



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Joan Semmel Papers,
1949-2013, bulk circa 1960s-2013,
in the Archives of American Art

Catherine S. Gaines

2015 February 5

Archives of American Art
750 9th Street, NW
Victor Building, Suite 2200
Washington, D.C. 20001
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions>
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/>

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Arrangement.....	3
Biographical / Historical.....	2
Scope and Contents.....	2
Names and Subjects	4
Container Listing	5
Series 1: Biographical Material, 1949-2013.....	5
Series 2: Correspondence, 1973-2013.....	7
Series 3: Interviews, circa 1970s-1986.....	8
Series 4: Writings, 1970s-2009.....	9
Series 5: Project Files, 1972-2000.....	11
Series 6: Teaching Files, 1970s-2000.....	12
Series 7: Printed Material, circa 1960s-2013.....	13
Series 8: Photographic Materials, circa 1965-2013.....	14

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Joan Semmel papers
Identifier:	AAA.semmjoan
Date:	1949-2013 (bulk 1960-2013)
Extent:	5.9 Linear feet
Creator:	Semmel, Joan, 1923-
Language:	Multiple languages The majority of the collection is in English; some correspondence and printed material is in Spanish. English; Spanish
Summary:	The papers of painter Joan Semmel measure 5.9 linear feet and span the dates of 1949-2013 with the bulk of the material dated circa 1960s-2013. The papers reflect her career and activities as a painter, writer, feminist, and educator through biographical materials, correspondence, interviews, writings, project files, teaching files, printed material, and photographic materials.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Donated by Joan Semmel in 2014.

Processing Information

This collection was processed to a minimal level and a finding aid prepared in 2015 by Catherine S. Gaines. The Archives of American Art has implemented minimal processing tactics when possible in order to increase information about and access to more of our collections.

Minimal processing included arrangement to the series and folder levels. Generally, items within folders were simply verified with folder titles, but not arranged further. Folders within boxes were not numbered. The collection was rehoused in archival containers and folders, but not all staples and clips were removed.

Preferred Citation

Joan Semmel papers, 1949-2013, bulk circa 1960s-2013. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions

Use of original material requires an appointment. Use of archival audiovisual recordings with no duplicate access copy requires advance notice.

Conditions Governing Use

The Joan Semmel papers are owned by the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Literary rights as possessed by the donor have been dedicated to public use for research, study, and scholarship. The collection is subject to all copyright laws

Biographical / Historical

Joan Semmel (1932-) is an abstract painter working in New York City and Easthampton, N. Y. Semmel's work explores erotic themes and the female body. She taught painting at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University from 1978-2000.

Born in New York City in 1932, Joan Semmel studied at the Cooper Union, the Art Students League of New York, and received her BFA in 1963 and MFA in 1972 from Pratt Institute. Semmel moved to Spain in 1963 and exhibited her abstract expressionist work in galleries and museums there before returning to New York in 1970.

Upon Semmel's return to New York, she became involved in the feminist art movement. One of the original Guerrilla Girls, Semmel was involved with several feminist activist art groups devoted to gender equality in the art world. Semmel spent years researching a book about women's erotic art. At the same time, her painting style shifted to incorporate more figurative imagery and she began working on series that explored the themes of the female body, desire, and aging. Each series consisted of 10-30 paintings, produced over several years, among them *First and Second Erotic Series*, *Self Images*, *Portraits*, *Figure in Landscape*, *Gymnasium*, *Locker Room*, *Overlays*, and *Mannequins*.

In addition to her teaching career at Rutgers University as a tenured Professor of Painting, Semmel taught briefly at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, Skowhegan, and the Summer Academy of Fine Arts in Salzburg, Germany. Over the years she served as a visiting artist, critic, and lecturer at many colleges, and participated in numerous symposia, panel discussions and conferences. She has received several grants and awards including Macdowell Colony and Yaddo residencies.

