

Medium



COURTESY MICHAEL KLEIN GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY

Beverly Semmes, *Green Dress*, New York, 1991.

Beverly Semmes: Fashioning Form

BY MICHAEL KLEIN

Having grown to be recognized for her oversized dress pieces, from singular works like *Big Green Dress* (1992) to room-sized installations such as *Yellow Pool* (1993) and *Buried Treasure* (1994), Beverly Semmes carved a compelling path for herself. No longer was the form a three-dimensional object made of clay, bronze, or marble. Instead, she utilized various kinds of fabrics with a wide range of colors, textures, and even patterns. Working on a monumental scale, some of her dresses are singular in form, while others are conglomerate, forming a group, pair, or trio. The notion of sisterhood is very much apparent in such works.

In Beverly Semmes' interview with

Lauren O'Neill-Butler, *Artforum*, 2014, she states, "I was struck by how much of a drawing it is. There's one long sleeve, and it drapes around the floor. The black crushed velvet is very light-absorbing; it has an oily burnt wood quality, a super black, like fine charcoal. Many of my sculptures from the 90s were designed to take up space." And, the space they took over was a field of shimmering fabric, not the usual sculpture of wood or steel like a Carl Andre or David Smith work. Semmes was taking sculpture in an entirely different direction, both personal and exploratory.

Over the years, she has expanded her repertoire to include works in ceramic and

IN BRIEF

■ IN WITH THE NEW

On March 21, 2026, the New Museum unveiled a 60,000-square-foot expansion with the inaugural exhibition *New Humans: Memories of the Future* and new long-term commissions. Funded by a \$130 million campaign and designed by Pritzker Prize-winning firm OMA, the project supports expanded exhibitions, international collaborations, and enhanced educational initiatives within the museum and its surrounding community.

■ LA WELCOMES AI

Led by artist Refik Anadol, the world's first museum dedicated to AI-based art will open this spring in a Frank Gehry-designed complex in downtown Los Angeles. Named DATALAND, the museum will feature five immersive galleries showcasing machine-created environments. The museum is powered by an open-source AI system trained on datasets from major institutions like the Smithsonian. The museum claims to be dedicated to ethical data usage.

■ REDISCOVERING A REMBRANDT

In March, the Rijksmuseum announced the reattribution of a small painting to Rembrandt van Rijn. Depicting Zacharias, the work underwent a two-year investigation and restoration that overturned earlier attribution to his workshop. Now recognized as an authentic Rembrandt, the painting has been placed on long-term loan to the museum by its private owners.

■ COLUMBUS REDUX

As part of the United States' 250th anniversary, the Trump administration installed a marble statue of Christopher Columbus on White House grounds. The work replicates a statue dedicated by President Reagan in 1984 and destroyed during 2020 protests. Its installation follows President Biden's recognition of Indigenous Peoples' Day in 2021, which occurs alongside Columbus Day. Critics argue such monuments promote a simplified narrative that overlooks Columbus' subjugation of Indigenous peoples.

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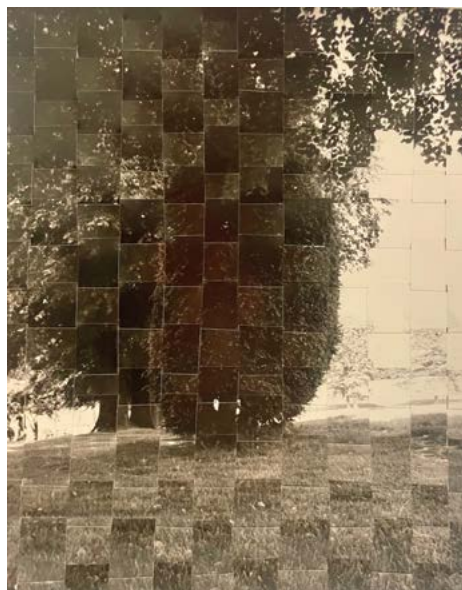


