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Oral history interview with Joan Semmel, 2023 January 6 and 18

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Joan Semmel on January 6–21, 2023. The interview took place at Semmel's studio in New York City, NY, and was conducted by Gail Levin for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Joan Semmel and Gail Levin have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[00:00:00]

GAIL LEVIN: Good afternoon. This is art historian and biographer Gail Levin, um, sitting together with the artist Joan Semmel in her Spring Street SoHo studio in New York City on January 6, 2023. Joan, it is a pleasure to speak with you today about your art and life.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well it's a pleasure to speak with you, Gail.

GAIL LEVIN: Would you please give us your full name and date of birth just to start?

JOAN SEMMEL: Joan Semmel is my full name. I have no middle name. And the date of birth is October 19, 1932.

GAIL LEVIN: Great. Um, have you ever been called by any other name, like a married name?

JOAN SEMMEL: Uh, yes. My ma—my, uh, birth name was Joan Alperstein, and my married name is Joan Semmel. And although I divorced, I never changed the name back because I wanted to have the same name as my children.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh of course. Of course. What were your parents' names?

JOAN SEMMEL: My mother was Sarah Zucker, that's her—

GAIL LEVIN: Maiden name.

JOAN SEMMEL: —my maiden name, Alperstein, and my father's name was Lawrence Alperstein.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay. Um, do you recall around when they were born and when they passed away?

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't really recall the dates. My mother was approximately 22 or 23 when I was born, and my father was the same—they were both the same age, my mother and father both.

GAIL LEVIN: So they were born around the first decade of the 20th century.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And you were born in the beginning of the Great Depression.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right. I was a Depression baby.

GAIL LEVIN: At any time in your childhood do you have, uh, recollections of the fact that things were difficult and tight?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes. That things were always difficult and tight, and most people surrounding me were really always, uh, aware of the whole Depression environment. People were poor. The neighborhood that I lived in was a neighborhood of poor people.

GAIL LEVIN: Which neighborhood was that, Joan?

JOAN SEMMEL: In the Bronx. I lived in—grew up—I was born in the Bronx and grew up there, and it was a neighborhood, primarily Jewish. It was like a ghetto in a certain sense. People had a very strong sense of community, and for instance, my mother and both of—two other sisters lived on the same block.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: So that the sense of connection was very strong within the community there.

GAIL LEVIN: And what community was it? Did it have a name besides the Bronx?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, it was just—it was the Bronx.

GAIL LEVIN: And what address? Around what street?

JOAN SEMMEL: It was, uh, I don't even remember the number. It was Sheridan Avenue.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, 1312 Sheridan Avenue. There it is.

GAIL LEVIN: Is there—is there a subway nearby?

JOAN SEMMEL: Is there a what?

GAIL LEVIN: Subway, at that?

JOAN SEMMEL: Uh, it was 169th Street was the subway on the Grand Concourse.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay.

JOAN SEMMEL: Okay.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah. Did you have a synagogue in the neighborhood?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, there were, but we were not a religious family. It was pretty secular. They did occasionally buy tickets for the high holidays, but I don't have much recall about that I wasn't educated in any kind of Jewish Sunday school or any of that. The boy children were.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: The male children in the family were, and they were bar mitzvahed, but the girl children were not.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you have brothers?

JOAN SEMMEL: I had one brother.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you have sisters?

JOAN SEMMEL: No. So we were two children.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh so just two. And is your brother older or younger?

JOAN SEMMEL: Younger. He was eight years younger than I.

GAIL LEVIN: And did he become an artist?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, he became an engineer.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, but that's—

JOAN SEMMEL: Well that was appropriate. I mean, I didn't have to—supposedly—wouldn't have to earn a living, so I could be an artist, so that's one of the good things about it back then.

[00:05:02]

But a boy had to be the provider, and so he had to be able to earn a living. And that was part of why choices were made that way.

GAIL LEVIN: What did your father do for a living?

JOAN SEMMEL: My father had a cleaning and tailoring store, and, uh, he was in business.

GAIL LEVIN: Did he own it?

JOAN SEMMEL: He owned it, but it was a very small operation, and he was in and out of business many times. It was always touch and go there.

GAIL LEVIN: Did your mother help him out at the business?

JOAN SEMMEL: She did at times. She worked at the store, so that saved him the salary of another person, and she, uh, worked at the store a number of years. I would take care of my baby brother when she went to the—to work. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: I'm thinking of your series of paintings many years later, decades later, of mannequins. Do you think that has any relationship to the fact of your father having a cleaning and tailoring business?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, I don't really think it has a connection. The mannequins came out of a whole other impulse for me that had much more to do with the way female identity was created, and the massification of cosmetics and fashion.

GAIL LEVIN: The reason I ask that is that people have had something similar about another artist whose father was a tailor, another Jewish artist, and that would be Man Ray.

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh.

GAIL LEVIN: And so there's been a whole—

JOAN SEMMEL: But it's a different kind of tailor than the kind of tailoring in a cleaning store. Like a—somebody who does tailoring in a dressmaking place is very different kind of creatively.

GAIL LEVIN: Well I'm not sure that Man Ray's father was so distant from your father.

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, maybe. I don't know.

GAIL LEVIN: But that's a very typical, um, first generation American profession.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes. And it was—

GAIL LEVIN: Was your father born in America or was he an immigrant?

JOAN SEMMEL: He was—my father was born in America. My mother was born in what is now Poland but at that time was Austria-Hungary. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Austria-Hun—Austro-Hungrian—the Hungarian Empire. Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. That's right.

GAIL LEVIN: That's interesting. And your father's parents, were they immigrants?

JOAN SEMMEL: I think so. I'm not really familiar—my grandmother, my father's mother, died very young, and he was raised by his grandfather, I think, who was a religious person. And my father really rejected all of that as soon as he was adult.

GAIL LEVIN: And did you have grandparents on your mother's side?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes I did. It was a large family, so my mother had—was one of five children, three sisters and two brothers, and the grandparents were alive, and the whole family would meet every Sunday.

GAIL LEVIN: I see.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was a constant kind of connection.

GAIL LEVIN: And among your cousins, were you in the middle, or the eldest, or the youngest?

JOAN SEMMEL: I was in the middle. I wasn't the eldest. I was in the middle.

GAIL LEVIN: Was anybody else artistic in the family?

JOAN SEMMEL: No one. No one. My mother would laugh and say she didn't know where I came from. They must have mixed up the babies at the hospital [both laugh].

GAIL LEVIN: My goodness. Did—so your mother's only profession was homemaker and working with your father?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes. I think she worked at first as a bookkeeper for a year—a couple of years before she had the children.

GAIL LEVIN: And were your parents doting parents?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, I would say they were, yeah. They were dedicated parents, you know.

GAIL LEVIN: Where did you go to elementary school?

JOAN SEMMEL: P.S. 88 in the Bronx [laughs].

GAIL LEVIN: So public school.

JOAN SEMMEL: A public school. It was public school. And then after that I went to Wade Junior High School because I went on to the rapid class. I was—at that point, they would advance children if they were considered, uh, especially smart, and so then I went to—I don't remember the P.S. number on it, but it was called Wade Junior High School, which was also in the Bronx. And after that, uh, to the High School of Music and Art.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh. Now you'd have to take an exam or submit a portfolio?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, yes. You had to take an exam and a portfolio I—I don't remember if it was a portfolio or an exam, but I was recommended by the art school teacher—the art teacher in the public school, who told my mother that I was talented and should be—

[00:10:05]

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: —and should, uh, progress.

GAIL LEVIN: And your—and your parents didn't veto it? They responded?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, they responded to it. As I said, uh, it didn't matter. I was female. I didn't have to earn a living in the same way.

GAIL LEVIN: So when did you first take an interest in visual arts? Can you remember?

JOAN SEMMEL: At that point. I mean, I took an interest for pleasure. I wouldn't say for visual arts. I didn't have that concept, even.

GAIL LEVIN: Right.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right? And then when I went to Music and Art High School, that was a whole introduction to a whole new world that was completely different than the art club at junior high school.

GAIL LEVIN: But did you draw as a young child?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, I copied things, right? I copied the comic books, things of that nature.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you do this on your own at home, outside of school?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, I was a sickly child.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: Which is, I think, interesting and probably important in developing the kind of, uh, ways of amusing oneself because you were closet—you were closed in. You weren't able to go out and play like other children, so you had to do things that kept you busy, and busy was drawing and coloring and making pictures and things of that nature.

GAIL LEVIN: So here you are at age 90. You got over being a sickly child.

JOAN SEMMEL: I got over being a sickly child and here I am, closeted and making paintings [laughs].

GAIL LEVIN: That's good. So in general, you would characterize your childhood as how?

JOAN SEMMEL: Uh, sometimes sad, I would say, I—because of not being well a lot of the time. And I think that also made my parents very protective, you know, of always having to be careful that she doesn't get sick.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you have sort of infectious disease? Or—

JOAN SEMMEL: I had what they called chronic mastoiditis, which was respiratory, essentially, that would then go into the ears.

GAIL LEVIN: Hmm. Well good thing medical science moved on, and—

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, we don't—we don't have that anymore.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah, and you were born in an age of antibiotics, so that's good.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right.

GAIL LEVIN: Which parent would you say had the greater impact on you, your mother or your father?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, I think the mother probably had the greatest impact on me. I adored my father, and resented my mother. [Both laugh.]

GAIL LEVIN: But in what way did she have a big impact?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, she was very controlling, you know?

GAIL LEVIN: Did that make you rebellious?

JOAN SEMMEL: Not at first. I was a very good girl, always was a very good girl. But boy when I rebelled, I rebelled. That was it.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay, so let's go back to the High School of Music and Art, or even before that. Was there a favorite art teacher that you recall, even if you don't know their names?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, I don't remember the names, but it wasn't favorite. There was only one.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right? There was only one, and it was like an art club after class. But I don't recall that as really being influential. The influence came much more the whole environment at Music and Art High School. It was—first of all, it was students from all different parts of the city, and they came from a totally different class of people, of intellectuals and artists and people that I never would have had any contact with. And the—and it was mixed, both art and music, so there were music people as well as art people, right? There were people of all races, that I had no contact with at all. There were people of all religions.

GAIL LEVIN: So that made it much more interesting, to have this diversity.

JOAN SEMMEL: It made it much more—it was like another world. It just opened up another world to me.

GAIL LEVIN: And were you already making art with figures in it by the time you were at the High School of Music and Art, or even junior high?

JOAN SEMMEL: I started—yes. I remember I started doing, uh, pictures of people, I would have called them, rather than figures, right? So I did do that kind of thing. Yes.

GAIL LEVIN: Portraits?

JOAN SEMMEL: Uh, I don't remember portraits. I—it's—

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JOAN SEMMEL: —interesting because of all the things that I did when I was that young, I remember I did a sculpture of my brother when he was small, when he was like child, in wood, that I chiseled out of wood. And I did a painting—

GAIL LEVIN: How did you learn to chisel out of wood?

JOAN SEMMEL: I went—at Music and Art, I think. I don't remember exactly if it was Music and Art or not. I can't remember when that was. And then, uh, the other thing that I remember about that early time in terms of images that I did, and I only thought of that much, much later, was that it was the first picture that I did a self-portrait of myself—

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: —in the mirror, nude from the waist up, with my hair covering my face.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow. How old were you?

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't remember how old, but I was young.

GAIL LEVIN: In high school?

JOAN SEMMEL: High school, I would say. And maybe earlier, very early on. And the reason I did that, I can still remember, because I thought that—I thought I saw pictures of art, and there were nudes in the art, and that was what art was. [Laughs.] And I covered my face with my hair so nobody should know it was me.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you have art books at that time?

JOAN SEMMEL: No.

GAIL LEVIN: And did you have television growing up?

JOAN SEMMEL: Uh, yes, we had the beginnings. My father—we were considered rich in the neighborhood because we had a television set, right?

GAIL LEVIN: How old do you think you were when you got the first TV set?

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't remember the—I don't remember the age, actual. I don't remember the age, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And you don't remember being influenced by any particular programs?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, I don't remember being influenced by any of those kind of programs.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you go to movies growing up?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, I went to movies. Saturdays it was my job. I took my brother and my cousin to the movies every Saturday.

GAIL LEVIN: How much younger was your brother?

JOAN SEMMEL: They were eight years younger than me.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: So I was like the—it was babysitting. [Laughs.]

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was early babysitting for me.

GAIL LEVIN: So did you have a favorite film or a kind of film in those days.

JOAN SEMMEL: No, I remember we used to go to—they had the serials in the movies Saturday mornings for kids, so I don't remember what they were, but they, you know, the Lone Ranger kind of thing, and Tonto and all that.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: So, um, do you remember who your art teachers were in high school?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, I don't remember the names of any of them, actually. It was just a totally different kind of environment.

GAIL LEVIN: Was there—were there any other, uh, class members in your high school class who actually became professional artists, that you know of?

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't know. I never kept—I never kept up with what—

GAIL LEVIN: So you didn't—

JOAN SEMMEL: —what happened with people after. Because they came from all over the city, do you know? It's like you didn't have that—that community of students that stayed together in quite the same way.

GAIL LEVIN: So you didn't go to any high school reunions later?

JOAN SEMMEL: Never did.

GAIL LEVIN: Well what happens after high school? Where do you go then?

JOAN SEMMEL: I went to Cooper Union.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, now you had to pass a big exam to get into Cooper Union.

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh yeah, yeah. I had to get an exam, and, uh, that—there was a much more cohesive group. First of all, by that time I could travel independently.

GAIL LEVIN: Was Cooper Union's art school then coed, or was it still all women?

JOAN SEMMEL: It was always coed.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh no.

JOAN SEMMEL: No, it wasn't. Originally it wasn't, but when I was there it was already coed.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. And Cooper Union of course was an art school and the engineering school, and that's how come my ex-husband, my husband was—

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: —an engineer because—and my brother, also.

GAIL LEVIN: They went to Cooper?

JOAN SEMMEL: They went to Cooper.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right. And so they were free schools. We never could have afforded, uh,

tuition or anything like that.

GAIL LEVIN: So how many years were you at Cooper?

JOAN SEMMEL: Cooper at that time was a three-year school, and they didn't give a degree. They gave a certificate.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you have a major at Cooper? Or does everybody get the same?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well I think from what I remember it was—it was design. You had to follow—there's a foundation program and then—and you followed that. I don't remember if you had choices. I really don't remember.

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GAIL LEVIN: Do you remember around what year you entered Cooper? Were you 18?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, I was earlier. I graduated high—I graduated high school and I was still 16.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh my.

JOAN SEMMEL: So I was very young, you know, when I—when I went.

GAIL LEVIN: So you were living at home and taking the subway to Cooper, in the Village?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: That's—that's adventuresome.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was, but it was a different time. I mean, we used the subways, uh, all the time, and it—my mother was nervous about it, you know, but we did it.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you have a favorite teacher at Cooper?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well my painting teachers were important. I remember, uh, Nicholas Marsicano and John Ferren were the two, uh, painting teachers, and there was a design teacher, a Miss Schutz.

GAIL LEVIN: Now John Ferren was an abstract artist.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, and—well, Marsicano was too, basically. It was the height of, uh, the early parts of abstract expressionism, when fervor was, you know, you either believed or you didn't, you know.

GAIL LEVIN: So we're talking the late '40s now.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right.

GAIL LEVIN: Were there any classmates of yours who also—we could have heard of today as professional artists?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, from Cooper Union, absolutely. People who were one year ahead of me: Alex Katz and Audrey, uh—

GAIL LEVIN: Audrey Flack?

JOAN SEMMEL: Audrey Flack. So I knew them, uh, at that point, and in my own group I don't remember particularly anyone who really—oh, who really made it, you know, in the same category of—

GAIL LEVIN: Well they certainly made it big.

JOAN SEMMEL: And they made it big, yeah. But yeah, you know. Aside from that, I don't

remember the younger—the younger people.

GAIL LEVIN: So you're finished with Cooper by the time you're 19 years old.

JOAN SEMMEL: Uh yeah, that's right.

GAIL LEVIN: What age were you when you got married?

JOAN SEMMEL: Nineteen.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh my.

JOAN SEMMEL: I got married in the last year I was still in school.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: I was still in school, and I got married at that time.

GAIL LEVIN: And moved in with your husband?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, and then I moved in with my husband. And then my husband—

GAIL LEVIN: Were you living in the Bronx?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, I was. And then my husband—that was the Korean War, and he had to—he had graduated, uh, I think he graduated the year before in the engineering school, and then, uh, he had to go to officer training school in Mississippi.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh my goodness.

JOAN SEMMEL: And I went with him there.

GAIL LEVIN: Where did you go in Mississippi? Do you recall?

JOAN SEMMEL: Uh, Biloxi. He went to Biloxi, Mississippi, and I lived on the Gulf Coast between Biloxi and New Orleans.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: I know.

GAIL LEVIN: That must have been very exotic for a Bronx girl.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was exciting. It was exciting.

GAIL LEVIN: Exotic.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exotic. It was. It was exotic. It was exotic but it was also weird because it was still, uh, segregated, you know. And that was my first experience of that kind of environment.

GAIL LEVIN: So this husband's name is where you got Semmel.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right.

GAIL LEVIN: From Alperstein, yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And what was his first name?