Semmel has exhibited widely and prolifically in the United States, Spain, the Netherlands, and South America, in addition to curating two exhibitions, *Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content* (1977) at The Brooklyn Museum of Art School and *Private Worlds - Art in General* (2000). Her work is represented in the permanent collections of many museums including the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Chrysler Museum, Guild Hall, Museum of Women in the Arts, Parrish Art Museum, and Vassar College Museum.

Joan Semmel continues to live and work in New York City and Easthampton, NY.

Scope and Contents

The papers of painter Joan Semmel measure 5.9 linear feet and span the dates of 1949-2013 with the bulk of the material dated circa 1960s-2013. The papers reflect her career and activities as a painter,

writer, feminist and educator through biographical materials, correspondence, interviews, writings, project files, teaching files, printed material, and photographic materials.

Among the biographical materials are awards, educational records, and audiovisual recordings about Joan Semmel and her work.

Professional correspondence concerns exhibitions, publication permissions, panel discussions, symposia, and visiting artist and summer school appointments. Also included are letters of recommendation for colleagues and students. A scattering of personal letters are from novelist David Markson and José Antonio, both of whom had personal relationships with Semmel. There are also a few letters from friends of a purely social nature and a few letters concerning routine personal affairs.

There are two interviews with Joan Semmel on video recordings, one was conducted for a television broadcast and the other is unidentified.

Writings by Semmel include the manuscript, illustrations, research material, and letters relating to her unpublished book about women's erotic art. Also found are articles, artist's statements, and notes for talks about her work. The writings about Semmel consist of several student papers.

Project files relate to two exhibitions curated by Semmel, *Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content* (1977) at The Brooklyn Museum of Art School and *Private Worlds* (2000). One file is related to a project in which Semmel was involved to document the role and status of women in the arts.

Scattered teaching files concern a course about contemporary women artists developed and taught by Semmel for the women's studies program at Rutgers University, circa 1978. Also documented are summer programs at Skowhegan and Sommerakademie in Austria where Semmel served as an instructor.

Binders (now unbound) of printed materials were compiled by Semmel consisting of exhibition catalogs and announcements for solo and group shows, reviews, posters, and miscellaneous printed matter.

Photographs of people include Joan Semmel, friends and colleagues. Among the individuals pictured are: writer David Markson, painter John Hardy, José Antonio Nieto; and feminist artists: Judy Bernstein, Mary Beth Edelson, Eunice Golden, Nancy Grossman, Harmony Hammond, Miriam Schapiro, Sylvia Sleigh, and May Stevens. There are slides, photographs, color photocopies and digital images of Semmel's paintings. Of particular interest are photographs, photocopies of photographs, and digital images that served as source material for paintings, including portrait commissions.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged in 8 series:

- Series 1: Biographical Materials, 1949-2013 (Box 1; 0.6 linear feet)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1973-2013 (Boxes 1-2; 1.2 linear feet)
- Series 3: Interviews, circa 1970s-1986 (Box 2; 0.2 linear feet)
- Series 4: Writings, 1970s-2009 (Box 3; 0.7 linear feet)
- Series 5: Project Files, 1972-2000 (Box 3; 3 folders)
- Series 6: Teaching Files, 1970s-2000 (Box 3; 0.4 linear feet)
- Series 7: Printed Material, circa 1960s-2013 (Boxes 4-6, OV 8; 2.2 linear feet)
- Series 8: Photographic Materials, circa 1965-2013 (Boxes 6-7; 0.6 linear feet)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Art -- Political aspects
Authors -- New York (State) -- New York
Educators -- New York (State) -- New York
Erotica
Feminism
Feminism and art
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York
Painting, Abstract
Women and erotica
Women artists

Types of Materials:

Illustrations
Interviews
Photographs
Video recordings

Names:

Bernstein, Judy
Edelson, Mary Beth
Golden, Eunice
Grossman, Nancy
Hammond, Harmony
Hardy, John
Markson, David
Nieto, José Antonio
Schapiro, Miriam, 1923-2015
Sleigh, Sylvia
Stevens, May

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, 1949-2013

0.6 Linear feet (Box 1)

This series includes 6 videocassettes about Joan Semmel and her work. Awards and certificates are: Mention de Honor, Salon de Marzo, 1967; Art Directors Club 58th Annual Exhibition 1979 Merit Award; NEA Visual Arts Fellowship Recipient Certificate, 1980; Citation presented by The Cooper Union, 1984; 71st Annual Guild Hall Members Exhibition honorable mention, 2009; The Cooper Union Alumni Association Golden Legion membership certificate, 2011; and WCA Lifetime Achievement Award with program and photographs, 2013. Educational records consist of high school, Cooper Union and Pratt Institute diplomas, and Pratt Institute transcripts. Financial records consist of a receipt for rent and utilities for an apartment in Buenos Aires and notes on the cost of plane tickets between Spain and the United States. Teaching credentials are a New York State provisional teaching certificate and New York City substitute license; a federal employment application for work as a substitute outlines her qualifications in detail.

Files are alphabetized by folder title, and videocassettes about Joan Semmel and her work are arranged chronologically.

Box 1	About Joan Semmel and Her Work
Box 1, Folder 1	EyeTango Films/ARTifacts Television Pilot Segments, Demo , undated <i>1 videocassettes (vhs)</i>
Box 1, Folder 2	"What Follows...Joan Semmel", undated <i>1 videocassettes (vhs)</i>
Box 1, Folder 3	"Joan Semmel Paints a Portrait," Paul Tschinkez, Art NY, CUNY TV , 1995 <i>1 videocassettes (vhs)</i>
Box 1, Folder 4	"Joan Semmel A Passion for Painting," ART/New York: A Video Series on Contemporary Art, Tape No. 42 , 1995 <i>2 videocassettes (vhs)</i>
Box 1, Folder 5	"Not for Sale: Feminism and Art in the USA during the 1970s" by Laura Cottingham, Hawkeye Productions, , 1998 <i>1 videocassettes (vhs)</i>
Box 1, Folder 6	Address Book, circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 7	Awards and Certificates, 1967-2013
Box 1, Folder 8	Curricula Vitae, circa 1973-circa 2013
Box 1, Folder 9	Driver License; Passports, 1963-1997

Box 1, Folder 10	Educational Records – Certificate, 1952
Box 1, Folder 11	Educational Records – Diplomas, 1949-1973
Box 1, Folder 12	Educational Records – Transcripts (1952-1970), 1970, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Financial Records, 1968, undated
Box 1, Folder 14	Teaching Credentials , 1963-1964

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 2: Correspondence, 1973-2013

1.2 Linear feet (Boxes 1-2)

Professional correspondence concerns exhibitions, sales, loans, consignments, donations of artwork for fundraising, insurance, reproduction rights, publication permissions, panel discussions, symposia, visiting artist and summers school appointments. Also included are letters of recommendation written on behalf of colleagues and students.

The majority of the personal correspondence consists of letters from Semmel's long time partner, novelist David Markson. Also included are photocopies of reviews and portions of Markson's published writings – some annotated or inscribed – a letter from his daughter, Johanna, paperback book covers from several of his novels, and the program from his memorial service. There are few letters from José Antonio Nieto with whom Semmel also had a personal relationship. Other correspondence is with tenants who sublet Semmel's loft at various times, and the management company for her apartment. Letters to Semmel concern her will, estate planning, taxes, and real estate owned by a relative; also found are a few letters of a purely social nature from friends. Copies of letters sent by her are about jury duty, problems with her retirement account, a parking ticket and similar subjects. Also found is a color photocopy of a holiday card sent by Joan Semmel and John Hardy featuring Hardy's illustration of the two of them painting.

Correspondence is arranged by year.

