

Vogel, Rachel. "Beverly Semmes: Boulders / Flag / Flip / Kick' at Tufts University Art Galleries," *Boston Art Review*, October 2025.



"Beverly Semmes: Boulders / Flag / Flip / Kick" at Tufts University Art Galleries
by Rachel Vogel

In 1980, while an undergraduate at Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Beverly Semmes molded chicken wire into monumental rounded forms, sheathing their organic curves in canvas. She first suspended these "boulders," as she called them, from the ceiling of her studio and then began inserting them into the landscape. Semmes took them to the green roof atop the university's library, then to the wintry shore of Crane Beach, where she and a friend rolled them across the sand and balanced them in the branches of leafless trees. "Beverly Semmes: Boulders / Flag / Flip / Kick" at Tufts University Art Galleries (TUAG)—the most comprehensive survey of the artist's work to date—opens with documentation of this early work, staging a fitting return to Semmes's alma mater and revealing how her early artistic experiments laid the groundwork for her multi-decade career. Semmes first gained recognition in the 1990s for her sculptural installations featuring oversized dresses, establishing herself as part of a generation of artists, including Janine Antoni, Cindy Sherman, and Kiki Smith, who examined how women's bodies are portrayed, displayed, and projected as objects of desire. Even as her works moved in this more figurative direction, she continued to think of her sculptures as landscapes, consistently returning to the surreal juxtapositions, tactile materiality, and bold spatial presence that characterized even her earliest pieces like *Boulders*.

TUAG director and chief curator Dina Deitch, along with Semmes, Camilo Alvarez,¹ and Deniz Bora, organized the show episodically, grouping approximately forty of Semmes's works into thematic sections that each span multiple decades and various media. This is reflected in the exhibition's title itself, which strings together four anchor works—*Boulders* (1980s), *Flag* (2024), *Flip* (2024), and *Kick* (2005)—into a kind of concrete poem that maps the show's divisions. Given

its scope, the exhibition offers more of a focused glimpse than a sweeping retrospective, inviting viewers to trace the recurring motifs and preoccupations that animate Semmes's practice.

The first section of the exhibition features Semmes's early installations and wearable sculptures. *Buried Treasure* (1994), an inky black velvet dress hung ten feet high on the wall, commands TUAG's opening gallery. One of its sleeves stretches out dozens of feet, the fabric cascading onto and across the floor, where it gathers in loops and coils like an elaborate root system anchoring the garment above. A nearby photograph reveals how Semmes activated the sculpture by situating it within the surrounding environment, just as she had with *Boulders*. In the photo, an anonymous figure dons the dress, their back to the camera as they look out to the horizon over a glittering body of water. The extended sleeve snakes through the grass behind the figure, its dark coils nearly filling the frame. A red X is emblazoned on the dress—the body turned into a treasure map, as the title suggests.

Semmes has stated that she didn't begin considering her work through a feminist lens until the curator Marcia Tucker included her in the landmark 1994 exhibition "Bad Girls" at New York's New Museum.² However, her early pieces seem to draw from the same well of psychoanalytic feminism that was reshaping artistic discourse throughout the late 1980s and early '90s, particularly in the writing of scholars like Rosalind Krauss and Griselda Pollock. *Buried Treasure's* empty dress, hovering ghostlike on the gallery wall, materializes the psychoanalytic logic in which woman is figured as lack—the unrepresentable element that both structures and sustains the masculine symbolic order. Meanwhile, its absurdly elongated sleeve, a phallic tube of fabric stretching on and on across the floor—well, some symbols hardly need decoding.

This is not to suggest that Semmes's work can be reduced to tidy packages of meaning. Part of what makes it so compelling is her open-ended evocations, which weave through different critical conversations simultaneously. Her sculptures engage with the gendered divisions between art and craft and the systematic devaluation of feminine labor, while their commanding scale serves as both a retort to the stern formalism of Minimalist sculpture (so often described as or assumed to be masculine) and a provocation about how much space women are permitted to occupy. Semmes's use of materials is seductively tactile, inviting you to linger and unravel the works' mysteries.

The second section, *Flag: Ghostling*, highlights Semmes's use of transparency, absence, and negative space across a range of different media and materials. But what proves most striking about this grouping is how Semmes systematically subverts material conventions: vessels created by coiling molten glass like clay; velvet dresses punctured with large cutouts that are filled with bulbous ceramic forms; an unwearable ruffled garment sealed without openings for arms or neck. In *Blue Legs* (2016), viewers encounter the back of a large sheet of photo paper, its surface branded with repeated Epson logos. We are denied the image printed on the other side, but Semmes's painted alterations to the photo bleed through to the visible verso, offering a ghostly trace of a woman's figure.

