



One of Beverly Semmes' creations, 'Yellow Pool,' occupies an entire gallery at the Norton. A waterfall of yellow organza spills from the skirt of an empire-waisted dress that hangs on the wall.

Daily News Photo By GREER GATTUSO

## Art All Dressed Up — with someplace to go

By JAN SJOSTROM  
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Entering an exhibition of Beverly Semmes' work, you might feel as though you have strayed into a giantess' closet. Huge, strangely proportioned dresses hang on the wall and cascade onto the floor.

You might take a tip from Jack of *Jack and the Beanstalk* and keep an eye out for the formidable

being who could fill these massive garments.

Semmes' dress installations and companion photographs go on display today at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach in the show "Beverly Semmes: All Dressed Up."

The New York-based artist was at the Norton on Thursday installing her work.

One piece, *Yellow Pool*, occupies an entire gallery. A waterfall of

yellow organza spills from the skirt of an empire-waisted dress that hangs on the wall. The billowing yellow fabric on the floor is encircled by the dress' elongated purple velvet sleeves.

Semmes has been working on the show since Tuesday afternoon. She's nearly finished, she says.

The spot on the side wall where the dress hangs now is the second position *Yellow Pool* has occupied

since Tuesday. At first, Semmes hung it from the back wall, where viewers would confront it immediately when they entered the gallery.

She moved it because she wanted the work to sneak up on the viewer.

"I like that it doesn't reveal itself until you turn the corner," she says. "The view from the doorway was nice, but I liked it being this pool of

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abstraction at first. I like the tension between the figurative and abstract aspects. And, this way, the scale gets bigger as you enter the room. By the time you get in and see what it is, you're really in there."

Semmes' work blends the figurative with the abstract. It uses one of the most familiar and intimate of objects as its starting point then reinvents it by manipulating line, color, texture and scale.

Semmes began her career as an abstract artist making sculptures and paintings.

Her change of direction was not deliberate. It sprang out of her affection for a formal garden she enjoyed visiting in upstate New York.

"This garden was so oddly pruned and overmaintained," Semmes says. "I decided to make a garment to wear in the garden."

The garment was an odd coat made of wire and flamingo-pink feathers. She accessorized the coat with a tall black hat similar to that worn by Dr. Seuss' *Cat in the Hat*.

Semmes asked a friend to wear the outfit as Semmes filmed her walking through the garden. Two stills from the 1988 film are on view in the show at the Norton.

In the photograph *Cornelia Walking Through the Formal Garden in the Pink Feather Coat and Hedge Hat No. 2*, the feathery get-up makes the figure look as pruned as any topiary. Its pinkness echoes the blush of flowers at the bottom of the frame.

Semmes' interest in performance and the landscape persisted when she stopped having models wear her garments and began hanging them on the wall in 1991. She still takes photographs that document her work in different settings, but she considers them a sideline to her installations.

Many of her pieces look like waterfalls or pools. Like the land, they force you to react to them. They crowd into your space. They make you walk around them.

Recently, Semmes experimented with her first motorized installation. In *Big Silver*, a giant silver dress slides up the wall then collapses to the floor. That work is in the Smith College

show.

Scholars see feminist overtones in Semmes' work. Semmes says the feminist messages in her work evolved almost unconsciously. She grew up in a household where there was never any question that she could and would have a career.

"I see the feminist aspect coming through in terms of the scale," Semmes says. "They're taking up too much room. They're beautiful and seductive, but when you look at them they're intimidating. They're too much. That can refer to women assuming power and the reaction to it. I think taking up too much space is an aggressive act, even if it's soft."

Others have interpreted her work as commenting on the way fashion and society's expectations affect women's perceptions of themselves.

We don't know who wears Semmes' empty dresses. They could be Semmes, the viewer — even that fearsome giantess. Surely, she's a woman who could wreak havoc on the safest of traditional values.

A 13-minute video on Semmes' work will run continu-

ously in a corridor by the museum store during the exhibition.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog. The catalog is a joint production of three museums, where separate exhibitions of Semmes' work will be shown during the next several months.

Curators from the participating museums — the Norton, Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, Mass; and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond — and a critic who has followed Semmes' career for several years wrote essays for the catalog. It is illustrated with fold-out color photographs of her dress installations.

Cooperating on the project enabled the museum to publish a more comprehensive catalog than each could have done separately, said Lisa Hurley, assistant curator at the Norton, who coordinated the publication and wrote one of the essays in it. The catalog was underwritten by the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation.

The show will be up through July 7 at the Norton, 1451 S. Olive Ave. West Palm Beach. For information, call 832-5194.