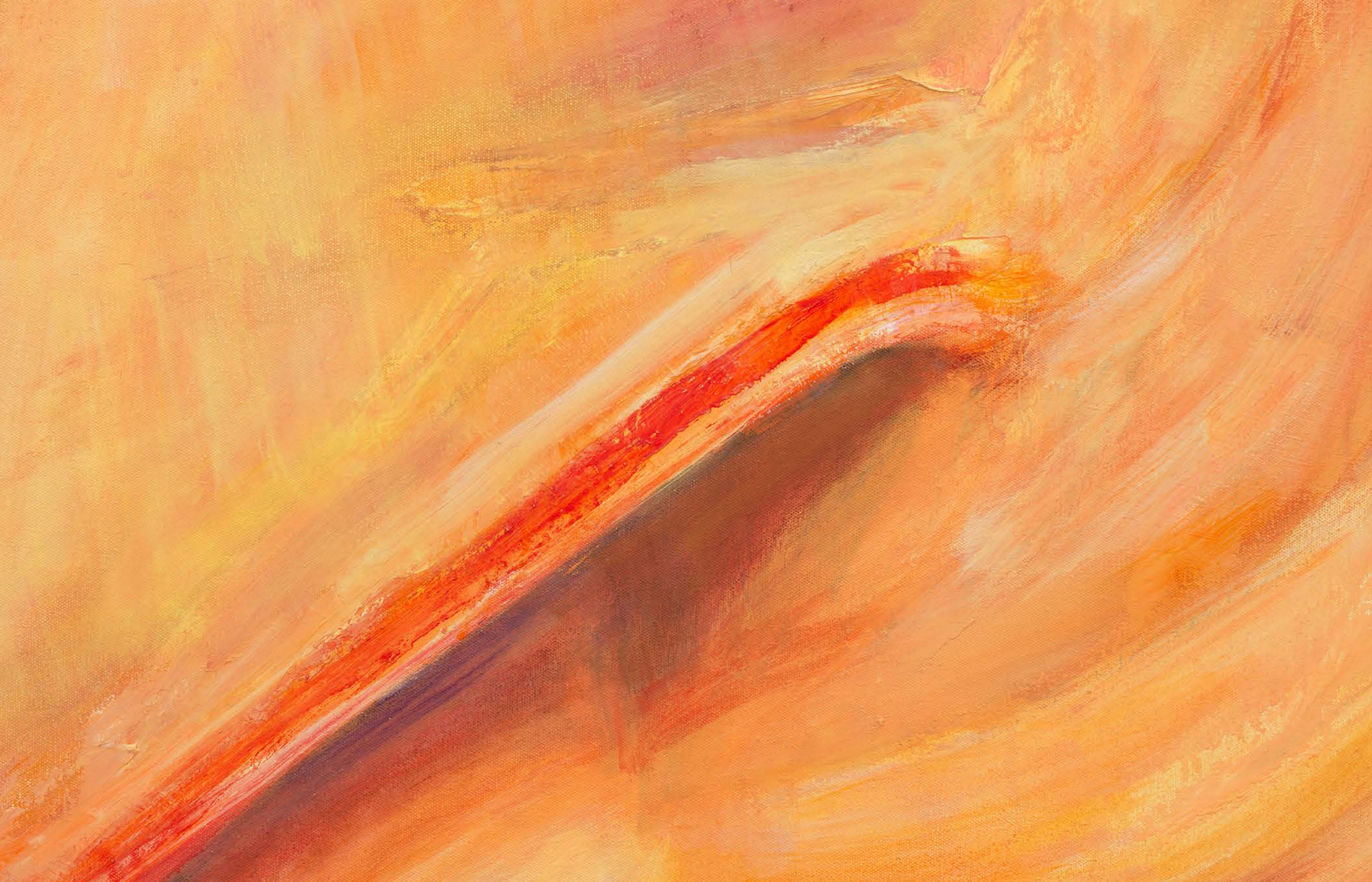
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Alexander Gray Associates

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January 10 – February 16, 2019

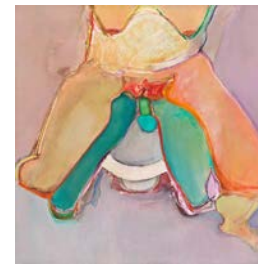
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Embodied Accumulation

by Laila Pedro

I first interviewed Joan Semmel in 2016, on the occasion of her last show at the Gallery, having long been fascinated by her ambitious, bold, formally seductive, and demanding paintings. Like many, if not most, who have engaged critically with Semmel's work, I was compelled and entranced by the content of the images—those gorgeous accumulations of flesh, the painfully human sensuality or awkwardness or closeness of what she calls her “sex pictures,” and the angles of the photographs she used when painting her own body, which couldn't help but be intimate. This notion of intimacy is a fascinating, sometimes elusive, and other times troubling aspect of Semmel's work, in different ways apparent in the sex pictures (1971–72), the nudes (1974–79), the series of faces (2007–13), and the locker room works (1988–91).



Hot Seat, 1971



Odalesque, 1998

If the paintings are tantalizing, enervating, or seductive, they are also not easy—which is to say that, not unlike Semmel herself, her works do not reward easy explanation or classification. They are not reducible to political paintings, or statement paintings, or nude studies, although of course they are partially all of those things. Rather, these paintings draw the viewer into a particular kind of difficulty: In the tension between the explicitness of what they show and the material subtlety of how they are constructed, the content can discursively overtake their prima facie value as *objects* built by human hands from a human mind. The genius of the works, of course, also lies in the resultant pinpoint equilibrium—the dynamic balance between what is depicted and how it is physically made, a case of 1 + 1 equals 11, of a whole that is greater, and of a different order of meaning, than the sum of its parts.

