

Art in America

BEVERLY SEMMES

Susan Inglett

Beverly Semmes became known in the 1990s for overscale dresses that cascade down the wall and flow into the room. Though colorful and lovely, these sculptures/garments disconcertingly advance on the viewer and aggressively claim the space. A crimson example from 2014 was included in the back room at Susan Inglett, but the focus was in the front



Beverly Semmes:
Carwash, 2011, ink
on magazine page,
10¾ by 6¾ inches; at
Susan Inglett.

room, on Semmes's canny and compelling works on paper, along with a cluster of six ceramic pots. The whole group was billed as the "Feminist Responsibility Project" or "FRP," which sounds like some earnest organization but is in fact Semmes's quirky solo endeavor, and has been for the past several years.

Drawing with ink or paint on pages from vintage *Penthouse* and *Hustler* magazines, Semmes boldly transforms stylized pornography featuring nude women, sexual acts and erotic calisthenics. In *Gloves* (2011), a seated, presumably nude woman wearing long gloves is now clothed head to toe, via an ink drawing, in flowing purple garb that suggests one of Semmes's dresses; behind her is a background rendered molten orange by the artist. Lush colors and rich, supple clothing make this sexual scene mysterious, ambiguous and altogether engaging. In *Anna* (2011), another formerly nude woman, her face totally obscured, is frankly sexy in a slinky red body stocking and a yellow robe, but is also elegant and dignified: she is a powerful individual, not a titillating fantasy. Semmes's intimate, in some ways obsessive, works hint at earlier high-art images of females made by males, including Odilon Redon's and Paul Delvaux's women, Balthus's girls and Surrealist nudes in collages. Semmes effectively invades a world of men—from porn producers to famous painters—and recasts it for her alternative purposes.

With her fiercely scrawled marks, Semmes is an avenging vandal of sorts, a DIY feminist censor on the loose. Yet these works can hardly be reduced to an anti-porn diatribe. While her powerful abstract forces and casual doodles fancifully clothe and mask the women, they also always decisively shift the context. Hints of skin and sexual activity remain, but they are now part of scenes conflating revelation and concealment, exhibitionism and solitude. In *Car Wash* (2011), two women in high heels are having sex next to a shiny white car. The crouching woman in front is festooned with black polka dots, while a billowing, translucent, silvery-gray veil ushers the women into a strange new place where they are still public (as in partially visible to the viewer) but also alone with one another. Some of the works are surprisingly festive; others are dreamlike and fantastical, with a carnival air of license and adventure. Still others are brooding and somber.

In the 7½-by-10¾-inch *Pink Pot* (2008), a weird vessel with multiple handles obscures the midsection (including the genitalia) of a squatting nude woman in heels. The painted pot is both barrier and protective covering, but also totemic, even magical. Its form is echoed in six actual vessels—lumpy, askew and oddly fleshy ceramics on pedestals. These seem to flaunt the effort and force that went into making them, in traces of muscular hands and fingers shaping wet clay. Similar to many of the ceramics Semmes has been making over the past few years, these unruly pots are anything but useful, and thoroughly upend our expectations of domestic objects. As with the drawings, they are wild-card forces full of transformative energy. They refuse to obey or conform.

—Gregory Volk