

Harris, Susan. "ArtSeen: Beverly Semmes *POT PEEK*," *The Brooklyn Rail*, 16 February 2022.



Beverly Semmes: *POT PEEK*



Beverly Semmes, *Copper Curtain*, 2021. Acrylic and glitter over photograph printed on canvas, 91 1/2 x 54 1/4 inches. Courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

Beverly Semmes's current show at Susan Inglett Gallery represents the multitude of modes and media with which she has been engaged for the last thirty years while introducing notable new elements that invite reflection on the relationship between her signature dress and ceramic sculptures and her "Feminist Responsibility Project" (FRP), an ongoing series in which she paints and draws over '90s-era porn magazine pages.

Beverly Semmes: Pot Peek comes on the heels of her inclusion in *Witch Hunt*, a show that took place in the fall at the Hammer Museum and the ICA-LA and whose premise began with considering what it meant to be a feminist in the age of Donald Trump. Semmes's installation included tall, red, shiny phallic towers of stacked, handmade clay pots with a crazy jumble of handles invoking Medusian snake-infested heads; these foregrounded a group of life-sized, mixed-media paintings from the "Feminist Responsibility Project."

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Semmes has been probing and poking at the complexities of the female body and its representation in an open-ended exploration of gender, power, and the patriarchy since the early 1990s, starting with cascading dresses that claimed space and voice through immense scale, brilliant color, and performative elements, as well as with handmade, deliberately awkward clay vessels and blown glass chandeliers, and photography and video. In the early 2000s, Semmes inherited a stack of 1990s *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines that she eventually began to work on by covering up the models' revealing parts with ink and paint. Semmes's protective, concealing instincts in what she later titled the "Feminist Responsibility Project" were as much directed towards the subjects as her viewers—even as she realized that her efforts to "fix" the X-rated parts brought even more attention and curiosity (including her own) to them. What does it mean, after all, for a female, feminist artist to paint on pornographic images created by men for men's gazes and pleasure?



Beverly Semmes, *Red See*, 2021. Ink, acrylic over photograph printed on canvas
55 3/4 x 40 inches. Courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery, New York.

Semmes's latest "FRP" works take over the main gallery in eye-popping, boldly colored, larger-than-life canvases on which she has enlarged and transferred the vintage porn images and covered them with painting, drawing, and printing. *Copper Curtain* (2021) is an almost 8-foot-high canvas that leans against the wall, resting on two yellow velvet bricks that look like feet poking out on the bottom—like those of the Wicked Witch of the East in *The Wizard of Oz*. Its large scale and occupation of the gallery space recall Semmes's oversize dresses that unfurled into the viewer's space, much as *Imitation Lambswool Dress* (1993) does, installed in the back gallery with its two sleeves draping down the wall and onto the floor in a long,

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unbroken loop: a drawing that jumped off the wall and into the room. Over much of its surface, *Copper Curtain* features a rippling, generously applied coating of copper-glitter that hangs like a stage curtain with thickly impastoed, white vertical ribbons of paint in the middle and, below that, vertical bands of gold paint overlaid by a graphic flourish of green curlicue. The paint and glitter cover the entire surface save for the small rectangle on the bottom right, out of which peers the photographic image of a sandaled foot stepping alluringly on a cushion on the sand, which quite humorously lines up with the velvet yellow brick. Did I mention how funny and clever Semmes's art is?

Winter Wheat and *Red See* (both 2021) are similarly startling in their reliance on curtains or screens of paint that not only obscure most of the underlying imagery, but do so through an unprecedented emphasis on a layering or weaving of bands of paint. In the spaces between *Winter Wheat*'s loosely laced warp and weft of blue painted lines, for example, are suggestions, not of titillating porn but of an abstract landscape defined in terms of space and light, an uncharacteristic terrain for Semmes. She moves back to her porn police post by revealing at the bottom right corner just a fragment of an arm and a high-heeled boot—both in black leather and occupying a space behind the painted blue screen, even as a flatly painted ceramic teapot perched on the heel is coplanar with it.



Beverly Semmes, *Eye Tooth*, 2021. Ink, acrylic over photograph printed on canvas, 54 7/8 x 40 inches. Courtesy Susan Inglett, New York.

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The exhibition's title, *POT PEEK*, reflects the extensive presence of her ceramic vessels—sculpted, painted, and metaphorical—throughout Semmes's oeuvre (even though this show might well have been titled "foot fetish" for all the feet and high heels that abound). Since the beginning of the "FRP" series when Semmes was working on a more intimate scale, she initiated the habit of concealing the racy images with a painted or drawn version of her clay teapots, thus inserting her own vessel as a metaphor for the female body in place of an inherently misogynistic one. She compared her ceramics with the "FRP" works in a 2014 *Artforum* interview: "The ceramics enter the gallery space as outsiders, as 'anti-' and on some level I've always thought of the 'FRP' drawings as doing the same." Semmes further subverts the male gaze in the current show's paintings *Eye Tooth* and *See Through* (both 2021) by covering the entirety of their presumably untoward content with her painted pots except for an eye that stares out at the viewer.

The show at Susan Inglett Gallery brings together many elements of Semmes's ardently feminist enterprise and exposes her art as an evolution of constant distillation and transformation. What stands out after three decades of making is the artist's longstanding commitment to process and materials in a multimedia body of work that is humorous, tactile, awkward and, in her words, "intimately aggressive."