JOAN SEMMEL: Harold. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And he was a boy from the Bronx?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. He was from the Bronx. Also from a much less well-to—less middle class, even, than my folks. You know, where they were really poor.

GAIL LEVIN: Your parents didn't have any, uh, college education.

JOAN SEMMEL: No. None at all. My mother didn't even finish high school. She had to go to work at that point, and my father tried to go to school at night, to go to college, but it was just too difficult because he had to work during the day to support them.

GAIL LEVIN: So you're off to Mississippi as a young bride.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: What was that like, day to day? What were you doing?

[00:10:02]

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, it was interesting. I'll tell you one very quick anecdote that I was visited by the wives of one of the officers there at officer training, and she asked me what church I belonged to, and I said I didn't belong to a church. And she was horrified. She said, "You don't belong to a church? That's not possible. You have to belong to some church." I said, "Well, I'm Jewish, you know, so I don't belong to a church." She said, "Jewish? I never saw one."

GAIL LEVIN: My goodness.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right? So things were really a little different.

GAIL LEVIN: How long did you spend in Mississippi?

JOAN SEMMEL: About six months.

GAIL LEVIN: And then where did you go?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well then my ex-husband was, uh, he had to go overseas. I had to go back and live with my parents.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh my.

JOAN SEMMEL: Because a woman couldn't live alone. If you lived alone, it meant that you were—you were not, you know, proper. So I went back and lived with my parents and got a job as a—I was modeling fur coats and then suits and stuff.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh really? Where?

JOAN SEMMEL: In the Garment District in New York.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yep.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right, because you could make more money that way than as a commercial artist, and I hated the idea of being a commercial artist anyhow. So I did that.

GAIL LEVIN: That's interesting. How did you get into that line of work?

JOAN SEMMEL: I just—there were ads in the paper. I was looking for what kind of work I could do, and said, "Oh,, I could do that," you know?

GAIL LEVIN: So was this during the Korean War?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: The period you're talking about?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: So you had—your husband was sent to Korea?

JOAN SEMMEL: He wasn't sent to Korea, no. He went—he was sent to North Africa.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: And he was at Wheelus Air Force Base in—I guess it was in Trip—I forget.

GAIL LEVIN: Tripoli would be Libya.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, Libya. Yeah. So over there, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah, wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: That must have been stressful.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, he was supposed to be there for a year or something like that, and then, um, the war was over, and they gave them a choice of they could just go out, you know, they could leave the service, and he did. He came back—

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: —at that point, and then we continued our lives.

GAIL LEVIN: What did you do as you continued your lives?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, uh, I continued—I continued working as a model, I think, until I became pregnant, you know, and by that time I was almost 20—I was 22, something like that, and I was being not pressured but what was wrong? Here I was married, and where are the babies? Right? [Laughs.] So, when? When? So I finally—we decided to have a child, and that's when I became pregnant, and, uh, my daughter was born when I was 23. And she was a wonderful baby, and I was thrilled to be a mother, and that's what I did until I—

GAIL LEVIN: Did you stop working outside of home?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, well, I worked as the model until I was about four or five months—five months pregnant. I started to show, and of course I couldn't do that anymore. So then, uh, I stayed home with the baby, and I got sick. And I got—I didn't realize at first what, but finally I was diagnosed—I had tuberculosis.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh no.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. And so, uh, I was hospitalized, of course, and my daughter, my mother had to take care of her, and it was really horrible and shocking kind of thing. And I was in the hospital for—I don't remember how much time now, but it was over a year. It was about a year. I remember she was a year and a half old at the time—

GAIL LEVIN: You were in the hospital for a year by yourself, away from your daughter?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, yeah. I was separated from—

GAIL LEVIN: That's very—so difficult.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was very difficult and very traumatic all around, for the whole—

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JOAN SEMMEL: —family. Right?

GAIL LEVIN: Absolutely.

JOAN SEMMEL: For the whole family. The reason I was there—after a few months, I was no longer contagious, but they wanted to operate and, uh, I agreed that it would be better to operate because it was less—the infection was very local in one lobe of the l—of the lung, and they were able to, uh, take that out and there would be much less possibility of it recurring.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: But if I wanted to, I could have not had the operation, because the medications that they had at the time did calcify the infection. But you ran the risk. It could always be re—started again, just because of any kind of respiratory illness could redo it. So—

GAIL LEVIN: So how remarkable. Here we are, almost 70 years later, and you are so—

JOAN SEMMEL: I never had—

GAIL LEVIN: —vigorous and so it was a success.

JOAN SEMMEL: I never—I never had, you know, I never had a recurrence. But of course, I mean, I had to be careful, and, uh, watch it, and the operation was quite enormous, a big mark on your back and, uh, it took quite a long recovery in terms of getting the strength back and so on.

GAIL LEVIN: This is so interesting, the idea of a scar on your back, which I've never seen or noticed or seen in any of your paintings of yourself.

JOAN SEMMEL: No, well I don't usually paint my back.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah, that's true. You don't see it because—

JOAN SEMMEL: And now the scar is very—it's not much, but it's very, very long. But it was a very traumatic experience, and it changed my life in a lot of ways. And I think it's probably where I decided to become an artist.

GAIL LEVIN: How so?

JOAN SEMMEL: Because before that I wanted, quote, a normal life, what I considered a normal life. Have more children, buy a house, do the American Dream thing, right? And I thought that, uh, I wanted to be able to have a normal life, to—not to—to be an artist somehow was some—was out of that realm. And when I was in the hospital, I realized that my life was really totally connected to the family, that the family was the beginning and the end of my world in a lot of ways. And here I was, forced into this kind of isolation. Their life continued. The family's life continued. Mine had stopped.

GAIL LEVIN: So when you were hospitalized with tuberculosis and the operation for it, were you drawing from your hospital bed?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, no.

GAIL LEVIN: No.

JOAN SEMMEL: No, no. I couldn't do any of that.

GAIL LEVIN: Were you reading?

JOAN SEMMEL: I was reading.

GAIL LEVIN: What were you reading?

JOAN SEMMEL: A book a day.

GAIL LEVIN: What kind of literature?

JOAN SEMMEL: Novels.

GAIL LEVIN: Ah.

JOAN SEMMEL: [Laughs.]

GAIL LEVIN: Did you have a favorite?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, I read everything. I read everything. I don't remember any of it—I mean, I read everything from Dostoyevsky to Hardy to—I just read everything.

GAIL LEVIN: Was somebody going to the library for you?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, I would—everybody would bring me books. I had a stack of books on the shelves—on the windowsill.

GAIL LEVIN: Do you think all that year of reading fueled your imagination?

JOAN SEMMEL: I always read. I always read a lot, even when, as a child, and I always went to the library. My parents were uneducated, but they believed in education. It was a very Jewish way of thinking. I remember I took a long walk—it was a long walk then to the library that was on 161st Street, and I lived on 169th Street. I was a little girl. I'd take my bag of books each time, and it was—you had to walk through an Irish neighborhood from a Jewish neighborhood. At that time, it wasn't that safe to do that. But I did it all the time, and I never had any incidents. But it was just considered dangerous to do, you know.

[00:05:00]

GAIL LEVIN: Oh my goodness.

JOAN SEMMEL: So I always read a great deal, and I was always fired up by *David Copperfield.* I was going to change the world and make it a better place.

GAIL LEVIN: So you recover, and you get out of the hospital and go home.

JOAN SEMMEL: I got out of the hospital and went home.

GAIL LEVIN: And your daughter is about two years old? Two and a half?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, she was—I know—what I'm confused about if she was a year and a half when I went into the hospital, or when she came out of the hospital—when I came out. But the year and a half is what I—is what I remember. And it was difficult at first because I couldn't lift her, you know, because of the operation, at all. But I had a little help, and I managed, right? And I lived, by that time I was living in Queens, no longer in the Bronx during the—

GAIL LEVIN: Oh. Which neighborhood?

JOAN SEMMEL: Uh, Bay—it was in Bayside. I don't remember what that was called, that Bayside there. And then—

GAIL LEVIN: Was that a Jewish neighborhood, or—

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, it was.

GAIL LEVIN: It was.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was. It was a garden apartment. I remember it was a garden apartment. I think it was a co-op that I lived in, and one of my cousins lived in the same garden apartment, so that was helpful.

GAIL LEVIN: A female cousin?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, a male cousin, but, you know. And—

GAIL LEVIN: Is this on your mother's side of the family, or your father's side?

JOAN SEMMEL: My mother's side. No, I have no—my father's side of the family, I really didn't have any contact with, except he had a sister, and they had grown up apart, of course, as orphans, and she came to live with us. She lived with us for many years.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, your aunt.

JOAN SEMMEL: My aunt, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: What was her name?

JOAN SEMMEL: Evelyn. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And did she dote on you too?

JOAN SEMMEL: She did, but then she—in the war, the Second World War, she was—when I was much younger, she went off and joined the WAACs—

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: —at that time. So then there was—after that—

GAIL LEVIN: So you were aware that you were living through a big war.

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, absolutely. I was aware—

GAIL LEVIN: What do you remember about that, as a child?

JOAN SEMMEL: I remember the fear. We were always in fear of what could happen in that war, because we were Jewish, and we knew what was happening, you know. So I was very much aware, and then I remember they were starting to draft fathers, and my father and my uncle were called up.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: And we were going to have to live together, so they—in one apartment, so that the kids and—so that we—they could afford to stay at—to keep everything, and the two men were going to go off. And then the war ended up, and they stopped, uh, drafting the fathers.

GAIL LEVIN: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't remember that so much. I do remember—it's funny, I remember when the war was over, and the—

GAIL LEVIN: A better memory.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Everybody shouting out from the windows and then, you know, and I also remember when President Roosevelt died, and there was the mourning, everybody, you know. So I remember that part. I was a little older by then, you know. So anyhow, we got out of sequence a little bit.

GAIL LEVIN: That's okay.

JOAN SEMMEL: [Laughs.]

GAIL LEVIN: It doesn't matter.

JOAN SEMMEL: So we have to go back now.

GAIL LEVIN: Have we left anything out about your early years that you really want to get in?

JOAN SEMMEL: Not that I can think of, particularly. I mean, I think that, um, probably some of my rebelliousness came from the fact that my mother always made me feel I had to be good all the time. I had to be clean. Everything had to be perfect.

GAIL LEVIN: Did your brother also have to be so perfect?

JOAN SEMMEL: No. No. But I remember that, and I remember when I finally rebelled.

GAIL LEVIN: When was that?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, very—pretty young, still. I was—it was a stupid kind of remembrance, really, just where I had done something and I refused to admit it.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right. Even though, uh, it was obvious I had done it. I said, "No. I didn't."

[00:10:05]

GAIL LEVIN: Is that anything you want to tell about?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, it was something stupid like dropping some ink on the floor, right? [Laughs.]

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, but it's related to art.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, of course it's related to art. [Laughs.] Right? And I didn't—I thought I cleaned it up, and I didn't, and then my mother came over and said, "What happened to the floor—my floor? My wonderful and clean kitchen floor?" [Laughs.] And I—she said, "Did you do that?" I said, "No. I didn't." [Laughs.] And she said, "Don't lie. Just don't lie to me." I said, "I'm not lying. I didn't do it." I never understood why I would never admit—I never admitted to her that I dropped the ink on the floor.

GAIL LEVIN: Well the ink was part of your life's blood of being an artist.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, my therapist at one point said that that was your first rebellion.

GAIL LEVIN: So when you come home from the tuberculosis episode, and you've—have you moved into Queens yet?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes. I was in Queens when I went—when I had tuberculosis.

GAIL LEVIN: So what happens next?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, that's when I went back to painting.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh. Just on your own, or did you take classes?

JOAN SEMMEL: On my own. Just on my own, at first. Just on my own. And then I went back to Pratt.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. I went back, and I went to Pratt.

GAIL LEVIN: Was that a degree program?

JOAN SEMMEL: It's confusing to me now. I just have to think back a little bit. That—I went—we had—my husband and I had bought a place in the country, up on the mountain in Woodstock, and I met people up there, and—friends, who suggested that I might be able to get a scholarship at Pratt to get the last year, so I could get my B.A.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, because you only had three years at Cooper.

JOAN SEMMEL: I only had three years at Cooper, and so I needed that extra year to be able to do that, because then I could possibly get a teaching job.

GAIL LEVIN: Right. I was thinking that, yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's what I was thinking about. So that's what I did. I went to Pratt, and commuted from Queens to Brooklyn to do that during that—

GAIL LEVIN: Do you know—do you recall whom you studied with at Pratt?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well I didn't really, uh—I just had to fill in the things that were—so like I took a printmaking course, and I took, um, a drawing from the model, stuff like that, to fill in the stuff that I needed that were empty. And—

GAIL LEVIN: You didn't take classes in Woodstock? That's really an artist colony.

JOAN SEMMEL: I didn't, but that's—I went—see,this is where I get confused. I went back to the Art Students League—

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: —first, because I needed some contact with other artists.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you run into the Woodstock artist Yasuo Kuniyoshi?

JOAN SEMMEL: That's—yeah, well that's—that's how I—that's how I got to know about Woodstock, through the—at the Art Students League.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh I see.

JOAN SEMMEL: So then I went from the Art Students League to Woodstock, and met more people there that were other artists and so on, and that had connections at Pratt, so that's how one thing leads—

GAIL LEVIN: Who did you study with at the Art Students League? Do you recall?

JOAN SEMMEL: Kantor.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, Morris Kantor.

JOAN SEMMEL: Morris Kantor.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: Morris Kantor. He was a great teacher. He had 100 students who were piled in, right? And he would walk around, and one of the things—I have an anecdote for Morris Kantor. He came by my—and he looked at my work, and he said, "You're a very good artist. A very good artist. But you'll make babies."

GAIL LEVIN: [Laughs.] That's terrible.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's what he said.

GAIL LEVIN: He was an immigrant, and he had that old world mentality about women.

JOAN SEMMEL: Totally. "You'll make babies."

GAIL LEVIN: In fact, he was a Jewish immigrant.

JOAN SEMMEL: And I was Jewish.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: And I said, "But I already made babies, Mr. Kantor." You know? And he said, "You'll make more."

GAIL LEVIN: Was your son already born then?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, no. I just had one.

GAIL LEVIN: Just had one.

JOAN SEMMEL: I said—he said—

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JOAN SEMMEL: "You'll make more."

GAIL LEVIN: You know—did you know he was a good friend of Edward Hopper?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, I didn't know that.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah, but very influenced by folk—American folk art, also.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, but Kantor, I mean, it—it was abstraction. You had to be making abstraction at that time.

GAIL LEVIN: At that time, in Kantor's course?

JOAN SEMMEL: Absolutely.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's what you—

GAIL LEVIN: How did you feel about that?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, I loved it.

GAIL LEVIN: No.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was wonderful. It was such freedom. It was great.

GAIL LEVIN: So at the Art Students League, at that time, people were into abstraction.

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, absolutely. Now people—there were—that class, because there were other classes of much more—

GAIL LEVIN: And you studied at the Art Students League only with Morris Kantor?

JOAN SEMMEL: Only with Morris Kantor, and that was only after Cooper Union, right?

GAIL LEVIN: Do you know why you chose Morris Kantor as opposed—

JOAN SEMMEL: Because it was abstract.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, okay.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Yeah. Because don't forget, I had been through Cooper—

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: —already. I had that whole background of studying through Ferren and Marsicano and all those people.

GAIL LEVIN: I see. I see.

JOAN SEMMEL: So that came afterwards.

GAIL LEVIN: Do you have any work left from that year?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh God, no. I don't think so.

GAIL LEVIN: [Laughs.] So, you get to Pratt and you're filling in courses, and do you get that B.A. degree?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, I got the BFA.

GAIL LEVIN: And then what happens next?

JOAN SEMMEL: I went to Spain.

GAIL LEVIN: Ah. Why did you go to Spain, Joan? You didn't run off from your family?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, no. My ex-husband ran off [laughs]. No, I mean, he really wanted to get away.

GAIL LEVIN: He took you and the baby, the little girl.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, he went first, because I had—I wouldn't go. I had to finish up and get my degree. So he went off about three or four months before, right, and I joined him as soon as I got the degree.

GAIL LEVIN: And did he go to Madrid in Spain?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, he went to Madrid.

GAIL LEVIN: He went to the capital.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And why did he go? Did he have a job offer?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well the job that he had, the firm that he worked for had work there that they were building a road or something, right, that he went there. And that's why—

GAIL LEVIN: So did you speak any Spanish?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, I didn't at that time, but I did. I took a class when I got there. You know, I went every day for a while to just—to be able to make my way.

GAIL LEVIN: Where did you live in Madrid?

JOAN SEMMEL: Zurbano. The street was Zurbano, *noventa y seis*. 96.

GAIL LEVIN: In central Madrid?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, it was, uh, it was right near the Hilton hotel.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, okay. And how did you like it?

JOAN SEMMEL: I loved it. I loved Madrid. It was—at first it was an adjustment, you know, to really, uh, just to get used to being in a foreign country and totally alone from relatives and everything, but it was a great freedom also.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you start to meet other Americans, or Spaniards?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, well I immediately of course met people from my husband's firm, right, and other Americans, you know. And at first it was mostly an American community, but I was painting—I started—I kept painting.

GAIL LEVIN: But in those days, surely the engineers were all male, and the—

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: —the wives were the—

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right. Their wives were now closer, but there was a social connection.

