

Griffin, Amy, "Self Conscious: Two Artists delve into matter of identity and perception in exhibits at Tang", *TIMES UNION*, 1 October 2014.



Self conscious: Two artists delve into matters of identity and perception in exhibits at Tang

By Amy Griffin

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Jester, pimp, entertainer. These are some of the identities that Jeff Sonhouse plays with in his work, on view at the Tang Museum. Next to his boldly painted portraits are pages torn from *Hustler* and *Penthouse* — the women depicted have been painted over strategically by Beverly Semmes. By placing these disparate works together in the same gallery, the museum's director, Ian Berry, highlights for viewers the conceptual similarities in the work of these two very different artists.

Both Sonhouse and Semmes take on issues of identity, masking, and representation, and both push the boundaries of painting in different ways. Sonhouse adds onto and burns into the canvas, while Semmes uses magazine pages as a surface for drawing with paint.

Using, and challenging, traditional portraiture in his show, "Slowmotion," Sonhouse depicts black men, some identified, some anonymous, all with an outward gaze that meets the viewer. Calling on influences as varied as traditional African masks, Romare Bearden, blaxploitation films and Chicago artist Ed Paschke, Sonhouse deftly critiques representations of black men and masculinity and the masking of true identities. His subjects are literally masked in a variety of prints and patterns.

For "Exhibit A: Cardinal Francis Arinze," Sonhouse quotes Frances Bacon's quote of Velazquez's "Portrait of Pope Innocent X." Arinze, widely considered as a top candidate for the papacy in the last two papal elections, would have been the first African pope in 1,500 years. Here, he wears the red-and-black diamond mask of a harlequin with a green background, evoking the three colors of the Pan-African flag. His hair is made from charcoal with embedded cowry shells, and he wears a rosary made of charcoal briquettes. Sonhouse's most striking use of mixed media affixed to the canvas involves matches. These are spliced, painted and layered, often forming large Afros, as in "A Bipolar Faith

Captured in Front of a Microphone." He lights and extinguishes these matches, sometimes leaving the imprint of smoke on the canvas, often burning right through the canvas. In this painting, conjoined twins with suits and faces of leopard print take the stand at a trial. The parts of their hair that aren't burned appear aflame with orange matches. The fire has eaten away at the words "In God We Trust" on the wall behind them. A single black leather glove is attached to a lapel, invoking the O.J. Simpson trial. The matches, smoke and burned areas seem to hint at the incendiary nature of race relations in America, made worse by the kinds of representations that Sonhouse skewers. In these portraits, the anger mixes with wit and Sonhouse avoids sanctimony.

Semmes, whose series is called "FRP" (for "The Feminist Responsibility Project"), in effect takes ownership of pornographic images of women, masking some areas and charging them with new meaning. Her quick, gestural overpainting sometimes, as in "Open Pot" and "Urn," turns the women into vessels, a nod to a different kind of objectification. With pop stars like Beyonce and Taylor Swift identifying as feminists and Emma Watson campaigning to challenge old stereotypes of what feminism is, it's possible that we're entering a post-post-feminist era. Semmes' strategic censoring of these images fits right in. These aren't first-wave feminist anti-porn images nor do they suggest that allowing oneself to be objectified equates with empowerment. Instead, she controls how we read these, sometimes heightening the sexuality with what she chooses to omit.

Included with these magazine paintings are crude sculptures made of red clay formed into large organic forms — like bodily organs arranged into totems. These are arranged around the middle of the room, while glass lamps hang from the ceiling. Like the mid-century modern "spaghetti plastic" lamps, these seem formed by extrusion. Semmes is exploring the same kind of intestine-like forms as in her clay sculptures. These three-dimensional pieces are a reminder that the body can be grotesque as well as attractive — it's all one organism.

In these two significant shows, both artists use masking to reveal as well as to conceal issues of identity in our culture. In doing so, each artist makes such skillful use of appropriation and humor as well as sheer technique that their works resonate on many levels. Along with everything else that's up at the museum right now, including the outstanding "I was a double" show downstairs, the Tang is not to be missed this fall.

Staff, "Solo Exhibits open at Tang July 5", THE SARATOGIAN, 2 July 2014.



Solo exhibits open at Tang July 5

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Three solo exhibitions of cutting-edge contemporary art open July 5 at Skidmore College's Tang Teaching Museum.

Opener 26: Jeff Sonhouse: *Slow Motion* features striking mixed-media portraits of African-American men by the New York-based painter in his first solo museum show. Opener 27: Beverly Semmes: *FRP* presents works on paper and ceramics from the artist's Feminist Responsibility Project. A third show, Opener 28: Erika Verzutti: *Mineral*, showcases an installation of bronze, concrete, and wax sculptures in the Brazilian artist's first solo museum show. The exhibitions are organized by Tang Dayton Director Ian Berry in collaboration with the artists.

All three artists have developed unique ways to represent their generations and to build on certain histories — issues of race and art history for Sonhouse, images of women and feminism for Semmes, and Brazilian modernism and conceptual sculpture for Verzutti. "The artists build on their particular traditions, and at the same time invent new ways of making and speaking about their experiences and ideas" says Berry.

Sonhouse, for example, "is of a generation of African American artists that are pushing against race as the only way to find meaning in contemporary portraiture and, in turn, makes paintings that resist categorization," Berry explains. Over the past decade, Sonhouse has created a powerful body of work, depicting often-masked figures that move painting into a third dimension. Vibrant in color, enlivened with harlequin patterns and fantastical settings, the works incorporate unusual materials — charcoal, shells, and matches — and are in many instances incendiary, literally. In *Meeting at the Crossroads* (2003), the figures' hair is constructed of hundreds of matchsticks that the artist individually glued into place and lit for a few seconds before extinguishing. Evidence of the burning becomes part of the work.

The power of his paintings, says Berry, comes from Sonhouse's unique play on traditions such as: "the formal portraiture of Picasso and the outside edge of pop from the '60s and '70s." The first solo museum exhibition devoted to his work, Opener 26: Jeff Sonhouse: *Slow Motion* brings together a selection of the artist's paintings from 2003 to the present, including several recently created pieces that will be shown for the first time at the Tang.

