

Gallagher, Kai. "A shrine to the female deity: Semmes' "Six Silvers" at the Henry Art Gallery challenges what femininity could be," *The Daily of the University of Washington*, 16 July 2019.

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A shrine to the female deity

Semmes' "Six Silvers" at the Henry Art Gallery challenges what femininity could be

By Kai Gallagher
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Six Silvers, the most prominent piece of Beverly Semmes' art installation at the Henry Art Museum, fills nearly the entire wall of the exhibit. [Hannah Murray](#)

The first thing visitors usually do upon entering the Beverly Semmes exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery is crane their necks up in awe — an action compelled by both the sheer size of the works and the height at which they are mounted.

Six dresses, woven in silver lamé fabric and about a dozen feet from top to bottom, are equal parts monumental and unnerving. They make up the main attraction, "Six Silvers," and each is woven to fit an enlarged abstraction of the female form.

The waists are located far above the elbows, the sleeves run well past the bottom of the dresses — implying arms that extend past the wearer's knees — and the strange tinfoil texture, as well as the mismatched lengths of the sleeves, allude to an origin far

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from any factory. The features suggest a wearer that, while unmistakably human and female, is also a bizarrely proportioned titan.

The atmosphere seems to be one of crude worship, a temple created by a civilization long past to honor a beautiful monster.

Two paintings on either side of the dresses extend on this theme. The women shown stand tall, their shirts open, their chests bare, and the floral patterns on their leg-wear beaming proudly. They are beautiful, like the dresses, but there is a similarly grotesque element that becomes apparent only upon close consideration.

Each is displayed in front of a nightmarish crimson background, its visibly frantic brushstrokes further suggesting a creation led by feverish worship. Their expressions are akin to the deified ancestors portrayed by Easter Island's Moai statues — solemn, resolved, beckoning their viewers to offer something worthy of their attention.

The eye, in seeking to establish scale, can only grasp at what appears to be a doorway in the background.

But if this is indeed an entrance to the room, then the female figures are of monumental height — the dresses of "Six Silvers" would be a fitting piece of clothing in their dressers. Taken together, the arrangement of the dresses and paintings makes the exhibit feel like a place of worship — a shrine to an ancient and powerful set of figures, to be both feared and respected unquestionably. To look up to the neckline of the dresses and imagine the colossal being that could inhabit it invokes both dread and reverence.

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Six Silvers is now a permanent exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery at UW. [Hannah Murray](#)

Semmes, the U.S.-born sculptor and creator of the pieces on display, has been creating enlarged dress sculptures since the early 1990s, and the pieces shown in the Henry Art Gallery expand on her "Feminist Responsibility Project." The paintings, each titled simply "Red Runway" with a roman numeral denoting its position in the sequence, are created by applying ink and acrylic paint over canvas prints of pornography, "reminding us of what we cannot see," according to the exhibit's brochure.

In the case of "Six Silvers," what we cannot see — what has been deliberately stricken — is any sense of traditional feminine roles. The women wear expressions of unwavering stoicism. They are gargantuan and immobile. Despite the objectifying circumstances the pictures were drawn from, they have been repurposed to display a figure that, while unmistakably female, will never bend to the whims of another as so many demeaning stereotypes would want. These are women commanding power derived entirely from the magnitude of their forms, and who use it solely to do what they see fit.

In this exhibit, Semmes has turned a longstanding symbol of the degradation of women on its head. In doing so, she creates a mirror and a window, one that invites the viewer to question what being female means to them and what it could be, in all its majesty and terror.

The exhibit will remain in the Henry Art Gallery until Oct. 13, when the paintings will exit. "Six Silvers" will remain in the museum's permanent collection.