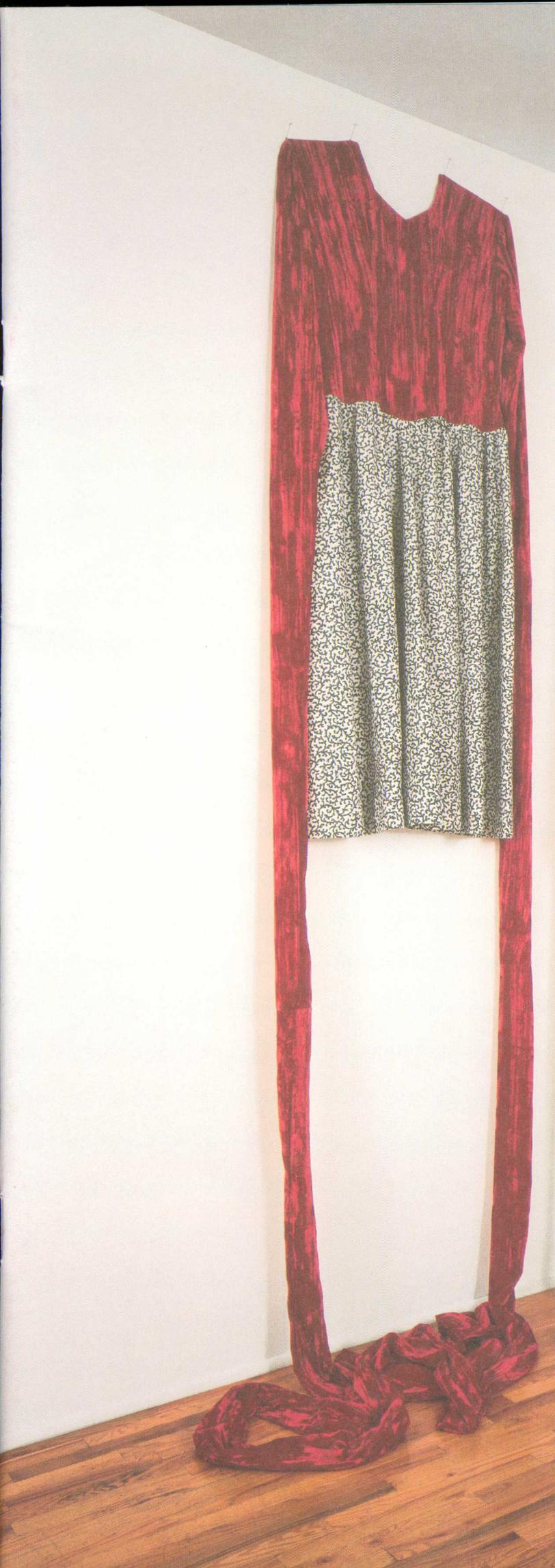


Semmes



## Beverly Semmes

Smith College Museum of Art  
Northampton, MA | April 12 – June 30, 1996

Norton Museum of Art  
West Palm Beach, FL | April 27 – July 7, 1996

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts  
Richmond, VA | June 22 – September 8, 1996

*The catalogue is supported in part  
through the generosity of the  
Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation*





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# Preface

## and Acknowledgments

This catalogue is the result of a unique collaboration between the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida; the Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts; and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia. Each museum is exhibiting work by Beverly Semmes during the spring or summer of 1996. Collaboration on a joint catalogue made possible a much more extensive and complete publication, affording a better understanding of the complete *oeuvre* of Beverly Semmes. We hope that this cooperative effort will benefit the museum visitors at each institution, and even encourage visits among institutions to see different aspects of Beverly Semmes's work.

We would like to thank the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation for its generous support of this publication. Ray Graham encouraged the Norton to develop a collaborative venture between institutions exhibiting contemporary art. All three institutions are pleased that the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation chose to support this project.

### FIGURE 2

*Haze*, 1994  
Crushed rayon velvet  
12' x 9' x 3'  
Collection of the Artist  
Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

The Norton Museum of Art received additional underwriting for the exhibition from the Ralph H. and Elizabeth C. Norton Philanthropic Trust. Lisa Hurley, Assistant Curator of the Norton, was responsible for the selection of works for the Norton's exhibition as well as for organizing the collaboration and for the development of the catalogue. The Norton would like to acknowledge former Norton Assistant Curator Olga Viso, now at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, who first introduced Beverly Semmes's work to the Norton. David Setford, Chief Curator, provided invaluable advice at every stage of the exhibition planning process. Kyle Zimmer, Director of Public Affairs, and Molly Murphy of Red Letter Design Group are to be commended for their efforts in the design and organization of this catalogue project.