At the heart of Opener 27: Beverly Semmes: *FRP* is a series of new works on paper with page spreads from porn magazines that the artist has "censored" or "clothed" by roughly drawing and painting over explicit parts. Of her Feminist Responsibility Project, the New York-based artist says, "Picture a committee of rogue censors responding to the imagery of porn. They blot out the literal; what is left behind and altered now speaks in a different voice." The resulting works, colorful and visceral, can both shock and seduce. The installation also includes video, sound, a recent series of deep red, floor-standing ceramic sculptures and low-hanging glass chandeliers that join to form an organic, otherworldly scene.

Opener 28: Erika Verzutti: *Mineral* is an installation of sculptural works that builds on the artist's presentation at the critically acclaimed 2013 Carnegie International in Pittsburgh. Verzutti creates objects in earthy materials—bronze, clay, concrete, wax—cast in natural shapes suggesting fruits and vegetables as well as ceremonial forms such as totems and gravestones. While the works are organized as one installation, each piece has its own name, and "depending on how one looks at them, they are abstract and fantastical or everyday and familiar," says Berry. Accompanying them is a series of small bronze wall pieces with indents made from molds of things such as eggs or pieces of wood. This is the first solo museum show for the Sao Paulo-based artist, whose work is informed in part by Brazilian avant-garde art of the '50s and '60s that merged minimal conceptual work with organic modernist patterns.

Scott, Andrea. "Beverly Semmes", THE NEW YORKER, 21 February 2014.



The artist's drawings are a lighthearted riposte to a post-feminist culture in which pole dancing is considered an act of female empowerment. Semmes, who is best known for her sculptures in fabric and clay (examples of each are on view), inherited a stash of porn magazines from a neighbor a decade ago and started painting on the pages. Based on the evidence here, the game has some rules: eyes, hands, and feet can be seen, but that's about it. The coverup reads as both censorship and protection, especially in works where the redactions occur in short, swift, repetitive marks that suggest knitted stitches. The Dada collages of Hannah Hoch are an obvious precedent, but the works also recall the faked splotches of ectoplasm in early-twentieth-century spirit photography, as if Semmes were reuniting bodies and souls. Through March 15.

February 7 – March 15

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Schwendener, Martha, "Beverly Semmes: 'FRP'", THE NEW YORK TIMES, 14 February 2014.
p.C30.

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ART & DESIGN

Beverly Semmes: 'FRP'

FEB. 13, 2014

Art in Review

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER



Susan Inglett

522 West 24th Street, Chelsea

Through March 15

Students at the all-women's Wellesley College recently wrote a [letter](#) to the school protesting the installation of a sculpture of a near-naked male sleepwalker on campus. Various commenters on the Internet suggested the women stage a creative intervention and dress him up. If so, they might have used the work of [Beverly Semmes](#) as a model.

Ms. Semmes is known for making giant garments that engulf figures or entire galleries, forcing us to question the norms of appearance and attire. For her current exhibition, "FRP," short for "The Feminist Responsibility Project," she has drawn and painted over images of women published in pornography magazines. What she leaves blank, in the midst of these colorful, blobby abstractions, are the grasping hands, supplicating eyes, or sharp stiletto heels we associate with pornographic images (and performances). The "FRP" works hark back to Dada photomontage, Surrealism and even earlier (male) masters of biomorphic creepiness: Odilon Redon, Edvard Munch, Francisco Goya or William Blake.

Displayed nearby is a small group of Ms. Semmes's ceramic vessels, which suggest prehistoric fertility sculptures — reframed in modern times as fetish objects — and a long, red velvet garment that is tacked to the wall and flows onto the floor. The best works are the "FRP" images, though, which update the antics of Max Ernst and Hannah Höch and slyly invert concepts like censorship, defacement and "defilement," putting power into the hands of an artist who offers a cunning creative remix.

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

ARTFORUM

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.

FRP: An Induction

Ingrid Schaffner

What is the Feminist Responsibility Project? And why is Beverly Semmes in charge of it? By the time Semmes emerged as an artist, the first wave of Feminism had already subsided, transformed from a political form of activism to a cultural form of reference. Semmes is part of a generation who made their mark during the early 1990s with a Feminist take on Minimalist art of the 1960s. Think of the monumental, monochromatic, mostly metal, always hard monoliths of such artists as Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Richard Serra. Now apply fabric, fashion, the body, craft, appetite, desire, excess, because that's exactly what Semmes—along with such peers as Janine Antoni, Polly Apfelbaum, Kiki Smith, Jessica Stockholder—seemed to be making sculpture with, for, and about.

For instance Semmes's Red Dress, 1992, now in the collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. As big as the wall, and attached to it by a hanger, this gargantuan velvet gown cascades to the floor, where it pools and pushes us out of the way like a coming tide, a red tide. Get it? The metaphors and imagery of Beverly Semmes's art typically flow in this direction: from the female body and out into the landscape. Dresses are to be seen as vessels, as Semmes's pots made out of glass and clay demonstrate. Like cartoon images of "making a pot," these sculptural objects are gruntingly physical embodiments of the touch, the craft, the pleasure, and work that goes into building even the most elemental of forms. Whether it's pots or dresses, Semmes's works are environmental in sensibility and scale, billowing, icy, earthy, aqueous, or luminous, depending on material and color, which are always superabundant and sensational.

There is also a performance aspect to Semmes's work. The dress sculptures can appear as costumes, worn by gallery attendants as part of an exhibition, or by models in Semmes's photographs and videos. The latter are usually family members and friends. (Getting people you care about involved with your work is always important.) Semmes too performs on occasion. She sometimes dons wig and sunglasses to deliver a talk, or, even, while working. As an artist-in-residence at Pilchuk Glass School, Semmes must have struck a glamorous note, hanging around the glory hole (as the firey center of the foundry is called) in a patently 70s get up.

The seventies was, of course, also the heyday of Feminism, which brings us back around to the

original question. The Feminist Responsibility Project—or, to use the artist's acronym, FRP—makes its debut here at Rowan University Art Gallery in the form of a gallery installation with video, sculpture, photography, and two performers. The immediate impression is of a set-up so highly stylized and strange that it must stand for something. But what? The floor is covered in a foamy sea of white chiffon fabric, in the midst of which two women in voluminous gowns sit on chairs, facing one another. One woman's gown is striped, the other's a kind of canine camouflage, all-over-dog print. As identified by their attire and other insignia, the women are characters, the "Super Puritan" and "Bitch." They are doing a picture puzzle, spread out on a table between them. Overhead hangs a beautiful chandelier, hand-crafted of clear molten crystal; it is lusciously globular.

