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Galleries: Steve Riedell works play with the rules of painting



*Katie Knowblock and Nicolette Absil in Beverly Semmes' "Feminist Responsibility Project" at Rowan University.
(AARON IGLER)*

Semmes at Rowan

Beverly Semmes has made more than a few unforgettable works since she began her career in 1990, notably her wall-mounted, elongated dresses, which continue downward and across the floor like a waterfall or Goldilocks' tresses. Her intentionally lumpen, childlike glazed clay pots - shown here in 2009 in the ICA's "Dirt on Delight" - and fantastical hand-sculpted, cast-crystal pitchers and baskets are charming and idiosyncratic. Semmes has a remarkable way with materials and a sense of how to channel their potential strangeness, to tell a fairy tale with them. When Semmes' various media merge in a performance, however, as they are currently doing in her "Feminist Responsibility Project" at Rowan University Art Gallery, her powers are somewhat diminished.

Much of the gallery is taken up by a billowing floor piece of white organza that is intended to suggest a cloud. In its center, two female Rowan students, wearing dresses designed by Semmes, sit across from each other at a table, working silently on a jigsaw puzzle that apparently has no beginning or end. One has a B (for "Bitch") on the back of her dress, the other SP (for "Super Puritan"). They're meant to represent female archetypes trying to envision the future of feminism. A crystal chandelier made by Semmes hangs from the ceiling above them.

Edith Newhall, "Semmes at Rowan," PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, 8 May 2012.

On one of the gallery's walls, Semmes is showing her paintings on photographs of women cut from pornographic magazines (the painted parts, hiding the offending parts, are almost creepier than what you imagine they are masking). On the other wall, she's showing a video of her own feet kicking pink potatoes across a frozen lake. The accompanying audio is grating and sinister, like the sound of munching insects vastly amplified.

It would seem that the project's imagery is meant to evoke a feminist's worst dream, or that it is a reflection on the censoriousness of 1960s radical feminism - but Semmes' typically dark humor gets a little lost in the details. I would not recommend seeing this show without its live performances. The final-week schedule is Tuesday 11 a.m.-1 p.m. and 3-5 p.m., Wednesday 11 a.m.-noon and 3-5 p.m., Thursday 3-5 p.m., and Saturday 2:30-4 p.m.

Rowan University Art Gallery, 201 Mullica Hill Rd. (Route 322), Glassboro, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays. Information: 856-256-4521 or www.rowan.edu/fpa/artgallery. Through Saturday.