The Smith College Museum of Art's installation, *Big Silver*, was organized by Linda Muehlig, Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture. A newly commissioned work, *Big Silver* was developed during the artist's residencies at the Fabric Workshop and Museum and at the Clay Studio, both in Philadelphia. In addition to the staff of the Smith College Museum, the following individuals are gratefully acknowledged for their assistance: Director Marion Boulton Stroud, Project Coordinator Merrill Mason, and Assistant Printer Chris Kronthaler of the Fabric Workshop and Museum; Director Jim Clark and School Shop Manager Matt Courtney of the Clay Studio; Director Patrick Murphy and Preparator William Rumley of the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; and Steve Schultz, President of Electro-Mechanical Systems, Harleysville, Pennsylvania. The Smith College exhibition is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. A portion of the Smith College Museum of Art's operating funds for this fiscal year has been provided through a \$112,500 grant from the Institute of Museum Services.

The Virginia Museum of Art is especially thankful to the collectors, Eileen and Michael Cohen, and Joel and Zoe Dictrow, for generously lending to the exhibition. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is also grateful to have been a part of the collaboration with the Norton Museum of Art and the Smith College Museum of Art in producing the joint publication, an especially rewarding effort for all three institutions. Of the many museum staff members who assisted in realizing this project, special thanks are due to Margo A. Crutchfield, Assistant Curator of 20th-Century Art, organizer of the exhibition; Sharon Casale, Grants Coordinator; David Noyes, Exhibition Designer; and Mary Brogan, Lighting Designer.

Collectively, we would also like to thank Michael Klein and David Gray of the Michael Klein Gallery, New York City; Beto Guedes and Juan Iribarren who assisted the artist in the studio; and Russell Ferguson, of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, who has followed Semmes's work for a number of years and contributed an insightful essay to this catalogue. Above all, we would like to thank Beverly Semmes, whose artistic vision enlightens and challenges us all.