There are pictures on the walls. A projection covers one (like Warholian wallpaper, a picture that moves) with a video of a woman's feet, kicking a potato over a frozen lake. The potato, painted pink, messes the ice and makes a dull thudding noise that fills the gallery space. On the other walls hang a series of pictures that come straight from the core of Beverly Semmes's Feminist Responsibility Project.

Over the past eight years and shown for the first time in this exhibition, Semmes has been diligently collecting and correcting images from what she refers to as "gentlemen's magazines." This is a ladylike (Semmes hails from the South with roots in Arkansas and Alabama) reference to her sources: vintage Hustler and Penthouse magazines, the pornography of which she has masked with strategic coats of paint. And if the five FRP works included at Rowan are anything to judge by, this project is much less straightforward than it may sound. For one thing, despite Semmes's "corrections" it's completely obvious that we are being confronted with shots of classic American porn. Splayed, spread, sucking on things, the women are more masked than concealed by paint-jobs that only amplify their objectification. Now things get tricky and funny, too, since the female objects on view are now simultaneously crude consumer objects of male desire and highly crafted feminist works of art. Focus on the painted parts and you see these silhouettes, the scale and shapes of which look a lot like Semmes's sculptures: tactile, oversized, sensual, scatological, enveloping, grotesque, humorous, basic. If you grabbed any one of these painted forms and set it on the floor, you would see one of Semmes's pots or dresses. Masked in color, all of Semmes's forms specify the body as something elemental with a hole in the center.

The provocation of the hole lies at the center of the FRP installation. Note that the female attendants sit inside an erogenous "O" of fabric on the floor. (And of course, in porno- parlance, women are just holes.)

So what is the puzzle that the Bitch and the Super Puritan are piecing together? It's an FRP image that Semmes sent to a company in Germany that will turn any picture into a jigsaw puzzle. Speaking of puzzles, now seems like a good moment to introduce some of Beverly Semmes's own notes about her installation. The use of fabric and craft, she writes, are intended to reference first wave Feminist art practices with their infusion into the mainstream of women's work and decoration. The potato-kicking feet are flat-footed Freudian phallic symbols. Doing puzzles together is a favorite way of passing time with her mother.

Like any sacred ceremony or mystery play, Semmes's installation—with its fetish objects, icons, and acolytes—looks just sanctimonious and serious enough as to appear a little ridiculous to those of us who stand outside of it. Is this how Feminism looks today? Would only a bitch or a prig challenge the common wisdom that women have achieved equal opportunity as well as control over their own bodies? Has anyone been paying attention to Congress's gambit to slash support of Planned Parenthood? Or, on a lighter note, has anyone read Tina Fey? The most successful woman in comedy has been writing about her experiences coming up with the guys who dominate her profession. From an essay in *The New Yorker*, here is one of Fey's more pithy observations: "I have a suspicion—and hear me out, because this is a rough one—that the definition of 'crazy' in show business is a woman who keeps talking after no one wants to fuck her anymore." Caustic, funny, fearless, I love this quote: it's the Feminist Responsibility Project at work.

Taken as a whole, Beverly Semmes's FRP is a kind of camp. It disrupts the normal flow of pornography by strategically amplifying the awkward and obvious construction of the pose, the gaze, the exploitation, and the bodies that make it work. And it calls to order Feminism, along with social issues and political responsibilities that, in so-called Post-feminist culture, we may not care to embrace. Beverly Semmes' FRP shows us that Feminism retains the super bitchy, pure crazy power to prove that we are no way near finished with the project.

Beverly Semmes
"The Feminist Responsibility Project"

Catherine Liu

Male artists and novelists of the 20th century struggle with the label of "great American." Women artists and novelists seem to be cosmopolitan and exotic—nation free. Less tortured by national traditions and identities, and yet also decidedly marginal to the great nation building projects of the 20th century, women writers and artists have been spared the kinds of critical reception that shapes national identity. Russian émigrés writing in English and living in New York City seem more likely at any moment to write the great American novel than Joan Didion or Joyce Carole Oates.

Beverly Semmes' work situates itself squarely in the history of American visual obsessions. Although her practice is located at the crossroads of many cultural and art historical traditions—feminist, craft, installation, performance, soft sculpture, its most bold statements are about the inescapable and powerful, even corrective and redeeming qualities of American Puritanism in both the history of American feminism and the history of American sculpture and craft. The larger than life, high collared, high waisted dresses of her work from the 1990s, their ritualistic installation and exaggerated proportions have had enormous resonance with and even influence on interpretations of costume and attire, from the austere proportions of Rei Kawakubo's creations for modern working women, to the pools of fabric in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*: the co-ed coven of sadomasochists drown in pools of fabric that drape and hide the exquisite bodies of the women who trained to service the New York elite's darkest tastes. And then there is the HBO series *Big Love*'s Chloe Sevigny with her terrifying French braids, hyperbolic ruffles and thin-lipped angry demeanor. If in the 1990s, I was trying to think through the new relationship between pop art's mimetic relationship to commodity fetishism and a new generation of women artists, today I am struck by the ways in which popular culture has been freely borrowing and poaching from the contemporary art scene, unabashedly influenced and shaped by the aesthetics of performance and experimentation in the contemporary arts.

The originality of Semmes' vision has had far reaching effects both inside and outside the art world, and the new project breaks ground in its full frontal assault on contemporary trends in feminist and anti-feminist performance and sculpture. From the 1970s onward, women artists have demonstrated a remarkable degree of ambivalence and creativity with regard the female

nude. Putting their own bodies on display, Cosi Fan Tutti, Eleanor Antin, Hannah Wilke and Lynda Benglis invited us to look long and hard at their young and defiant bodies. Self-display as provocation has become somewhat of a cliché, artists such as Vanessa Beecroft and Nikki Lee have upped the performative ante, seeking out forms of theatricalization in degradation and fetishization aimed at destroying any principle of aesthetic or formal unity that curmudgeonly criticism might offer. Young women artists are put in a reactive position with regard to feminism and their ambitions in the art world. Evasive maneuvers notwithstanding, a young woman artist today has to deal with aesthetic decisions as a set of refusals and affirmations, as if she had to choose to accept or reject Semmes' ironically heavy handed formulation, "feminist responsibility."