Blue Legs belongs to Semmes's *Feminist Responsibility Project (FRP)* which receives fuller treatment in the following section. Semmes began *FRP* in the early 2000s after inheriting a stack of porn magazines—*Penthouse*, *Hustler*, and the like—from the '70s and '80s. She began drawing over the explicit images, covering splayed bodies with colorful abstract forms rendered in ink or paint. This was an inherently ambivalent gesture, one that Semmes herself describes as both "violent and restorative."³ On one hand, her interventions function as protective acts, shielding the women's bodies from objectifying scrutiny. On the other hand, they enact a form of puritanical censorship, effectively legislating what constitutes proper visual consumption and appropriate female representation. What is, exactly, a feminist's responsibility?⁴

The section *Flip: Screen/ings* shows how Semmes has since extended the *Feminist Responsibility Project* into other mediums, incorporating the altered pornographic images into her dress sculptures and a series of reverse-glass paintings. In recent works such as *Green Shoe* (2024), Semmes has dramatically expanded the scale of these edited magazine pages, printing them on canvas and applying another layer of painted additions.

Despite its earnest, academic title, the *Feminist Responsibility Project* reveals itself as more than a little tongue-in-cheek in execution. Semmes's strategic obscuration of X-rated content often does little to diminish its erotic charge—if anything, her partial concealments heighten the material's suggestive power. Given merely a glimpse of fleshy curves, a pair of patent leather thigh-high boots, a cascade of blonde hair, or a hand tensed in apparent pleasure, the viewer's imagination eagerly supplies what has been withheld. Semmes seems acutely aware that her feminist interventions paradoxically intensify pornography's dynamics of looking and longing, implicating herself and viewers in scopophilic consumption while simultaneously asserting space for feminine desire.

The final section on the main floor revisits the notion of landscape, presenting a sense of symmetry by recalling the exhibition's opening themes and motifs. A short film, *In and Around the Garden* (1989/1993), once again places Semmes's wearable sculptures in dialogue with their surroundings as she frolics across the grounds of a former psychiatric hospital, her oversized feather coat mirroring the rounded forms of the topiaries. And as in the first gallery, visitors must navigate around a textile installation that sprawls across the floor: a cloud of loosely piled organza and chiffon, titled *Not Here* (1999). It is marked with a fluorescent yellow X, visually rhyming with the one pictured in *Buried Treasure*. These echoes offer a satisfying sense of recognition and emphasize continuities across Semmes's practice to today, though this return to landscape leaves less room for other readings of her work to come into view—especially given the interpretive richness Semmes's practice could sustain.

Downstairs, the exhibition closes with a coda featuring the CarWash Collective, Semmes's collaboration with fashion designer Jennifer Minniti. Images from the *Feminist Responsibility Project* are printed directly onto fabric and transformed into playful garments that echo the same dynamics of exposure and concealment that structure *FRP*. A projected video captures these outfits being paraded down a catwalk, accompanied by Semmes's lumpy ceramics repurposed as unconventional accessories. This project represents another contextual shift for Semmes's work, operating simultaneously within the world of fashion design and the gallery's critical framework—an apt conclusion for an artist who has always thrived in the spaces between categories.

Like the *Feminist Responsibility Project* itself, "Beverly Semmes: Boulders / Flag / Flip / Kick" doesn't give it all away. Instead, we are given a tantalizing peek into the depths and capaciousness of Semmes's practice.

¹ Camilo Alvarez is a board member at Boston Art Review. To avoid potential conflict of interest, no member of the Boston Art Review senior staff was involved in the writing or editing of this review.

² Semmes makes this comment in a recorded 2021 conversation with the curator and gallerist Camilo Alvarez, excerpts of which are on view in the lower level of the exhibition.

³ Beverly Semmes in Ian Berry, "Turned On: A Dialogue with Beverly Semmes," in *Opener 27: Beverly Semmes—FRP* (The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, 2015), 6.

⁴ In one of the several "Faculty Voices" wall panels throughout the exhibition, Sarah Luna, director of Tufts's Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program, situates *FRP* within the context of the intra-feminist debates around pornography in the 1970s and '80s, particularly the tensions between anti-pornography feminists who viewed it as inherently exploitative and sex-positive feminists who argued for women's agency in sexual representation.