Christina Orr-Cahall

*Director, Norton Museum of Art*

Suzannah Fabing

*Director, Smith College Museum of Art*

Katharine C. Lee

*Director, Virginia Museum of Fine Art*

FIGURE 3

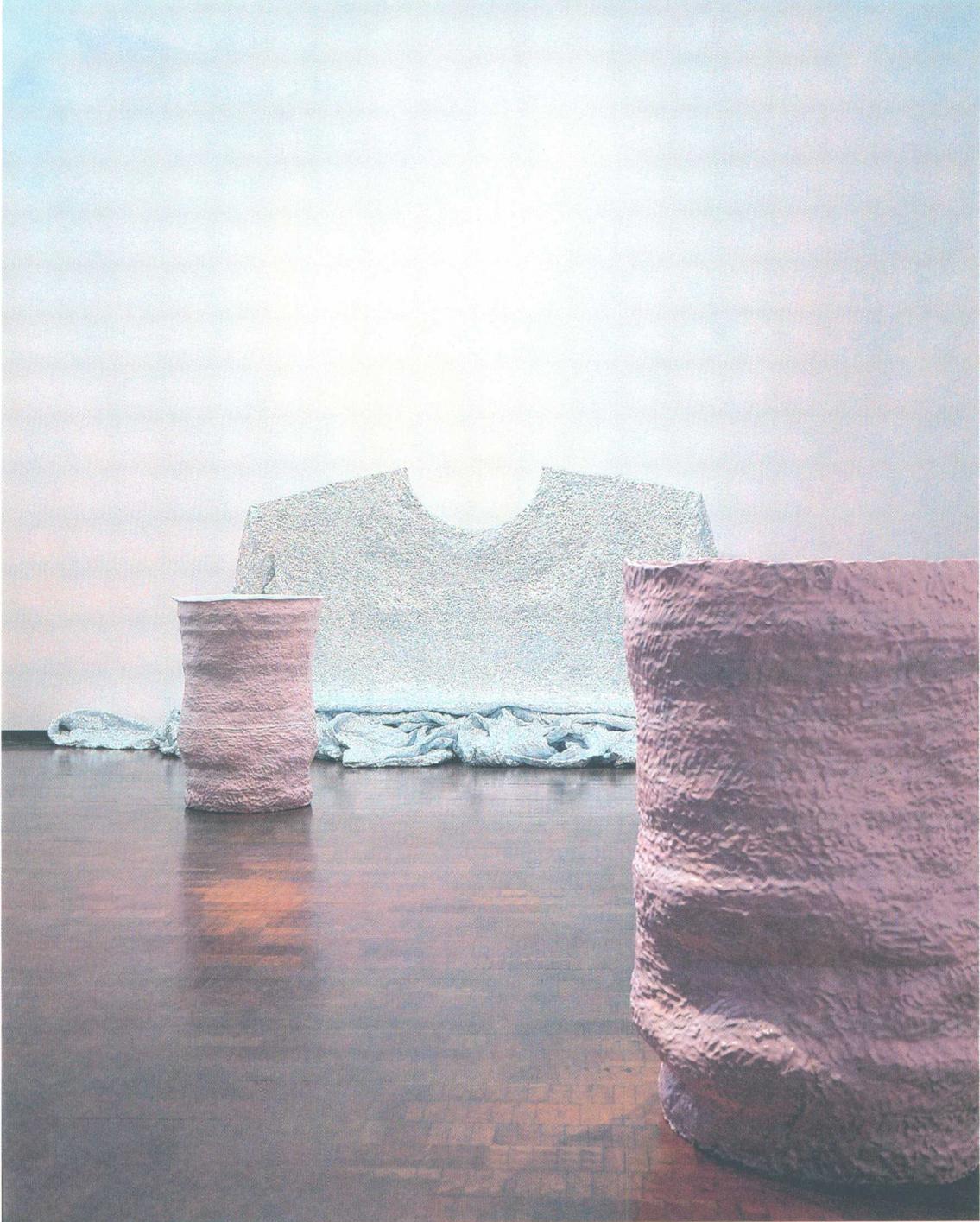
*Big Silver*, 1996

Crushed lamé, motor and pulleys,  
glazed terra cotta ceramics

Dimensions variable

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York



# Big Silver

Beverly Semmes's *Big Silver*, a new work commissioned as an installation for the Smith College Museum of Art, belongs to a series of sculptures developed by the artist since 1988 that makes use of clothing as an allusive metaphor for the body.<sup>1</sup> Although much of Semmes's previous work implies motion or is given movement in performance, *Big Silver*'s action is both autonomous and independent. A single, immense silver gown, trailing forty-foot-long sleeves that coil near large, freestanding ceramic pots, *Big Silver* begins as a glittering drift of fabric on the gallery floor (fig. 3). Slowly drawn up the two-story high wall by a motor and pulley system, the sculpture assumes its recognizable form as a dress (fig. 4), then collapses into itself as it makes the return descent. Literally rising from abstraction to figuration, *Big Silver* performs a formal choreography of repetitive, precisely controlled movement, becoming both dance and dancer.

Dance, in fact, provided the original impetus for *Big Silver*, whose immediate predecessors are the sculptures designed by Semmes for the Mathilde Monnier contemporary dance company in Montpellier, France. Commissioned to create sets and costumes for the ballet *Nuit*, which premiered in summer 1995, the artist designed three sculptures predicated on movement in space. One, a bright orange gown with a

long, trailing skirt, flowed from the back of the stage in a fiery stream toward the footlights. As the dancers interacted with the dress, portions of the skirt were designed to detach and come away and, in a sense, to become part of the dance. Semmes originally conceived another sculpture, a golden yellow gown, as an "empty dancer." At one point in the creative process, Semmes had considered that this sculpture might be raised and lowered by the dancers like a flag or banner, but in the final staging the performers manipulated the gown's elongated, spidery sleeves. A third sculpture, an enormous turquoise-green chemise that was ultimately not used in the dance, took on the form and function of a theatrical curtain or scrim that opened to reveal a wide bodice with sleeves and closed to the simple geometric form of a hanging rectangle.

With *Big Silver* Semmes revives, reworks and transforms her original intentions for the yellow and green sculptures for *Nuit*. The sculpture is no longer donned and "performed" by the wearer, as in the artist's earlier work (figs. 5, 7), but becomes the active agent and locus of performance. Separated from the actual context of the stage, *Big Silver* can be seen to refer to the dance by enacting the repetitive regimen of the ballet barre in perpetual, deep pliés from floor to ceiling. Its size, scope and movement also allude to

<sup>1</sup> This essay is largely based on an interview with the artist on February 3, 1996.



FIGURE 4

the role of the theater curtain, which cloaks and then reveals the performance space, much as clothing covers or exposes the body. As the shimmering, faceted expanse of metallic fabric is raised and lowered, it fires, then foils, expectation; its motion signals the anticipation of drama or even arousal. While its repetitive action may echo the daily private rituals of dressing and undressing, the addition of an audience to the act infuses the sculpture with subtly erotic content. Ironically, its fall, like a garment slipped from the body, reveals no desired object beneath; the curtain opens to an empty stage. As in the theater, the character or costume are “put on” to create an alternative reality, an emotive and compelling illusion performed in a magic arena, which exists in time and space, then disappears.