It seems to me that there is therefore room for correction—or, more gently, for amplification—in our ways of seeing and feeling Semmel's work. A review

of how she has tended to be written about reveals a substantial focus on the work's visual content—sex, flesh, women's bodies, the woman artist's body—and its political implications. As well, attention is drawn to her use of photography, specifically in the context of and adjacent to the Pictures Generation. The questions of feminism and self-regard are without

doubt essential to Semmel's self—to her development as an artist, to her paintings, and to her overall project. As she said to me two years ago, “When I came back to New York, and came into the feminist movement, that was the change that triggered the figurative work. It wasn't because I was a figurative painter or because I needed to make figures. It was because what was so complete in my life at that point was to be able to express certain ideas that had to do with my involvement politically, and I have maintained that ever since. But I was exploring painting itself, so that it was also about the unity of style and content.”

If the political content of her works is inseparable from their style and genre, this is also inseparable from the social risk, a real danger to women artists—and particularly to expressly feminist women artists—that their thoughts, their position, and how they occupy and express these, occlude the artistic rigor of their work. Sometimes, in listening to what Semmel has to say, we risk losing the all-important ways in which she says it.

For Semmel, who has throughout her career explicitly stated as well as painted her position, there should not be any need to choose. It is not only long overdue, it is felicitously rewarding to us as viewers to reconsider the paintings with an intentional shift of attention to their formal and structural merits. In this way, they begin to reveal their central nugget of meaning and to unmake the easy assumption that they are solely paintings *about* flesh—instead they are bodies built, flesh-like, out of paint.

It is worth noting here that my way of looking at art is informed by a highly verbal sensibility, and the etymological implications of the word “intimate” provided me with a helpful entry point into this latest body of work. It is a word connected to drawing in, to pulling inward, and it also suggests friendship or deep affinity. The intimacy of Semmel's works lies not only in their subject matter, but in their effect on us: visually, they reject distance—the scale of her figures and the pulsating intensity with which she renders them, makes them seem to jump towards us out of their frames.



Alborada, 1968

There are multiple registers of encounter in this intimacy: There is the image's effect in communicating a narrative, there is the narrative embedded in how it is constructed from the paint, then the story of their intersection, and finally the fourth dialogue—the intersection with the viewer. These multiple points of encounter emerge from Semmel's unique formation as a painter. Semmel comes from a particular technical

trajectory that informs how her works are built. Trained first in abstraction, her earliest compositional impulse was to flatten out the image, to remove any accumulations or visual narratives that would accrete into the suggestion of a figure or deliver a deceptive illusion of space. As her practice evolved and shifted—from both formal and ideological considerations—she learned how to construct figures, dealing with representation with a vigorous autodidacticism and an unflinching, clear-sighted engagement with her own body.



Four Rings, 2003

Because Semmel's evolution and her devotion to her work have been so meticulous, even relentless, it is possible to trace over time the boldness and inventiveness in her use of paint, but also how, once grounded in her strong and inimitable pictorial language—large in scale, the figure crowded so densely in the canvas that it seems about to burst out—she has freed herself to explore and experiment with different technical aspects of the work, with a renewed attention to color and to the tactile interactions between paint and canvas. In the last series she showed at the Gallery,

in 2016, Semmel's visual touchpoints are present, but so is an intriguing experimental device. She superimposed layers of different images into the work, so that the already compressed visual planes were ever more finely and densely layered over themselves, fragmenting the figures in two- and three-dimensional cross-sections.

The body of work now on display dispenses with such intervention—if the superimposed works drew our eye to how she thinks about images, Semmel now calls our attention to how she builds with paint itself—they ask us to engage, not with flesh made out of paint, but with paint as a kind of flesh itself.



Turning, 2018

Turning (2018) embodies these concerns and reveals Semmel's masterful experimentations in the fecund space between structure and content. It could, in many ways, stand as an abstract work on its own terms, but for the figure anchoring the central third of the canvas and sluicing across to the right and very slightly out of frame. Semmel's use of scale, particularly in the way her figures occupy the camera, often makes it difficult to really speak of background and foreground; in this way the structures of abstract expressionism shine



Joan Semmel studio in New York City, 2018

through in the figurative work—the depth collapses in such a way that it is necessary to dispense with it as an illusion and focus on how the colors interact within the two-dimensional plane.

Viewed this way, the sophistication of Semmel's chromatic experimentation grounds the image technically—in the rapports between complements and hues—and affectively—in an aura of mystery and deep emotion. From the pale washes of lavender at the top left, through to the inky midnight blue or violet precisely opposite; from the pale green and lavender washes of abstract hair at the top right to the deep purply red at bottom left (what Semmel called her “mini-Rothko”) the chromatic interactions create a kind of axis around which the central figure twists. In this way, Semmel uses her abstract expressionist sensibility—the whorls of color, now deeper, now lighter; the occasional use of a highlighted line (see the inner curve of the arm) in way that signals, but does not become, drawing—to pull our attention back to the figure.

If Semmel has thus far employed color to draw us into the figure, she uses texture to makes us look at it ever more closely. In a powerful image built out of soft lines and swooping flesh there is a hint of vulnerability in the way the figure twists (the content gesture of twisting around this axis echoing the structure the colors create), holding a small stool. The stool itself is the only hard edge in the painting, a visual counterpoint to the soft lines of breast, waist, and thigh.