GAIL LEVIN: But you were painting.

JOAN SEMMEL: I was painting.

GAIL LEVIN: And you were painting abstract art?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Totally abstract. Right.

GAIL LEVIN: So what's the context? Are you seeing art on view in Madrid? What are you looking at?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, in Madrid, you know, there's plenty. I mean, the—just the Prado was unbelievable, and the Black Goyas are, you know, an amazing kind of thing to see, and everything, everything. I mean, the Prado Museum is a fabulous museum, so—

GAIL LEVIN: Yes it is.

JOAN SEMMEL: —there was a—there was a lot to see. And then I gradually got to meet all kinds of people, and more and more involved in the Spanish community, too. I just got an email today from somebody in Spain.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, how wonderful. From that year? From that period?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And how long did you spend altogether in Spain?

JOAN SEMMEL: Almost eight years.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, that's quite a long time.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. It was a long time. It was—I went—we were supposed to be for a year,

you know. And it was—it became a long—

GAIL LEVIN: But you visited your family in that period. You must have come home.

JOAN SEMMEL: Once.

GAIL LEVIN: Only once?

JOAN SEMMEL: And they came once, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh. Oh, that must have been interesting.

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh yeah. It was—it was a long time. My mother never forgave me. She never forgave me.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, wow. Wow. Now was your son born in Spain?

[00:05:01]

JOAN SEMMEL: My poor son was born in Spain.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh my goodness. Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Well how was that experience, giving birth in Spain?

JOAN SEMMEL: It was interesting [laughs]. I mean, it was—it was different, you know? But it was fine. It was not—

GAIL LEVIN: By that time, did you speak some Spanish?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, sure. I spoke Spanish.

GAIL LEVIN: That's useful.

JOAN SEMMEL: And the thing about being in Spain with children, which was different, was that because help was so inexpensive—

GAIL LEVIN: I see.

JOAN SEMMEL: —right, I always had help, which I never would have had the opportunity—I never had in New York.

GAIL LEVIN: Do you recall the year you went off to Spain, or approximately?

JOAN SEMMEL: 1940—1952? No. 1960—

GAIL LEVIN: Is it after the Korean War ends?

JOAN SEMMEL: It was after the Korean War, so 1963 is when we went off to Spain. I remember because—yeah. It was '63.

GAIL LEVIN: So Franco, the dictator, was in power.

JOAN SEMMEL: Was still—was still in power.

GAIL LEVIN: So Spain was kind of repressive compared to America?

JOAN SEMMEL: Very—certainly. You know, I mean, the newspapers every day, the front page was a Saint's Day, you know, what the saint was.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh really?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh yeah, it was very religious. It was very repressed. As a foreigner, though, you weren't affected by it in the same way. Do you know? I mean, because you just weren't. But you were—as I became more and more involved in the—with the Spanish artists, of course, I understood.

GAIL LEVIN: Were the Spanish artists you met women or men or both?

JOAN SEMMEL: Men mostly. A few women, but not much, and—but it was mostly male, the artists. So I was a novelty there, and, uh, I got connected to one museu—one gallery, and then gradually made my way up into the most important gallery in Madrid.

GAIL LEVIN: Do you remember the name of it?

JOAN SEMMEL: The first one, um, I don't really remember. I'd—

GAIL LEVIN: That's okay.

JOAN SEMMEL: —I'd have to look it up.

GAIL LEVIN: And the second one, do you remember?

JOAN SEMMEL: Juana Mordó Gallery.

GAIL LEVIN: Juana Mordó.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, that was the major gallery—

GAIL LEVIN: In Madrid.

JOAN SEMMEL: —in Madrid at the time. And it showed major artists.

GAIL LEVIN: Now who were some of the artists that showed there? Do you recall?

JOAN SEMMEL: Mompó, Ribera, um, I'd have to—

GAIL LEVIN: Were any of the other artists women, or were you the only woman?

JOAN SEMMEL: There were one or two, I think. Yeah. There were one or two.

GAIL LEVIN: But they were a small minority of the artists.

JOAN SEMMEL: Small minority. A small minority. And, uh, they didn't expect a woman to be, you know—

GAIL LEVIN: Did they give you a group—put you in a group show, or give you a solo show?

JOAN SEMMEL: Solo. Solo shows. I had solo shows, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: So—

JOAN SEMMEL: I started out, you know, sending work, like, to the Salon Feminina, right, that they would have back then, and things of that nature, and I gradually, you know, made my way in, and found, uh, people that—for example, I mean, it's such a much smaller community, so I remember going to, um, I used to like to go to the whiskey jazz club, which was a, you know, a bar. They had American music and stuff, and some of the artists would go—would go there. Or to Gijón, which was really—which was the café where all the artists and poets hung out, right? And gradually you got to speak to people and to know them. And then the first show that I had, I think the name of the gallery was Edurne but I'm not sure. I'd have to check it out. And I was going to have a show. I got—actually got a show. And I was walking on the street near where I lived one day and ran into one of the guys that I knew from Gijón—I don't remember exactly—and he—I told him I was having a show, and he said, "You're having a show? Who do you know? You don't know anyone here yet." I said, "Well, but I have a show lined up." He said [slams table] he said, "You can't do that. You're coming —" He said, "I'm coming with you. I'll make some phone calls."

[00:10:00]

He came up to my house with me and said, "Do you have a bottle? A bottle of wine? Okay. Bring me the bottle. Bring me a pen." He made some drawings while he's talking on the phone, and he called everybody in Madrid—

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, to invite them?

JOAN SEMMEL: —who was anybody, to invite them to my opening.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, how wonderful.

JOAN SEMMEL: To my show. This was somebody I just knew, you know. He was so wonderful. My show was mobbed. Everybody—I got to meet everybody. He was famous there. He was a famous—

GAIL LEVIN: Oh wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Viola was his name. Do you know?

GAIL LEVIN: And did you—

JOAN SEMMEL: And these little drawings that he made on little—this kind of paper, with some crayons that I had, my daughter sold them, finally, a couple of years—about two years ago.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Unbelievable. It was unbelievably welcoming and—

GAIL LEVIN: He's no longer alive I take it.

JOAN SEMMEL: No, he's gone a long time. He was an older man.

GAIL LEVIN: What was his name again?

JOAN SEMMEL: Viola. V-I-O-L-A. I don't remember his first name. Yeah, so I mean there were just lots and lots of—living in Madrid was a great—a great experience for me in so many different ways. And I met all kinds of people, you know, all kinds of people from—from ambassadors to whatever, you know? And—and it would—gave me the possibility to, again, meet people from all different strata of society and international, there, because international people saw each other in different places. So it was a very rewarding experience. It took me totally out of the environment that I had grown up in. All of those restrictions and colloquial—and just, uh, very small-minded ways of thinking about what the world was changed.

GAIL LEVIN: So you went from '63 in Spain?

JOAN SEMMEL: To '70, I came back to New York.

GAIL LEVIN: So you were there seven years, about?

JOAN SEMMEL: Seven and a half it was, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah. Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Yeah. And I traveled some while I was there, too.

GAIL LEVIN: Where did you go?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well we had to—I had to leave the country every six months for a day or so to maintain my tourist visa, or I wouldn't be able to have a car.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh my goodness. What about your husband? Did he have to do that, too?

JOAN SEMMEL: We—I don't—yeah, he had to do it, too, but he traveled a lot because of his job.

GAIL LEVIN: I see. That's fascinating.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, no, we did. It was—it was wild. It was a pretty wild ride.

GAIL LEVIN: So where did you go when you left Spain?

JOAN SEMMEL: I didn't—I went over the border to Portugal, or I went into, um, I went to Morocco, and I went to Israel one time. I mean—

GAIL LEVIN: Oh. Did you go to France?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, I didn't go—I don't remember if I did France. I did at one point. We traveled some, you know, so we went through France at one point, too, and, um, I'm not remembering too well right now.

GAIL LEVIN: But your experience in Spain left a lasting impact.

JOAN SEMMEL: Absolutely. It was a lasting impact. I had friends that, uh, remain friends for a very long time.

GAIL LEVIN: I remember you heard from someone in Spain not so long ago.

JOAN SEMMEL: I heard from an art historian there actually who wrote me that my name keeps coming up in his research, and he wanted to know if, you know, if I had any works there, and so on. And I just—and he connected me to somebody, because when I left Spain, we traded—people there, we always traded work, and I traded work with, uh, with her husband. And she had a piece of mine, and I had a piece of his, you know. And he put me in contact with her. I just got an email from her, yeah. So it's still—it's still—

GAIL LEVIN: Is he still alive, the artist? Or no.

JOAN SEMMEL: No.

GAIL LEVIN: But the widow is.

JOAN SEMMEL: They're all gone.

GAIL LEVIN: They are.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's the hard part, that every—

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JOAN SEMMEL: —body that I knew there is gone.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow, yeah. Well, being 90, it's—

JOAN SEMMEL: Being 90, that's—

GAIL LEVIN: Not everybody is still around.

JOAN SEMMEL: And I was the young person in there, you know.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah, right.

JOAN SEMMEL: You know, they were older. They were all older.

GAIL LEVIN: Even then, yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow. So has anything else you want to say about Spain before we get you back to America?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, I think that Spain was very formative to me in a lot of ways, in first of all understanding, uh, repression, in terms of how the personal life was so connected to the political life in the fact that women's role in Spain were—was much more restricted than here. It was so blatant. I mean, you couldn't—you couldn't sign a lease. You couldn't, uh, you couldn't take a child over the border without your husband's consent. You couldn't, uh, you couldn't—it was amazing that you couldn't—I had—you couldn't sign a lease without your father or your husband's signature, one of the other. A female signature wasn't worth anything. If you had a bank account, your husband could use your—could use your bank account. You couldn't use his. Things of that nature. So that—the societal restrictions were much clearer than they were here, where they were—they were here, but they weren't as open about it. You had to be home before 10:30, or there was a cop on the street, a *sereno*

[de la noche], he was called. You had to clap your hands for the *sereno*, and he would unlock the door for you to get in the house.

GAIL LEVIN: Really?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, because that was dinner time, and you were supposed to be home by then if you were a decent woman.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, they were worried about streetwalkers.

JOAN SEMMEL: They were worried about everything, you know? There was really about control of everything. So I mean, there were just lots and lots of things like that, and also the whole thing of the religious, uh, aspect of life there was very clear also. So all of that became very clear on my mind as to—so that when I got back to the States I was primed for feminism.

GAIL LEVIN: Now why did you decide to return to the United States?

JOAN SEMMEL: I had to return because for one thing, my son was learning disabled. I was told that two languages were really difficult under those circumstances, and I wanted him—both of my children to really be educated here rather than there. And I needed—

GAIL LEVIN: And by then—

JOAN SEMMEL: —a divorce.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: And I couldn't get a divorce there. There was no way. There was—it was ille—you couldn't get a divorce.

GAIL LEVIN: How old were the children when you returned?

JOAN SEMMEL: My son was five and my daughter was about 14, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, there's quite a gap between them.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, there's a—there's ten years' difference. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GAIL LEVIN: Wow. So the marriage ended in Spain.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

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GAIL LEVIN: Joan, before we leave Spain and go back to America and New York, you were an abstract painter while living in Madrid, and you were an abstract painter when you arrived in Madrid. What abstraction, modernist and contemporary abstract painters, were you interested before you went to Spain? Were any of them Spanish, and what interested you while you were in Madrid, in the way of modern and contemporary abstractionists?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, before I went to Spain, the only abstract Spanish painters I knew were Miro, Joan Miro, and Antonio—Antoni, I guess it is—Tapies. And both of them were pretty, uh, symbolic of much of the work in Spain. This—the work that I saw there was largely darkly colored or monotone, highly textural, abstract, but not in any way about paint in quite the same way that the American artists were. The American artists came off of a whole kind of jazz idea of space and color and light, whereas the Spaniards came much more out of the Black Goyas, and that was a kind of influence on me, but subtly. It wasn't as if I started to make paintings that were suddenly darkly colored or—I maintained my palette. I maintained the way I applied paint, all of that. But structurally, the structure of my paintings became somewhat more surreal inasmuch as that there was a kind of configuration of—I'm trying—

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JOAN SEMMEL: So, the American painting always tried to break down the whole idea of figure ground, and it became about paint and surface and gesture. Just the gesturality of American painting was much, much stronger, whereas in Spain, texturally and symbolically, the abstraction tended to feel somewhat more surreal. In my own work, I always maintained the very high color, and the quick gesture, but the structure of the painting itself tended to become more figure ground than it ever was before.

GAIL LEVIN: Joan, did you have any interest at all in the work of Salvador Dali, who's sort of a more hyper realistic or surrealistic?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, I never did. I never liked Dali's work. I always felt like it was too commercial. And that's a prejudice that I had from having been so deeply involved in the abstract expressionism of New York at the time. As time has gone by, and I've seen some of Dali's really good works—because I think he was a wonderful painter at a particular time before he just abandoned himself to, uh, making money.

GAIL LEVIN: Great. Well, it's been a great day, and I'm looking forward to continuing this at our next session.

JOAN SEMMEL: Okay. So will I.

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[00:00:00]

GAIL LEVIN: Oh there. Okay. I believe we're on. This is Gail Levin, in New York City, interviewing the second session on January 14, the artist Joan Semmel. Good afternoon, Joan.

JOAN SEMMEL: Good afternoon, Gail.

GAIL LEVIN: So happy to see you again.

JOAN SEMMEL: It's delightful.

GAIL LEVIN: So let's pick up where we left off with you in Madrid, and talk about some of your early exhibitions in Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries.

JOAN SEMMEL: Okay. When I got to Spain, it took me a little while to get myself oriented, but I originally had a small gallery show at a place called Edurne Gallery. And that was a place that, uh, Viola invited all of his friends to, everyone that he knew in Madrid, that was the whole art community, and I was introduced that way to everyone. And from then on, I was part of the environment. So I finally was able to get introduced to the Juana Mordó Gallery, which was the major abstract gallery in Madrid and in Spain at the time.

GAIL LEVIN: Was Juana Mordó a person?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes. She was.

GAIL LEVIN: A woman?

JOAN SEMMEL: She was a lovely woman, yes, and she had a good staff, and they were interested in contemporary work. In Spain there was a very strong group of, uh, artists, very well-known there, some of them well known outside, but they all belonged to that gallery. People like Antonio Tapies and, uh, Millares, [Rafael] Canogar, Juan Mompó, Rivera, and, uh, Manuel Rivera was the, um, the artist who introduced me to Juana Mordó, and from there I had, uh, a show at Juana. She never sold much because, uh, most of the selling got done to American tourists who were interested in Spanish artists. But nevertheless, I was part of the group, and was very happy there. It taught me many things about how one got connected in the art world, of where everyone is, first of all, by being involved with a group of artists. Secondly, by being involved in politics to some degree. And that was an interesting thing for me to learn because the Spanish artists were all highly political.

GAIL LEVIN: Was that dangerous during Franco's regime?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, it was—it was dangerous, and I believe that part of the reason that many of them went to abstraction was because of the abstraction hided the—hid the content

so that they would not be challenged. And they gradually earned all kinds of, uh, awards internationally, and so the government there also supported them, not realizing that the work was really critical of that—of Franco government. So that was an interesting experience. And I was also, um—

GAIL LEVIN: Joan, were there any other women artists at the time at Juana?

JOAN SEMMEL: There were one or two. There were—were there—I think there were two artists, uh, at Juana Mordó's at the time. They weren't important, but they were there. And, uh, so they were part of the group. I was also introduced to a Uruguayan critic by the name of Ernesto Heine, and he came to my studio and loved the work, and offered me the possibility of doing an exhibition in South America in Uruguay and in Buenos Aires and Argentina. And of course I was interested, and prepared a major show that was taken by the Museo de Artes Plasticas in Montevideo. It was a major museum show, my first major museum show, and I traveled with my two children by boat with the paintings in boxes as luggage.

[00:05:03]

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: 30 paintings, I think.

GAIL LEVIN: How old were your children?

JOAN SEMMEL: My son was only two, and my daughter was 12.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, so you had your hands full.

JOAN SEMMEL: I had my hands full. It was—and Heine's wife helped me when I got to Montevideo securing help with the children and so on. But I stayed a month, and moved on to Buenos Aires to do a show in the Bonino Gallery. I was also supposed to, at the time, travel to Brazil and have a show in, um, oh I forget now the exact, uh—

GAIL LEVIN: Rio? Or—

JOAN SEMMEL: No, not Rio.

GAIL LEVIN: São Paolo?

JOAN SEMMEL: São Paolo, yeah. But I was cautioned that it would be difficult getting the work out once I got it in, so I backed off because even coming into Montevideo and Buenos Aires, it was a tremendous problem getting through customs. It was very hard for them to believe that there were paintings in those boxes.

GAIL LEVIN: And you spoke Spanish, not Portuguese.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, uh, no, I spoke Spanish not Portuguese, right.

GAIL LEVIN: But did you get any press for these shows in Uruguay and Argentina?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, there was some press. I don't remember now exactly what, but there was press, and it was, you know, nicely presented and I was introduced around. The whole trip when I would be making drawings to pay for some of the expenses and selling them, one of those drawings, something came up on auction just recently from Montevideo, and I said, "Well, it must have been one of those that I had sold at that time." So it was, uh, a very exciting, difficult, but rewarding trip for me. And then I went back to Spain with the work. I took the work back, and, uh, everything worked out fine. So, uh, I went on to have a show at Juana Mordó in 1969. The shows in South America were in 1968. The Bonino show was in '68.