Unlike the implied movement of Semmes’s sculptures like *Yellow Pool*, 1993 (fig. 6), with its churning torrent of organza, or *Red Dress*, 1992 (fig. 9), whose skirt spills crimson across the gallery floor, *Big Silver* is audacious in its advance and retreat. Semmes considers her sculptures as alter-egos, not only as surrogates for the body but as “self-surrogates,” a projection of herself in sometimes luxuriant and sensual fabrics or comfortable homespun, a presence proclaimed by absence. While many of these dresses suggest glamour and womanly garb, others adopt a simple jewel neckline or prim Peter Pan collar and flat bodice, suggesting that the artist sees herself in multiple guises as child, adolescent or adult. Size signifies dominance; size, abetted by movement, takes on added authority, assertiveness and even the possibility of aggression. With Semmes’s Alice-in-Wonderland inversion of proportions, the small girl becomes larger than the largest adult and therefore beyond parental control; the woman outsizes and overcomes issues of appearance, of being thin enough, young enough, or dependent on others for validation. The alter-ego on the move in *Big Silver* claims its space like a prima ballerina or diva making her entrance,

commanding and then exiting the stage to return for the next act.

*Big Silver* combines fabric sculpture with several large-scale terra cotta pots that ground the installation with the gallery floor. Semmes developed her ceramics independently from her clothing-related sculptures, first showing them together in 1994 in an exhibition at the Michael Klein Gallery. After that, the pots began gingerly to invade the territory of the dresses. Quirky, stubby, off-balance, sometimes with multiple or even internal handles, the pots are coiled and pinched, rather than thrown on the wheel, and are covered with a glaze that resembles fondant icing. Inspired in part by her admiration for the eccentric but highly sophisticated ceramic vessels of George E. Ohr (1857–1918), the “Mad Potter of Biloxi,” Semmes makes uniquely self-referential pots bearing thousands of her own finger imprints. These are often gathered in groups that suggest a confounding archeological find, but *Big Silver*’s ceramic sculptures, grown to three- to four-feet in height, take on more corporeal associations. In contrast to the lightweight silver fabric of the dress, the vessels affirm the absent body with their solid forms, resolute weightiness, and the pale, rococo pink flesh of their glaze. Torsos or limbs, feet planted firmly on the floor, they are the earthbound foundation of the airy maneuvers of *Big Silver*.

Linda Muehlig

*Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture  
Smith College Museum of Art*

### *Checklist*

*Big Silver*, 1996

Crushed lamé, motor and pulleys, glazed terra cotta ceramics

Dimensions variable

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

*In all, let Nature never be forgot,*

*But treat the Goddess like a modest Fair,*

*Nor over-dress, nor leave her wholly bare.*

*Let not each Beauty everywhere be spied*

*Where half the Skill is decently to hide.*

*He gains all Points, who pleasingly confounds,*

*Surprises, varies, and conceals the bounds.*

[Alexander Pope, "On the Use of Riches," 1731 (lines 51-56)]

# Time, Change, and Beauty:

## The Landscape as Metaphor

Alexander Pope's poem, "On the Use of Riches," celebrates the English landscape garden, a site where the human hand has shaped the natural world into a realm of ideal beauty, offering escape and encouraging contemplation for the visitor. The work of Beverly Semmes invites the viewer to enter a similar realm—an enigmatic, fanciful landscape of beauty and imagination. In Semmes's world, enormous, flowing dresses of diaphanous fabric spill from the gallery walls like waterfalls, with undulating folds of fabric that pile in heaps on the floor, creating pools that seem to churn and froth. Photographs depict mysterious figures, adorned in eccentric costumes, that become a part of the landscape. Like the architect of an English garden, Semmes constructs and shapes the viewer's experience of nature and the landscape in order to investigate and reveal the ephemeral, intangible aspects of one's experiences in this world.

Semmes's interest in the landscape is manifest in her earliest works. She created natural forms out of artificial material, often placing these constructions

outdoors to contrast further the natural and the artificial. Examples include *The Boulders*, 1982, an installation of rounded rocklike forms, built of chicken wire and white cloth, strewn on a beach as if naturally occurring. *Spring Tree*, 1986, a sculpture built of steel and branches that are painted green, was placed outside among real trees, again mimicking the natural world. Semmes soon expanded her outdoor installations to involve the viewer in a more active, physical way. *Formal Garden*, 1987, invited participants to enter three towers camouflaged with artificial greenery. From inside these spaces, the spectator could look out on the landscape from a specific point of view determined by the artist.

