

DIRECTIONS

BEVERLY SEMMES

MARCH 21-JUNE 23, 1996



Kimberly (detail), 1994, crushed velvet and organza, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist, courtesy Michael Klein Gallery, New York.

KIMBERLY, 1994, BEVERLY SEMMES'S installation at the Hirshhorn, materially expresses the insatiable nature of desire. Sewn of lush, rich fabrics—crushed golden velvet for the bodice, and sheer pink organza for the flowing skirt—this voluminous dress form spills out onto the gallery floor nearly thirty feet from the wall. Threatening to overwhelm and envelop us, *Kimberly* (cover and fig. 4) simultaneously challenges our relationship to its intriguing presence, at once familiar and distorted, and to the surrounding architecture. Indeed, the shocking triviality of the dress and its material excess assault the senses. Engaging us on a visceral level, *Kimberly* curiously registers our need to touch, feel, and desire “her.” Who is the monumental woman capable of wearing such a dress? Is she beautiful? Is she grotesque? We are curiously drawn in and shockingly repelled by the possibilities. *Kimberly* wreaks havoc with our notions of beauty.

Semmes began to sew her monumental clothing sculptures in 1991 out of an array of fabrics—elegant silks, velvets, and organzas, as well as mohair, flannel, wool, and rubber-treated cloth. Sometimes approximating human scale, as in *Little Grey Suits*, 1992 (fig. 1), Semmes's sculptures generally exist in exaggerated and attenuated reality. Uneven sleeve lengths meander in artful patterns on the floor, and skirts pile in baroque festoons often overtaking the architectural spaces they inhabit. Provocative yet restrained, witty and always contemplative, Semmes's installations explore the sculptural and emotive possibilities of dress.

Semmes's “empty dresses” are frequently viewed within a feminist context. This approach to her art is based, in part, in the handcrafted aspect of her sculptures, often associated with “women’s work” and their obvious reference to women’s fashion. Indeed, the “body politic” as the locus for discussions about gender and identity has been a subject of great interest to many artists working in the 1990s, including Cindy Sherman, Mariko Mori, Chuck Nanne, Sylvie Fleury, and Karen Kilimnik. Through the medium of photography and the creation of sculptural tableaux using fashion items and accessories, these artists have explored the social and cultural implications of clothing.¹ *Kimberly*, too, is a work very much about the psychology of fashion. Recalling a high-school prom dress and other ceremonial gowns, *Kimberly* represents a powerful cultural sign about “coming of age.” The prom gown, like a wedding dress that is worn only once and then relegated to the closet, becomes a fetish—an overblown symbol of a young woman’s hopes, promises, dreams, and desires that is reflected in the sculpture’s gargantuan propor-



1. *Little Grey Suits*, 1992, imitation lamb's wool, 38 x 34 in. (96.5 x 86.4 cm). Collection Jay Jopling, London.

tions. Objectifying an event in a woman's life that is fraught with contradictory emotions, *Kimberly* embodies dualities: innocence and experience, individuality and conformity, anticipation and disillusionment.

This type of gendered reading combined with Semmes's inclusion in a number of recent exhibitions organized around the subject of dress in contemporary art² has placed her firmly within the discourse about identity politics and the body that has dominated the art world of the early 1990s. In some respects, however, the politicized context has clouded a deeper understanding of Semmes's sculpture in terms of its connection to landscape, a constant in her work since the early 1980s. The critical focus has also discouraged consideration of the works' strong formal qualities and of the artist's interest in aspects of performance. To gain deeper understanding of Semmes's projects in the latter context, one must look to her films and photography from 1988 to the present as they relate to her sculptures. The film and photographic works reveal the insistent presence of the figure and the sense of narrative implied by the figures' actions in landscape.

In 1988–89, Semmes made two short films, which together are titled *In and Around the Garden*. These early film sketches, in which the human figure “wears” the landscape, shed light on the origins of Semmes’s sculptural language and its deep ties to nature. Donning “hedge hats,” “cloud coats,” and “watercoats,” which Semmes created out of plastic myrtle, expanded aluminum mesh, feathers, cloth, and wax, figures (typically the artist or the artist’s friends) animate the sculptures in garden, coastal, and interior settings. The actions recorded in the films relate to accompanying film stills (see fig. 5) and independent photographs staged for the camera. Here, nature and the body come together with a frank and disturbing fluidity.