GAIL LEVIN: So, um, these are your last years in Spain. What made you move to New York—back to New York?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well—back to New York. Well, I was very settled in Spain and very happy there, but I needed to go back, uh, to get a divorce because I couldn't divorce in Spain. There it was illegal, and also my son, who was learning disabled, I wanted him to be

educated in the US where I had the proper kind of help for that kind of a problem. So those were two personal reasons that were overriding any other kind of desires I might have had.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you have a place to live and a studio when you moved back?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, no. When I came back, I—I came to my mother and father's apartment—

GAIL LEVIN: In the Bronx?

JOAN SEMMEL: —in the Bronx. We camped in the living room, and I came down to SoHo to find a place to live. I found a loft by just walking down the street, seeing some guy who looked like an artist, and I said, "Hey, do you know of any places to rent?" He said, "Yeah, I have one," and I came up to this place that I am still living in today.

GAIL LEVIN: Was it raw space at the time?

JOAN SEMMEL: Almost raw. It was very raw. [Laughs.] It was really pretty crude, and, uh, I just stayed in it that way for a short time, and then tried to fix it up some with the help of other friends around, and got it set up so that it was more comfortable for myself and my children.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay. So what's your impression, being back in New York? So this is 19—

JOAN SEMMEL: '70.

GAIL LEVIN: '70.

JOAN SEMMEL: 1970. Well, New York was exciting, challenging. I couldn't imagine how I had ever stayed away. It—the whole, uh, question of being in your own culture is very, very different when you've lived outside of your culture for a number of years because when you're away, you are an outsider, totally, and you're not—don't take—have any responsibility for anything that happens there.

[00:10:11]

Whereas when you come back, and you're part of the same culture, it's your job to be involved in whatever's going on. So I became much more involved politically. It was exciting to walk down the street and run into somebody I had gone to school with. I mean, this was—this was something that I could not have done in Spain.

GAIL LEVIN: Were there any artists that you had kept in touch with in the seven years abroad?

JOAN SEMMEL: A few—a very few—very few people who had been at Pratt. I remember running into Al Hansen, who was a great friend when I was back at Pratt, and, uh, so that was—that was exciting, and I immediately got involved—I went to meetings. I had learned in Spain, connect with other groups that you felt, uh, that you had a relationship to. I went to the Art Workers' Coalition meetings, so I met lots of artists there. I got involved with the women there who at that time were started breaking off from the men and became really involved in feminist politics.

GAIL LEVIN: Do any particular members, male or female, stand out in your memory?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, I was—I really loved Lucy Lippard. She was a vital force in all of that. I think that would be the most important person.

GAIL LEVIN: Very important critic for feminism.

JOAN SEMMEL: Very important critic for feminism at the time. But we were all just learning, you know. I also got involved with that feminist group of—against censorship.

GAIL LEVIN: And what about the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee?

JOAN SEMMEL: And I was involved with the women—Ad Hoc Committee. I was involved—actually, I was involved with several of the different committees there, but that was the most important one, the Ad Hoc Committee.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you picket at MOMA or at the Whitney, those various—

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, I picketed. I have one picture of myself somewhere with a picket, so I'm at the Whitney, I believe it was, that said something about how many women and no Black artists in the show, in what was supposed to be a representative show. So I did all of that.

GAIL LEVIN: Were the Guerilla Girls operational at that time?

JOAN SEMMEL: No. The Guerilla Girls were much later. They were in the '80s, and this was back in the '70s, right? So the Guerilla Girls happened later on.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay. Um, is there a particular moment or a story where, um, that stands out in memory? Was anything particularly important or influential for you?

JOAN SEMMEL: Uh, I—at that—at that time, I was just sort of getting a foothold in New York, so it was very exciting. It's hard for me to remember a particular thing because it was just—there were constant panels, discussions, uh, all kinds of things going on. We used to, uh, go—the women, we would—we formed our own groups, and we used to go from one studio to another. We couldn't get, uh, any kind of, uh, coverage from the galleries. So we'd go to each other's studios and have meetings each week in a different studio, and that way we got to see the work, all of each other's work, work that some had never been exhibited. Some people were relatively famous. I mean, even Louise Bourgeois was part of that at one point. Uh, Joan Snyder, Pat—I'm blanking on her name. In any case, there were just a very—it was a very exciting time for us.

GAIL LEVIN: Did they come to your studio, too?

JOAN SEMMEL: I'm sure. And they got—and we had, um, I got—I finally got a job teaching at the Brooklyn Museum. At that time they curated—

GAIL LEVIN: Which had an art school.

JOAN SEMMEL: It had an art school, so that was my first real teaching job, and the, uh, they—

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JOAN SEMMEL: —let me curate a show there, uh, at the—the school itself was part of the Brooklyn Museum, and at the time they were going to bring, uh, the show in that—from the West Coast of women artists until 1950.

GAIL LEVIN: Right.

JOAN SEMMEL: So I said, well okay, if I could curate the show I would do it if I could do women contemporary that were operating at the time. And I did a show there called *Contemporary Women—Consciousness and Content*.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay.

JOAN SEMMEL: Contemporary women. I think that was the exact title.

GAIL LEVIN: And you put your own work into it, also.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes. I had my own work into it also, but it was, uh, an important show. It was one of the first feminist shows.

GAIL LEVIN: Is this—is this set the same time as we're talking Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin show?

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right. It opened at the same time that that show came to the Brooklyn Museum.

GAIL LEVIN: So we're now—are we into the mid '70s now?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah. That's what I thought.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. That's—that's in the mid '70s.

GAIL LEVIN: Right. So how did that impact upon you, being able to organize this show and being in the show? And I don't know, how was the press? Was it hostile? Was it supportive? Mixed?

JOAN SEMMEL: The press was mixed, right? And, uh, it was interesting because you saw the censorship in a certain way. I did—I even designed the poster. I did everything myself. There were no funds for anything. I was on the truck to pick up the work, [both laugh] you know? And Louise Bourgeois, for instance, was in that show, so I collected and made like a patchwork quilt with a picture from each one of the artists in the show in the quilt on the—on the poster.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay.

JOAN SEMMEL: So that it showed the whole array of people there, and they would not, uh, exhibit the poster because, uh, the piece by Marisol, uh—I don't remember whose piece it was that was so offensive to them.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh my goodness. They were puritanical about the imagery.

JOAN SEMMEL: Absolutely.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: So I mean, this was the kind of stuff that—that came up, that you understood. You didn't even realize how all of that worked, you know. I think it was a Nancy Grossman piece that really bothered them, you know. The leather piece with the—

GAIL LEVIN: Yes.

JOAN SEMMEL: So—

GAIL LEVIN: Joan did this have an impact on your work in the studio, this experience organizing? This reaction? This puritanical reaction?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, I think the—I was at the time going, uh, moving back into figuration at the same time, and even earlier. So I was already involved in work that I wanted to be—have a feminist, uh, direction, and to make a political statement. And that was what was driving my change from abstraction into figuration. I never thought of it as figuration. I thought of it as being political.

GAIL LEVIN: Can we mention that you were working on a book manuscript? I think it was called something like *A New Eros: Sexual Imagery in Women's Art.*

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes. That was part of my whole—everything that was going on then for me because when I moved from abstraction into quote figuration, I was interested in how would my work be political? How could I make it important and necessary for women? What would—what would state what I was thinking in a way without being pedantic? And what I—what I was very convinced of was that, uh, feminism really needed to begin in the bedroom, that the sexuality was an essential part of women's liberation, the need for them to find their own agency sexually as well as politically. And that without one, the other would not ever really materialize. So I was interested in how women received their sexual education, and at the time in New York, pornography was, uh, a new kind of thing.

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But I was convinced that most of the pornography was male-determined, and that I personally couldn't respond to it in any way except by being negative.

GAIL LEVIN: There is a moment when your gallery tells you you don't fit in its show because it's political, and what's the tryptic that you make? Tell us about that.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was called, uh, *Mythologies and Me.* But what I did—

GAIL LEVIN: So that's 1976.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right. So that painting was for, uh, it was the bicentennial year, and my gallery did a show that was supposed to be about—critical of the—of American politics at the time.

GAIL LEVIN: And your gallery in New York at the time is Lerner-Heller?

JOAN SEMMEL: Lerner-Heller. It was Lerner-Heller. And so it was called a patriotic show, and I wanted to be in it. I said, "My work is political." And he said, "How can I stand up and give a lecture on why—why the nudes are political?" And I said, "Okay. I'll paint you a diagram." So I did this three-part painting that was one piece showed a parody of a Playboy image of a woman. The other end was a parody of a de Kooning woman, and the center piece was a self-nude. So what I was—and then I called it *Mythologies and Me.* So I was showing precisely how the way the culture gave us an identity as women was so corrupt that it was almost impossible to become ourselves. And so that was my way of asserting myself as I see myself, as I experience myself, as the content of my work.

GAIL LEVIN: Was that Lerner or Heller that said that to you?

JOAN SEMMEL: That was [Dick] Lerner. Heller was really a silent partner.

GAIL LEVIN: I see.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And then Lerner's first name? Do you recall it?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, uh, I'm just blocking right now.

GAIL LEVIN: Well we'll find it later.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay. So the painting actually that you made for it was actually shown? They accepted?

JOAN SEMMEL: It was shown in the gallery, yes. It was never shown in the museum, incidentally. The Whitney, which was at the time doing things that dealt with appropriation, and here I had this painting that appropriated both a pop culture and a high culture, supposedly, in quotation marks, images, and they—they wouldn't even look.

GAIL LEVIN: My goodness.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Do you know if de Kooning ever saw it?

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't know that.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah. Did you ever meet him?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, I never met him personally. No. I met Elaine, but not him.

GAIL LEVIN: A lot of the women artists, Lee Krasner for example, considered de Kooning's women paintings very aggressive and hostile towards women.

JOAN SEMMEL: It's interesting. I did at that time. I felt it was—that they were very hostile, but I must say that as I've gotten older I—I mean, I always loved the paintings nevertheless. It's a wonderful painting. I must say that I always felt that, uh, they expressed men's fear of women, and so they were honest.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay. So, um, speaking of your political activism, were you involved with the publication *Heresies?*

JOAN SEMMEL: I was invited, but at the time I was teaching. Now that's the other thing that

in the '70s I finally landed a teaching job at Rutgers University, and that was my survival. That guaranteed survival.

GAIL LEVIN: That was a tenure track job where you eventually won tenure.

JOAN SEMMEL: Which I eventually got tenure, yes. So that was a tenure track job, and that was what freed me so that I didn't have to worry about surviving by selling paintings and I was able to, uh, have an income and still be myself. I mean, I still was working as an artist.

GAIL LEVIN: Now, there weren't many women with tenured positions in Mason Gross art school—or were at the Douglas?

JOAN SEMMEL: I think I was the first fully tenured.

GAIL LEVIN: Rutgers, yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: In the studio practice.

GAIL LEVIN: Yes.

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't know what—

GAIL LEVIN: So it was very unusual, and I believe you had spoken out professionally about the lack of women, maybe at the College Art Association?

[00:10:01]

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, I did a speech at the College Art Association for the Ad Hoc Committee, actually, because we did research at that time checking on all the schools. They wouldn't—we sent out a questionnaire about how many women were on their faculty, and they never answered. So we went down the lists of all the schools and picked up the female names and counted and made a whole kind of research thing out of it. And I did a speech talking about—precisely about that. That speech actually was reproduced, I think, in a publication called *Women Artist News.* It was a, you know, a paperweight.

GAIL LEVIN: It was significant, not just for your own career, but for women contemporaries.

JOAN SEMMEL: For women in general. Well I was politically involved, and not just about myself. I was involved in moving women into a position where they could function professionally.

GAIL LEVIN: So we were talking about your shows in this early period in New York, and we mentioned the Brooklyn show. We mentioned your book manuscript, which was never published, *A New Eros: Sexual Imagery in Women's Art.* Who were the other collaborators? Do you recall? Was it Carol Duncan?

JOAN SEMMEL: Carol Duncan, Lucy Lippard.

GAIL LEVIN: Yes. Oh, and April Kingsley.

JOAN SEMMEL: April Kingsley. There were only the two others. Elizabeth Weatherford did a piece on anthropology, and I don't remember.

GAIL LEVIN: Who was supposed to publish it, and what happened? Do you remember?

JOAN SEMMEL: Hacker Art Books was supposed to.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh right, a big art—

JOAN SEMMEL: I had a contract, right? And he ended up not publishing it. They told me that, oh well, it was too late. Feminism was over.

GAIL LEVIN: Over?

JOAN SEMMEL: Over.

GAIL LEVIN: In 1973?

JOAN SEMMEL: 1970-something. I don't remember. It was probably a little later than that. Probably more around 8, I think. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Well, we know it wasn't over.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. But the archives has—have that manuscript.

GAIL LEVIN: And your gallery published your introduction in a recent catalog.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right, yes.

GAIL LEVIN: Your current gallery.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes. Alexander Gray Associates.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah. So that was nice that they brought that out.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: A bit late, but—

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, but it happened. It's still there. And the interesting thing is how current all of those ideas still are because they've been acted on to some degree. Things are better than they were, certainly, and have changed a great deal. But there's a great deal left to be done.

GAIL LEVIN: Were there any other shows in this early period which you participated in that you'd like to get up and circle back around?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, well I would like to say, first of all, that I could not get a gallery to show my work even though I had a very good history in Europe and South America, and I would come into a gallery and try to make contact, and I couldn't get past the receptionist. So, uh, I ended up doing a show on Prince Street where I rented the space myself, and put up a show of the first figurative paintings that I did, which were, uh, the sexual—the sexual group of work. The ones that were, uh, realistic. And that show got—

GAIL LEVIN: So these are ones of couples, together, yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: Of couples. And those paintings, uh, got a great deal of attention, and I think it was written up in the *Village Voice*, and all kinds of places.

GAIL LEVIN: Positively or negative?

JOAN SEMMEL: Positively, yeah. I was always—all of that work was very well received by the critical community.

GAIL LEVIN: But still no gallery offers.

JOAN SEMMEL: But still no gallery. They wouldn't touch it. And museums wouldn't touch it either. They, you know, the sexual work was really not—

GAIL LEVIN: Were some of those the paintings shown later at MoMA and another young artist show? Or did that come later?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, not the paintings. They weren't shown at MoMA. Not those paintings.

GAIL LEVIN: Something else.

JOAN SEMMEL: They were shown at WAC, some of them, just—

GAIL LEVIN: The Women Artist—

JOAN SEMMEL: That first show that was later on.

GAIL LEVIN: The feminist show in California, right.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, yes, yeah. Then it was shown. But they were not shown, except for the show that—

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JOAN SEMMEL: —I did.

GAIL LEVIN: And who gave you the idea to make your own show on Prince Street? Were you imitating another artist?

JOAN SEMMEL: Nobody gave me the idea. It was my—

GAIL LEVIN: You just did it?

JOAN SEMMEL: I was determined. I felt that the work was important, that it had something to say, and I wanted it to be seen. And I couldn't get anyone to show it, so I said okay, well I'll do it myself.

GAIL LEVIN: Were you already at Rutgers teaching by that time?

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't remember that. I'd have to check the exact dates.

GAIL LEVIN: But they hired you at any rate.

JOAN SEMMEL: They hired me, yeah. They hired me. I dressed down very carefully when I went for the interview [laughs].

GAIL LEVIN: Do you remember who was chairing the department when you began teaching? It must have been a man.

JOAN SEMMEL: It, uh, I don't remember if it was—I don't remember exactly when I was teaching.

GAIL LEVIN: Who were some of your male colleagues in Rutgers?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, it was a great group. Leon Golub, Geoff Hendricks, Bob Watts was there then. They had a very strong Fluxus group, right? Stroud, Peter Stroud. Mel Edwards was there. So Rutgers had a strong political kind of, uh, thing, but there wasn't—there weren't women, yet. Right? So—

GAIL LEVIN: But did you get respect from the male colleagues?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh yeah. They were respectful, and they moved me up fast because I came in at the very bottom. That was all they would offer, and I was grateful to get whatever I could. But they moved me up through the tenure position very fast. My work was respected by the male community. I was—I didn't have problems with that. It was institutionally and commercially that it was blocked, you know.

GAIL LEVIN: And from those years teaching, are there still—are there any artists that you're still in touch with who were your students, professionals?

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't know about—this is a long career.

GAIL LEVIN: Yes.

JOAN SEMMEL: So it's hard for me to remember where—

GAIL LEVIN: I'm thinking of the whole career.

JOAN SEMMEL: The whole career, when and who precisely entered at what point.

GAIL LEVIN: Right.

JOAN SEMMEL: Because I was connected, you know, over and over again, in different ways. But I mean, there were young artists who still call me, you know? But don't ask me for names. I can't bring up names at this point, right?

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah. But there are people out there that—

JOAN SEMMEL: There are people out there.

GAIL LEVIN: —you affected.

JOAN SEMMEL: That I affected.

GAIL LEVIN: Or infected.