Even though it may be intellectually and academically scandalous to cite Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss in one breath, it seems increasingly obvious that they have more in common with each other in their critical negativity than they do with contemporary art practice, which is more addicted to kitsch, theatricality and installation than they could ever possibly have imagined when they wrote their respective polemics against each of these techniques. Banksy's recent film *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010) demonstrates that in today's art world, marrying hype, celebrity and exhibitionism to superficial and facile political statements nullifies any kind of aesthetic or formal aspirations in the work of art. Semmes is channeling a parodic energy similar to Banksy's when she takes a risk with "Feminist Responsibility." While Banksy takes on the mindless aping of Warhol and its alleged commentary on commodity culture, Semmes takes on the gravity and seriousness of performance and sculpture, pointing to the ways in which they veer towards senselessness and erotic obsession.

Against Greenberg's affirmation of the formal and emancipatory qualities of abstraction, engagement with kitsch and the manipulation and reproduction of mass produced objects is a part of every art school curriculum. Against Fried's polemic against theatricality, absorption in the work is rejected in favor of ever more imitative and theatrical ways to display lack of technical skill and formal ambition. Against Krauss, escalating sloppiness in installation accelerates. The more disjointed the better, installation is now just one part of relational aesthetics where the artist mimics a service provider: cooking, palmistry and empathy are offered in a variety of messy, hands on settings, from camping vans and tents to full scale

reproductions of domestic spaces in gallery settings.

By the 1980s, an impasse was reached in contemporary art in the once productive tensions between transgression and prohibition. The more critically viewed a practice was, the more transgressive energies migrated to such forms of art making. Certain forms of artistic activity have become completely indistinguishable from pathological forms of acting out. In the name of justifying the banalization of self- display, self-mutilation and self-preoccupation, critical theory was both embraced and rejected as an unwieldy apparatus upon which to build one's ideas about the concept of making art itself. The middle classness of feminism both inside and outside the art world inspired many male artists of my generation to regard feminism as a fundamentally blue stocking, moral uplift kind of movement, produced by the repressed to repress others. Every time, however, a critical intervention is made denouncing contemporary trends and their arcs of recognition, the trends become strengthened, not weakened. Jeff Koons aggressively took on the sculptural and political rhetoric and self-display when he married La Cioccolina and then posed with his porn star wife as part of his "work."

The obscenity promoted by alleged working class maleness drew its energies from its projected other – nagging middle class feminist, hyper-intellectualized adversaries, many of whom were academically oriented and invested in something once known as "theory." Very quickly, feminist artists were seen as Academicians, pedantic in their sexual and aesthetic politics, even when the artists themselves had claimed self-exposure and the cloacal areas as their very own areas of preoccupation.

It was Mike Kelly against Mary Kelly. Richard Prince against Carolee Schneeman. These dramas are played out against an angry anti-elitism that might actually have taken a page out of Barbara Ehrenreich's work on middle class anxiety married to Norman Mailer's notorious essay, "The White Negro," with brainy white women trying to protect their recent advances into art world representation while white men slummed it as deadbeat dads and collectors of Playboy bunny mudflaps. An African- American woman artist like Kara Walker in the meantime, took on American history. Her understanding of craftsmanship and hucksterism and low entertainment has been a profound intervention in the fabric of contemporary art practice, but recently, the most visible artists of color end up coming from a Third World elite.

In the 1970s and early 80s, there was some- thing

vaguely proscriptive about the use of "gaze" theory as a way of castrating if not truncating the gaze: Laura Mulvey may be British, but the iconophobic impulses in her critique of the "male" gaze were definitely flowing from Protestant sources. Catholicism, the Baroque aesthetic and cults of Mary embrace excessive visual display of the compassionate maternal figure. Mulvey sort of told us it was wrong to look at women and desire them. There should be a different gaze the 1970s feminists suggested, a gaze that recognizes and empathizes with the other. There is nothing empathetic about Semmes' Super Puritan. The Feminist Responsibility Project represents a new strategic move on the chess- board of aesthetics and feminist politics. Semmes is calling out the historical associations between the political power of American feminism and the moral power of American Puritanism, whose energies she has obviously found a way of channeling.

The sense of surveillance is uncanny in Semmes' work, but in the Feminist Responsibility Project responsibility is crossed with the pleasures of Puritanical censure AND erotic voyeurism. Putting porn under erasure, Semmes "appropriates" and then violently marks up images of women twisted in acrobatic display of their genitals. We get a hint of fingers inserted into shaved orifices, mouths yearning and pulsating with exhibitionist desires. Ritualized and violent formal arrangements still characterize this work, but a primitive, raging ambivalence about the powers of the image of the female body course through its conceptual disposition.

The American relationship to the pleasures of seduction and the seduction of images is rife with contradiction: a disciplined relationship to visual pleasure seems to have been the end game of not just Calvinism, but feminism as well. And yet the countercultural drive for hedonism, self-indulgence and immediacy sets the stage for a monumental battle of the wills. In Semmes' work, the struggle between Puritanism and pleasure takes place within a single art- work: there is no "sex-positive" agenda in Semmes' engagement with erotic materials. Why has she been so obsessed with pornographic images? Why are her installaions of fabric so sensual and lush, and yet so haunted by austere alien witnesses who seem to sit in judgment of any form of spectacle at all?

There is something tantalizingly violent and grim about the defaced porn that Beverly Semmes has produced. The work is feral: in fact, as more of this work is displayed, it is going to be quite obvious that it is a serial and obsessive displacement of both erotic and repressive energies. Whether she is working with ceramics,

glass or fabric, Semmes is always pushing the

material to an excremental extreme, and then pulling back just at the point of breakdown in order to create something formally coherent and potentially uplifting. The dark side of the defaced porn is literally uncontainable – is there a moment of redemption for either porn or feminism? Does feminist responsibility produce a monstrous blob that moves out to stamp out all signs of pleasure with indelible ink? Or is Puritan vigilance the sexiest position of all?