Box 1, Folder 15-25	Professional Correspondence , 1973-1980, undated
Box 2, Folder 1-22	Professional Correspondence, 1990-2013
Box 2, Folder 23-24	Personal Correspondence, 1984-2013, undated
Box 2, Folder 25-28	Personal Correspondence – David Markson , 1981-2010, undated
Box 2, Folder 29	Personal Correspondence – José Antonio Nieto, 1974-2007, undated

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 3: Interviews, circa 1970s-1986

0.2 Linear feet (Box 2)

This series consists of audio visual recordings of two interviews with Joan Semmel. There are two copies of the interview conducted by Calvin Albert for his television show, "Art Beat." The interviewer and purpose of the other recording is unknown.

Box 2, Folder 30 Joan Semmel, Edited, undated
 2 Videoreels

Box 2, Folder 31 Joan Semmel Interviewed by Calvin Albert, "Art Beat" #4, LTV , circa
 1970s-1986
 1 videocassettes (vhs)
 1 videocassettes (u-matic)

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 4: Writings, 1970s-2009

0.7 Linear feet (Box 3)

Articles are "Women and Sexuality" written for *Redbook* but never published and the published version of "Sexual Imagery in Women's Art," written with April Kinglsey, that appeared in *Women's Art Journal*. Proposed titles for Semmel's unpublished book about women's erotic art changed over time and included "Sexual Imagery in Women's Art," "Erotic Art by Women," "Through the Object's Eye," "A New Eros," and "Imaging Eros."

Among the writings about Semmel are "Feminist Theory as Applied to *Through the Object's Eye* Art Exhibit by Joan Semmel" by Toby Everett and "Sensuality, the Nude and the Dismantling of Sexist Imagery" a paper by Lisa A. Roberts presented at the Young Scholars Conference, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and University of Virginia Commonwealth. Also included are student papers and a seminar presentation.

Illustrations for Semmel's book arrived in two unlabeled binders and there is no internal evidence suggesting their order. The disbound volumes now bear the arbitrary titles volumes A and volume B.

Box 3	Writings by Semmel
Box 3, Folder 1	Articles, 1974-1980
Box 3	Book about Women's Erotic Art
Box 3, Folder 2	Outline, 1970s, 1970s
Box 3, Folder 3-6	Manuscript, circa 1980
Box 3, Folder 7-9	Illustrations, Volume A (dismantled), circa 1980
Box 3, Folder 10-12	Illustrations, Volume B (dismantled), circa 1980
Box 3, Folder 13	Contract, 1974
Box 3, Folder 14	Letters, 1974-1975
Box 3, Folder 15	Letters from Agent and Publishers, 1995-1996
Box 3, Folder 16	Submissions, circa 1975
Box 3, Folder 17-20	Research Material, 1970s-2009
Box 3, Folder 21	Statements, 1980s-2006, undated
Box 3, Folder 22	Talks – Unidentified Venues, undated

Box 3, Folder 23

Talks - Wexner Center, Ohio State University, 2007-2008

Box 3, Folder 24

Writings about Semmel, 1980-1995, undated

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 5: Project Files, 1972-2000

3 Folders (Box 3)

Project files document two exhibitions curated by Semmel. Also included are statistics documenting the status of women in art departments – as studio instructors, their representation in exhibitions, art history courses, slide libraries, etc. – with a letter from Semmel (representing the Ad Hoc Women's Committee of WEB, a national coalition of women in the arts) outlining goals and concerns.

Box 3, Folder 25	<i>Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content</i> (1977 October 1- November 7), The Brooklyn Museum of Art School , 1977
Box 3, Folder 26	<i>Private Worlds</i> (2000 May 31-July 8), 1999-2000
Box 3, Folder 27	Status of Women in Art Departments, 1972-1973

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 6: Teaching Files, 1970s-2000

0.4 Linear feet (Boxes 3-4)

This series consists primarily of slides and a reading list for a course about contemporary women artists developed and taught by Semmel for the Rutgers University women's studies program, circa 1978. Also documented are programs at Skowhegan and Sommerakademie in Austria where Semmel served as an instructor for one summer at each school.