JOAN SEMMEL: I get—I get letters sometimes from people, and I have, you know, and I remember running into one artist at some opening who was going to then have a show at the Met, you know. And she hugged me and told me how I was the only person at Rutgers who she ever could really—who said something that was important to her, and that that was what made her time there important. So those kinds of messages made teaching, although it was difficult and time consuming and all, it was rewarding in many other ways.

GAIL LEVIN: I think I even ran into one of your former students in Cuba.

JOAN SEMMEL: Really?

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, yeah. That's right, I think I remember.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah, I think.

JOAN SEMMEL: I mean, I remember visiting one in Trinidad, right? So there was—it was just always very, uh, rewarding in many different ways, even though it was also taxing, so that when I finally was able to retire it was like a great freedom, and a burst of energy that came out in the work at that time.

GAIL LEVIN: You remember when you retired?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes I do, because I retired in the year 2000.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh. Okay.

JOAN SEMMEL: So I was a new millennium. [Laughs.]

GAIL LEVIN: Well it's nice that you've had a good run since then.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay. Are there any other early shows that you'd like to, um, discuss before we move on to other topics?

JOAN SEMMEL: No. I think—I think that, uh, those early shows that I did, that work that I did myself, was probably the most important, but then from that work I moved into the self-image. And the self-image, the nude self-image, from my own point of view. And what happened at that point, I had begun to use the camera to take my own pictures rather than working from models.

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And that was extremely important in the formation of my work. So the use of the camera freed me up to use my own body, and to use it from my own point of view, and that's how I got the idea to abstractly construct the paintings from that point of view, because it illustrated, again, my political idea of forming your own self-identity, and of how a woman needs to see herself and experience her own body rather than take the male view of the female body.

GAIL LEVIN: So you show, in fact, active agency, sometimes using mirrors.

JOAN SEMMEL: Sometimes.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: As—well, as I gradually moved away from just using the self-image from my own point of view, I did it from my own point of view through a camera, by taking it in the—

in the glass, in the reflection. At first I didn't want reflected view because I felt that that still wasn't true to how one really experiences the body. But once I understood—once the work showed how the body felt from one's own experience, I wanted to deal with the construction of the image of the woman, and how the issue of who looks at who, who is seeing, so I was dealing then already with the male gaze before that kind of, uh, verbiage came into the dialogue, right?

GAIL LEVIN: Speaking of the verbiage, how have you felt about all the sort of critical theory? Does that really convey what you're after in your work to the audience, or is just looking at the work and responding a more direct way?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well I always wanted the work to be—to have an emotional, uh, and intellectual response from the audience, and also to be personal. So I never wanted the work to feel pedantic, and the theoretical, all the theory and academic writing was perhaps necessary to, uh, theorize the work for the future, and to make it explicable intellectually, but I didn't want it, uh, I didn't want it experienced through that. I wanted the work to be seen as art, and to be experienced emotionally and visually, and aesthetically.

GAIL LEVIN: You mention, of course, concern with your own body, which you're depicting. There are some times when you—you did a locker room series, and you did a mannequin series. Can you talk about how you moved from yourself to doing those, and why?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well again, the work always came through my own experience. So that one of the things—one of my criticisms of the culture was, especially in relation to how women had to experience it, was that it was so totally narcissistic. After having lived overseas, one could understand that much more, now American culture was so superficial, and narcissistic. And, uh, one of the things that I did was I had to use the locker—the gymnasium locker rooms for myself because of I was having back problems at the time. So I needed the exercise. And when you walk into the locker room, it's—into both locker rooms, and the gymnasium, it's all mirrors. All one sees is mirrors, and people standing around and communicating with themselves, not with each other. So I felt like that was a perfect metaphor for—to use for that—my criticism of that kind of narcissism. Now I don't know if that comes through specifically in the paintings, but I didn't want that specific. I want—what I wanted was the viewer to look and understand that, emotionally, that this was critical, not to have, you know, a scrim to read that this and this and this is what's happening.

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So I dealt with those images, group images. I took pictures. The camera was vital. I took pictures, but I took the pictures in the mirror because if I took the pictures in the mirror, people didn't pose for me. They didn't realize that I was taking the shot. And that way I got a more authentic view of how people moved and experienced the gymnasium. And once I did the gymnasium pictures, I was then able to move into the locker room, where the people were nude. Of course, they were all women in the locker room, whereas in the gymnasium they were both men and women.

GAIL LEVIN: And were these women you photographed in the locker room aware that they were being photographed?

JOAN SEMMEL: Not specifically at the moment that I took the pictures, but I came with the camera, and they knew me because I would come all the time. A lot of the people were artists and dancers and all kinds of people, and they knew that, you know, I always asked permission if it would be okay if I was doing that, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: I recall that I have a bathroom with many mirrors, and you came—you asked to come and—

JOAN SEMMEL: I have two paintings from that—from that—

GAIL LEVIN: I didn't realize you made them because—

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh yeah?

GAIL LEVIN: —at first you told me that they weren't going to work.

JOAN SEMMEL: No, but I did. I did two, two of them.

GAIL LEVIN: Which two? Do you remember?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, well I don't remember the titles right now.

GAIL LEVIN: But maybe we can find them later? I'm eager to see them.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, yeah, sure. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And here we are near the same room.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right.

GAIL LEVIN: Scene of the crime. That's great. Now besides the human figure, you've also done portraits of various friends and family members.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah I always do—whenever I got stuck for a while, like what shall I do next, I always went to the portrait because the portrait—the person is there, and you deal with that. So that—so I did several of colleagues or friends. I did one very large piece that was called *Faculty Freeze* that was a meeting, the faculty, which of course at that time was all male, right? So it—

GAIL LEVIN: [Laughs.] Is that painting—

JOAN SEMMEL: —made my point.

GAIL LEVIN: Where is that painting now?

JOAN SEMMEL: That's at Rutgers.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. It's at the Rutgers Museum in Voorhees.

GAIL LEVIN: All right, so the Zimmerli Art Museum it's called now.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Great.

JOAN SEMMEL: So that was of the male faculty.

GAIL LEVIN: Is it a large canvas?

JOAN SEMMEL: It's—yes, it's very large. And it—I showed that in another show where I did another show of all the portraits that I had done, which I also incidentally did on my own because nobody would show them.

GAIL LEVIN: The portrait show?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yep.

GAIL LEVIN: Was that in another gallery in SoHo?

JOAN SEMMEL: It was another space in—on Greene Street, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Okay.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And did you get press for that?

JOAN SEMMEL: I did, yes.

GAIL LEVIN: Positive or negative?

JOAN SEMMEL: Very positive. What's her name, Simpson wrote on the—

GAIL LEVIN: But still no offers from a gallery?

JOAN SEMMEL: I think by that time I might have been in a gallery. I don't remember the dates exactly. I was at Lerner-Heller gallery for a long time. It was—and then that gallery closed.

GAIL LEVIN: I see.

JOAN SEMMEL: The dealer died, and so it closed, and I was like, for about five years I couldn't get a gallery again until I went to, uh, Grunebaum Gallery, and after Grunebaum in 1987 I remember because it was the crash, the stock market crash, and the dealer had played around a lot, and he suddenly closed up and disappeared.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh my.

JOAN SEMMEL: Not paying artists or anything, and it was a shock.

GAIL LEVIN: That was Grunebaum?

JOAN SEMMEL: Grunebaum, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh wow. So you lost work.

JOAN SEMMEL: I didn't—I only had, uh, I didn't lose work because I was very careful because I had lost something when the Lerner-Heller died, so I always made sure I was paid up to date, do you know. And I had—I don't remember what my show there was, but he didn't have any of my paintings—

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JOAN SEMMEL: Already had everything back at the studio, so I was lucky.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah, wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

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GAIL LEVIN: Okay. I would like to talk more about your portraits, and I don't think they were very conventional portraits where you had sitters come and pose. And did you use the camera, and do you want to talk about that?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes. Since I came to figuration from abstract expressionism, I wasn't used to dealing with a posed model that I had sit—to sit for me. So all of the portraits that I did were done from camera shoots that I would take lots and lots of pictures and then edit and choose that which most expressed the individual, and naturally myself also, in the painting. So it was interesting that I never thought of using the camera in that way as anything but, uh, normal, and appropriate. It never occurred to me that using the camera wasn't the conventional way of taking a portrait—of making a portrait. But obviously, if you think of the history of portraiture with the model posing, it was a very different way of dealing with what portraiture is about.

GAIL LEVIN: Joan, had you studied photography as art?

JOAN SEMMEL: No. I was a primitive photographer. All I could do was press the button, and the picture snapped, and that's all I cared about because I could choose. So I could just keep shooting and shooting and shooting until I found something that worked for me. I didn't have the patience, uh, to really learn the various stops and all the mathematical stuff to get a fine photograph. I wasn't interested in a fine photograph. I almost liked the distortions and the shadows where they shouldn't be, and things like that, because it gave me ways of improvising on the painting that I might not have been able to discover by myself. So the primitive camera became a useful tool for me in terms of developing new ways of looking and seeing that one might not see or understand in the same way as looking at the model.

GAIL LEVIN: So before digital, you still didn't do your own printing. You just sent them out—

the film out.

JOAN SEMMEL: No I never—I never did my own printing. I sent them out, and then also I didn't only work from the photograph. I worked from a colored Xerox because that was another technology that happened at that time. So I would go down to the print shop, have the slides that we worked—we made slides for color prints, although some of my early work was from black and white photographs. But when I started to be able to get color Xerox, I was able then to just take a slide and have it, uh, printed in a color Xerox which gave me another level of distortions. And I liked having all those distortions to work with because it freed me up to think about color and shape and form in a much freer way than I might have if I was forced—not forced, but if I just tried to reproduce what the camera did. I never tried to make it look like a photograph.

GAIL LEVIN: So often your portraits are giant heads. I mean, they're large. They're not small.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well some of the portraits are—they're all very large in scale.

GAIL LEVIN: That's what I meant.

JOAN SEMMEL: Because at that point, the painting had to be large to be important. I mean, we were still coming off of the whole AbEx performative thing with paint, and with scale, and scale was something that was very important in terms of, uh, contemporary painting at that time. And it was unusual to be able to move things into very large scale.

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So I used, um, the scale and then the color distortions that I got from the Xerox to trigger my own color in the work, and, uh, I did full portraits that were—not full bodies, but the normal, seated kind of portrait of people. I also did some commissioned portraits that were less—they were less adventurous, let's say, to conform to the traditions of pictures of a judge or a faculty member that were going to be installed in a particular place.

GAIL LEVIN: Well those wouldn't be the nude portraits. I meant—

JOAN SEMMEL: No, those are not the nude portraits.

GAIL LEVIN: I think you did one of your friend David, that was in your Pennsylvania Academy show.

JOAN SEMMEL: I did. I did—some of the people in the first self-portraits, where I did like Antonio and I, was of a partner, and I always used photographs to make those, but I never considered those body pictures portraits, although they were sometimes seen as portraits. They weren't intended as portraits. They were intended as iconic images that would hold the content that I was interested in projecting rather than as representations of particular individuals.

GAIL LEVIN: Well I guess your titles led people to think that they were portraits.

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't know—

GAIL LEVIN: Since you named the figure, Antonio.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, I named—I did. I named the figure because I wanted it to be clear that they were specific people rather than models, right, so that they represented a psychological state of being as well as a physical state of being.

GAIL LEVIN: So the people you painted were always important in your life at that moment.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly. They were people that I was involved with in one form or another, and there was—that's what I used. I did—never hired models or went to totally strange people for, uh, it was always people that were involved in areas that things that I was doing, and I was involved with. I took very literally that personal is political, and I operated in that way.

GAIL LEVIN: Well I remember seeing a number of your large-scale portraits in the Bronx Museum show in 2013, almost 10 years ago, but I can vividly remember that they really held the space.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, yeah. Well the Bronx Museum show, uh, used not only that work, but they used a whole series of very small pictures that I call heads, because—because I did my own body, looking down, you couldn't see your own face. And people always said, well why did I cut off the head? So I did a whole series of heads to show that I didn't disrespect heads, I just simply didn't—wasn't able to see them in that way. So those paintings, those were also done from photographs, photographs that I took in the mirror. And they were photographs that I took in the mirror, and I did cut off the heads to just take the heads from the body, and use the heads without the bodies. So that was, uh, another important piece, but in general there was a whole section of portraits that I have done over my—the length of my career, starting with, uh, the pictures of people that I worked with, and other artists, and partners that I had, and then my own faces. So all of those things, uh, would take—be a whole section of work that had certain kinds of relationships with each other, but they all came through the camera to me.

GAIL LEVIN: Is there a favorite image that you managed to pull off that speaks to you now more than—

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JOAN SEMMEL: My favorite is always the very last thing I did.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: [Laughs.]

GAIL LEVIN: That's talent.

JOAN SEMMEL: It's just the way it is, you know? It's always that way. I always feel like the last thing I did is the best thing I ever did.

GAIL LEVIN: That's a wonderful attribute. Terrific. Tell me more about your use of the camera. When did that begin, and—

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, it began with, uh, that whole period of needing to be able to find a way to use the body so that it was not seen through the eyes of a man. And so I wanted my own body to be the specific body because I didn't want to objectify any other woman, and I didn't want to idealize the body. And if I used somebody else and took pictures of them, and didn't idealize it some, it might be very upsetting for them, and I would feel that that—it wasn't fair to—in some way, I was still objectifying another person. But if I used myself, I was not. So that was my reason for going to myself. Also, I was always available to myself, so—

GAIL LEVIN: And free.

JOAN SEMMEL: And free. So that was very convenient.

GAIL LEVIN: How did you move to make drawings that involve collage of photographs? Can we talk about that?

JOAN SEMMEL: That was the time that I first discovered, you know, the use of the Xerox and was able to get these prints, the Xerox. And so I liked them, and then I was doing a series of drawings, and I started playing, of course, with how could I get that image again without it being as realistic, because I liked what happened with the, uh, the Xerox distortions. So in that play period of making drawings and trying to find ways of doing things, I saw the image reproduced by—as it was, and then the image as I could explode it. So I tried to get the series of paintings that I called *Echoing Images*. So I would have the one image that was the Xerox image, collaged into the drawing, and the structure of the Xerox was repeated in the structure of the drawing around it, except that that drawing expanded it and became more abstract. So that way I had a very realistic image together with a very expressionistic image, and I got that sense of what I called the *Echoing Images,* where as one felt very representation—self-representational, the other one felt to me to be more a reaching out into the culture to—of the abstract people that I had always connected myself to.

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GAIL LEVIN: So we've talked about the use of the camera and its use in portraits and self-

images. Can we talk also about the concept of time in your work, not only in the portraits but—and the figure paintings and the self, and how do you think about time? You—it's a complex issue.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well I think that, uh, I came around to it almost accidentally because of the way I made, uh, the pictures using the various technologies that developed—have been developed, from the camera to the computer, so that I started by working with the Xeroxes and abstraction. I was always interested in combining the realism with abstraction, that why couldn't I use both? I always felt cheated when I had to conform to either one or the other. So the collages that I've just described was one way of dealing with it. Another way with dealing with that was by using some of the early paintings that I had of the sexual pieces and throwing images of some of the locker room figures over those paintings, and superimposing one on the other. And what happened when I did that was suddenly one got the sense of time, and memory. Both time and memory seemed by—expressed by superimposing one image over another, and that superimposing one image over another was also somewhat influenced, I think, by my connection to movies, and seeing films, and films, the way images are a flashback. So I never thought of that directly, but when I think back on what I did, I recognize the connections between that and, culturally, the world that I lived in at that time.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you have a favorite, um, group of film directors?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, no. I was—I had very Catholic taste. I mean, I liked—but I tend to like serious films more than, you know, the musical kind of thing, you know, so that I really was just—

GAIL LEVIN: What about Spanish surrealism when you were in Spain? Were they showing Bunuel, Luis Bunuel? Did you even know that work?

JOAN SEMMEL: I knew that work, and I knew it here, you know, of course. I always knew about the surrealists, and even the way I, uh, dealt with abstraction in some ways, there was one period of the abstraction where I was working with more symbols and not just gesture. So I combined certain kind of symbolic things that seemed interesting to me into the abstraction, which gave it some of the surreal kind of content that almost, uh, Joan Miró might have. So I was playing with all of those elements, you know.

GAIL LEVIN: You know how you have pictures in recent decades of yourself where you move, maybe, before the camera? In your mind's—the back of your mind, do you ever think of Duchamp and the nude descending the staircase, and that—

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, there is—there are one or two paintings, actually, I have that are very connected to that, and I got the image by superimposing one image over another, and obviously once I saw it, you know, once I had it, I connected that and said, "Ah, it's my nude descending the staircase." But I didn't particularly like the idea of it feeling that derivative.

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GAIL LEVIN: I don't think they're derivative, but I think Duchamp would like them.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, I'm sure, I mean that they certainly have that connection, you know. But later on, I mean, that superimposition, the computer, for instance, comes into play much later. And one of the things that once the computer became—and Photoshop was available, although I could never really handle Photoshop without an assistant, so I could then overlay one image over another and get transparencies and get that kind of range of motion, so to speak, into the paintings with using a computer image as a reference rather than just, uh, a photograph.

GAIL LEVIN: You speak of yourself as a political artist, going back to your early days—

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right.