In the first film of the series, 1988–89 (1 minute, 15 seconds), a figure in a coat and hat made of pink feathers ventures through an exquisitely manicured nineteenth-century garden. The perfectly pruned hedges and modulated topiary shrubs are echoed in the sculptures created and worn by the artist. As the costumed Semmes engages in a curious, investigatory dance with a shrub, she parodies the ridiculousness of the garden and its unnatural exactitude. Also growing out of her experience in the garden was a monumental sculpture, *Cloud*, 1990 (fig. 2), a bulbous formation made of expanded aluminum mesh. Evoking shrub mounds, this work is related to Semmes’s other large-scale sculptures of the 1980s that refer to landscape.

In the second film, 1989 (2 minutes, 15 seconds), Semmes wears a purple velvet bathrobe and a “cloud hat” made of aluminum mesh. As she sits in serene woods in her constructed garb, Semmes performs a miraculous feat with a series of brightly colored oranges. Appearing to levitate from the ground, the oranges are scooped up into her hands in quiet rhythmic motions. The purple velvet bathrobe and “landscape props” that appear in the films (feather coat, hedge and cloud hats) led to the creation of other props and wearable fabric sculptures for use in independent photographs, such as *Figure in the Cloud Clothing with Cloud Hats and Purple Velvet Bathrobes*, 1991 (fig. 3). The “props” from the latter photograph eventually became part of a discrete sculpture, *Four Purple Velvet Bathrobes*, 1991, the artist’s first independent fabric sculpture featuring robes on hangers hung directly on the wall. According to Semmes, the human figure no longer was necessary to her work. For her, the absence of the body was as much the result of striving toward simplification of form as it was a desire to address corporal politics.³

Translated into Semmes’s subsequent monumental dress sculptures of the 1990s is the exaggerated scale of

Cloud, as well as the metaphoric reference to landscape and architecture, underscored by the titles of the works: *Yellow Pool*, 1993; *French Landscape*, 1993; *Black Doorway*, 1993; *Cherry Blossom I–III*, 1994, and *Haze*, 1994. Cascading rolls of sheer fabric evoke trickling waterfalls and puddling pools, meandering sleeves suggest wandering vines, and delicate mesh fabrics take on atmospheric qualities. The pooling pink fabric of *Kimberly* and the material excess of its golden pillows also evoke landscape. The topography here, however, is psychological rather than natural.

Semmes’s interest in landscape as metaphor and as a place to perform has precedents in the work of Rebecca Horn and the late Ana Mendieta, both of whom filmed and photographed their actions and interventions in landscape in the 1970s.⁴ The relationship of Semmes’s figures to landscape, however, differs markedly from Horn’s or Mendieta’s in that Semmes’s figures are not transformed through nature; they relate independently and ambivalently. In some respects Semmes’s sculpted figures mimic and parody landscape, making no attempt to succumb to or become one with its forces. Instead they are absorbed by the clothing. Cornelia Butler has noted that the pink feather coat has more presence than the moving, animated figure.⁵

Semmes’s photographs of sculpted beings in landscape and in staged interior settings are not records of complete actions. They capture, rather, a suspended moment—a glimpse into another reality, dreamlike and



2. *Cloud*, 1990, installation at P.S.1 Museum, The Institute for Contemporary Art, Long Island City, New York; wheat straw bales and aluminum, 216 x 264 x 132 in. (548.6 x 670.6 x 335.3 cm). Destroyed.



3. *Figure in the Cloud Clothing with Cloud Hats and Purple Velvet Bathrobes*, 1991, C-print, edition of 5; paper 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm), image 4 7/8 x 3 1/8 in. (11.7 x 7.9 cm). Collection of the artist, courtesy Michael Klein Gallery, New York.

phantasmic. This surreal world, however, is not free of conflict. A strong element of longing overtakes the figures as they look out onto the landscape or toward a light source from a window, as in *Figure in the Cloud Clothing with Cloud Hats and Purple Velvet Bathrobes*. Here, real and imaginary worlds collide. Trapped in a moment of ethereal transformation, the imaginary figure is grounded in real time by the hanging robes.

Narrative is implicit in Semmes's independent fabric sculptures such as *Kimberly*, which may be said to "perform" in their own right; they imply motion, tension, and direction via their scale and placement within an architectural space. We sense the sheer mass of *Kimberly*, for example, as yards of fabric pile and pool on the floor. Both weighted and weightless, she is, in essence, a geometric volume that may be interpreted in terms of line, color, material, shape, and form. The controlled placement of every fold and the determined rhythmic scattering of pillows in symmetrical arrangements show a desire for equilibrium and balance. The stark division between the zones of pink and gold where the bodice meets the skirt suggests fields of color, as do the ambient reflections of color on the surrounding walls.