These early projects directly led to the photographic works included in the Norton's exhibition. *Cornelia Walking Through the Formal Garden in the Pink Feather Coat and Hedge Hat #2*, 1988 (fig. 7), is a color film-still from a video documenting a performance piece by Semmes. The artist first built a structure of wire and artificial feathers, *Pink Feather Coat*, that transformed its wearer into a strangely exotic bird or bush. Semmes saw a connection between this construction and a formal garden in upstate New York that she frequented. Like her work, the garden was a man-made manipulation of natural forms, with its carefully pruned hedges and brightly planted flower beds. Semmes dressed a friend in a pink feather coat and a hedge hat, a Dr. Seusslike hat made of artificial branches, and filmed her wandering through the gardens. From this film, Semmes chose several film-stills. Functioning as a work of art in its own right, as well as a document or record of the performance, each film-still shows a strange conflation of the natural and the artificial. The figure becomes part of the garden, with the shapes and textures of her costume mimicking the shrubbery and plantings.

Similar photographic projects followed, also depicting costumed figures in the landscape to emphasize the

connection between the person and the environment. *Figure in the Purple Velvet Bathrobe and Cloud Hat*, 1991 (fig. 5), depicts a figure standing on a sandy point overlooking the ocean. Her voluminous, purple robe falls in thick folds, like a waterfall or a stream that will lead to the ocean below. The puffy, cloudlike form of the figure's enormous hat is barely distinguishable from the pale sky. In effect, as the figure contemplates the view, the costume incorporates her into these surroundings.

Beginning in 1991, Semmes experimented further with her clothing pieces, increasing their size and bringing the works into the gallery. No longer meant to be worn, the dresses were hung from the gallery walls, their long skirts and arms flowing onto the floor. As sculptural installations, Semmes's dresses function as metaphors for both the figure and the landscape. Like Alexander Pope, Semmes equates nature with the female form, but for Semmes, one can ascribe a feminist interpretation to this association. By replacing the female body with the dress, Semmes speaks to the societal importance of image. Fashion represents the idealization of feminine beauty, or a glamorous facade. Like the garden, a site of carefully constrained and constructed beauty, fashion creates an image for woman that is often difficult to attain.

Semmes's dresses are fashioned from luxurious, seductive fabrics—light, diaphanous organza and heavy, crushed velvets. The fabric colors are equally lush—candy-colored yellow, deep blue, lavender, and hot pink. *Yellow Pool*, 1994, (fig. 6), is enormous in scale, nearly filling the gallery space. The fabric falls from the gallery wall like a waterfall, its folds creating a pool on the floor. The long, velvet arms encircle this pool, circumscribing the space that it occupies, like the banks of a river or lake. The viewer must interact with the sculpture's space, walking up to it or around it like a feature of the landscape.



FIGURE 6

*Yellow Pool*, 1993

Organza, velvet

8' x 28' x 29'

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York



Semmes creates in her photographs and dress installations a psychological and metaphorical landscape—a magical, dreamlike space of the imagination. Within this space, Semmes repeats several themes. Her subjects and materials contrast the natural and the artificial, revealing the beauty of our environment, both unaffected and man-made. By emphasizing differences of scale—the very large dresses versus the very small photographs, and by creating installations around which one must walk, she manipulates the viewer's experience of space, encouraging one to consider how our environment shapes and informs our conception of ourselves. Throughout her work, Semmes emphasizes the temporal; her photographs and empty dresses imply a past performance, documenting and recording the passing of time, the constant change in the environment, and the short-lived beauty of nature. By relating the human figure to the natural environment, Semmes captures what is difficult to judge—time, change, and beauty—while encouraging the viewer to contemplate through her work these fleeting aspects of life.

Lisa Hurley

*Assistant Curator, Norton Museum of Art*

### Checklist

*Yellow Pool*, 1993

Organza, velvet

8' x 28' x 29'

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

*Haze*, 1994

Crushed rayon velvet

12' x 9' x 3'

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

*Pink Arms*, 1995

Velvet, organza

8' x 10' x 12'

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

FIGURE 7

*Cornelia Walking Through the Formal Garden in the Pink Feather Coat and Hedge Hat #2*, 1988

C-print

10" x 8"

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York



*Figure in the Purple Velvet Bathrobe and Cloud Hat*, 1991

C-print

10" x 8"

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

*Cornelia Walking Through the Formal Garden in the Pink Feather Coat and Hedge Hat (Film Still #2)*, 1988

C-print

10" x 8"

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

*Cornelia Walking Through the Formal Garden in the Pink Feather Coat and Hedge Hat (Film Still #3)*, 1988

C-print

10" x 8"

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

*Two Figures in the Watercoats and Cloud Hats Attached at the Quarry*, 1991

C-print

10" x 8"

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

*On the Coast of Maine*, 1994

C-print

10" x 8"

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

*Buried Treasure*, 1994

C-print

20" x 16"

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

FIGURE 5

*Figure in the Purple Velvet  
Bathrobe and Cloud Hat, 1991*

C-print, 10" x 8"

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York



# Familiar and Old- Established in the Mind

Beverly Semmes's *Yellow Pool*, 1993 (fig. 6), begins as a dress, huge but recognizable. The skirt, however, quickly bursts the banks of its familiar form to pour onto the floor, pooling up in an excess of pale yellow organza. The material becomes a kind of anti-form, a cloudy liquid that refuses the limits of the pattern from which it has escaped. Form abandons function for fluidity. In a related work, *Kimberly*, 1994, soft pillows of golden velvet bob on the surface, floating memories of a formal bodice that has become disengaged from any body.

