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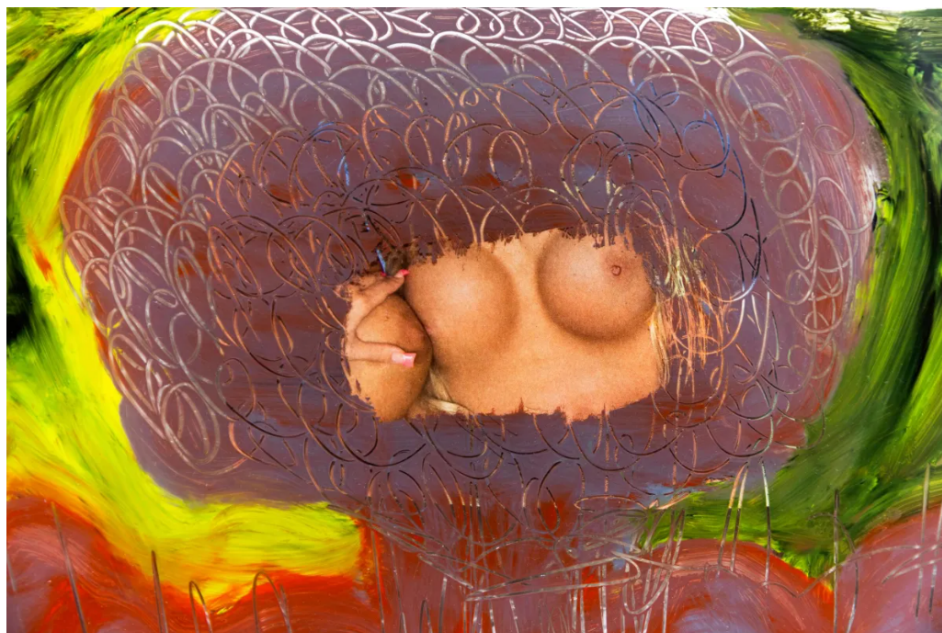
Art Review

## Beverly Semmes's Feminist Palimpsests

Women's bodies are a locus for corrosive stereotypes and ebullient individuality in the artist's sculpture, painting, fashion, and more.



Martha Buskirk September 14, 2025



Detail of Beverly Semmes, "Big Tree" (2017), oil and magazine page collage on glass (photo by Adam Kremer, courtesy the Artist and Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC; all other photos Martha Buskirk/*Hyperallergic*)

MEDFORD, Mass. — Fabric works bookend Beverly Semmes's *Boulders / Flag / Flip / Kick* at the Tufts University Art Galleries. Yet the exhibition's 45-year span evidences a dramatic range of interests. Performance is one throughline, with objects inspired by costumes or props taking on an independent existence. Another is the insistent materiality of fabric, clay, and even glass alongside the exploration of digital mediation. Finally, Semmes constructs a complex interplay of presence and absence in her investigation of women's bodies as loci for corrosive stereotypes and ebullient individuality.

The incongruous nouns and verbs of the exhibition title are drawn from individual pieces within each of four loosely thematic sections. The earliest work in the exhibition, "Boulders" (1980) — a series of large, irregular objects made from fabric draped over chicken wire dating to Semmes's undergraduate years at Tufts — is represented by projected photos documenting its movement through various sites in the greater Boston area. The first work in the show itself, however, is "Buried Treasure" (1994), in which performance morphs into installation. It takes the form of a crushed velvet dress, flattened on the wall, one sleeve transitioning into a long, narrow tube that spills out across the gallery floor in loops. An accompanying photo shows a figure standing by

the shore wearing the dress, which extends into coils across the landscape. Though the work is now firmly a gallery object, an element of performance persists since its arrangement is adjusted for each site.

"Flip" (2024) melds Semmes's previously distinct painting and textile elements, though its usage of flipped image fragments to pull apart and recombine representations of the female body is typical of her work. Starting in the early 2000s, she began marking up images found in vintage *Penthouse* magazines, transforming them into disquieting silhouettes. The ongoing series, with the umbrella title *FRP* (*Feminist Responsibility Project*), has since come to include scans of her own manipulated images, enlarged and printed onto canvases that are then overpainted. The result is a complex palimpsest.

"Wrap" (2024), which includes a portrait of a former *Penthouse* model named Nickie in the upper right, represents another convergence. Semmes had already been working on *FRP* when she met the model by chance, and she [has recounted](#) the heightened sense of connection she felt to her own body when working with photos of someone she knew. As if this weren't layered enough, she also decided to digitally transfer some of that collaged imagery onto fabric, which became the basis for a collaboration with fashion designer Jennifer Minniti. Clothing they produced under the moniker Carwash Collective, as well as video of an associated fashion show, appear in an adjoining space as a coda to the exhibition.

The final gallery, like the first, is both an assembly of independent works and an installation specifically configured for this site. "Not Here" (1999), an expanse of white chiffon and organza across the gallery floor, might appear sumptuous, even frivolous, were it not for the large yellow X extending across its surface — and as the wall text notes, it commemorates the loss of her grandmother. Nearby, the video "Kick" (2005), in which feet abruptly entering and exiting the frame propel amorphous pink forms around another white field, introduces a different kind of tactility. Further punctuating the ensemble are vertical red ceramic pieces reflecting Semmes's longstanding opulent and visceral manipulation of vessel forms. "Billboard" (2025), consisting of three colossal robe forms made from crushed velvet, looms over the gallery, its shimmering expanse ominously punctuated by a scattering of red circles.

Semmes's work tends to lure viewers in with texture, color, or slightly absurd setups, but material sensuality quickly shades over into something more unsettling. As seen in this exhibition, her engagement with varied media is animated by a consistent sensibility evident in the interplay of embodied presence and ephemeral trace.