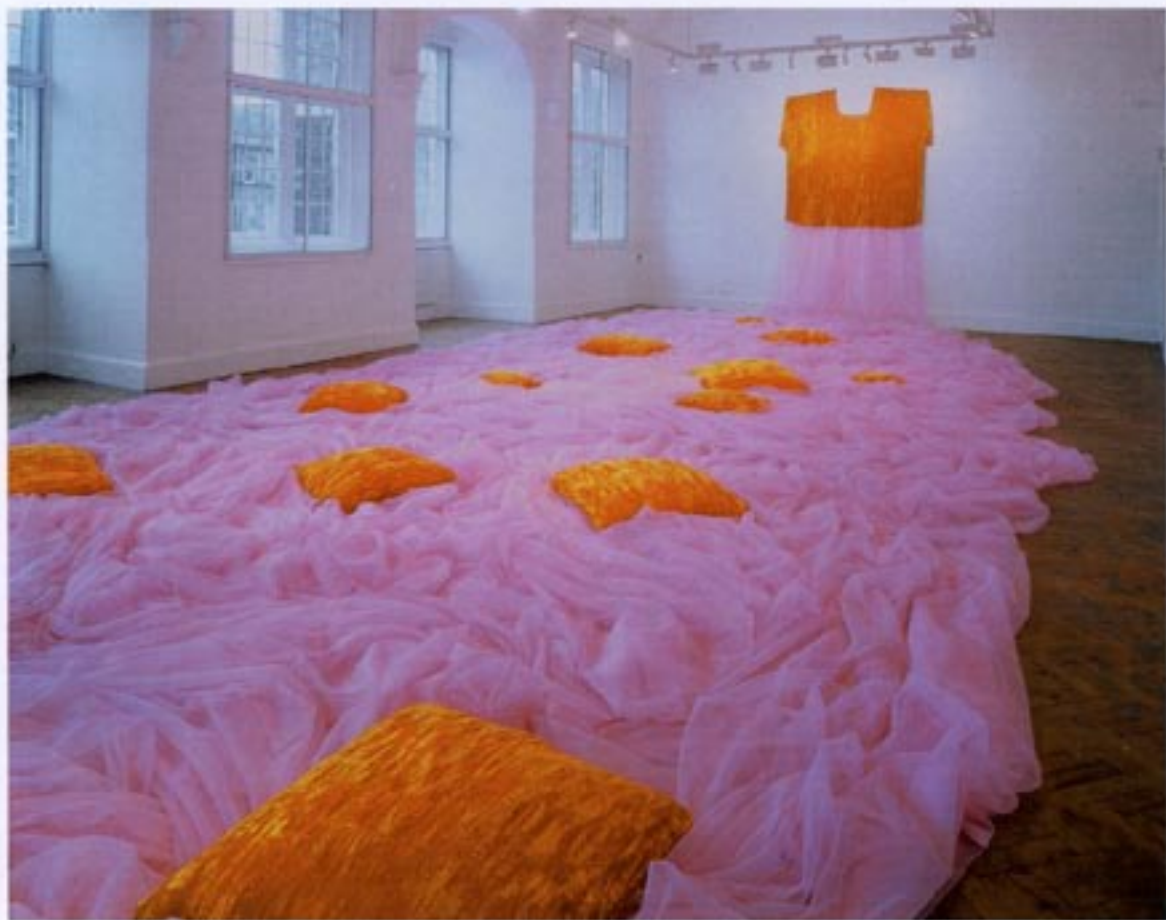
Throughout the history of Western art, drapery has been used as a compositional motif to amplify the human figure and suggest motion. As a decorative backdrop in painting, swathes of elegant fabrics often create depth and indicate the directional action of the figure, as well as heighten the drama of the moment depicted. In portraiture the number of folds and the type of fabric can convey social status and imply ease, grace, and levels

of distinction in the sitter. In Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, 1645–52, in Rome, exaggerated billowing effects of stone-carved fabric around the figure deeply enhance the mystical moment of grace the sculptor depicted. Such associations and pictorial traditions are brought to bear on Semmes's contemporary manifestation. Always an ancillary, yet essential, component of figural art, the sculptural qualities of drapery here become a primary concern. Evocative of both landscape and the human figure, Semmes's *Kimberly* objectifies insatiable, unquenchable desire and its many provocative contradictions.