Seated in Red, 2018

If, in *Turning*, Semmel deployed color variance to build the architecture of the work, in *Seated in Red* (2018), she has used shifts in warmth and saturation to build a complete emotional state out of paint using one primary color. The effect of the throbbing crimson deepens and is deepened by its contrast to the central figure, the color's boldness and assuredness both literally framing and emotionally contrasting with the vulnerability of the pose. The effect of the contrast between color and position is to highlight and intensify both; the scale of the figure and its central, solidly rooted situation within

the frame further anchor these visual dialogues between assertiveness and vulnerability. The reality of vulnerability has long been thematically and visibly present in Semmel's work, as she insists, boldly, on the ineluctability of being vulnerable, thereby bringing a strong argument to what is by definition an unprotected position. Semmel's works are made with such certainty that they can seem fixed, even hermetic. But it is in

fact her openness to mark-making, to leaving in what emerges in process, that gives them their buoyancy and dynamism. Here, she has applied paint meticulously to the canvas, letting its varying thickness play with the underlying material to produce a vibrancy of light and saturation. In *Turning*, the color's luminosity fairly throbs in contrast with the loose mark-making that builds the hair and signals the textures of flesh in the figure's back.

The question of luminosity is an interesting one in Semmel's work, and *My Saskia* (2018) is perhaps the most dramatically and emphatically lit of the works in this exhibition. Signature Semmel moments are scattered like clues throughout—her nearly omnipresent turquoise ring, a glimmer of hardness against the hills of flesh, and the implied presence of the camera and mirror. But it is the lighting that makes this work stand apart. From the top right-hand corner beams a light so powerful that Semmel's hanging hair is almost completely whited out into a wash of palest gold. The starkness of her face in profile is highlighted by the sure, sharp line of her nose, marked in a close shade of white that seems to guide the light in a flow down the front of the body. In this way light, the most painterly of tools, transforms a pose—resting one's hand on one's knee, shoulders bent forward—that could easily suggest age, frailty, a simple need to pause for breath, into a figure of glowing power.

This notion of power is, it seems to me, indispensable in considering both the works now on view, and the longer trajectories of Semmel's career. She has represented dynamics of power from an empowered position—as both subject and artist, from behind the camera and in front of it, with words but most importantly with images. With the benefit of years of experience of exploring the figure, and with the body as an ever-present, ever-evolving, and ever compelling subject, these newest works reveal both her understanding of power of the elements of a painting—color and canvas, structure and scale—and also her own mastery of these elements. In the work, the facets of power come together—on the verge, seemingly, of being unleashed.



