

Semmes, Beverly, "500 Words: BEVERLY SEMMES", ARTFORUM, 5 February 2014.

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Beverly Semmes

02.05.14



Beverly Semmes is a New York-based artist who has exhibited internationally since the late 1980s. Her latest shows span the US: Los Angeles's Shoshana Wayne Gallery is presenting two of Semmes's large-scale dress works, produced in 1992 and 1994, from January 11 to March 1, 2014. In New York, Semmes will show selections from her ongoing Feminist Responsibility Project, as well as ceramics, at Susan Inglett Gallery from February 6 to March 15, 2014.

IN THE EARLY 2000S, I inherited a stack of 1990s-era porn magazines. It's a long story in itself, but basically I was helping a friend in upstate New York who wanted to get rid of them but was too embarrassed to take them to the town's recycling center. I took them home. Not long after, I was working in my studio and I thought: I need these. As I was cracking them open, I had the idea to get some paint out. The first pieces were essentially cover-ups—fluorescent censorships. This is how the *Feminist Responsibility Project* began. I wanted the *FRP* works to have a protective aspect: protective to the viewer, protective to the subject. The covering up is nurturing—in a grandmotherish way—and it's complicated. The redactor is spending a lot of time with the imagery, censoring to keep you from getting/having to see the original material. The images break out of the control: There are rules, but these codes keep getting broken and content slips forward. I'm often putting this body of work to the side while I focus on another project, but then I end up returning to it. At this point it's been more than ten years, and I've made hundreds. They've taken on a painterly surface; they are structured in response to the absurdly concocted magazine scenarios. I make these drawings at the kitchen table. There's a lot of editing afterward. I'm rethinking and reworking them all the time. There will be pieces in the "not working" category that later become my favorites. It evolves.

I recently installed my show at Shoshana Wayne in Santa Monica—the main gallery is an expansive rectangular space—and the 1994 piece I'm showing there, *Buried Treasure*, fills the room. Re-seeing this work after many years, I was struck by how much of a drawing it is. There's one long sleeve and it drapes around the floor. The black crushed velvet is very light-absorbing; it has an oily burnt wood quality, a superblack, like vine charcoal. Many of my sculptures from the '90s were designed to take up space. The viewer is pushed way to the side; you can't really walk into the room. Like the *FRP*, there is a graphic sensibility to my[[?]] sculptural work of this time. The *Feminist Responsibility Project* is more intimately aggressive.

As the Susan Inglett Gallery show in New York approaches, I continue to ask myself about the relationship of the drawings to my ceramics. The question has been hanging over my head for at least five of the ten-plus years I've been doing the *FRP* drawings. Ceramics has been my most consistent medium—the one I continue to return to. I began working in clay right after I finished school. The pieces are hand-built. I begin with a lot of very wet clay and then build them up over time, adding handles. They are heavy and off-kilter, and there's no goal of perfection or lightness as with traditional craft. The glaze has a skin-like aspect; the works are extremely tactile. The ceramics enter into the gallery space as outsiders, as "anti-," and on some level I've always thought of the *FRP* drawings as doing the same.