*Yellow Pool* and *Kimberly* suggest an overflowing, an almost sexual bursting of constraints, an imminent surrender to formlessness that erupts out of the most traditional of grounds. In Semmes's work, the critical point, the point around which everything else revolves (or dissolves), is precisely that moment at which balance seems to be lost, yet each piece retains its own unity and coherence. Just as surface tension can hold a drop of water together on a sheet of glass, so can Semmes hold form and formlessness together in a single work.

Semmes often begins with a pre-established form. The initial upper line of her dress forms is established with large T-pins that literally and precisely pin down the shape out of which new form will devolve by means of a kind of liquefaction. Her new piece, *Big Silver*, 1996 (fig. 3, 4), reverses the process, although to similar ends. It begins as an amorphous pool of

silver. Out of this shining lake of fabric the familiar shape of a dress slowly emerges, ten feet wide and twenty feet high, a self-generating birth of Venus. While the steady rising of the fabric might suggest a particularly male eroticism, the great width of the dress (and the fact that it is a dress) makes it in the end quite unphallic. It does evoke the chilly glamour we associate with glittering evening dresses, and yet at the same time it also suggests the protection of an enveloping cloak. *Big Silver* erect is regal, dominating, but still soft. And in a few minutes it sinks back to shapelessness, only to rise again. It acts out, in fact, a repetitive cycle of rising up and sinking down, of laying claim to form and surrendering it. The rising element, however, offers a potential recontextualization of earlier pieces such as *Four Purple Velvet Bathrobes*, 1991, which until now have always appeared to flow downwards into formlessness. *Big Silver* raises the possibility that they might also be emerging from the pool on the floor into a self-sustaining autonomy.

Near the endlessly long, snaking arms of *Big Silver* sit large pots, each almost four feet tall and three feet wide. Their rims wander unevenly in and out of the circular forms they eventually succeed in completing. Their surfaces are milky, fleshy, lumpy. Apparently they are only just managing to hold together in their urn-like form. Their gaping mouths seem to invite entry, although the threat of clammy collapse dissuades us. In reality, if they are touched, the urns ring