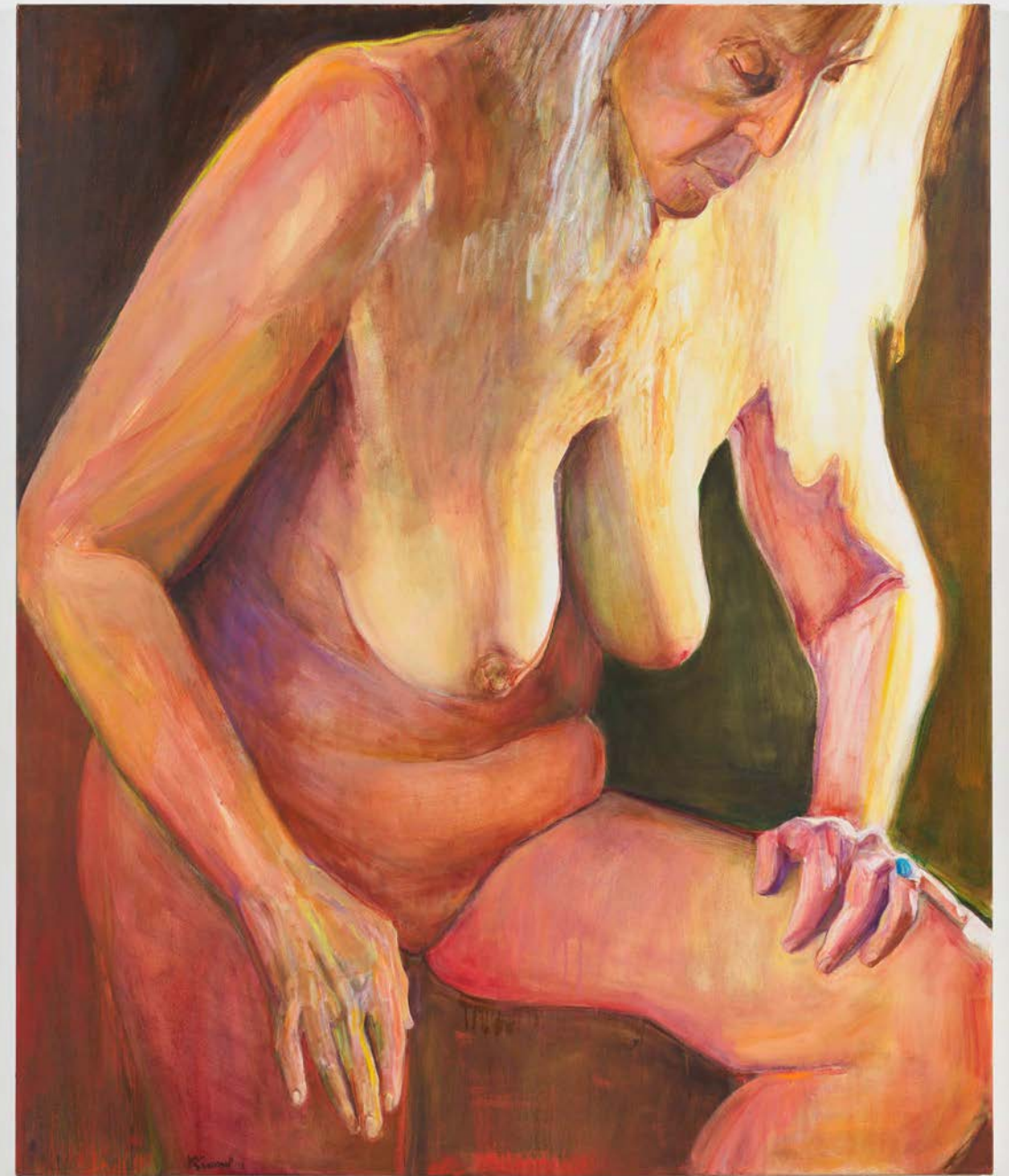
My Saskia, 2018, detail



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019



Crossed Arms, 2018



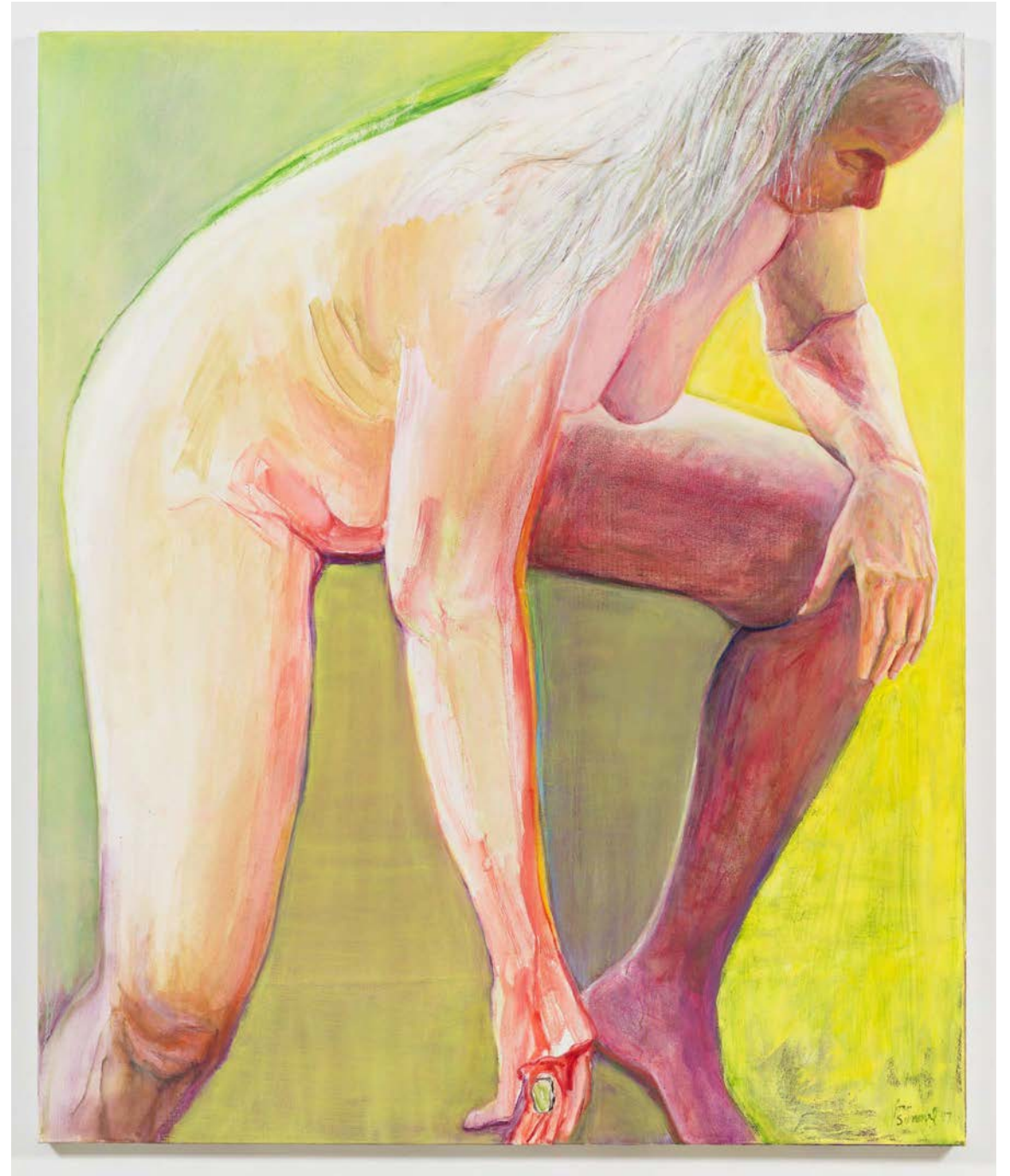
My Saskia, 2018



Knee Up, 2017, detail



Knee Up, 2017



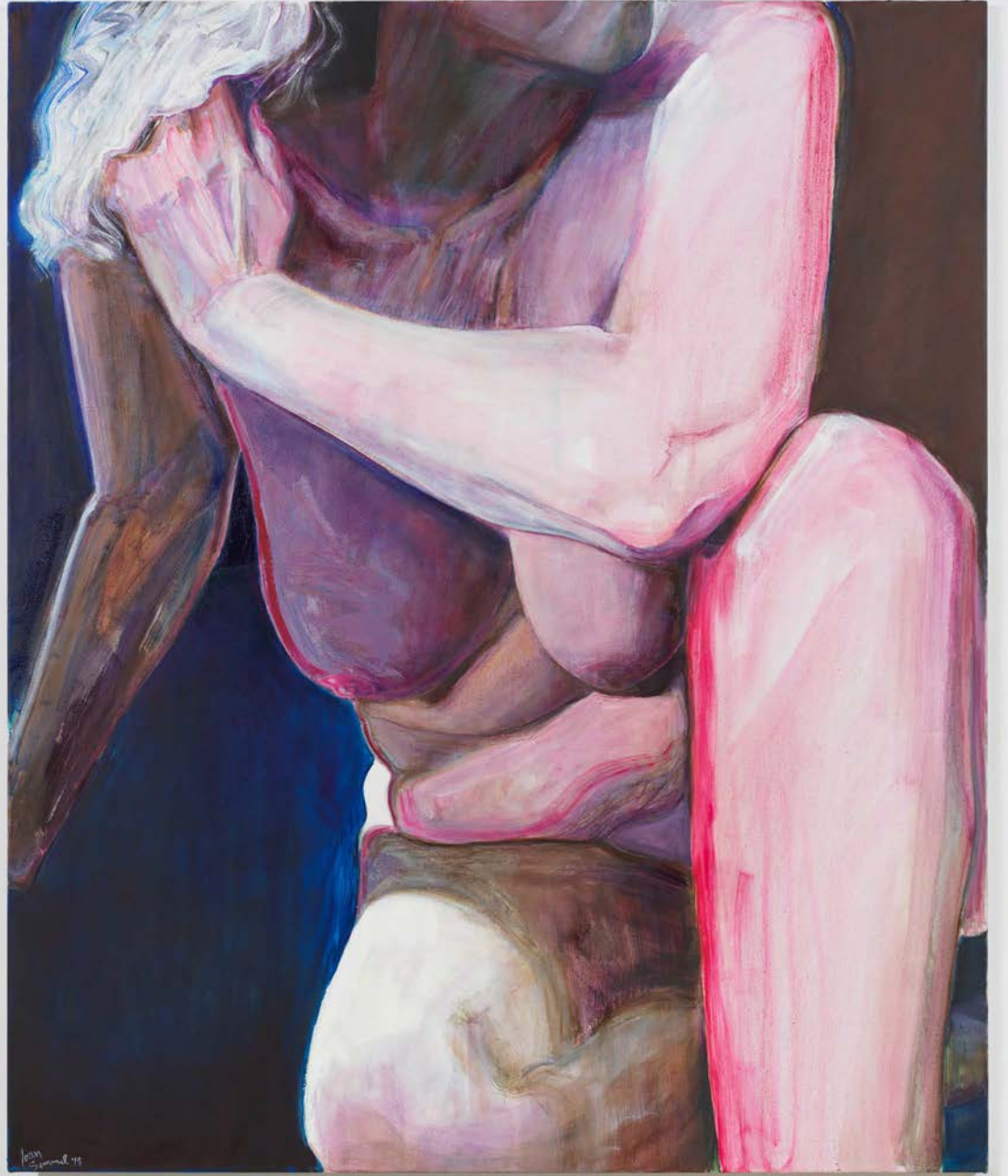
Long Reach, 2017



White Skin, 2018



Seated in Red, 2018

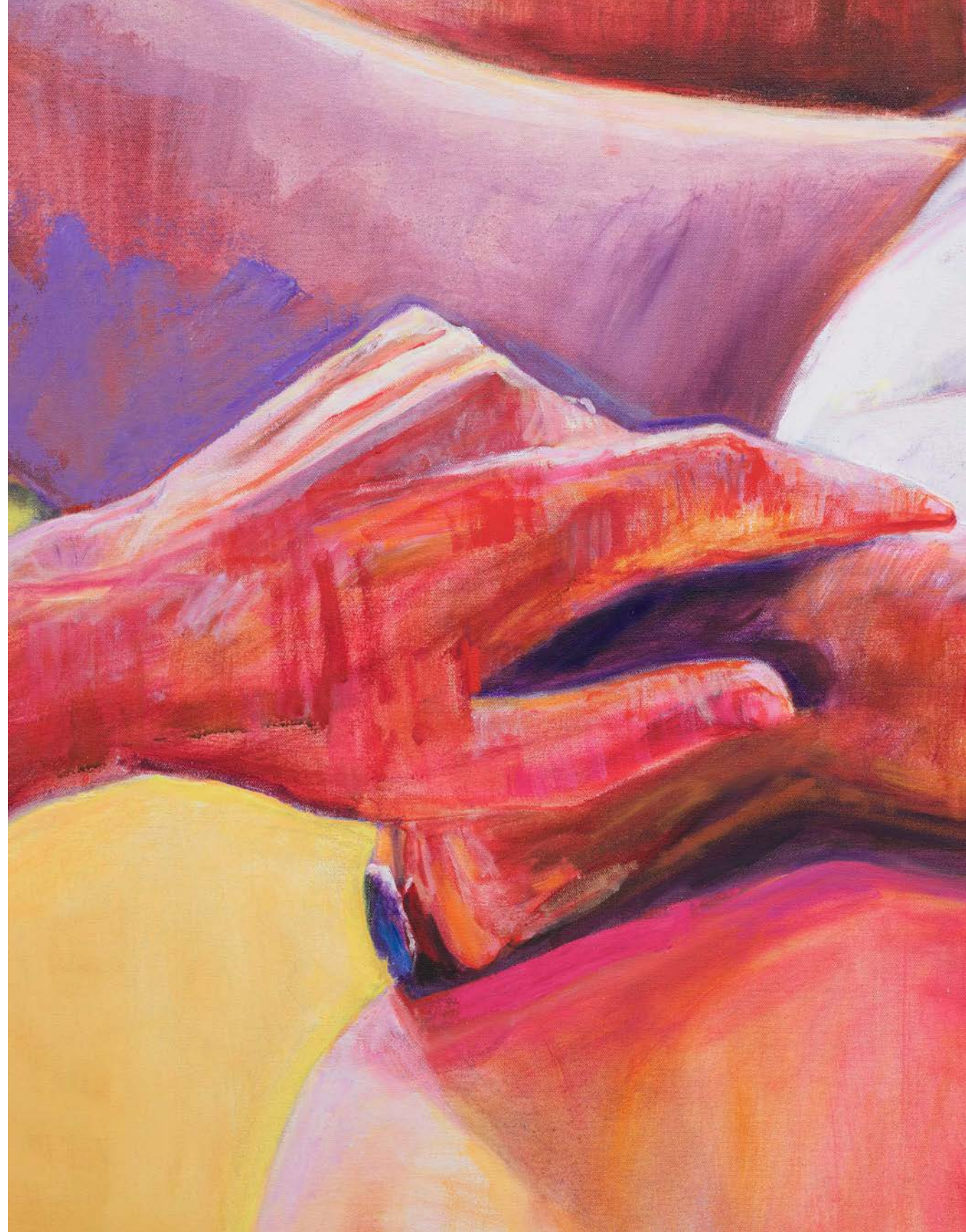


Red Line, 2018



Red Line, 2018, detail

Revisiting, 2018, detail



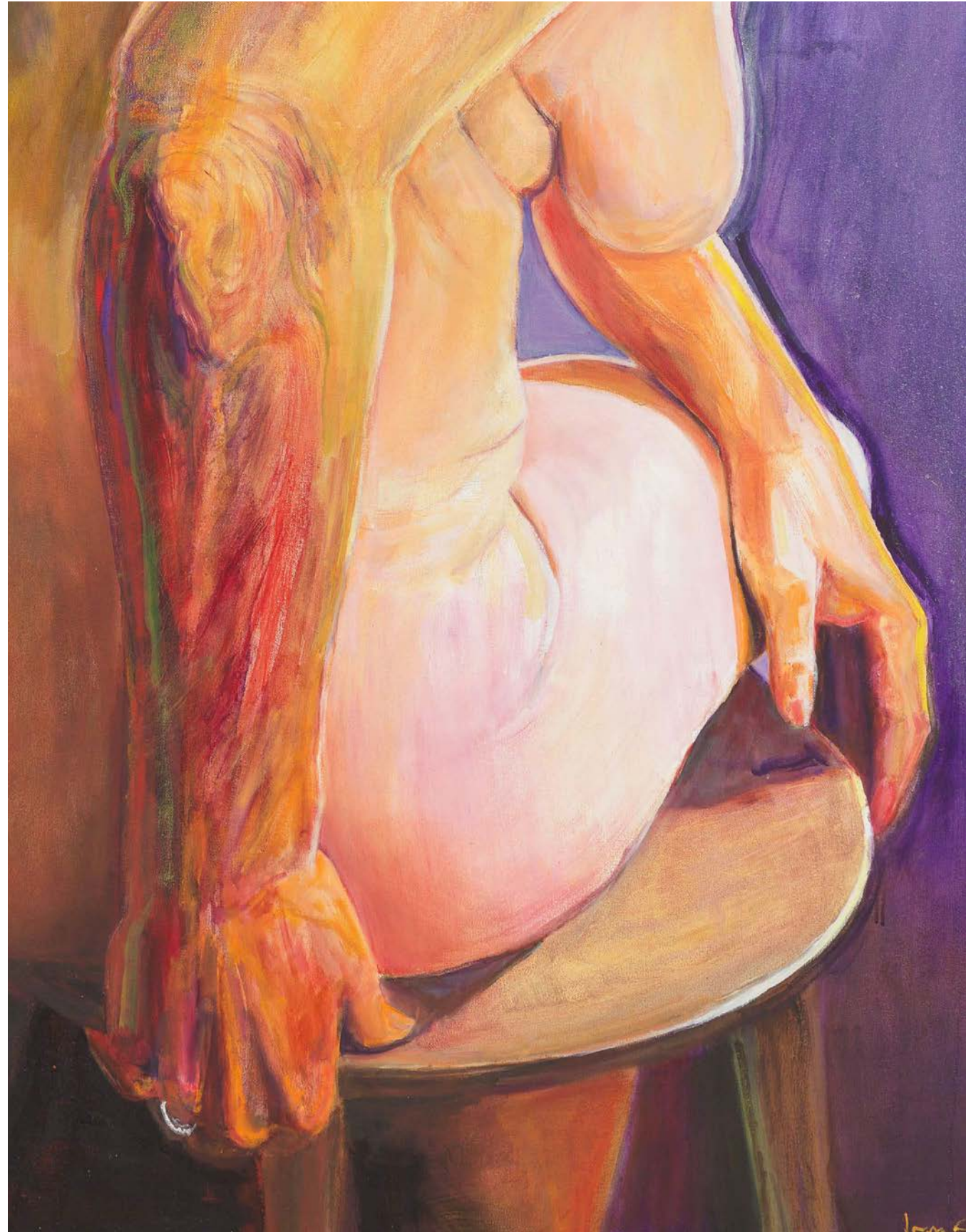


Revisiting, 2018



In The Green, 2017

Turning, 2018, detail





Turning, 2018



Weathered, 2018



Weathered, 2018, detail



White Foot, 2018



My Side, 2018



Fleshed Out, 2018



Fleshed Out, 2018, detail



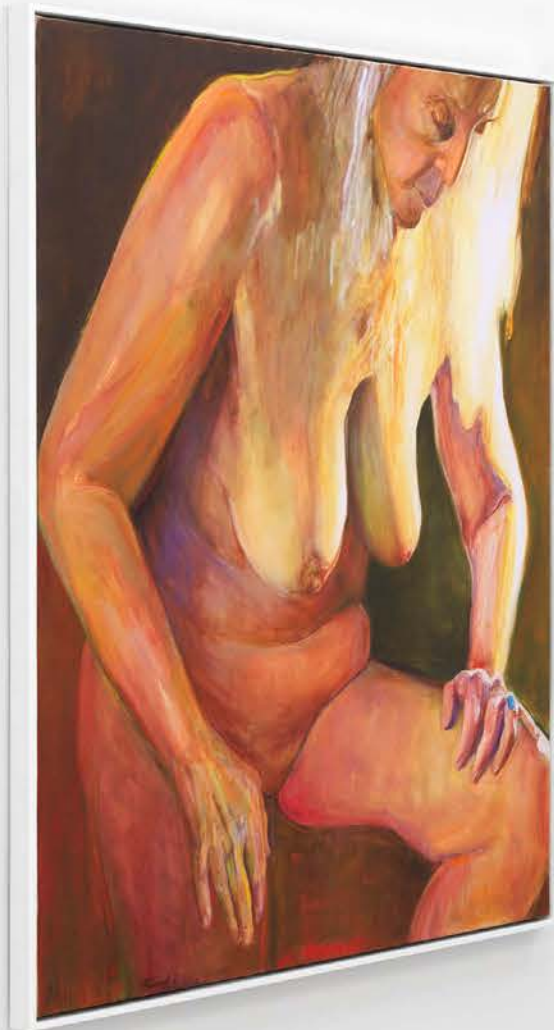
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019



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Joan Semmel in her New York City studio, 2019

Joan Semmel (b.1932) has centered her painting practice around issues of the body, from desire to aging, as well as those of identity and cultural imprinting. She studied at the Cooper Union, Pratt Institute, and the Art Student's League of New York. In the 1960s, Semmel began her painting career in Spain and South America, where she experimented with abstraction. Returning to New York in the early 1970s, she turned toward figurative paintings, constructing compositions in response to