We can better understand through the defaced pornography how throughout her career, Semmes has been revising the American Gothic and remaking it as the American grotesque. Giant dresses, blobs of fabric, blobs of ink are all out of proportion, celebratory and horrifying at the same time. In the most recent body of work, the performer as witness is a Puritan is hybridized with a feminist. This figure is a visionary, capable of calling us to arms when it comes to slavery and class oppression: she is a pioneerswoman with enormous inner resources. Her presence itself indicates that judgment awaits us all. The drive, however, for self-indulgence and immediacy sets the stage for a monumental battle of the wills, played out in Semmes' work against a horizon of political and formal innovation. The Puritan watches over us all, both outraged and satisfied by the agonies of feminist responsibility.

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.

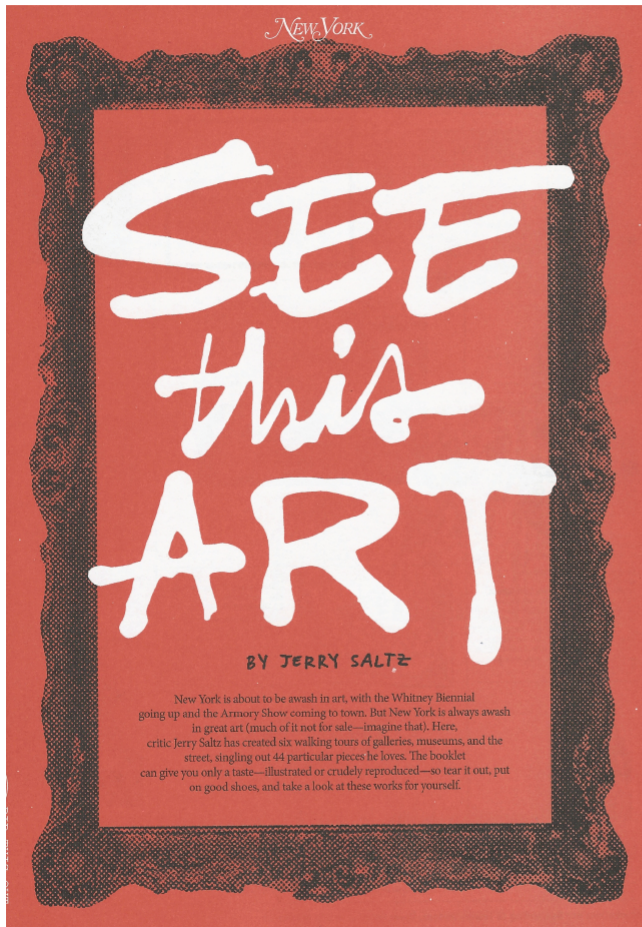
Drawing with ink or paint on pages from vintage *Penthouse* and *Hustler* magazines, Semmes boldly transforms stylized pornography featuring nude women, sexual acts and erotic calisthenics. In *Gloves* (2011), a seated, presumably nude woman wearing long gloves is now clothed head to toe, via an ink 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

Saltz, Jerry, "SEE this ART, NEW YORK MAGAZINE, 24 February 2014.



BEVERLY SEMMES, Eight, (2013)
Susan Inglett Gallery
522 West 24 Street

Well Known for making imposing clay vessels and gigantic garments, Semmes now takes on porn, showing just enough 'tude and body to slap a few faces.

Chattanooga Times Free Press

Sunday, May 8, 2011

TO GIVE THE NEWS IMPARTIALLY, WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOR

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Breaking News: 423-757-News

FINEARTS

Beverly Semmes makes blown-glass vessels, such as "Egg Basket," that are intended to be nonfunctional.

New York artist Beverly Semmes will be featured in a solo exhibition at Hunter Museum



'Starcraft'

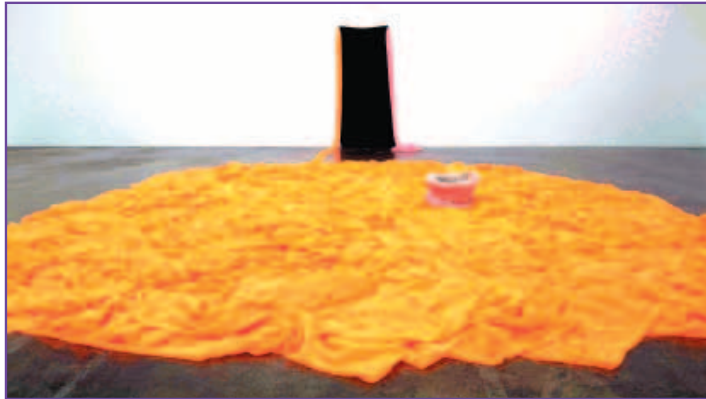
BY ANN NICHOLS
STAFF WRITER

Beginning May 15, visitors to the Hunter Museum of American Art can see sculptural dresses, photographs, collages, blown-glass vessels, ceramic pottery and a video installation by Beverly Semmes. The artist uses this variety of mediums to challenge the conventional definitions of craft and "women's work" by constructing nonfunctional items from traditional materials such as clay, fabric and glass.

"Treading the line between fantasy and reality, Semmes evokes visions of fairy tales through her lush dresses, distorted vessels and striking photographs," said Nandini Makrandi, curator of contemporary art for Hunter Museum. "All of the work is extremely tactile and brilliantly colored — from the luscious velvets in the fabric pieces to the thick clay in the ceramic 'sketch-pots.'"

The 52 pieces that will be in the show have been created since the 1990s. The focal point of Semmes' exhibit is her series of three dresses that range from 7 feet to 30 feet long. These large-scale silk and velvet dresses are "the mainstay of her work," according to Makrandi, and evolved from costumes she designed for her photographs and videos.

Throughout her career,



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

"Prairie Dress" is one of a series of three large-scale dresses that Semmes constructed for the exhibition.

Semmes has explored the themes of body and landscape, as well as contradictions — the beautiful versus the grotesque, the idea of absence and presence, and fetish and fascination.

In 1991, she began making ceramic and glass objects— typically functional items but in Semmes' hands, they were transformed into empty, nonfunctional, vessel-like forms. Assembling the dresses with these pottery and glass objects illustrates what Makrandi describes as the strength of the artist's work.