FIGURE 8

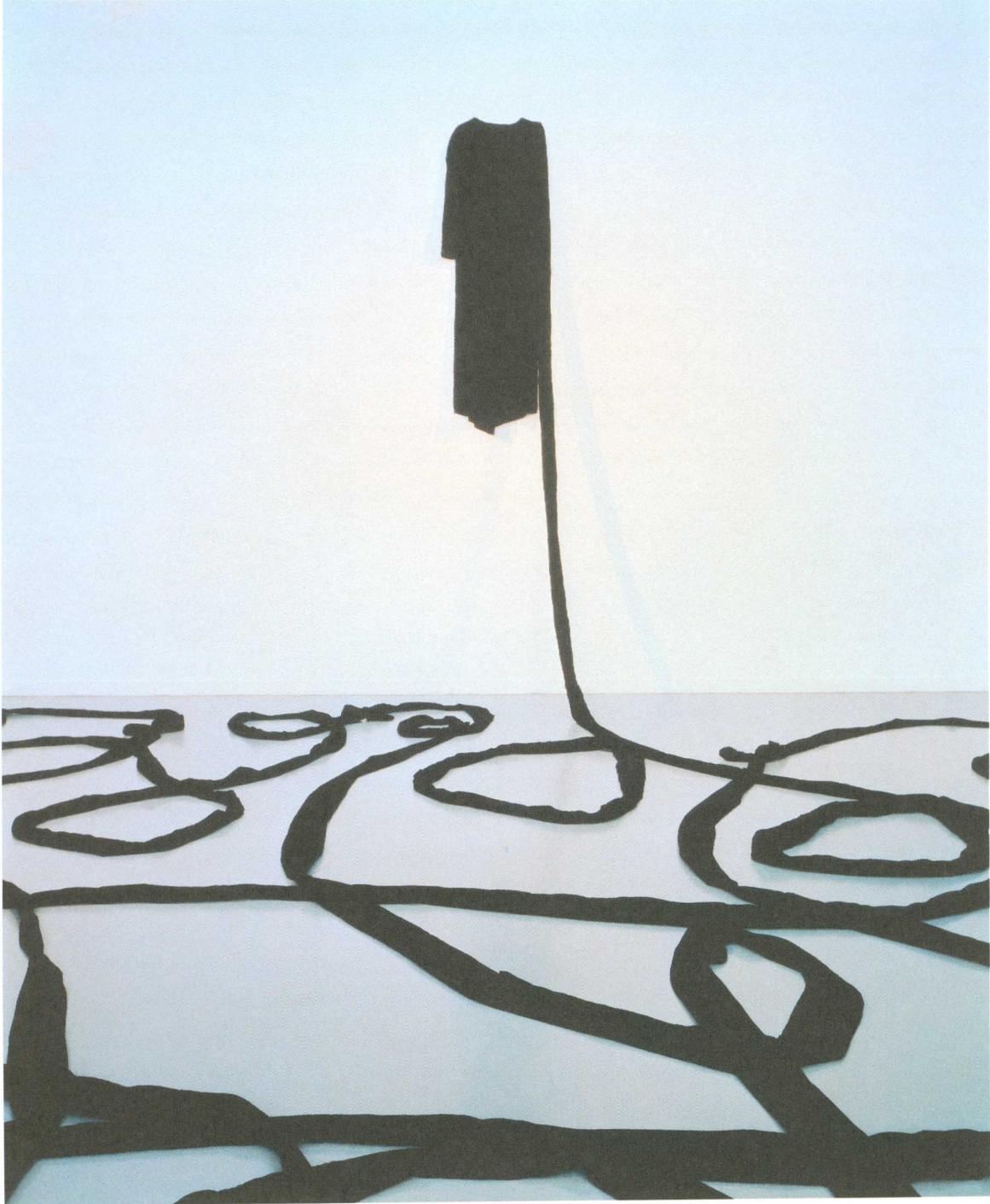
*Buried Treasure*, 1994

Crushed velvet

Dimensions variable

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York



with the brittle, metallic sound of fired ceramics. The appearance of oozy softness masks rigidity.

Semmes has described *Kimberly* as a “more feminine” alter ego, the name Kimberly reminiscent of her own name, Beverly. Equally, the initial letters of *Big Silver* may suggest to us another, unconscious, echoing of the artist’s name. The theme of doubling is present, for example, in the two *Brown Gowns*, 1991, in the double-bodied dresses of *Chorus*, 1992, or in *Famous Twins*, 1993 (fig. 1). But what is produced by this doubling? Freud recognized the anxiety, the feeling of the uncanny, generated by the appearance of a double, even in as simple a form as an unexpected glimpse of oneself in a mirror. For him, “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand... the uncanny as something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light.”<sup>1</sup>

Freud’s comments, bringing together as they do the double, the repressed, and the concealed, lead us back not only to the fleshy interior of Semmes’s pots, but also to other of her works, most notably the photograph *Buried Treasure*, 1994. As in all treasure maps, X marks the spot where the treasure is buried, but in this case that spot turns out to be a human body. To recover the treasure, must we enter the body? And if we were to go inside the body, would our act be sexual? Surgical? Violent? For Freud, the entrance would inevitably represent a return to the womb, “to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time.”<sup>2</sup> At the far right of the photograph, almost out of the frame, flutters an American flag, counterbalancing the archetypal themes with a specificity that returns us to real earth and to a real person. As an installation, *Buried Treasure*, like all of Semmes’s dress pieces, leaves out the real body, and

also, significantly leaves out the cross that marks the location of the treasure. All we have instead is the single sleeve that loops around and around until it fills up the entire floor.

The huge scale of the dress pieces suggest equally huge appetites, but the forms remain flat, fleshless, and their velvet flows without regard to any bodily form. The pots, by contrast, are only too close to the body. With evidence of the artist’s hands all over them, they beg to be touched again. In combination, a powerful tension is established between the rich textures of the dresses pouring out from the pins that seek to hold their form in check and the tinny rigidity of the pots whose visual message is one of moist, quivering corporeality. If the body and its desires are repressed in Semmes’s dresses, the re-emergence of flesh in the pots still leaves the uneasy, uncanny, sense that the real return of the repressed in this work lies even further beneath the surface. Freud reminds us of the helplessness evoked by involuntary return, “As, for instance, when one is lost in a forest in high altitudes, caught, we will suppose by a mountain mist, and when every endeavor to find the marked or familiar path ends again and again in a return to one and the same spot.”<sup>3</sup> What is the destination sought by these dresses that pour off the wall? Does X after all mark the spot? Are we returned to the specificity of the physical body? Or does Semmes’s pool of yellow organza continue to resist both form and interpretation?