pornography, popular culture, and concerns around representation. Her practice traces the transformation that women's sexuality has seen in the last century, and emphasizes the possibility for female autonomy through the body.

In the 1970s, Semmel began her exploration of female sexuality with the *Sex Paintings* and *Erotic Series*, large-scale images of sexual encounters. In these works, Semmel employs expressive color and loose, gestural brushstrokes to depict couples entwined in various intimate positions. Produced in a cultural landscape shaped by Second-wave Feminism, the two series celebrate female sexuality, heralding a feminist approach to painting and representation. Building on these paintings, in 1974, Semmel embraced a more realistic style, and began to use her own body as her subject, shifting the perspective from that of an observer to a more personal point of view. Using a camera to frame her body, she created images notable for their formal complexity. In the 1980s, Semmel built on this complexity, painting dynamic scenes that featured her camera and body doubled and refracted via mirrors.

Since the late 1980s, Semmel has meditated on the aging female physique. Recent paintings continue the artist's exploration of self-portraiture and female identity, representing the artist's body doubled, fragmented, and in-motion. Dissolving the space between artist and model, viewer and subject, the paintings are notable for their celebration of color and flesh. Semmel applies saturated abstract colors in a variety of styles, merging figure and ground. Approaching her own form as a site of self-expression, in these works she challenges the objectification and fetishization of women's bodies by redefining the female nude through radical imagery that celebrates the aging process—refuting centuries of art historical idealization.

Joan Semmel's work has been the subject of numerous one-person exhibitions, including The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (2013); Jersey City Museum, NJ (2000); Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY (1998); Pratt Manhattan Gallery, New York (1993); State University of New York, Oswego, NY, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY, and State University of New York, Albany, NY (1992); University of Virginia, Richmond, VA (1992); Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC (1991); East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art, East Hampton, NY (1989); University of Missouri, St. Louis, MO (1986); State University of New York, Plattsburgh, NY, Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, PA, and Kutztown State College, Kutztown, PA (1980); and University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT (1978).

Her work has also been featured in group exhibitions including the Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken, Germany (2018); Brooklyn Museum, New York (2018 and 2016); Jewish Museum, New York (2018 and 2010); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); Dallas Contemporary, TX (2016); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014); National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC (2014); Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen, Germany (2013); Museum of Modern Art Arnhem, The Netherlands (2009); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH (2008); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2007); National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (2007); and Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX (2006); among others.

Semmel's paintings are in the permanent collections of the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA; Dallas Museum of Art, TX; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; Jewish Museum, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; Rose Art Museum, Waltham, MA; Tate, London, UK; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; among others. She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including the Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award (2013), Anonymous Was a Woman (2008), and National Endowment for the Arts awards (1985 and 1980). She is Professor Emeritus of Painting at Rutgers University.