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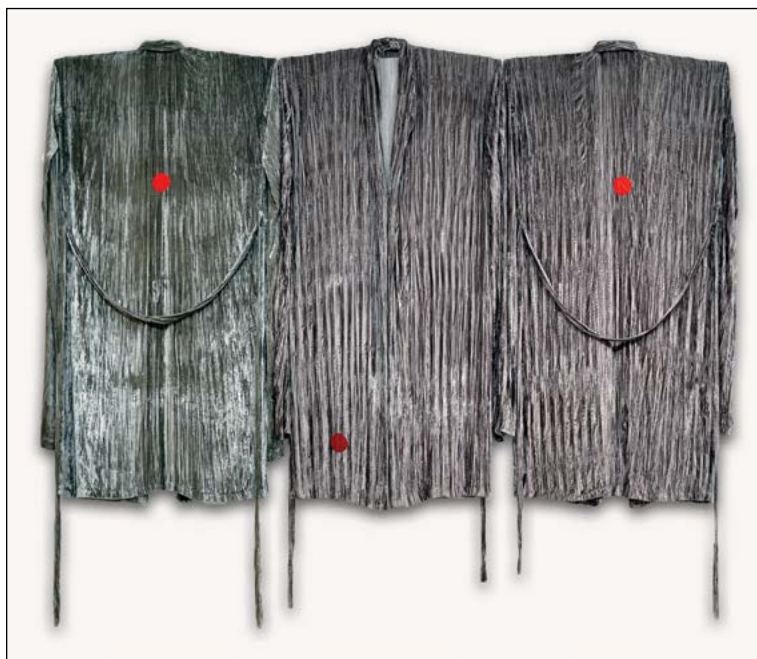
ABOVE: Beverly Semmes, *Cloud Hats*, 1991, Aluminum mesh in seven parts (various dimensions).

RIGHT: Beverly Semmes, *Woven Garden III*, 1989, Woven photographic paper.

BELOW: Beverly Semmes, *Billboards*, 2025, Crushed rayon velvet.



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print, but in a recent show at Susan Inglett Gallery titled *Slip*, a vast selection from her oeuvre was on view including photographic works documenting her early clothing and dramatic aluminum hats. Max Ernst created the collage *The Hat Makes the Man* in 1920, but in Semmes' case, it is actually the hat that distinguishes the woman. Her oversized and somewhat eccentric aluminum hats, seven in total called *Cloud Hats* (1991), appear in the photographs on view and as a relief sculpture: a wall of hats of different sizes. Anonymous figures modeling oversized hats and gowns look very late-19th century. Semmes' focus is strictly on the costume; it is the signifier, hat and gown presented as a fictional tableau.

In relation to the dress, a triptych, entitled *BILLBOARDS* (2025), is oversized and installed against the wall. Generally, these dress assemblages are shown from the front, the groupings reminiscent of the statuary from Greek or Roman buildings, noble and silent ceremonial witnesses to the day-to-day life of mortals.

Drapery and the choice of fabric also play a key role in her sculpture; they become part of the expressive character of the work, equal to the exaggerated scale. The same character of expressive exaggeration comes to play when looking at her ceramic works. Though a vase or vessel is functional in form, these are larger and seemingly overbuilt with multiple layers of clay, making each a handbuilt, three-dimensional abstraction—a significant counterpoint to the flat, formal dress piece. And, like the dress, it is an exaggeration transforming the ordinary into an icon.

Semmes has laid out a strong conceptual plan for her work, as this exhibition demonstrates, from the early '90s through to today: costume, ceramics, and photography. She represents a unique place among her generation of contemporary artists like Kiki Smith and Dona Nelson: women forging their own place and vision. ①

Michael Klein's expertise is as a private art dealer and freelance, independent curator for individuals, institutions, and arts organizations. Today, Michael Klein Arts works with a diverse group of artists, estates, galleries, and non-profit institutions providing management, curatorial, and other consulting services.