

Stein, Judith, "Beverly Semmes : Marigold," *The Brooklyn Rail*, 22 December 2022 – 23 January 2023.



Installation view: Beverly Semmes: Marigold, Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, 2022. Courtesy Locks Gallery, Philadelphia.

Beverly Semmes came out swinging at the patriarchy in the early 1990s, propelled by feminist indignation and a canny sense of humor. At Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, her recent show of work from the last two decades was ample evidence that her well-aimed licks continue to connect. The form and content of women's garments remain favored strategies, here apparent in fabric sculpture, shown in the company of paintings and works in clay.

The majestic installation *Marigold* (2022) occupied pride of place opposite the entrance to the room. Sarah Burton and her design team at the Alexander McQueen studio commissioned Semmes and eleven other women visual artists to engage in a "creative dialogue" between their own practice and items they selected from the designer's new collection. Along with the other commissions, Semmes's witty interrogation of what we mean when we say "fashion" debuted at McQueen's flagship store in London.

Partnering with women artists is new territory for the McQueen studio, possibly as a gesture to put paid to any lingering accusations that McQueen's often transgressive fashions objectified women. The designer, a fashion genius and ace provocateur, died thirteen years ago. "If people do say I portray women like that," he once said, "it's because I want to portray the way society still sees women in some ways, not the way I see women."

As her readymade ingredients, Semmes chose a McQueen dress, handbag, and pair of shoes that she soon shielded with cloaks of near invisibility. For *Marigold*'s base, she assembled an agitated sea of wan-colored organza encircled by bands of rippled velvet. An impossibly tall, purple velvet robe embodied the artist's signature inclination to distort scale. Mounted high on the installation's back wall,

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it created an emphatic, phallic-shaped central axis. Semmes entombed the designer's off-the-shoulder, yellow corset dress inside the robe, leaving visible only the folds at its hem, fanned out like a mermaid's tail.

As a riff on the trope of beauty and the beast, fashion shoot stylists sometimes include canines as accessories to spice up the *mise en scène*. Semmes alluded to this penchant by furnishing Marigold with a life-size, life-like black Labrador Retriever, a thrift-shop find. This rigid exemplar of the country's most popular dog breed, the Lab maintained a pose of eternal attention, calling to mind the vigilant pooch in vintage ads for His Master's Voice.

For her face-off with fashion, Semmes sweet-talked McQueen's high-end raiment to forsake life and align with art as assisted ready-mades. She reverse-camouflaged the purse, swaddling it with a slathered coat of highliner-yellow paint, similarly obscuring part of its strap with hot pink. In its new guise as a lumpy bundle, the clutch sits at the pooch's feet. A filched segment of its shiny, linked chain was pressed into service as the animal's collar. Nearby, Semmes displayed a pair of gracelessly painted scuffs that began life as McQueen's snazzy mules. The black faux-fur mat they rest on is cousin to the dog's simulated hair.

The garment-shaped *Knave* (2007–22) is another beguiling if arcane example of the artist's fabric sculptures. As nuanced as patinated metal, its shimmering taffeta bodice and skirt appeared to vacillate in color between copper and mauve. Asymmetrical bands of magenta and turquoise velvet formed sleeves that tumbled down from shoulder to floor and came to rest as an untidy pileup of folds. As did *Knave*, the ethereal *Slice* (2016) referenced the body without representing it. Like *Knave*, *Slice* was anchored high on the wall, its cascading crinoline of pale yellow tulle ended where three half-circles of richly colored velvet began.

Semmes's tactic of revealing and concealing her sources, seen to advantage in Marigold, began in 2003, when she launched her ongoing "Feminist Responsibility Project" (FRP). Christened with a purposely pretentious title, the project began as a small, personal venture carried out on her kitchen table. Out of curiosity, she'd brought home a pile of discarded porn magazines. Paging through them more as an artist than a scold, she "fixed" their exploitative, staged scenarios by obscuring sections with brush strokes or scribble-scrabble in vivid, opaque colors, occasionally leaving hints at what was underneath.

The Locks exhibition included five, generously-sized paintings that represent FRP's current iteration. For these, Semmes scanned the doctored pages and freshly sabotaged the enlarged narratives with exuberant, brightly-colored shapes that often represent pitchers or bottles. Her abiding interest in containers as metaphors for women's bodies was evident as well in six totemic ceramic sculptures (all 2012). Semmes's toffery stacks of mixed-and-matched vessels flaunted feral surfaces, evidence of the artist's rowdy relationship with her material. The six were painted blazing red-orange, a color that to Donald Judd's thinking, heightened awareness of edges, lines, and textures. In Semmes's sculpture, the color did not disappoint.