Olga Viso
Assistant Curator

Notes

1. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, artists Joseph Beuys, Mimi Smith, Judith Shea, and Maureen Connor were using fabric in a sculptural, feminizing way, a type of critique that has become ever more politicized in the 1990s.
2. Recent exhibitions (1993–95) dealing with fashion and contemporary art include: Independent Curators, New York, and traveling, "Empty Dress: Clothing As Surrogate in Recent Art"; John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, "Discursive Dress"; Florida International University Art Museum, Miami, "American Art Today: Clothing As Metaphor"; and Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, "Fall from Fashion."
3. Conversation with the artist, May 24, 1995.
4. In an early performance by Horn, *Unicorn (Einhorn)*, 1970–72, a figure wrapped in fabric embarks on a "trancelike" journey into the misty morning landscape "in competition with every tree and cloud in sight" (Rebecca Horn, texts accompanying "Objects and Installations," fig. 4, *Rebecca Horn* [New York: Rizzoli, 1993]). The journey of Semmes's curious figure in the pink feather coat through the garden bears the strong influence of Horn, who also recorded her performance on film. Semmes's attenuated fabric sculptures are further presaged in Horn's *Arm Extensions*, 1968, which she created by wrapping the human body in bundles of fabric and *Feather Instrument*, 1972, in which the figure inhabits an armature of feathers. I am grateful to Stephanie Jacoby for her insightful observation regarding the connection between Horn and Semmes.
5. Cornelia Butler, "Beverly Semmes," *Beverly Semmes* (New York: Artists Space, 1990), 2.



4. Kimberly, 1994, installation at Camden Arts Centre, London, crushed velvet and organza, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist, courtesy Michael Klein Gallery, New York.



5. *Cornelia Walking through the Formal Garden in the Pink Feather Coat and Hedge Hat #1*, 1988. C-print, edition of 5; paper 10 x 8 in. (25.4 x 20.3 cm), image 4 7/8 x 3 in. (11.1 x 7.6 cm). Collection of the artist, courtesy Michael Klein Gallery, New York.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Washington, D.C. Attended School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in cooperation with Tufts University, Boston, B.F.A. 1982; Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, 1982; Yale University School of Art, New Haven, M.F.A. 1987. Received Visual Artists Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts, 1994. Lives and works in New York.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 Artists Space, New York, "Beverly Semmes"; P.S.1 Museum, The Institute for Contemporary Art, Long Island City, New York, "Beverly Semmes: Special Projects."
- 1992 Sculpture Center, New York, "Beverly Semmes—Installation."
- 1993 Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, "Beverly Semmes"; Contemporary Culture, Dallas, "Beverly Semmes," organized by and tour to Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
- 1994 Michael Klein Inc., New York, "Beverly Semmes"; Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, Italy, "Beverly Semmes"; Galerie Ghislaine Husemot, Paris, "Beverly Semmes"; Southampton City Art Gallery, England, "Beverly Semmes," and concurrently, James Hockley Gallery, West Surrey College of Art and Design, Farnham, Surrey, "Beverly Semmes: Buried Treasure," and Camden Arts Centre, London, "Beverly Semmes: Kimberly."
- 1995 Kemper Museum for Contemporary Art and Design, Kansas City, Missouri, "Beverly Semmes: Yellow Fool"; Baxter Gallery, Maine College of Art, Portland, "Beverly Semmes"; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, "Options 50: Beverly Semmes."

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1991 Blum Helman Warehouse, New York, "Plastic Fantastic Lover (object a)."
- 1993 Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, "American Art Today: Clothing As Metaphor"; Denver Art Museum, "First Sightings: Recent Modern and Contemporary Acquisitions"; Russisches Kulturzentrum, Berlin, "Extravagant: The Economy of Elegance"; Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, "Fall From Fashion"; Neuberger Museum, State University of New York, Purchase, "Empty Dress: Clothing As Surrogate in Recent Art," and Independent Curators, Inc., tour; Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn Harbor, New York, "Image Makers"; 1994 New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, "Bad Girls"; Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, "Bad Girls West"; Todd Gallery, London, "Stephen Hepworth, Byron Kim, Cathy de Morschauz, Beverly Semmes"; Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, "From Beyond the Pale: Art and Artists at the Edge of Consensus: Selected Works and Projects (Part One)."
- 1995 Brattleboro Museum and Art Center, Vermont, "Universe of Meaning"; Entwistle, London, "Fashion Moda"; Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, New York, "In Three Dimensions: Women Sculptors of the '90s, Part I, Issues of Gender."

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Options 50: Beverly Semmes. Exhibition brochure. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995. Essay by Amada Cruz.

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CHECKLIST

Kimberly, 1994
crushed velvet and organza
dimensions variable
Collection of the artist, courtesy Michael Klein Gallery, New York



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