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# Beverly Semmes: *Slip*

By Jessica Holmes



The dual forces of concealment and revelation are subtle impulses that quietly shape so much of human behavior. The mind constantly negotiates with itself over the myriad ways, physical and emotional, we cover and uncover ourselves to the world: Do I share this curious thought aloud? Shall I bare my soul? And how do I look in this miniskirt? These tight jeans? That unbuttoned shirt? This conceptual framework of covering and uncovering has played out consistently through the decades of Beverly Semmes's long and varied career, and *Slip*, a focused show at Susan Inglett Gallery, justly highlights this thematic pursuit across the artist's sculpture, installation, and performance photography.

Semmes is perhaps best known for her "Feminist Responsibility Project" or "FRP" (2003–ongoing), a continuing series of work she makes from porn magazines. Cutting lascivious images from the pages, Semmes cunningly paints over the women's bodies, obscuring them

in radiant color while also sometimes allowing a tantalizing detail—a spike heel, a thong panty—to emerge through the paint. But even earlier than this, she garnered attention in the early 1990s with her large-scale fabric installations. Works like *Red Dress* (1992), a grandiose velvet gown that hangs on a wall, the sumptuous fabric spilling and pooling over the floor (now in the collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden), dominate their settings. At the same time, Semmes developed performances like *Cloud Hats* (1991), where female models donned similar, drapery garments and oversized hats of her own creation.

The original hats from this performance salute the visitor upon entry to the first gallery. Their arrangement, hanging across two walls just barely overhead, lets one both view the hats straight on and take in their risibly large sizes, and walk beneath them, which provides a tangible sense of their true weight and heft. From afar, the material of the hats resembles a fine tulle; up close, it becomes clear they are made from aluminum mesh, a much more formidable substance. An adjacent gallery displays black-and-white images from Semmes's original *Cloud Hats* performance, further defining the array of hats. Wry satire is intrinsic to much of her work, and in a photo like *Three Figures in Cloud Hats and Purple Velvet Bathrobes at the Table* (1991), the viewer can easily find humor in the trio of abundantly cloaked women, their heads and faces almost entirely devoured by the heavy metal headgear. But looking at the images thirty-five years after their making, the comical aspect soon seems a double-edged sword: in the present political environment, where any advancements in women's rights and gender equality are under threat by a suspicious administration and a vocal, traditionalist minority, this immoderate obfuscation of the body can easily take on a more sinister undertone. Comparisons to the ubiquitous *The Handmaid's Tale* costume—red shroud and winged, wide-brimmed wimple—frequently invoked by protestors, feel apt.

Presiding over a large central wall of the gallery is *Billboards* (2025), a more recent descendant of *Red Dress* that likewise commands a viewer's attention. The work is a fabric triptych of smoking-jacket-style bathrobes, made from crushed velvet in a swarthy, chromatic slate hue. The two outer bathrobes appear as if facing away from the audience, flanking the central robe whose frontal opening opens out over the gallery. All three trail untied rope belts, an erotic detail that hints at the imagined unclothed bodies beneath the garment.

Affixed to each of the three is one splash of color, a small circle of crimson fabric that echoes the color of the two human-scale sculptures, *Fish* and *Suitcase* (both 2012), also on display. These tomato-red, ceramic totems are composed of thick slabs and ropy tendrils of clay, replete with evident marks of the artist's hand. The longer you gaze, the more the lumpen forms and looping curvatures come to resemble tendons, muscle, intestine—what would be uncovered were you to strip away our individualized outer armor, the skin. Move close to the sculptures and these innards themselves become a skin, a protective barrier to whatever lies inside, which the viewer can only guess at by peering into the small crevasses and deliberate gaps in the clay. What meets the eye is only darkness, a void inside the hollow sculptures that cannot be discerned. The very human size of the works underscores their vulnerabilities as they simultaneously expose and suppress their secrets, which in turn continually shift as one circles each work. This feeling of impermanence is carried across the exhibition; in *Billboards*, which will never hang exactly the same way twice due to the transitory nature of fabric, in *Cloud Hats*, the physical remnants of a performance long gone by. Our bodies are impermanent, Semmes seems to say, our control of them and what they succumb to or surmount, limited to what we choose to shield and what we choose to unveil.