

OPENINGS

Beverly Semmes

Catherine Liu

In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers.

The diva is a woman who is larger than life and therefore does not exist as much as she insists (as Jacques Lacan would say) on taking up more space, monopolizing everyone's attention, and acting out great loves and great betrayals. We believe in her suffering and her passion; she demands nothing less. The greatest of divas, like Maria Callas, understand betrayal: they understand that becoming a woman is not only impossible, it is never enough. There is always another woman to replace them; in Callas' case it was Jackie Kennedy. But Callas struggled against the inevitability of her failure; she even starved herself to achieve an Audrey Hepburn-like figure. It wasn't enough that her voice was sublime.

"What does woman want?" It's very simple, she wants more—the feminist's more, the wife's more, the whore's more, the lover's more, the mother's more, Medea's more; but a woman's appetites are supposed to be contained by her body, which, after all, is not so big. If a woman were to become as big as her appetites, she might very well fit into one of Beverly Semmes' extralarge dresses. That the commodity itself has discovered the logic of feminine demand is obvious in the familiar commercial promises of "all this and more." The commodity promises a perfect fit, which the art object stubbornly refuses, especially in the case of work made by women like Cindy Sherman, Rosemarie Trockel, and now Semmes.

Semmes once fashioned a coat out of pink feathers, to be worn while taking walks in the topiary-filled garden of the upstate-New York hospital where her boyfriend worked. In an attempt to make sense of this unusual setting, she shot a film of someone walking through the gardens in the coat and a matching pink feather hat. Her subsequent clothing work is less tied to a specific place, but that is because the outfits have become topographies unto themselves. They are subject-places, that is, they describe places where the subject might arise, and in this respect they are sculptures in the most rigorous sense of the term.

Four Purple Velvet Bathrobes, 1991, suggests that Semmes is a satirical artist who is interested in, if not exclusively obsessed with, parodic and glamorous deformations of the body. The robes hang 12 feet high and end on the floor in a puddle of luxurious velvet. The seductive quality of the piece is otherworldly, but otherwise their sex is recognizable and perhaps even functional. Being four, however, they already imply the difficulty of being one, the woman, a site of so much potential misunderstanding, so much passion.

In *Pink Negligee*, 1992, another piece in a series of works about uneasy seductions, Semmes expands her vocabulary of desire by stuffing a negligee with kapok and quilting it with tortured lines of thread. This quilted negligee is definitely not the "something more comfortable" that might have shimmered under the robe of a lounging femme fatale. It is, in fact, only nominally a negligee; this piece of quilted lingerie implies a space from which the body is barred, suggesting that there is something altogether impossible about slipping into anything graceful-



Beverly Semmes,
Red Dress, 1992,
velvet, 13 x 11 x 46".

ly at all. But this is not to say that those who try are any less courageous, or, for that matter, any less tragic.

Another series, this time of dresses, betrays the elegance of *Four Purple Velvet Bathrobes*. These garments are cut in different widths and of different fabrics, along the pattern of a modified Lanz nightgown doing double time as a sensible matron's dress. The pieces have the gravity, authority, and self-possession of a woman who has given up all aspirations to sexiness, like Barbara Bush. They are gendered but hardly feminine. The irony is that the dresses, though expanded to absurd proportions, look as if they could belong to pudgy little girls. The pregenital girl form assumes a matronly authority as two temporally disparate sexual limbs are formally connected in the shape of a dress. *House Dress*, 1991, looks like house curtains; except for its unbelievable girth (it is five and a half feet wide), it suggests that practicality can go amok. In *Red Dress*, 1992, with its impossibly long train running like a twisted river of red velvet along the floor, Semmes treats the fabric as if it were viscous, producing the effect of fluidity so much sought after by window decorators. What makes this work more than decor, however, is its simple excess.

Though it is tempting to read Semmes' works as allegories of the social, to narrativize sculpture is almost never a good idea. It is actually very much to the artist's credit that her work steers clear of simple symbolism, though her forms often refer to the figurative. This work has always been about the opening up of certain spaces in memory and out of time, and it has always achieved its ends in a rigorously formal manner.

While Semmes' universe is not, as one might begin to believe, exclusively female (she has also made beautiful diminutive boys' suits in fabrics like fake lamb's-wool and orange velvet), there are no couples in her world, nor is there even the possibility of coupling. Although there is coquetry and violence, consumption seems unlikely in such a landscape. Semmes tries to represent visually the phantasms of a speaking subject that must first of all negotiate with its own opacity as a body, a body with a proper name and therefore with a sex, a body that needs to clothe itself.

Lacan wrote, "When the thread shows through, it means that the weave is no longer disguised in what is called the fabric. Fabric is everywhere and always metaphorical in use—it could easily serve as an image of substance."¹ Semmes' works can be understood precisely as metaphors in fabric for the places of the subject. If fabric is understood as a metaphor for substance, then clothing represents the shape of the substantial; this is why getting dressed is never a simple matter. Semmes is not a tailor for the physical body, she is a visionary of the phantasmatic one. □

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1. Jacques Lacan, "Seminar of 21 January 1975," in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Irresistible Woman*, trans. Jacqueline Rose, London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1982, p. 363.