Checklist

Revisiting, 2018 *
Oil on canvas
56h x 60w in
(142.24h x 152.40w cm)

My Side, 2018 *
Oil on canvas
44h x 50w in
(111.76h x 127w cm)

My Saskia, 2018 *
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in
(182.88h x 152.40w cm)

Crossed Arms, 2018 *
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in
(182.88h x 152.40w cm)

Knee Up, 2017 *
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in
(182.88h x 152.40w cm)

Fleshed Out, 2018 *
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in
(182.88h x 152.40w cm)

In the Green, 2017 *
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in
(182.88h x 152.40w cm)

Seated in Red, 2018 *
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in
(182.88h x 152.40w cm)

Turning, 2018 *
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in
(182.88h x 152.40w cm)

Long Reach, 2017
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in
(182.88h x 152.40w cm)

Weathered, 2018
Oil on canvas
56h x 60w in
(142.24h x 152.40w cm)

White Foot, 2018
Oil on canvas
72h x 60w in
(182.88h x 152.40w cm)

White Skin, 2018
Oil on canvas
38h x 50w in
(96.52h x 127w cm)

* Included in the exhibition

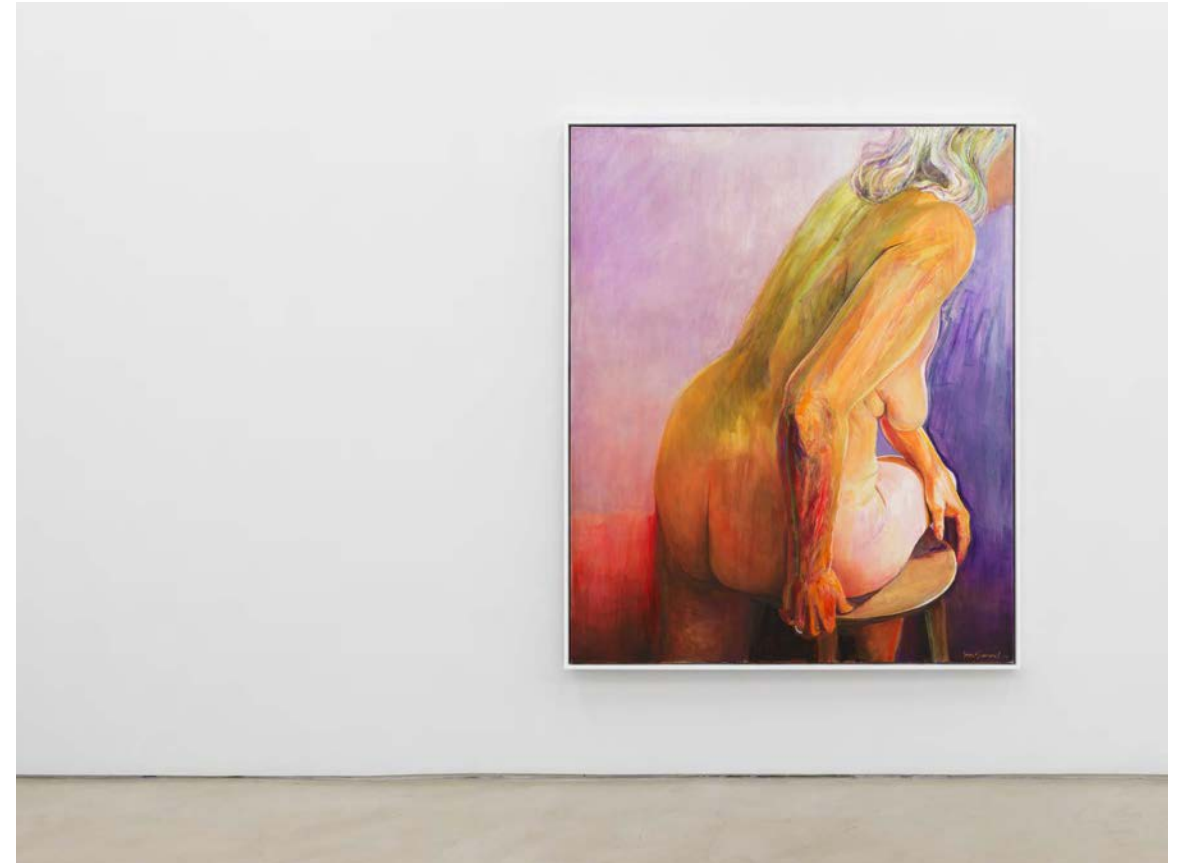
Other Illustrated Works

Hot Seat, 1971
Oil on canvas
69h x 69w in
175.26h x 175.26w cm

Odalesque, 1998
Oil on Canvas
54h x 66w in
137.16h x 167.64w cm

Alborada, 1968
Oil on linen
70.90h x 70.90w in
180.09h x 180.09w cm

Four Rings, 2003
Oil on Canvas
54h x 44w in
137.16h x 111.76w cm



Turning, 2018, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019

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Alexander Gray Associates:

Alexander Gray, David Cabrera, John Kunemund, Victoria Pratt, Alejandro Jassan, Page Benkowski, Alex Santana, Margaret Ewing, Edward Cabral, Gena Beam, Adriane Connerton, Hannah Cirone, Ariel De Sal, Gabriel Alexander, Clarence Johns

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Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

Alexander Gray Associates

510 West 26 Street

New York NY 10001

United States

Tel: +1 212 399 2636

www.alexandergray.com