"What I see as the common thread is her ability to take materials and forms that have been made for centuries — dresses and pots — and push them in new directions," she said. "The intense

colors and sensual tactility of both dress forms and pots invite discussion of feminist imagery and desire. The works on display here investigate literally where the pot meets the dress."

Semmes, a resident of New York, grew up in Washington, D.C., and has ties to the South as her grandmother was a native of Chattanooga. She has exhibited in Denmark, Ireland and throughout the United States.

The exhibition continues through Oct. 23.

The museum, 10 Bluff View, is open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Friday, Saturday; noon-5 p.m. Wednesday, Sunday; and 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday. Call 267-0968.

Email Ann Nichols at annsichols@aol.com.

Flash Art



Beverly Semmes, *Recent Sculpture*, 1996. Installation view.

DÜSSELDORF

BEVERLY SEMMES BUGDAHNS UND KAIMER

The "Recent Sculptures" (the title of Beverly Semmes' exhibition) are made from a material that excludes the notion of sculpture in its technical sense (Lat. *sculperre* — to chisel): velvet and organza. Maybe the reference to sculpture as a medium is an attempt to claim the value and status of the works: working with needle and thread — Beverly Semmes makes the pieces herself — still carries connotations of typical, badly-paid, women's work and so-called "applied art."

One work was installed on each of the three levels of the gallery; the basic forms were taken from women's dresses, although the formats were unnaturally enlarged and the proportions distorted. The extended sleeves of the three "Black Gowns," lined up side by side in the first space, the sleeves of a single dress, *Yellow Pool*, surrounded the undulating organza strips of the skirt like a lake extending a number of meters into the space. The third work, *Shadows*, consisted of a series of six dresses made of transparent pink organza, whose long skirts stretched into the space, terminating in a straight line.

These dresses aren't just made for exhibition. They have a reference to the space that derives from minimal art, as borne out by the serial hanging, the use of the three dimensions, and the necessary movement of the viewer around the works. But their strength lies in their hybrid character, which doesn't rule out their being used.

In the gallery office there were a number of film stills showing friends of the artist wearing Semmes' sculptures, taken in a landscape with an atmosphere recalling the aesthetic of decadence with real flowers looking like artificial ones. In the performances and their documentation the dichotomies of the natural and the artificial, the body and its surroundings become unstable and give the performers the opportunity to reinterpret them.

Barbara Hess

(Translated from German by Shaun Whiteside)

ARTFORUM
I N T E R N A T I O N A L
SEPTEMBER 2006

Beverly Semmes

SHOSHANA WAYNE GALLERY

Beverly Semmes's second solo exhibition at Shoshana Wayne Gallery was billed as an homage to Annie Oakley. A photo of the marks-woman staring down a barrel graced the show's announcement, three of Semmes's trademark dresses-as-sculpture sported exaggerated right arms, possibly alluding to Oakley's trigger hand (though she was actually an ambidextrous shooter), and twelve crystal vessels subtly referenced the glass balls that Oakley was known for shooting as part of her act. But the muse who guided Semmes in the studio was still not too overweening a presence in the gallery, and this was all for the better. Rather than clinging to a backstory with a literalness that might have left viewers wondering if Semmes's garments were the emperor's new clothes, the show got on with the business of presenting a rich and insistent materiality and of elaborating a formal proposition that transcends specific narrative to address broader questions of identity and attitude.

Entering the gallery, viewers were confronted by the aforementioned crystal containers, each one made from a coil of molten glass. These are objects that embody multiple contradictions—looking wet even though they're dry, appearing soft while they're actually hard and brittle, conflating the erect with the slumped, unifying elegance and clumsiness, and suggesting the possibility of a vessel that is itself a fluid. The crystal pots are clarity incarnate, their dazzling plays on concept, materiality, and appearance making them the slick cousins to the other vessels on view: Crudely formed by hand from clay, then painted in electric orange-reds, these seem to be molded from pure color. Illuminated by dangling bulbs and looking like ice stubbornly refusing to melt, the crystal pots faced off with *Prairie Dress*, 1996–2006, a gunnysack made of deep-red velvet. The garment's chiffon sleeves are so long that the left one creates a puddle of pink fabric on the floor and the right forms a pond of orange. This was the largest work in the show but also the least interesting, little more than just another of the artist's usual suspects.

The work Semmes presented in the back room is fresher. Here, four more dresslike velvet sculptures—two with stretched right arms, one with long trailing braids, and one with a hole in the middle—seemed at first to bring things back to Oakley, but they also ultimately occupy a curious middle ground between this specific reference and