Box 3, Folder 28	Contemporary Women Artists Course, Reading List , undated
Box 3, Folder 29-31	Contemporary Women Artists Course, Slides (by artist, A-Z, unidentified) , 1970s
Box 4, Folder 1	Internationale Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst Salzburg , 2000
Box 4, Folder 2	Post-Tenure Review, 1995
Box 4, Folder 3	Recommendations, 1996-1998
Box 4, Folder 4	Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, 1991

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 7: Printed Material, circa 1960s-2013

2.2 Linear feet (Boxes 4-6, OV 8)

All printed material mentions Semmel or includes reproductions of her work. Included are exhibition catalogs, announcements, articles, and reviews. Posters announce exhibitions, talks, summer sessions, and lectures. Miscellaneous printed items include advertisements for Semmel's exhibitions, press releases, newsletters, lecture announcements, notices of studio tours, and school catalogs.

Five binders of printed material organized by record type were dismantled; now housed in folders, the contents of each binder retain the original order. Loose printed material, sorted by record type, is arranged by year.

Box 4	Printed Material, Volumes 1-5
Box 4, Folder 5-6	Volume 1: Catalogues, etc., 1975-2013
Box 4, Folder 7-8	Volume 2: Solo Exhibitions, 1975-2013
Box 4, Folder 9-10	Volume 3: Group Exhibitions, 1976-2012 , 1976-2012
Box 4, Folder 11-13	Volume 4: Reviews, 1973-2004, undated
Box 4, Folder 14-15	Volume 5: Reviews, 2002-2013
Box 4, Folder 16-22	Articles/Reviews, 1960s-2013, undated
Box 4, Folder 23	Exhibition Announcements, 1979-2013, undated
Box 5, Folder 1-19	Exhibition Catalogs – Group Shows , circa 1960s-2013
Box 5, Folder 20-22	Exhibition Catalogs – Solo Exhibitions, 1961-2013, undated
Box 6, Folder 1-2	Miscellaneous Printed Items, 1960-1980, undated
Box 6, Folder 3	Posters, 1990-1992, undated
Box OV 8	Oversized Posters (from Box 6, Folder 3), 1990-1992, undated

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 8: Photographic Materials, circa 1965-2013

0.6 Linear feet (Boxes 6-7)

Photographs of people include portraits of Semmel, views of her in her studio, at home, and with others. Among the friends and colleagues pictured are: writer David Markson, painter John Hardy, José Antonio Nieto; and feminist artists Judy Bernstein, Mary Beth Edelson, Eunice Golden, Nancy Grossman, Harmony Hammond, Miriam Schapiro, Sylvia Sleigh, and May Stevens. This series includes slides, photographs, and color photocopies of Semmel's paintings. Of particular interest are source materials consisting of color and black and white photographs, photocopies of photographs, and digital images used for paintings and commissioned portraits.

This series is arranged by subject.

Box 6, Folder 4	Joan Semmel , circa 1965-2015
Box 6, Folder 5	Joan Semmel with Friends, circa 1980s-2013, undated
Box 6, Folder 6	Paintings by Semmel, executed 1970s-2006 (35-mm color slides), undated
Box 6, Folder 7-9	Paintings by Semmel, executed 1978-1991 (dismantled binder; color photocopies) , undated
Box 7, Folder 1-4	Paintings by Semmel, executed 1970s-2000s, , undated
Box 7, Folder 5	Exhibition Installation, Unidentified Venue, undated
Box 7, Folder 6	Exhibition Installation, Lerner-Heller Gallery, 1979
Box 7, Folder 7-11	Source Material , undated
Box 7, Folder 12	Source Material - Portrait Commissions, undated

[Return to Table of Contents](#)