GAIL LEVIN: —in New York, certainly. How much do you think about content, say political content, versus style, and how do you see them as interacting in your work?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well that was one of the problems for me, was that I had felt that early on the only discussion that was possible in the art had to do with style. One never discussed

content. I mean, you would see a painting of one person murdering another, and they would talk about how the color and this is changed, or whatever. So the aesthetics were always primary, and then when I became politically involved, I was determined that the content had to connect to the aesthetics, that it could not exist—that the aesthetics could not exist independently without some connection to content. So I became much more involved with content, and to this day, I still am. That the content is important always, so what the implications of how a painting is painted and what kind of color is used, and what kind of structure is used, and what kind of scale is used, all of those issues add or detract from the kind of content that is being—that it intends—is intentional on the part of the artist.

GAIL LEVIN: So recently you've been using a lot of gestural, I would say high color, some pinks when you least expect it. Hot pink, for example. Does that have political significance?

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't know. I don't know if it has political—I don't use it for its political significance. It's emotional for me at this point.

GAIL LEVIN: It's powerful.

JOAN SEMMEL: It's powerful, and I think it has to do with the power of them because of course as a little old lady you're supposed to be discreet.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh.

JOAN SEMMEL: And I don't want to be discreet.

GAIL LEVIN: I don't think you're a little old lady.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well I know, but you know what I mean.

GAIL LEVIN: But let's talk about aging.

JOAN SEMMEL: I'm say—I'm saying that of course, uh, in a sarcastic way.

GAIL LEVIN: But in this society, to deal with aging, it's an issue. It's an issue that's everywhere.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, I—when I began working with my own body, it never occurred to me at that point because when one is young, one doesn't think about being old. It never occurred to me, of course, that as I continued, my work would really be dealing with aging rather than dealing with sexuality, specifically. So it happened naturally for me that suddenly—and also I think that, uh, my pictures in the women's locker room also had some people who were much older that utilized the locker room, and so I had naked bodies that were not ideally—idealized or young, and that threw me into a whole different area of aging and the demographics of the world that—the United States, at least, where we live right now, have really not dealt with the necessities of a culture that has a very large aging component in the population.

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So aging became a kind of political, um, content in the work. But it wasn't only political. It was truly also emotional because it's a classic problem for people, mortality, and it has always been in art forever because it is—it's just part of being human that we are—our time is finite. And we know it. And the older you get, the more you're aware of it. And so in my own consciousness as a human being, it came out in the work also.

GAIL LEVIN: So I'm thinking back ten years. I had this young male assistant working with me on a curatorial project, and he found out I knew you, and said, "Oh, you know Joan Semmel?" You were one of his favorite painters, and he had selected your early works off the internet in his collection of favorite works. But I'm curious—I know you have a lot of very young fans. Do they respond both to your earlier, more youthful works, and to your works that treat aging? Do you know? Do you get any feedback?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well I think—I think they respond to both, for different reasons. And the earlier work, uh, the color is more naturalistic, right. The later work, the color explodes, goes back to the abstract period, practically. Maybe that's why I use it, because it's attractive in a sense, powerful. It's joyous.

GAIL LEVIN: It deflects from the—

JOAN SEMMEL: The negativity that's connected with age, always.

GAIL LEVIN: You've inverted that, by upping the ante with color.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly.

GAIL LEVIN: Brilliant.

JOAN SEMMEL: So that the pleasure—you need, for me, art is instructive and moving, but it's also pleasurable, and it's the pleasurable aspect that the color gives me that if I wasn't using color in the way that I always enjoyed using it, I didn't want the paintings to be depressed. I'm not depressed. I'm old but I'm not depressed.

GAIL LEVIN: No, and you're not painting someone black and blue.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly. I'm not—I didn't have—I wasn't—I'm not interested in, uh, the negativities that have been permeated about what aging is. Obviously there are downsides to aging, but there are also upsides to it, you know. And I wanted the painting to be an aesthetic pleasure. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Hear, hear. Going back to your education, your art education, is that where you formed your first vocabulary of color?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes.

GAIL LEVIN: And were there particular artist models for color, or was it Matisse? Was it Kandinsky? Was it a professor?

JOAN SEMMEL: I had a very good grounding from Cooper Union in color. It was a wonderful design teacher, we all had to take. Her name was Miss Schutz. I still remember. And she put us through a series of all kinds of exercises of color that she said—and she was quite right—she said, "You'll do all this. Yes I know you hate having to do it this way, but you'll do this and you'll never have to worry about color again."

GAIL LEVIN: What did she have you do?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, we had everything. We did everything from, you know, all kinds of limitations of just doing one thing all reds, right, where you had to get the range from cool to hot in the range of every color—of each different color.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, I see.

JOAN SEMMEL: So I mean, each different thing was sort of, uh, separated out into a structural way of understanding it, and so that then became automatic that you'd just do it.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you do—try anything like that with your own students at Rutgers?

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JOAN SEMMEL: To some degree, smaller. Not as rigorous, but to some degree I did. I'd have them do—we'd start limitations of color. In the—you know, if I was teaching early classes, and I mean, you know, like foundation classes, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Now, across your nine decades, you've been with various partners, and have many of them been artists?

JOAN SEMMEL: No. They've been a few writers, right, but my last partner was an artist, and a very good artist. His name was John Hardy, and we were together for 22 years. So I mean, we were essentially like married, but we never did the legal aspect of that. And he had a—we got together when, uh, I was 60 and he was 70, and we spent, uh, it was just—I was very lucky, you know. It was just a really, really good relationship.

GAIL LEVIN: John Hardy, whom I knew, was also a figurative painter.

JOAN SEMMEL: He was a figurative artist. We knew each other—and it's interesting the way we found each other. Originally we were friends, but we became friends because we were, uh, he was chosen for a show that Benny Andrews curated over at the settlement in—on the Lower East Side, of artists choose artists. And John was chosen, and then on the next round, he had to choose somebody, and he chose me. He chose my work. He knew my work.

GAIL LEVIN: John Hardy chose your work?

JOAN SEMMEL: John Hardy chose me in that particular show, and that's how we met originally.

GAIL LEVIN: Ah. But you already knew Benny Andrews. You had painted his portrait, right?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, I knew Benny. I knew Benny Andrews. We were friends.

GAIL LEVIN: And I got confused when I saw the portrait you painted of Benny because I knew John had long been friends with Benny Andrews.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's—but—

GAIL LEVIN: That's there, I'm glad to hear the story.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's the—that's the connection, yeah. Yeah, you know. Oh, Benny always wanted to get us together [laughs], but, uh, at the time, John was with somebody else, and so was I, so we were just friends for years. And then after John's partner died, and I was on the loose for a bit, you know, at that point we just connected and got together, and that was it. That was it until he died, of course.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah, at age 90. He was 90 at his death.

JOAN SEMMEL: He was 92 when he died.

GAIL LEVIN: 92, yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: He was 92 when he died, you know. And he—his work was exhibited at various—

GAIL LEVIN: Well I do know, because I've written about it.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right.

GAIL LEVIN: And I was, uh, friendly with you both at the time.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, right, right. So he was an interesting and really great guy, and good artist. Really good artist.

GAIL LEVIN: Yes, and you were wonderful together as a couple.

JOAN SEMMEL: We really enjoyed each other, yeah. It was great to have a companion and a friend and a lover and to be together in those very years of our lives when we could appreciate each other.

GAIL LEVIN: And there was mutual respect there.

JOAN SEMMEL: Mutual, yes.

GAIL LEVIN: Absolutely.

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GAIL LEVIN: Joan, from the time you retired from teaching at Rutgers in 2000, your career seems to have just taken off like a rocket. To what do you attribute that, and can we talk about some of those landmark shows you've been in?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, I think that first of all, just being free from not having to teach also gave me much more time to, uh, participate in terms of the gallery scene, museums,

etcetera, so I was out there more. And come—and being out there more, I had many more opportunities, so that was very helpful. But aside from that, I was also helped a great deal by several people. I connected with Mitchell Algus at the time, who ran this small little gallery where he showed artists who had had careers and suddenly been disappeared, so to speak. And he was—had a very good eye and was very well respected by the writers. He didn't do much in the way of selling, but he showed the work, and it always got seen and written up. And so I approached him, and he took me on, and later on he—I introduced several of my friends who he showed also. So he was very instrumental in getting, uh, several of us women out there again.

GAIL LEVIN: Can you say who some of them were?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, he showed Anita Steckel, he showed Juanita McNeely, he showed Judy Bernstein, he showed Martha Wilson, so these are some of the people who, uh, I had introduced to him at the time. Other friends that I had from the early days who we were very close were really very well connected by that time, but they fit more into the painting and—patterning and decoration group, like Miriam Schapiro and, uh, Joyce Kozloff. They were friends during that early period, too. But Mitchell was instrumental in getting myself and these other artists who I just mentioned, uh, out there again. So that was very helpful, and he was approached at one point by Helen Molesworth, who was—had been interested in my work, and did this show for me—not for me, but this show called *Solitaire* at the Wexner Center at Columbus, Ohio, with Lee Lozano and, oh God, and, uh—

GAIL LEVIN: Sylvia Mangold?

JOAN SEMMEL: Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Lee Lozano, and Joan Semmel. And it was called *Solitaire,* and it was about—it was like three individual shows, but they were—it was all together in the museum, which was a very beautiful museum, and it was very well hung and attended. And that was very important. And one other thing that happened at that same time, or right after that, was that Robert Gober approached me about contributing to a show of five people that he organized at Matthew Marks Gallery. And that, uh, didn't—he didn't title the show. Just—it was just came under his name, but our work was what made his installation. So that installation, incidentally, was later on put up at the installation at—with my work—at MoMA, several years later, when Gober had his major show there.

GAIL LEVIN: And was that the first time your work was ever shown at the Museum of Modern Art?

JOAN SEMMEL: That was the first time my work was shown in the Museum of Modern art, yes. So those were all very pivotal and important kinds of, uh, things that brought me out into the public view again.

GAIL LEVIN: Was it also true that it took institutions like MoMA a while to kind of catch up and pay attention to feminist art, and artists associated with feminism?

[00:05:10]

I remember they had a big symposium, must be 20 years ago now, and they got a woman patron to pay for it. Did that kind of thing affect your renaissance, we could call it?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, I think that all the feminist, uh, agitation that we did in the early days was cumulative, and it kept building and building. And gradually, but very gradually, the institutions began to take notice. So there was, I remember—I don't remember it exactly. The Guerilla Girls also, uh, in the '80s, came out very strong. I worked with them for a couple of years also, and we did all kinds of things to make that point, and that, I think, had a real effect. Because what the Guerilla Girls did was that they made it clear that it was not so much personal discrimination as it was institutional and commercial discrimination that prevented women from getting in, so that the galleries and the museums were instrumental in keeping women out of a system instead of bringing them in.

GAIL LEVIN: And now they have to make up for their terrible deficit in collecting women artists.

JOAN SEMMEL: And now—and now they finally are trying to compensate for some of that, and paying attention. And aside from that, I have to say that just as a feminist, and as a woman, I used to joke around when I—when we were struggling early on. It was always clear

that occasionally the museums would pay attention to some very old woman, somebody who was in their eighties or nineties, and I always said that well, you have to hang on by your fingernails until you are old enough to no longer be sexually threatening to these men. And that was part of the psychology behind allowing us into the group, once we were 80. [Both laugh.]

GAIL LEVIN: Woah. Your recent success, really in the last 20 years, is something you were longing for and working for for a long time, and it's great that you can enjoy it now, and you're also helped by having a very supportive and engaged dealer, your gallery. Do you want to talk about that and have you been to art fairs and shown outside the US?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, well my gallery is a really wonderful gallery. It's called Alexander Gray and Associates, and they carried me through the years before the work was getting the attention, because I started there in about 2011, I think it was. And we've done a show about once every two years, I've shown there. And then, they also helped with the show at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh yes, you've had a retrospective with them.

JOAN SEMMEL: I had a retrospective—

GAIL LEVIN: I attended, it was beautiful.

JOAN SEMMEL: —there, and a very nice publication with the show. So all of that has happened, uh, in this last period, and they have been quite wonderful in taking me through all of that.

GAIL LEVIN: They must have seen something about your change, and that they could help it happen.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well I think that, uh, this gallery has always been one interested in culture and change, and has been supportive of artists who have been ignored and who have been effective and affecting cultural change. So they've supported many of the Black artists, long before it became popular to do that, and other women artists, and people of color, and internationally.

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And they've taken my work to all the fairs and the international fairs where I've had, uh, like one person shows, actually, like at the Frieze Master's show in London, and at the Basel, Switzerland—Basel show. So I've had a lot of coverage in Europe and in all of that kind of exposure.

GAIL LEVIN: Did I hear that there's going to be a group show at the Tate Gallery that's—

JOAN SEMMEL: I just got notice that the Tate is doing a big show on, uh, photography and painting, how they have been interacted with each other, and that one of my pieces that's in their collection will be in that show.

GAIL LEVIN: In fact, your work has, over the last 20 years especially, been picked up by many different writers on different themes that you've been into: photography and art, focus on the body, the nudes, women self-portraiture. Has that all made a difference, too? There are a lot of art writers out there.

JOAN SEMMEL: I know they have, but they haven't even gotten to all of the things that I've been involved with. For instance, the show that I did at the Jersey City Museum of Mannequins that I had done back then that was very important, it was about 30 paintings that I did where I used mannequins as a kind of alter ego to deal with the mass commercialization of femininity and what it means, and how that is, uh, utilized commercially and how detrimental it is to women's self-image. So my work has been, uh, very steady and continuous in terms of the kinds of themes that I have used have been themes that had to do with the way women's identity is constructed in this society, and how detrimental that has been to their agency as human beings. And I have tried to deal with that from the time they were young, they—we, from the time we are young, until the time we are old, and how it needs to change.

GAIL LEVIN: When you did that mannequin show, were you at all thinking of the use of the mannequin in surrealism, in Giorgio de Chirico and earlier 20th century modernism?

JOAN SEMMEL: Actually, I wasn't thinking of it in those terms because I was really trying to deal with it from the point of view of today, and using it as a kind of alter ego rather than as an art object. So it was different, but because some of the mannequins that I actually found on the street, and they had broken, uh, parts, and—but beautifully painted faces, they really felt strangely surreal and human. And that exaggerated their content for me, made it stronger, but made them quite disturbing and surreal. So in that way, they connected to the way mannequins, the surreal mannequins of a Bellmer, Hans Bellmer, perhaps, right, but totally different in attitude, but nevertheless connected intellectually.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah, it's another theme someone could take up—

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly.

GAIL LEVIN: —with your work.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly.

GAIL LEVIN: Because you change it.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly.

GAIL LEVIN: But it still has a continuity.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Going back for a minute to 1975 and this feminist hot haven or bed of activity, out in Springs in East Hampton, you and Joyce Kozloff I believe organized a feminist show.

JOAN SEMMEL: We did. We did. I was renting a house out there. Miriam Schapiro lived out there, and she was a good friend, and so we decided there were so many great women around in East Hampton that we should do a show. And so Joyce—

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JOAN SEMMEL: —and I got together and curated a show called *Women Artists Here and Now*. And we, uh, invited several people. There were about ten artists, I think, in the show, and we also invited a few of the women artist filmmakers, amongst whom were Carolee Schneemann, and so Carolee came and did a performance at the opening, at one of the openings, and where she did that piece that became very famous of the, uh, scroll, of the wrap—

GAIL LEVIN: *Interior Scroll*?

JOAN SEMMEL: The *Interior Scroll*. So—and she came with her own photographer, and—

GAIL LEVIN: That was its debut, by the way.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was. That was the first time she did it, and it was, of course, a knockout, and of course had become very famous. And the show consequently also became famous as the venue.

GAIL LEVIN: Did all the women you invited agree to be in it?

JOAN SEMMEL: Not everybody. Some people—most people wanted to be in it. Lee Krasner did not [laughs].

GAIL LEVIN: Do you have any idea why that was?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, it's—it was logical. It was very difficult for a woman to become a really well-known artist at that time, and it was an achievement when they did. And then to be classified as, quote, a "woman artist," none of us wanted to be a woman artist. We wanted to be an artist. And so she was in the position where she was strong enough and famous

enough to say no.

GAIL LEVIN: And yet fearful enough to be back in a woman's ghetto.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly. She was—she did not want to be back in a woman's ghetto.

GAIL LEVIN: Whereas you, your generation of feminists saw it as a way out, as a—

JOAN SEMMEL: Well we saw it as a necessity to get out.

GAIL LEVIN: Exactly.

JOAN SEMMEL: If the only way to get out was to insist that we were very strong, and we were together, and we could—we were as good as any of the men.

GAIL LEVIN: Did you get any voiced objection, um, from critics, from just individual men, at the time?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well out in East Hampton, there was a lot of resentment because we were in the newspapers there, because they thought we were outsiders coming in, and doing this, and that there were lots of women there, and why hadn't we used all of them? But we wanted to use—it was not a very large space, and we needed to have what we called major works, works of size and substance rather than small paintings where—how they had always shown, like the women in these very small little paintings around so that there were lots of them, but it became insignificant.

GAIL LEVIN: We should mention that Ashawagh Hall is a kind of community art center.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was a community art center there that we rented.