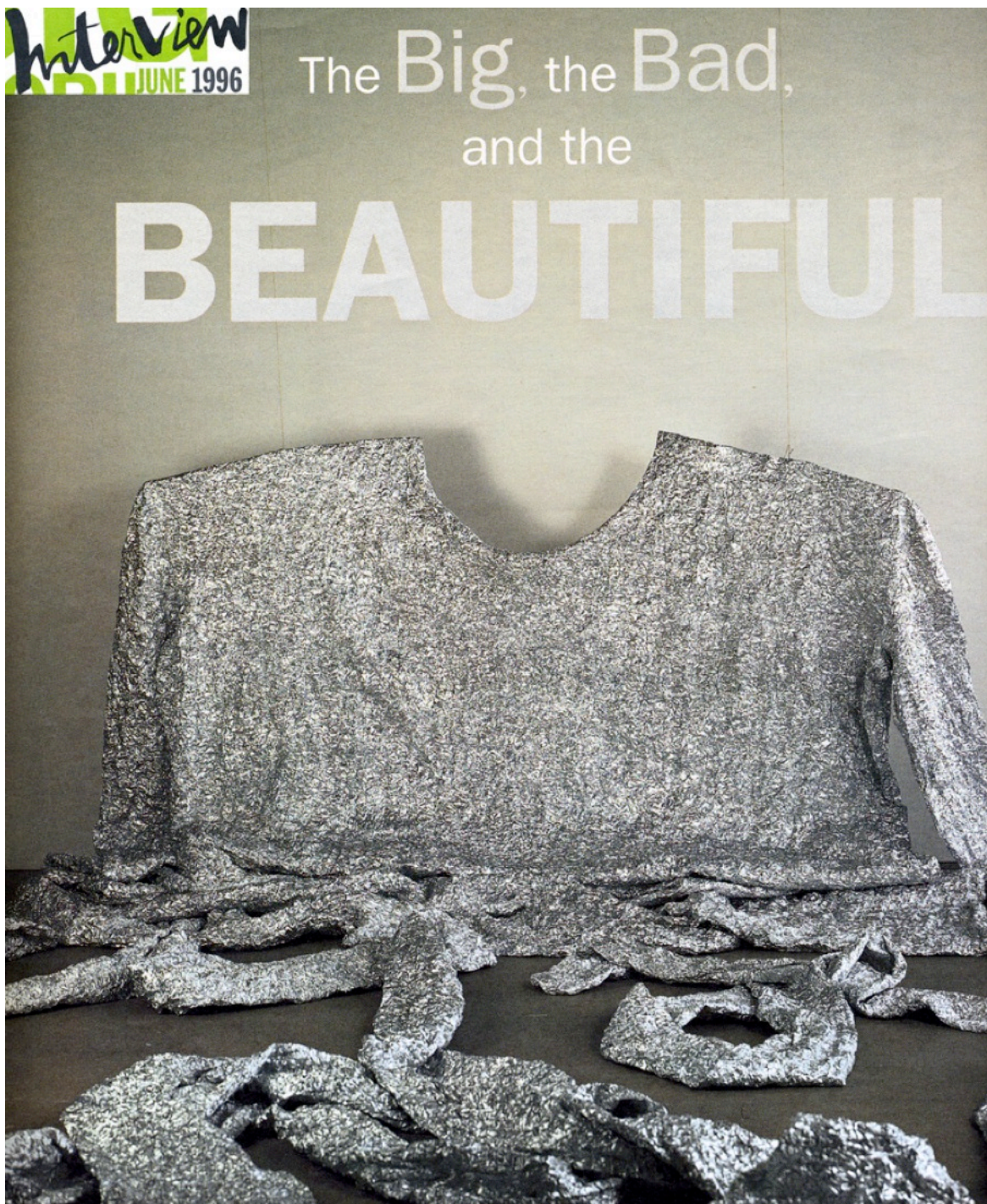
Beverly Semmes,
Prairie Dress, 1996–
2006, velvet, chiffon,
and glass, 6' 9" x
13' 4" x 23' 6".

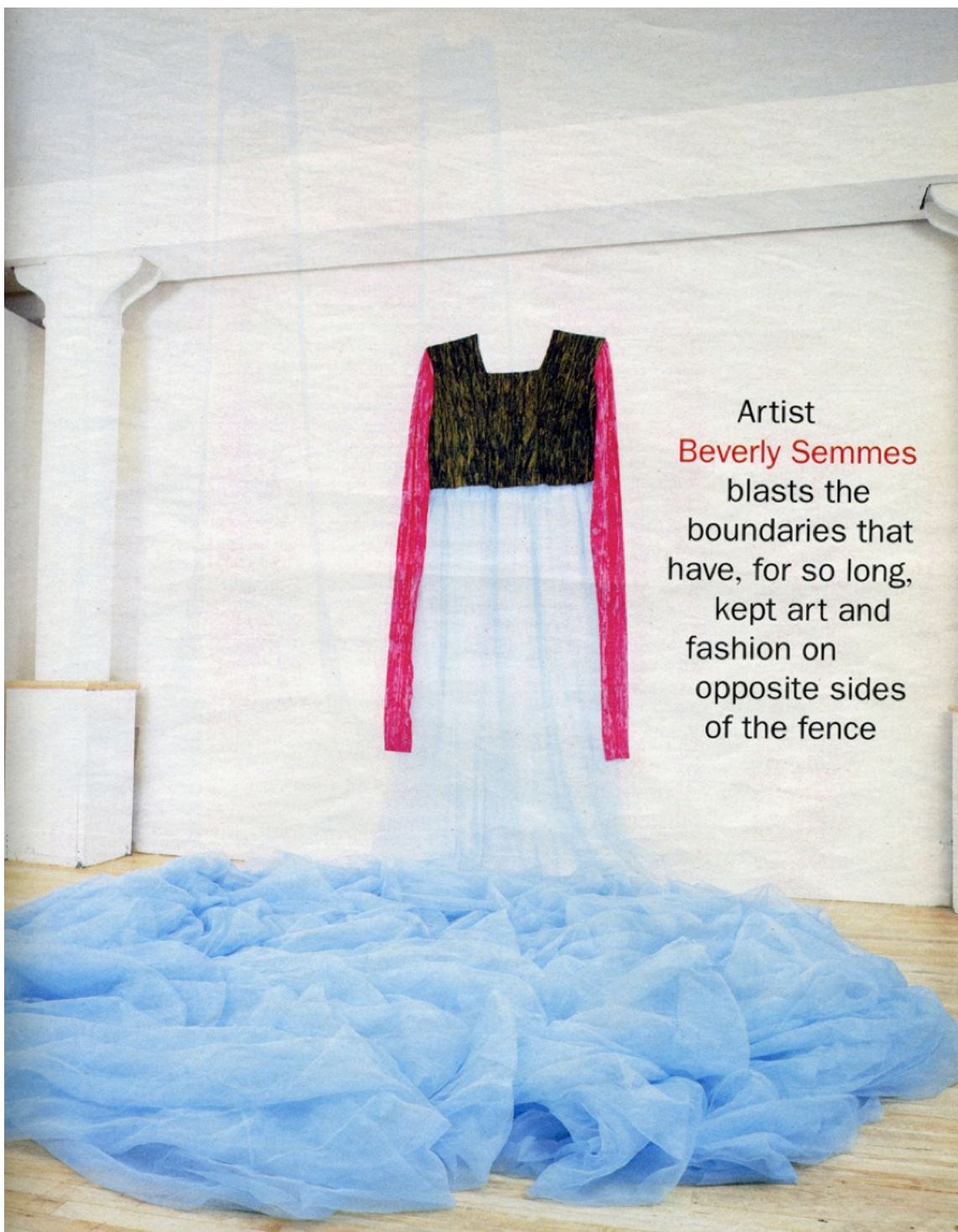
other, more purely functional or more obtusely coded meanings. These works, too, embody an abundance of contradictions: Their design is simple in conception but complex in execution. Semmes intertwines the attitudinal gestures of the expressionist, the Minimalist, and the fashionista to produce objects that are tough and frilly, hard and soft, loose and precise, showy and homely, serious and funny.

