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THE POWER OF WORDS IN ART

Beverly Semmes, the space taken up by fabric



Listen to me carefully, you bunch of snobs: if you think a dress is nothing more than a garment, you haven't understood Beverly Semmes's work yet. Since the late 1980s, the American artist has been building, from fabric, glass, and ceramics, a territory where the female body is presented without ever fully revealing itself. Her oversized dresses, cast glass vessels, and lumpy clay vases compose a stubborn vocabulary, tirelessly returning to the same obsessions: scale, material, modesty turned against itself. Two approaches allow one to engage with this work with the rigor it deserves: the sociology of space occupied by gendered bodies, on the one hand, and the science of matter, those that govern the flow of fabric and the casting of glass, on the other. These two approaches rarely intersect in existing criticism, which is precisely the reason to take them here, one after the other, with the patience that a work so vast requires.

Let's start with an almost childlike question, but one that governs the artist's entire work: how much space does a woman have the right to occupy, in a room, on a street, in an image? The answer Beverly Semmes gives, since her first oversized dresses from the early 1990s, is contained in one gesture: take up all the space, and even more. Her velvet dresses, several meters high, occupy entire wall sections before spilling onto the floor in long trails of fabric ^[1]. Such an overflow is never innocent: it reenacts, on the gallery scale, the old sociological debate on the gendered distribution of public and private space. Studies dedicated to ordinary female gestures have shown that women learn, from childhood, to fold their limbs, to occupy the minimum surface, not to obstruct others' passage. Semmes does exactly the opposite: her textile sculptures spread out, invade, forcing the visitor to move, to circumvent, to yield ground they thought was secured. The piece entitled *Red Dress*, whose endless train slides across the wooden floor like a river of velvet, is not only a spectacular image: it is a statement on the circulation of bodies in social space.

One might wonder why this simple act of occupation is enough to provoke such discomfort in the viewer. The answer likely lies in what sociology calls embodied disposition: we have internalized templates, proportions, ways of holding ourselves, and excess makes us uncomfortable precisely because it reveals these norms by contrast. A five-meter-wide dress is not just large: it is a silent denunciation of all the dresses that, on the other hand, obediently conform to the measure of the body they clothe. To this must be added a second, more cunning gesture: the Feminist Responsibility Project, started in the early 2000s, in which the artist covers images from pornographic magazines inherited from a neighbor with paint. Again, the sociological question immediately surfaces: who holds the right to look at a body, and under what conditions? By concealing certain areas of the photographed body while letting a heel, a strand, or a gaze emerge, Semmes does not abolish the order of the gaze: she redistributes it to her own advantage. Here we witness an almost manual example of what is called the reconfiguration of visibility norms: the artist does not censor in the name of modesty, she reclaims the power to decide what is shown and what is concealed.

A critic has indeed noted that this gesture is both restorative and somewhat punitive excess, with both overlapping without ever fully resolving ^[2]. This ambivalence is itself a social fact: it replays, without grandiosity, the tension that traversed feminism in the 1980s regarding pornography, between those who saw it as pure and simple exploitation and those who saw it as a possible space for agency and claimed pleasure. Semmes never settles this debate: she stages it, page after page, magazine after magazine, never pretending to hold the solution. Can we then speak of feminist propaganda? Certainly not: the humor, omnipresent in her work, prevents any unambiguous lesson from taking hold for long. Just look at the recent assemblages in the Body Shop series, where luxury slippers, signed Gucci or from more modest brands, perch on fur busts like improbable breasts, to understand that Semmes mocks both the pornographic market and the luxury market alike.

These two economies of desire, that of pornography and that of fashion, both rely on the same logic of consumption of the female body, and the artist treats them with an almost comic fairness. The sociology of consumption teaches that the luxury object, like the pornographic image, promises a satisfaction it never quite delivers: Semmes materializes this mismatch by literally pinching the shoe onto the fabric body, which doesn't need it at all. One can then wonder why desire is lodged in objects as trivial as a pair of indoor slippers. The answer lies precisely in the fact that the trivial is where the greatest number of social norms are exercised, often unnoticed: a brand shoe often says more about social hierarchy than a long learned discourse. Semmes's large empty dresses remain haunted by the absence of the body they should have contained, as if the garment, once removed from its functional use, revealed all the social charge it had carried silently until then.

This absence is never sad, however: it is rather an invitation to imagine a body that would have, for once, all the space it legitimately claims. In this sense, Semmes's work can be read as applied sociology, carried out not with surveys and statistics, but with velvet, thread, and scissors. It demonstrates, better than a scholarly treatise, that space is never neutral, that it is distributed according to tacit and ancient rules, and that art can take on the task of making them visible by deliberately exaggerating them. Each new dress, each new assembly, thus reformulates the same foundational question from a slightly different angle, without ever exhausting it completely, which explains the remarkable coherence of a practice spread over forty-five years.

The second path that allows entering Beverly Semmes's work with the rigor it deserves is that of material sciences, particularly fluid dynamics and the chemistry of glass and glazes. Anyone who has contemplated one of her velvet dresses hanging on the wall, the train accumulating in loops on the floor, has unknowingly witnessed a demonstration of fluid mechanics applied to textiles. Velvet never falls just any way: its mass, its inherent stiffness, and its friction against the floor determine the exact shape of the folds, according to laws that one could almost describe as those of a thick liquid that solidifies as it slowly falls. Can one really speak of a fluid in relation to fabric? Strictly speaking, no; but in its observable behavior, the question arises with an amusing legitimacy, and it is precisely this ambiguity that the artist has consistently exploited for thirty years.