GAIL LEVIN: And where the abstract expressionists like de Kooning and Krasner and James Brooks had shown and made posters.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly. They had always shown, so—

GAIL LEVIN: But your show didn't—did it have a poster, the 1975?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, Joyce and I put together a poster, also, and, uh, that poster's been picked up recently by some young curators and they're selling it now, from what I understand. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Well—

JOAN SEMMEL: Okay.

GAIL LEVIN: That's a great moment to pause.

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[00:00:00]

GAIL LEVIN: Joan, your retrospective at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts featured a painting called *Skin in the Game,* no?

JOAN SEMMEL: That's wrong.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, I'm sorry.

JOAN SEMMEL: I'm sorry. It's not—the title of the show—I can tell you this, I bet.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: The title of the show—

GAIL LEVIN: Are you wearing your—

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, I am. The title of the show, uh, was called *Skin in the Game*, and it was named after, uh, the skin in the game painting that was in the retrospective show and was originally painted for the Basel show, and the Basel Fair. And the painting was, uh, five panels of images of self-images, as it moves through one through the other through different periods of the time that I had worked with the self-image. And I did that painting because my dealer asked me if I would like to do something for—there's one gallery at Basel that they use for outsize pieces that are too large to fit into the cubicles that they show the work in the fairs, and if I would like to participate in that. And so although I might never have tried something that large on my own, just because of the problems of moving and storing and so on, I was delighted to have that possibility, and so I did that particular piece, and it was shown there at the Basel Fair. My gallery, uh, does many of the international fairs. Basel and Zurich, and Basel, Switzerland, and the Frieze Fair, the Frieze Masters at London, and we've done in Miami also, and various others, and they've always spotlighted my work. Sometimes one or two paintings, but occasionally the full—a full group show—a full show where they would use the whole—the whole cubicle for a one person show.

GAIL LEVIN: But was that painting, *Skin in the Game,* also in the Pennsylvania Academy show?

JOAN SEMMEL: It was. It was. I'd forgotten it was also in—

GAIL LEVIN: Because that's when I saw it and—

JOAN SEMMEL: —that's right.

GAIL LEVIN: —I would say it was featured because—

JOAN SEMMEL: It was.

GAIL LEVIN: —anywhere that painting is, it's featured.

JOAN SEMMEL: It's featured. It's so big.

GAIL LEVIN: Because it's—exactly.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: It's not only big, but it's sensational. It's an eye-grabber.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, no, it is an eye-grabber. It was very successfully, uh, seen. I don't remember if it was written up specifically, but it was just—it just really is an important piece, and it's a museum piece, of course, and has been shown in that kind of a context.

GAIL LEVIN: Did it travel to Ithaca to the Johnson Museum at Cornell?

JOAN SEMMEL: I think it did. I think it did, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And as a result of showing in Basel and other international art fairs through your gallery, Alexander Gray Associates, have you entered any collections, private collections?

JOAN SEMMEL: I have—

GAIL LEVIN: In Europe?

JOAN SEMMEL: I have several important collections in Europe. One, in fact, by—let me think if I can remember his name. He's an important publisher, Springer. He's a CEO there. I'm just blacking on his name.

GAIL LEVIN: Is that German?

JOAN SEMMEL: Austrian.

GAIL LEVIN: Austrian.

JOAN SEMMEL: And they published a magazine called *Blau*, B-L-A-U, and they gave me the

cover after that interview. He bought a piece from my work, and then, uh, he gave me the cover of the *Blau* magazine, the number five issue, and it was really—and there are about ten pages in the magazine with reproductions of mine.

GAIL LEVIN: So you've come a long way from having to rent your own gallery on Prince Street.

JOAN SEMMEL: Absolutely. Absolutely. It's been—it's been a great ride, I have to say.

[00:05:03]

GAIL LEVIN: If only you knew then what would be experienced now.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well I have to say that a lot of friends, uh, have at this—in this period gotten exposure and success that took a long time to get, and I've—I say to some of those who are still struggling for visibility that you really, really have to just stay the course. It's—you never know when the timing just comes together of the right gallery, the right person, the right moment that your work can be seen in a way that it will be appreciated. It doesn't mean that it's any better or any worse. It's just that moment, at a particular moment, there's—there's access.

GAIL LEVIN: There's something to say for being resilient, isn't there.

JOAN SEMMEL: It's about being resilient, but it requires this one other thing that artists—that women have had a lot of trouble gaining, and it's why feminism has been so important, and that is a confidence in one's own vision, and that one's own vision is worthwhile.

GAIL LEVIN: Sounds—I really agree with that, and your trajectory is such a wonderful illustration of that.

JOAN SEMMEL: It's been a great, uh, vindication and I'm very grateful to have been alive to see it, because I have friends who died before they had the pleasure of seeing their work out there, and it's out there now.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah. So there's been so many wonderful events in your long and rich career. I know we've left out a lot, um, and maybe we'll be able to do another session at some point. But is there anything else you really want to bring up now?

JOAN SEMMEL: I really can't think. I think we've covered a lot of things. It is—it's been a long career, and my memory is still pretty good, but it's hard to get it all lined up [laughs] sequentially and in a way that makes it coherent. The thing that's interesting to me was in seeing the retrospective that I did, that was done for me, at PAFA in Philadelphia, it was almost a kind of revelation to be—to me myself, to see how the work progressed from one thing to the other, but still how there was a thread of continuity that moved through it that made it all have sense and be very representative of how I have learned and grown and become who I am today. So I'm very grateful to have been here.

GAIL LEVIN: I have to say that was my reaction seeing it at the opening, and I've followed your work for years, but it was still a marvelous revelation to see images that I knew and that I didn't know, and see how they all came together.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was really, really felt very good to me. I had one friend, well-known, Judy Bernstein, came up to me. "Joan," she said, "I cried when I came through your show." She said, "It was—just felt so remarkable to see what you've done over the years." And I felt proud that, frankly, that that was the feeling I had myself.

GAIL LEVIN: And I can remember decades ago when both of you felt very discouraged at the state of things—

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly.

GAIL LEVIN: —particularly for women artists.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly.

GAIL LEVIN: So we can celebrate how much better things are today.

JOAN SEMMEL: They are. And Judy has done very, very well.

GAIL LEVIN: Very well.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And encouraged—put a word out there of encouragement to younger women. At least by the time they turn 70 or 80, things get better.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well a lot of them are doing a lot better now, right in the beginning. And I have to say, in all truth, that an artist's life—men, also. Look at my darling John, who died—it's a long, hard road, and one doesn't always have the pleasure of seeing that happen. But what one always has is the gratification and the pleasure of making the work.

[00:10:05]

GAIL LEVIN: Hear, hear. Thank you so much for talking with me, Joan.

JOAN SEMMEL: Okay.

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[00:00:00]

GAIL LEVIN: Hi Joan.

JOAN SEMMEL: Hi Gail.

GAIL LEVIN: Here we are for another session in your New York Studio, on January 21, 2023, and it's delightful to have everything technologically working again.

JOAN SEMMEL: [Laughs.] Hopefully it will stay that way.

GAIL LEVIN: And I've been enjoying our conversation. So I'd like to focus on the kind of discrimination that women have faced traditionally, especially of your generation, how difficult it was to have your work seen and validated. But looking at your long resume of accomplishments, you seem to have managed despite all the obstacles. I wonder if we could just touch on who some of the early champions, the art critics, and the curators were, and how you managed to catch their attention, if you—

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, it's a long story because I started on directly at it when I came back to the US. I understood immediately that I needed to get my work seen. And I knew from my time in Spain how important networking is for artists, how the connections that they have with each other and with the writers and the discourse around all of the issues of the time, how important all of that is for an artist to tap into it. So I, uh, connected immediately at the Art Workers' Coalition. But I also began teaching at Rutgers. So at Rutgers there were artists of different persuasions, who were well known in the field, and I became known to them, people like Leon Golub, who was head of department for a while, and Geoff Hendricks, who was part—and Bob Watts, who were part of the Fluxus Group. So those were like two different groups that I immediately, uh, became familiar with. And then of course the women like Martha Rosler and Lauren Ewing. So all of these people became the kind of seeding of a way of getting to know other people in the group. And the critics, when they became familiar with my work, were almost uniformly—almost all of them were positive, and they supported me. And that was really, really important. So Lawrence Alloway, for instance, did a—one of my catalogs and also wrote several reviews.

GAIL LEVIN: Lawrence Alloway, the British critic who came here?

JOAN SEMMEL: The British critic, yes. He and his wife, uh, Sylvia Sleigh, who was another realist artist working at the time, and he was a champion of representation art. And for me, uh, the whole advent of the—the whole advent of, uh, the women's movement and the civil rights movement really was the impetus for me to return to representation. Before that, I was truly an abstract artist, but when I decided that I wanted my work to include the issues that I was interested in politically, that's when I moved to representation. So I never thought of becoming a figurative artist, particularly. I felt that my work was political, and that's why I needed to use figuration to make those issues understood by my audience.

GAIL LEVIN: That's so interesting because, um, someone like, oh, Edward Hopper who painted the figure didn't share your politics at all, and somebody not understanding the background might just see two figurative painters and think there could be an aesthetic link when in fact there's little link at all.

JOAN SEMMEL: Very little. Very little link. And so that was—that was—I resisted being called a figurative artist. I didn't want to be called a figurative artist. That was considered very old fashioned at that time. But I understood myself and the way I worked as pushing certain issues that I was interested in.

[00:05:08]

And I wanted the figure in my work to come off of the canvas, not to pull the viewer in, but to be able to move into the viewer's space. And so I moved the figure very close up to the picture plane, which was a much more contemporary way of thinking of the figure, rather than, uh, the kind of figuration that came off of the Renaissance, where it moved back into—into the space that the artist created.

GAIL LEVIN: So in a sense what you're saying is your perspective was really in the viewer's face.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly. It was. It was confrontational, and I intended to be confrontational. And everything that I did in the work was confrontational so that I, uh, used—for instance, I used the camera, which at that early time, it was still not quite kosher for an artist to work from a photograph. It was considered somehow cheating, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Joan, did you get any particular pushback from some of the more conservative male, say, representational figurative artists?

JOAN SEMMEL: I wasn't aware of it, frankly, because I simply didn't know them. I knew people within my own circle.

GAIL LEVIN: And you didn't—some of those men were jurors of sort of museum exhibitions. Did you submit to those exhibitions?

JOAN SEMMEL: I was—I don't know exactly even how the museum exhibitions came about, but they happened, one by one. The first one, of course, of my abstract art, and that was in Montevideo. But after that, I had, uh, museum exhibitions, one at the Jersey City Museum, and that was of the mannequin paintings. I had a full time show at Guild Hall, which was a museum in East Hampton.

GAIL LEVIN: But these are your solo shows.

JOAN SEMMEL: Those are the solo shows, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Were you in group shows leading up to those solo shows?

JOAN SEMMEL: Not a lot. Most of—any of the group shows that I was in were usually feminist shows. And even those, if they were museum shows, I had difficulty because of the use of nudity. And museums were very conservative at that time, and not only couldn't I get into the museums, but once I got into them, they wanted to put up signs in the front to not take children in to see them. Even the show of the mannequins. They weren't even human. [Both laugh.] But they were undressed mannequins, and so therefore they were dangerous for children. [Both laugh.] So that was—it was just a different time. It's a little hard to really visualize just how much things have changed, and also how much they haven't.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, but we know there are still conservative backlashes—

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly.

GAIL LEVIN: —about many issues in the country.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly. There are. There are many. So, you know, we work around them. We do the best we can with them, but, uh, I—even back then, though, luck? I don't know exactly how. There would be a good curator somewhere, so like at the Greenville County Museum, which is in South Carolina of all places, I have pieces in their collection, and there was a show of some of my work there. So somehow it happened, and from—I also—I also lectured

a lot, across the country I did lectures. At Notre Dame, for instance.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh really?

JOAN SEMMEL: In California, in Kentucky, in all kinds of places of—some of the most conservative areas in the country, and I was always well received. People were interested. They were interested because there was something that they—in the work that touched them, that had to do with their lives and with what they were confronting in their lives. And I think that had a lot to do with why my work was so well received always, because it was personal. It was personal not only in terms of what was about me, but what was about what was happening in their world, in the world of how everything was changing.

[00:10:03]

GAIL LEVIN: You did a triptych that was, I think, your answer to whether your work was political so that you could get in the show by political art at Lerner-Heller.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right.

GAIL LEVIN: How—that—can you describe that triptych? There's a de Kooning, there's a reference—a painting of yourself in the center. What's on the left? Where'd you get it, and what were you after in that triptych?

JOAN SEMMEL: We did that already.

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, we did?

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, yeah. Well, the—that's the piece that was called *Mythologies and Me.* And it's at the museum in, uh, Austin, in Austin. I forget the name of that museum.

GAIL LEVIN: The Blanton.

JOAN SEMMEL: The Blanton Museum.

GAIL LEVIN: In Texas.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's it exactly. The Blanton Museum. And they did a show using that with, um, three of us. It was called *Transgressive Women*, and it was Yayoi Kusama, Ana Mendieta, Lee Lozano, and me. So that was great company to be in, and it was a really, really interesting show of four women, each working in totally different ways, but all considered transgressive. Maybe it was transgressive for women to do anything original at that time [laughs].

GAIL LEVIN: Weren't you put in another group show later with Lee Lozano in Columbus, Ohio?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes I was, because later on, Helen Molesworth curated a show in the—in Columbus, Ohio, the Wexner—the Wexner Museum. The Wexner Center. I forget the name of the museum. And it was called *Solitaire.* And the reason that Helen called it *Solitaire* because she took three women artists who she thought all worked as feminists, but each one of them really kept very much their own council, so to speak, that they didn't fit into any of the groups that the feminists were pushing. And Lee Lozano of course, who supposedly hated women in the end, and didn't want to speak to any women at all, and Sylvia Mangold, uh, Plimack Mangold, who did these wonderful, very realist kind of corners of rooms, and me. And that was the three of us. And, uh, [Richard –Ed.] Myer wrote a beautiful essay on my work for that show and in that catalog, and he had some very interesting things to say about my work that had to do with the formulation of the self-image from my own point of view. So that was—that was interesting.

GAIL LEVIN: But it's Helen Molesworth who put together those three women. You didn't come as a group.

JOAN SEMMEL: No. We didn't come as a group. She put us together in that particular show. So that was—that was an interesting, uh, kind of show. And that was a period when suddenly my work started to get another look, so to speak, that after a while, usually a career takes off. Mine took off in the early '70s, and then there was a quiet period when I was teaching a lot, and I had to get my work out there all the time, and I always did. But it wasn't the same

kind of, uh, excitement around me as being the new latest, hottest thing anymore.

GAIL LEVIN: Speaking of the hottest thing, do you, um, in any way attribute that dip in attention in your career to being a middle-aged woman, as opposed to coming out the other end as a triumphant older woman who didn't give up?

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, I think that's true, but I have to say that the art world is very fickle, and not only women, but men also have to, uh, really deal with that midlife crisis kind of thing. If you're out of a gallery in the middle of your career, everything stops. They don't want to look at you anymore. That has changed recently, and frankly, my dealer—

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JOAN SEMMEL: —is one of those who started looking at people who, in their middle—in the middle of their career, when they were doing very well, were suddenly dropped, right? And he has brought back some really important artists that way, like Mel Edwards and he has, of course, paid a great deal of attention to both Black artists and women. And it's been remarkable to see that change in these late—in these years, and that has helped me a great deal as my career suddenly, gradually though, took off again. Robert Gober, for instance, came to me—I didn't know him—and wanted to use some of my paintings for an installation that he was doing at Matthew Marks Gallery, and that installation was written up in every magazine, in every newspaper, the *New York Times* and so on, and he recreated that at the Museum of Modern Art just a couple of years back now. And of course, that was my first entry into having my work at the Museum of Modern Art.

GAIL LEVIN: Do you know how Robert Gober, a much younger male artist, where he discovered your work?

JOAN SEMMEL: I don't know exactly where, but as I say, my work was being exhibited all the time because I made sure it was. If I couldn't get a gallery to show it, I showed it myself, and then I was—

GAIL LEVIN: You rented a space.

JOAN SEMMEL: I rented a space and showed it. So I made sure that the work was seen all the time. And so I assumed that he just saw it at somewhere, and there was something about the up close, personal, emotional, sexual aspects of the work that triggered what he was trying to promote—not promote, but explore in his own work.

GAIL LEVIN: He identified with your depiction of bathing your young son, as if he were—your young son was a stand in for him.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly. And it had to do with sexuality and how his parents, and what his whole life had been about. So my work, in certain ways, expressed his life.

GAIL LEVIN: Obviously it spoke to him.

JOAN SEMMEL: It spoke to him, and I was very happy that it did, and as I say, it was one of the things, between that and the Helen Molesworth show, that really, uh, triggered a whole resurgence of interest in what I was doing.

GAIL LEVIN: Just before, um, the Helen Molesworth show, you were in the show *WACK!,* a feminist show curated by Connie Butler.

JOAN SEMMEL: Connie Butler.

GAIL LEVIN: And she had been—that was at MOCA in Los Angeles, but she had been also at MoMA before—

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right.

GAIL LEVIN: —when they had a symposium on women artists whom they weren't really collecting very much before that.

JOAN SEMMEL: No, no. They weren't collecting at all, never mind much.

