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## Artist Beverly Semmes probes scale and feminism at Tufts

July 31, 2025 By [Arielle Gray](#)



"Beverly Semmes: Boulders / Flag / Flip / Kick" is now on view at Tufts University Art Galleries.  
(Courtesy)

Tufts University Art Galleries has opened a new exhibit devoted to the work of an alumnus whose work challenges ideas of space, scale and femininity. "[Beverly Semmes: Boulders / Flag / Flip / Kick](#)" is the first comprehensive survey of Semmes' work.

The show takes a sweeping look at the breadth of Semmes' work. "As her alma mater, it seemed that the show should be rooted in her time here as a student," said TUAG director and exhibition curator Dina Deitsch. "So we start it with a slide show of her long-gone student installation 'Boulders,'" which was displayed at Tufts in 1980. The exhibition is named for the titles of other works Semmes created throughout her career.

This show brings together the different mediums that Semmes utilizes to tell a story about the world around us, including textiles, ceramics and paintings. "I was more interested in how one artist has covered such wide ground, material-wise, while retaining a core aesthetic and conceptual spine in which the awkward and irregular are fully celebrated," Deitsch said.

That "conceptual spine" of Semmes' oeuvre was fortified in the 1990s with her oversized dress sculptures — monumental textile pieces that not only disrupted a male-dominated field at the time but took a radical look at how much space women are allowed to take up in society. Semmes didn't necessarily conceive of her early works as feminist. "Growing up in the '70s, I definitely identified as a feminist, but as an artist, I didn't see my works as holding feminist messages," Semmes said in an interview with art platform Elephant. "It hadn't really occurred to me that feminism on its own was a big subject or that I would be biting off something to do for a long time."

Works like the bright orange chiffon "Flip" dominate the gallery, forcing viewers back. With these sculptures, Semmes combats the misogynistic propensity that expects women to be "thin" or to shrink themselves to fit into spaces to accommodate others. "She describes some of the large fabric installations as 'passive aggressive' – they are huge and take up enormous space but with the soft power of, say, velvet," Deitsch explained.

In this way, Semmes questions our notions and definitions of power. Is "soft power" (a method built on persuasion and influence) just as effective as more physical forms of power? How do our notions of gender and gender roles impact our understanding of what is "powerful"? Deitsch said these kinds of questions are incredibly vital at this moment in time.

"Beverly Semmes: Boulders / Flag / Flip / Kick" also includes pieces from the "Feminist Responsibility Project" that Semmes launched in 2002. The ongoing series includes hundreds of different works including video, drawings, glass and more. Some pieces are reimaginings of pornographic images from magazines like "Penthouse" and "Hustler" that are transformed and partially covered with paint and ink. These works are exercises in both the revealing and the covering of the female form. Semmes is "playing with this push and pull and often conflicting tendencies around desire — to both desire and be desired," said Deitsch.

Deitsch pointed out that there's much to be gleaned from Semmes' oeuvre of work, particularly in this current cultural climate.