She herself confided that she was "seeking a quality of openness in the forms, a place where the work breathes" ^[3], a phrase that inevitably evokes the vocabulary of porosity as commonly used in materials science. This porosity is found, even more literally, in her glasswork started in the early 2000s. The crystal vases she shapes are made by winding long cords of molten glass, a technique inherited from clay work but rarely applied to a material as capricious and unstable. In clay, the winding gesture closes without leaving a trace because the potter smooths the material and the joints disappear under the regular pressure of the thumb. In molten glass, the same operation becomes almost impossible, as the material's viscosity changes every second during the cooling process.

In this case, the seams remain visible, irregular, grainy, like the trace of a gesture the material itself refused to erase entirely. Why does glass thus refuse to hide its own seams, whereas clay so willingly and docilely lends itself to it? The answer lies in a purely physical fact: molten glass has a much narrower working range than wet clay, and it solidifies before the hand can complete its usual smoothing. The artist derives from this a vocabulary of vases topped with so many handles, sometimes as many as fifteen on a single piece, that they lose all practical function to become pure structural ornaments, almost decorative by excess. We then witness a curious paradox: the more the object accumulates grasping attributes, the less it effectively becomes graspable by a human hand.

Chemistry also plays a role in ceramics, whose glazes with vivid hues, sometimes almost saturated tomato red, owe their intensity to metallic oxides that require firing at precise temperatures, measured to the nearest degree Celsius. A variation of just a few degrees in the kiln is enough to shift a glaze from bright red to a dull, flat brown, which explains the almost scientific monitoring the artist gives to the firing of each of her pieces. These ceramic vessels, with tubular and almost visceral shapes, have been described as evoking tendons or organs that have been laid bare and exposed to the gallery's light. The gaze lingers long, trying to distinguish what is a formal coincidence from what is an anatomy deliberately suggested by the artist. One may wonder whether this organic resemblance is intentional or merely accidental: both hypotheses coexist without contradiction, the artist herself having never resolved the question in her successive interviews.

Another scientific chapter of the work concerns the chemistry of paper and ink in the Feminist Responsibility Project, where the paint, applied to magazine pages printed on low-absorbency glossy paper, must contend with a support that literally refuses to be penetrated by the pigment. The ink slips, beads, accumulates on the surface before drying slowly, producing these sharp outlines and saturated areas that distinguish her gesture from the more classical drawing on an absorbent, porous paper. This chemical behavior partly explains why the covered areas retain an almost lacquered sheen, as if the color also refuses to fully blend into its host medium.

The artist's first installations, as early as 1980, in which metal mesh covered with canvas formed large rounded shapes called Boulders, already reflected an almost geological thinking about matter and its slow transformation. She said: "I thought the landscape was a vast subject" ^[4], long before measuring the scope of what she was undertaking at that time. These forms, carried along a beach or hoisted onto a green roof, borrowed from the earth's relief its own vocabulary: accumulation, sedimentation, slow erosion under the effect of wind and sea salt. The sculpture then becomes an almost geophysical discipline, where form is no longer drawn but accumulated, like a dune or a pebble patiently polished by years of repeated backwash. This continuity between mineral and textile, between rock and dress, between molten glass and flowing velvet, constitutes one of the most rigorous threads throughout the whole work, and it is not an exaggeration to see in it a scientific thought applied to matter with the patience of a laboratory, transposed to the modest scale of an artist's studio.

Finally, it remains to measure what these two paths, the social and the material, have in common. Both start from the same intuition: that form is never a simple aesthetic covering, but the visible result of forces that cross it, whether social or physical. A dress that is too large disturbs just as much as an irregular glass pour confuses, because both refuse the expected measure, the standard size, the silent norm to which we had become accustomed without even thinking about it. Beverly Semmes works precisely at this boundary, where the material imposes its own logic of behavior and where the social body imposes its own, without either ever fully yielding to the other. It is in this shared discomfort, between the matter that refuses to be tamed and the female body that refuses to be reduced, that lies the lasting strength of her work. One might fear that a work built on such vast obsessions would end up repeating itself, going around in circles around the same velvets and the same vases; on the contrary, the opposite happens, each new decade bringing its share of variations, new materials, unexpected collaborations, from the pure velvet of the beginnings to the brand-name slippers of recent years. This work never claims to have solved the question it has relentlessly posed since its beginnings; she prefers to reformulate it, over and over, with a rare consistency and an inventiveness that does not wane, which is more than enough to justify the sustained attention given to it by the most demanding institutions.

1. Catherine Liu, "Openings: Beverly Semmes", *Artforum*, December 1992.
2. Jessica Holmes, "Beverly Semmes: Slip", *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 2026.
3. "The Artist's Voice: Beverly Semmes", in "Bossy Blue Gowns: Beverly Semmes", National Museum of Women in the Arts, blog, September 2017.
4. Meka Boyle, "These Subversive Works by Beverly Semmes Paint Clothing in a New Light", *Elephant*, June 2023.