GAIL LEVIN: So did you go out? Can you talk about going out to see—for the *WACK!* opening, and the—

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh yes. I went to the *WACK!* opening in California when it was at MOCA.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: And I went with Miriam Schapiro. It was a very festive, wonderful moment, right? For all of us, because it encompassed so many of the artists, and showed the pluralism, and the bravery, the kind of revolutionary work that women were doing at the time, and breaking boundaries of all kinds. So it was very exciting, and we all knew each other.

GAIL LEVIN: And you had many friends in the show. Not—

JOAN SEMMEL: Many friends.

GAIL LEVIN: —Miriam Schapiro from the pattern and decoration movement doing very different art than you, but you had similar political interests.

JOAN SEMMEL: Exactly. We were poli—and we supported each other, all of us. We did. There was a great sense of camaraderie and of the importance of, uh, our whole sense of why we were there, and what we were trying to do. And so many of us became friends, lifelong friends, really. And I think that, uh, the fact that that group was there for us all, I think, made a big difference in our possibility of sustaining ourselves over all of those years when there was not, and there was—when there was not a lot of interest.

[00:05:16]

But more than there not being a lot of interest, there was a heavy backlash.

GAIL LEVIN: Hmm. As you began to gain recognition, your hometown gave you a solo show, and I'm speaking of part of New York City, the Bronx Museum.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, the Bronx Museum show, uh, Sergio Bessa, I think his name, was the curator there, and Holly Block was the director. And they were doing really interesting shows up in the Bronx. And that museum, uh, was just about three or four blocks from where I grew up.

GAIL LEVIN: Wow.

JOAN SEMMEL: So it was really very exciting for me to go back to the Bronx.

GAIL LEVIN: That was in 2013. That's ten years ago. Did you still have living relatives in the Bronx?

JOAN SEMMEL: Did I still have?

GAIL LEVIN: Relatives living in the Bronx?

JOAN SEMMEL: No. No. No. Not anymore. They're all gone.

GAIL LEVIN: But that was your home turf.

JOAN SEMMEL: That was my home turf. That was where I grew up, and the show itself is interestingly enough again the conservatism of the museums of necessity so that they didn't, you know, make things impossible for themselves. They showed, um, mostly the portraits, the stuff—I had done a whole series of heads of my own heads because most of my work dealt with the body, and I had wanted to show—

GAIL LEVIN: And the nude body.

JOAN SEMMEL: The nude body.

GAIL LEVIN: So they were worried about school groups.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. So they were worried about the nude, so they used the heads instead. And a couple of portraits that I—some images that I had done in the mirror, by that—at that

time, I had started taking photos of myself in the mirror, not only just from my own point of view, and so they used all of the, uh, the paintings that came from that series, from the photos in the mirror, that were clothed, some of them, and heads. It was an interesting show nevertheless.

GAIL LEVIN: I remember. I saw it. I traveled out there.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. It was an interesting show, so I had no problem with it, but it was just the fact that that's what they had to do, and when they did also, they took beach pictures that were clothed, right? They didn't use the pictures that had the nude in them.

GAIL LEVIN: When you're painting a series, do you think about that?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, not specifically, except—I mean, I work with the nude because it's referring to sexuality, and it's referring to women's bodies and how they're utilized. So the nude says it in a way that a clothed figure does not. A clothed figure just becomes another portrait. But a nude would become just another nude, except that not the way I do it, it's not. And that's the difference, and that's what's important. Because I do it as a woman, and I do it as an artist, as the artist who does it. So I don't objectify it.

GAIL LEVIN: You did a locker room series. What—can you talk about that, and what you were after in those paintings?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, the locker room series I did at the time I was using the gym. I had to use the gym because of back problems that artists usually have. And I became fascinated with seeing, uh, all of the people who were fascinated with themselves, looking at the mirror—looking in the mirrors. And I thought, well, it's a perfect, uh, metaphor for the kind of narcissistic society that we live in. So I thought I would do a whole series on the women's locker room, and the gymnasium. They both came together at the same time. And in the women's locker room, of course, I had lots of other figures that were there, and there were people of all ages there, so that was my first, uh, kind of entering into the possibility of thinking somewhat about age. And of course, in using my own body, as I got older, my body got older. And it just became part of what the work was about.

[00:10:00]

GAIL LEVIN: But you were never about idealizing nudes.

JOAN SEMMEL: No. I was never about idealizing. I was always against idealizing because I felt that what had been done to women's bodies and to how women presented themselves was about presenting what was pleasing to the male eye, and what was stimulating and seductive for a man. And I wanted this—my work to be about how a woman experiences herself.

GAIL LEVIN: Before we leave the Bronx show entirely, do you recall any of the other subjects—you had some portraits of people not yourself, not just self-portraits.

JOAN SEMMEL: I did one show of just portraits of other people.

GAIL LEVIN: They weren't commissioned, though.

JOAN SEMMEL: No. They weren't commissioned. I had done some commissioned portraits, but these were not commissioned. I did some portraits that were of other artists, artist friends. I did one portrait of myself that I called *Self Portrait on the Couch,* where I sat on the couch, clothed, with a photograph of the picture that I had worked the portrait of my father from. And behind me, uh, I repainted the painting—a male nude of the man whom I was with at the time, right. So that was one where I—one where I used clothed figures, and more than one figure in it.

GAIL LEVIN: So there is a kind of autobiographical thread through that picture.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes. There's—and I would say my work in a certain way is autobiographical because I move through the kinds of things that interest me at a particular time and a particular phase in my life. And I've always wanted the work to be very close to who I was, that I wasn't just working from other art.

GAIL LEVIN: So during this period, your work begins to be recognized with awards. I'm just

going to remind you that you got, um, in 2008, Anonymous Was a Woman award.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, right.

GAIL LEVIN: And that, I think, was a sizeable sum of cash.

JOAN SEMMEL: That was. It was great. I mean, somebody called me up and of course you never knew who nominated you or anything, but it was a great tribute, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: And I remember writing for the award catalog for the Women's Caucus of Art Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Right.

GAIL LEVIN: Just a decade ago now. And then the next year, 2014, you were elected a National Academician at the National Academy. Sometimes thought of as a fairly conservative—

JOAN SEMMEL: It was fairly conservative, and it took a while until there were enough women getting elected into it that I could pass judge—the judgment of the juries there to get in. So I—I had to go twice before I went in—

GAIL LEVIN: Oh, so you wanted that acceptance and recognition.

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, sure.

GAIL LEVIN: You welcomed it.

JOAN SEMMEL: I welcomed it.

GAIL LEVIN: I'm thinking of Edward Hopper, who—

JOAN SEMMEL: Rejected it.

GAIL LEVIN: He got rejected, so when they finally took him, he said, "No thanks."

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, no, well I wasn't that egocentric. [Laughs.]

GAIL LEVIN: And perhaps a good thing, especially for a woman in the treacherous art world at the time.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right, right. I mean, well I always tell students you have to be strong enough to take criticism, and have a strong enough ego, you know, to not let it stop you from doing what you need to do.

GAIL LEVIN: So, let's talk about—

JOAN SEMMEL: You want to stop?

GAIL LEVIN: We can pause here.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Thinking—

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GAIL LEVIN: Joan, you turned 90 years old last October. Here we are in January 2023, and you're going strong.

JOAN SEMMEL: I am. I am.

GAIL LEVIN: The last decade has been really quite remarkable. In fact, I think your aesthetic, um, evolution is fascinating. I wonder if you could talk about what's been going on in your studio, and I'm particularly interested in your application and use of color, which has become a really—sensational. But a lot's going on.

JOAN SEMMEL: Well, uh, thank you for saying all that. My work in these last ten years really

has taken off, and it's kind of—there's something about when you're old, you can say a lot of thing that you can't say when you're young. So it's a kind of liberating phenomenon of a certain kind of age. But I was able to go back and use some of the ideas that—color in the way I loved using it when I was an abstract artist. And to combine that with the, uh, full three dimensionality of figure. So it's something that I've always been interested in doing, and gradually I've tried many different ways of doing it, of using a mirroring image, for instance. They're like one group of paintings that I call the echoing images, way up—way back when, when I used a kind of collage idea of one realistic image next to one expanding, abstract image of the figure. Now I've—I was able to use color in a way that is free and has very little to do with representational color, but that still functions as creating the figure in almost three-dimensional form. So it's been very exciting for me, and it's been, uh, extremely well received that people really seem to love what I'm doing now. And this new work has been shown in a lot of different ways. There's one very large painting called *Skin in the Game,* that I originally did for a show at, um, in Switzerland, in the—

GAIL LEVIN: Was it in the Basel Art Fair?

JOAN SEMMEL: —the Basel Fair, and it was for—there's one room at the Basel Fair for outsized paintings, and this painting has five panels, each one 60 by 82 inches, so—and they all fit together. So that painting went into that—into that particular space.

GAIL LEVIN: So someone suggested you create it for that space.

JOAN SEMMEL: That's right. I was suggested that I do it for that particular purpose. And then, of course, we showed it in the retrospective that I had at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art last year, in Philadelphia. And it was, of course, part of the entrance to the show, and I titled the whole show after that painting. Also, of course, I rather liked the *Skin in the Game* as a kind of [laughs] a flag to carry.

GAIL LEVIN: A wonderful metaphor, and a wonderful show, I might say, since I was there at the opening.

JOAN SEMMEL: Right.

GAIL LEVIN: And I think you had a lot of trepidation, but you seemed to have really enjoyed the fabulous showing that you had, and so many people going down even from New York to see your work.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, I was very, very gratified that so many people came, and it was a great event for me. And it was also very interesting for me to see my work from the early time to the present time, and to see its development, and to see the thread that moves through it all, so that even though I have done very different things from overlays of one image over another, to transparencies, to straight portraits, to mirrored images, to transparent images, and yet it all hung together.

[00:05:10]

GAIL LEVIN: That was the wonderful thing for me. I'd seen, you know, something here, something there, but seeing the through line of it all, it so cohered. It was absolutely triumphant.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was really—it felt—it was like—it was revelatory to me, and I made the work.

GAIL LEVIN: And we have to say that you held this in the midst of the pandemic, the COVID pandemic.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: So all these people travelling in and, you know, wearing their mask. It was amazing.

JOAN SEMMEL: It was amazing. It was amazing, and I was very thrilled that it worked out, and there's a great catalog also from it.

GAIL LEVIN: Yes, and the show traveled—much of it—

JOAN SEMMEL: It went to the—well, selections from it, actually, it was too big for the whole museum. But it went to the Johnson Museum up at Cornell, in Ithaca, in New York State after that. And because of the COVID, we weren't able to get it to travel too much, just because all of the museums sort of shut down.

GAIL LEVIN: Absolutely. Very difficult time, and yet you managed.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, I managed. I managed. Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: Which was amazing.

JOAN SEMMEL: So that was—that was really nice. But the new work for me has been really exciting, and I keep working, and more things keep happening.

GAIL LEVIN: And I think you're winning new audiences, new patrons, and I see from—

JOAN SEMMEL: I've had, now, several things happening. There was a show in Mexico City, and hopefully now there'll be something in possibly in Belgium. We're not sure, but it's also been at the Frieze Fair in London, and at Basel, Switzerland, and I've had work in Vienna, and in many different places.

GAIL LEVIN: Stuttgart owns your work I believe , the museum. But don't you have a show about to include your work at the Tate Gallery in London?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, there's—I have a piece at the Tate Gallery, that will be shown this year. So the work is really—

GAIL LEVIN: Is that show about, um, painting and photography?

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, it is. It is. It's about painting and—it's *Catching the Moment*, I think it's called.

GAIL LEVIN: So your work fits in a lot of different categories.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yes, and my work does fit in a lot of categories, and I'm very thrilled that now it is happening that way, because as much as I'm a feminist and I support feminism and have worked hard for it, I want my work to be seen as itself, and I want it to be, uh, as good, as included in any show that deals with any of the aesthetic issues that it deals with, and not only be seen in feminist circles. So that has begun to happen now, and that of course, is very gratifying to me at this time. So I'm really pleased with that. But there have been many recent shows, uh, and other, I think other people are feeling that way too. There was a show just recently at Karma called *Painting in New York* from in the '70s, and it was all women. But it was called *Painting in New York*, and it showed the strong women that we were all working in New York at that time, and of course we're not included in most of the things that were happening.

GAIL LEVIN: Joan, was there ever a moment when you sort of lost hope, or were you always—did you always know things were going to turn out right in the end?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, you didn't always know. There was—there was always a heavy backlash, and you'd take two steps forward and one back. So—

GAIL LEVIN: What kept you going? Where's your strength come from?

JOAN SEMMEL: It's a kind of, um, I think that the feeling that what you're doing was important, and what we're doing was right, right? So you keep fighting. You don't stop. You know? You just—you just keep going, and hopefully things turn out better. And they, like I say, they—you move forward, and then sometimes it moves back again, but you keep going forward because you feel the strength of—of your cause, of the reason why you're doing something.

[00:10:01]

GAIL LEVIN: When you were at Cooper Union, did you already have the sense that you were going to stay the course and make it?

JOAN SEMMEL: I had no idea. No idea.

GAIL LEVIN: By the time you were at Pratt and getting a master's, did you know?

JOAN SEMMEL: Maybe by then. By the time I had gone through normal ambitions for women: get married, have children, get a place to live, all of that, I did all that. The time in Spain was a liberation, and I think that was probably the time when I knew that I would always move on. I would—that the work was central for me.

GAIL LEVIN: Was there anybody along the way that really believed in you, that helped you?

JOAN SEMMEL: There were many people who really believed in me. I mean, there was this Uruguayan critic, Ernest Heine his name was, and he organized the show that was my first museum show at the Museo de Artes Plasticas in Montevideo, and then later on, I mean, my gallery, my dealer now has supported me through the first years when there wasn't that much happening, and all the way on through 'til now, when there is so much happening. So there's always been people who have been there for me, and supported the work, and the critics have always been very favorable. So I'm very, uh, beholden to them because back then, people like Alloway and Kuspit and all of them. I mean, some of the women critics that wrote for me, Arlene Raven, Joan Marter, they all supported the works all the way through. So I have always had a very strong support base. And I have always had a strong populous support base, which is interesting. Students write me letters, people I don't know, right, about how important the work is for them, and that's extremely gratifying, you know.

GAIL LEVIN: It must be interesting for the museum in Ibiza, Spain, that got one of your abstract works back when you were in Spain, that they're—

JOAN SEMMEL: They brought it out recently. I didn't even know where it was, right? And suddenly there it was in a show. I got—actually I got a letter from a critic in Spain who was researching work from that period and said that my name kept coming up all the time, and asked me if there was any work of mine left in Spain. And I said, "Well, there was this painting that I had donated to the museum in Ibiza, but I never heard anything of it. I never knew if the museum ever was existed." And sure enough, he researched it, and there it was, and it was being hung just then when he called on it. So it's really an amazing story.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah.

GAIL LEVIN: So the seeds of success were there, you just had to keep working and eventually recognize them.

JOAN SEMMEL: And have faith.

GAIL LEVIN: Yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: I had to have faith. I believed in my work, I have to say. Maybe every artist believes in their work, because how else could you keep working? I think you have to really believe in your work, and sometimes it works. Not always. There are plenty of very good artists who just never, you know, it just never connects for them. I—I do think that part of the success and part of the holding power of my work had to do with the fact that I did things that were strictly personal to me, but connected to the social movement of the time. And I did it with a very clear understanding of the importance of what I was doing without sacrificing the aesthetic integrity of the work.

GAIL LEVIN: If—you do have a daughter, and she didn't become an artist.

JOAN SEMMEL: No.

GAIL LEVIN: Would you have, um, encouraged a daughter to become an artist, or do you think, looking—

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GAIL LEVIN: —the road you've had to travel, is it—does it demand too much?

JOAN SEMMEL: No, it doesn't demand too much. It liberates you. It doesn't demand too

much. To believe in something and care about it passionately enough for it to carry through your whole life, that's a great gift.

GAIL LEVIN: It is indeed.

JOAN SEMMEL: It's a great gift to have.

GAIL LEVIN: So art has given your life—

JOAN SEMMEL: It's given my life meaning.

GAIL LEVIN: —a lot of meaning, yes.

JOAN SEMMEL: Absolutely. Absolutely. It's given my life meaning, passion, and joy.

GAIL LEVIN: And you've shared it with others—

JOAN SEMMEL: I have.

GAIL LEVIN: —through the work, yeah.

JOAN SEMMEL: With my work, and I, as I say, I've taught, I've lectured, you know, I've exhibited. I've done everything I could to share it.

GAIL LEVIN: Yes, and I've run into your students from time to time who are artists, some of them.

JOAN SEMMEL: Yeah, some of them.

GAIL LEVIN: And of—

JOAN SEMMEL: And even those that aren't, they write me, you know, letters how important I was for them at a given time. But for me, the joy is the work, and seeing it now, seeing it now getting the attention that I've always wanted it to have, and feeling like I made a contribution, and that that contribution has value not only to me but in the larger sense of the word, you know.

GAIL LEVIN: Well perhaps that's a perfect note to end our discussion today.

JOAN SEMMEL: Oh, thank you [laughs].

GAIL LEVIN: Thank you, Joan.

JOAN SEMMEL: Okay.

GAIL LEVIN: For all these wonderful gifts of art—

JOAN SEMMEL: Thank you.

GAIL LEVIN: —and insight.

JOAN SEMMEL: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]