What might seem like simple riffs on the basic form of the dress, indulgences in fabric, or plays on geometry are in fact considerations of how form exudes a personality. Semmes's approach achieves a balance between the demands of history painting and portraiture and those of pure, referenceless object making and results in works that are allusive rather than straightforward. If she set out to make works *about* Oakley, she failed, but she succeeded in the much harder task of making works in sync with the sharpshooter's idiosyncratic spirit.

—Christopher Miles

McFarland, Terence, "The Big, The Bad and The Beautiful", INTERVIEW MAGAZINE, June 1996. p. 92-95.





Artist
Beverly Semmes
blasts the
boundaries that
have, for so long,
kept art and
fashion on
opposite sides
of the fence



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SUSAN INGLETT



PHOTOS: THE RUBELL FAMILY COLLECTION/MIAMI; COURTESY OF THE MICHAEL KLEIN GALLERY/NYC

TERENCE MCFARLAND: Beverly, your sculptural works use fabrics and clothing shapes in such a large scale. What's your relationship with fashion, both personally and in your art?

BEVERLY SEMMES: I'm very ambivalent about fashion. It's a constant source of anxiety for me. I always *mean* to dress up more, to care more about it, but half the time I can't seem to get myself to a store to buy a new pair of shoes.

TM: Do you welcome people's interpretation of your work as fashion or as a comment on fashion, or would you prefer that it's seen in the context of your background, which is sculpture?

BS: Well, obviously there's some relation to fashion just because they're clothes, and there's the fabric. But my work has less to do with what's on the runway this month and more to do with what Barbara Bush was wearing to the last Republican Party fundraiser. I'm really into that Barbara Bush style—kind of Peter Pan colors and big, boxy bodices, full skirts. To me, it's more about using the symbol of a dress than "fashion." The work I did at school was more abstract sculpture. I was doing large-scale pieces, but I had this feeling that the work was separate from me. One of the things that inspired me was this photograph I saw of the artist Louise Bourgeois, where she's standing on the stoop of a building and she's wearing this big coat with bulbous, breastlike latex forms all over it. There was no line drawn between her work and her body and herself. It really fascinated me and kind of gave me permission to go ahead with that idea.

TM: When did you start producing your "clothing-influenced" work?

BS: The first one was a pink feather coat I finished in 1988. I was obsessed with this formal, very manicured garden in upstate New York, and I made a garment to fit the space—to look like just another bush or shrub. I used it as a prop in this Super-8 film in which a friend and I slowly meander through the

hedges in this garden. After that, I kept trying to hang it at various shows, but it just didn't fit outside the context of the garden.

TM: At what point did the pieces begin to work on their own?

BS: At a big group show—all women—at BlumHelman Warehouse in 1991. I was given a corner to make an installation piece and started fooling around, setting up coats and some purple velvet bathrobes and hats and shoes—sort of as a dressing room people could enter—although I wouldn't have gone so far as to invite them to put the clothes on! And then, because the space had these incredibly high ceilings, I decided to hang the bathrobes so they trailed down the wall instead of on the floor. And they looked so much better. It was simple and straightforward enough for the viewers to project themselves into the piece and invent their own narratives. I liked leaving it open-ended.

TM: Other than in that early film, has anyone actually worn your pieces?

BS: Well, last year I designed the costumes and sets for a French dance company. It was a good experience, but also really frustrating because I had these definitive ideas about how I wanted the dancers to move in the dresses, and of course that wasn't my territory.

TM: Describe your large-scale, motorized piece *Big Silver*. How does it work?

BS: It begins with a big puddle of fabric on the floor—it's a kind of silver lamé but looks like tinfoil. And it's attached to a pulley with these very thin wires so it rises up, sort of hugging the wall like a curtain, and then it slowly becomes apparent that it's in the form of a dress rather than just—

TM: —a blob of fabric?

BS: [laughs] Right. It goes from a blob to a being. So this huge expanse of silver rises up to approximately twenty feet. But very slowly, like an iron lung. So slowly that you can stare at it and not really know it's moving. Yet the more

you look, the more it becomes apparent that it is, in fact, moving.

TM: Do you see your works as embodying different characters?

BS: I do think of my pieces as performers in a theater, but the early works had more distinct personalities for me. Recently they've become increasingly abstract.

TM: Tell me about *Blue Gowns*, which makes use of three identical pieces. Why multiples?

BS: I'm not really sure. Repetition is very formal, very reinforcing, very architectural. Those blue gowns look like columns to me.

TM: When I look at it, I think of three very strong female figures.

BS: *Blue Gowns* has been interpreted as representing The Mother—like you want to be held by its big maternal energy, but at the same time you feel repulsed, like you'll be smothered. It's sort of the idea of too-muchness. There's also this feeling that you don't want to let down your defenses in front of this thing.

TM: Have you ever thought about designing everyday clothes?

BS: I wouldn't even know where to begin. And I'd be such a fascist of a fashion designer! [laughs] I'd be like, "Stand here against this white wall and cover up your head. And if you *do* have to move, please move very slowly and mechanically." I've always felt that fashion is some kind of game, and I don't quite understand the rules. In a way, my work is my alter ego, which can be glamorous, or grand, or seductive, or larger-than-life. I have this clear sense of how I want these works to be seen, placed perfectly on the wall just the way I want them. But as for me and what I choose to wear day-to-day, I'd rather be invisible. ■

Editor's note: Beverly Semmes's work will be on exhibit at the following galleries: The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (through June 23); the Norton Gallery, West Palm Beach, Fla. (through July 7); the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Va. (June 25 through September 9); and the Michael Klein Gallery, NYC, in October.

Artwork on this and the preceding pages: Page 92, *Big Silver* (1996), materials include electric-motor parts and ceramics; page 93, *Pink Arms* (1995), materials include velvet and organza; page 94, *Blue Gowns* (1993), materials include velvet and organza.

Interview by Terence McFarland

INTERVIEW June 1996 95