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VISUAL ARTS

The Big Cover Up

Artist Beverly Semmes' oversized dresses and painted-over photographs anchor a career-spanning exhibition of the alumna's work



In the early 2000s, artist Beverly Semmes, A82, A82 (BFA), found inspiration in a stack of vintage *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines. She layered paint and ink over the pornographic images, leaving just glimpses of the originals: a breast, a high-heeled leg, some locks of blonde hair, a satin pillowcase. Is she censoring, or highlighting?

These works of redaction are part of an ongoing series Semmes calls *FRP* (*Feminist Responsibility Project*). Several FRP pieces anchor an exhibition of her work, *Boulders/Flag/Flip/Kick*, at the Tufts University Art Galleries (TUAG) in Medford through November 23.

Her first solo survey show, it encompasses the full length and breadth of her 45-year career, from sculptures she made as a student at Tufts and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (now SMFA at Tufts) in the 1980s to her recent collaboration on a couture collection of wearable art for the CarWash Collective. Through an array of media—sculpture, painting, ceramics, glass, film, photography, and performance—the exhibit explores themes of fashion and feminism, women and their representation.

"It's a nice way to think about how one artist's body of work can really encapsulate all forms of making," said TUAG Director Dina Deitsch, who co-curated the exhibit with Semmes and Camilo

Alvarez and based its name on the titles of individual artworks Semmes has made over the years.

Semmes credits her undergraduate studies with exposing her to a wide range of art forms.

"The SMFA and the ethos of that period had a big influence on me," she said. "There was a lot of freedom at the school." If a drawing class wasn't giving you what you needed, she said, you could walk down the hall and join a printmaking class. "There was a real sense that you, as an artist, could keep finding your own way."

As a student, she remembers bringing rough spheres she had made of chicken wire, canvas, and cheese cloth up on the green roof of what is now Tisch Library, placing them so they interrupted the view of the skyline. This was the early work "Boulders."

"I was trying to make sculptures so light and luminous that when I photographed them, they would appear like a gap in the photo, a cutout," she said. In a way, it foreshadowed the redaction she would do with the FRP two decades later.

Deutsch said she was lucky that Semmes, who earned a BA in art history as well as a BFA from Tufts, had carefully archived the "Boulders" photographs and other early creations in her storage space; that's why pieces like "Cloud Hats," from 1991, could be shown for the first time in 30 years. The hats, which seem to float up the gallery wall, have the look of airy tulle, but are actually a fine aluminum mesh.

From the beginning, Semmes was drawn to fabric and clothing. At first, she created outfits as part of performance pieces, films, or photographs. One early photograph from 1991 shows three women at a table wearing the outsized Cloud Hats, their velvet robes so long they pool at their feet like an oil spill. In her 1989/1993 short films "In and Around the Garden," Semmes wears an oversized coat and pointy hat, both covered in bubble gum pink feathers, that completely obscure her form.

But later, she found a new approach. In her tiny studio in New York's Little Italy, she would hang the garments she was working on up on the wall to get them out of the way. Tacked flat like paintings, they became something different.

"I imagined somebody looking at the empty clothing could think about it being inhabited, maybe by them, maybe by some other being," Semmes said. "I thought there was something there for me—when the garments were empty, they yielded more power than when they were worn."

The absence of a body freed her to create impossible proportions—sleeves that extend long past the hem and skirts that drape down three stories. The dresses hang on the wall, but they are not wallflowers. In 1994's "Buried Treasure," a simple black velvet dress unspools through one sleeve, tracing curly cues across the floor like a giant page of dark, cursive script. The dress commands the room, with the viewer having to skirt around it.

"This one actually is the smallest it's ever been—it can fill up the whole gallery if it had to," Deutsch said. "These dresses are surreal and ridiculous, but they take up space in a way that maybe women don't feel able to or are socially conditioned not to."

Dominating one gallery wall is a new work that Tufts commissioned for the exhibition, titled "Billboard." Three enormous silver robes hang high on the wall, mimicking the size and shape of a roadside advertisement. The robes are untied, as if ready to be slipped off. The artwork

plays off the proliferation of aggressively sexy ads, for everything from gentlemen's clubs to teen clothing, one doesn't need to open a porn mag to encounter.

"These current examples make the *Penthouse* images in Semmes' FRP paintings seem almost prim," Deitsch said.

Semmes said she began manipulating pornography with the aim of "keeping some erotic quality or sexual life force in the paintings while at the same time cutting out anything I did not want to look at."

How does she choose what to hide and what to reveal? Sometimes she will focus on imperfections, such as a chipped fingernail or an ill-fitted shoe that leaves the model's toes hanging out. They are details that Semmes may have been the only one to notice—and now preserve.

She keeps adding to the FRP project, in part because when she began doing it more than two decades ago, she framed it as her "responsibility" to edit.

"I set it up as a lifelong mission," she said, tongue in cheek. "There's a lot of porn in the world, and I'm going to have to take care of all of it."