Russell Ferguson

<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919) in *Studies in Parapsychology* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

# The Presence of Absence





*Red Dress*, 1992

Velvet, wood and metal hanger

12 3/4' x 10 1/2' x 45 1/2'

Collection of Eileen and Michael Cohen

Beverly Semmes's monumental sculptures and her smaller, equally beguiling fabric creations explore the signifying power of clothing and its ability to influence, shape, even define the self. "Clothing is about who we think we are, how we choose to represent ourselves, and how we are seen and culturally defined."<sup>1</sup> As an indicator of both individual and cultural values, clothing transformed into sculpture, becomes for Semmes a vehicle to explore multifaceted aspects of the self. In this context, the strangely distorted bodices and elongated arms of Semmes's dresses, with their startling profusion of intense color and luxuriant fabrics, present rich psychological terrain. Semmes's exaggeration of clothing forms to surreal extremes and their transformation into outrageous, even rampant fantasies, result in sculptural creations that reflect a concern shared by many contemporary artists with the politics and psychology of identity.

*Red Dress* (fig. 9)—a massively proportioned gown measuring almost 13 feet high by 5 feet wide with a 45-foot-long train that gushes out across the gallery floor—assumes metaphoric dimensions as a site to construct and deconstruct the self. The profusion of red velvet and the sheer opulence of this wildly exaggerated dress lend it an imposing, almost regal presence. With its gargantuan scale and intense red color, *Red Dress* projects an image of power and strength. As "projections or extensions of the self,"<sup>2</sup> Semmes's sculptures reveal aspects of the ego in concrete, sculptural form. Here, *Red Dress* becomes an extreme expression of the desire for all-encompassing beauty, power, and authority. This alluring fantasy is not, however, without conflict or contradiction. The Peter-Pan collar at the top of the bodice, with its connotations of innocence and naiveté contradicts the image of power projected. *Red Dress* seems comical, even ludicrous, with its grandiose posturing, as if pretending to be something that it is not. In *Red*

*Dress*, aspects of the self are in conflict, and the authenticity of the self is called into question.

Such undertones are further compounded if *Red Dress* is perceived as excessive, uncontrollable passion, or if, upon closer scrutiny, one considers the oddly truncated arms that appear shriveled or mutilated.<sup>3</sup> Parallels to corsets, the bound feet of Japanese women, or high-heeled shoes, can be seen here, with implications about artificial standards of beauty and their crippling effects. Moreover, there are associations in Semmes's work with bondage and captivity, and the suggestion has been made that the dresses could strangle, drown, or suffocate the wearer.<sup>4</sup> The psychological and physical discomfort conveyed by Semmes's garments is particularly evident in *Red Dress*, when its flowing red train is construed as a river of blood.<sup>5</sup> *Red Dress*, as a metaphor for the body under siege with references to violence inflicted on women, is yet another interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Evoking a complexity of images, *Red Dress* reveals an all-powerful, yet vulnerable woman. The self, described in such grandiose terms is nevertheless vacant. In a paradox that is central to Semmes's work, the body—or its manifestation as the self—is made all the more present by its absence, and it is all the more visible by its invisibility. This presence of absence resonates throughout Semmes's sculptural creations with both dramatic and telling effect.

<sup>1</sup> Elise Siegel, *Empty Dress* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993), 64.

<sup>2</sup> This and all following quotations are derived statements made by the artist in conversation with the author, February 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia C. Phillips, "Beverly Semmes," *Artforum* (November 1992): 109.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Johnson Dougherty, "Beverly Semmes at SECCA," *Fiber Art* (November/December 1994): 62.

<sup>5</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "Beverly Semmes: Art to the Nines," *Art Press* 188 (February 1994): 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

*Famous Twins*, 1993 (fig. 1), for example, a corner piece with two enlarged dresses facing each other, features inversely duplicated outfits and mirrored but absent selves. Taking its title from a reference to circus twins, *Famous Twins* becomes a strangely humorous play on the idea of doubles in a curious comment on identity.<sup>7</sup>

In the sculpture installation *Buried Treasure*, 1994 (fig. 8), an empty black dress hangs high on a wall with a single, extended arm descending in swirling patterns of dark coils on the floor. Viewed from a distance below, the black bodice seems to “burn into the wall like a black hole in space.” With brooding, almost monastic associations, the empty black dress resembles a shroud, and the serpentine sleeve that winds infinitely along the floor conjures images of intestines or entrails. The tone here is subjective, internalized and desolate. *Buried Treasure*, remarks Semmes, “evokes negation,” and as such alludes to the darker recesses of the human psyche.

Created in response to a remote, northern extremity of the Maine coast, *Buried Treasure* also exists as a series of staged photographs in which a mysterious figure wears the fabric sculpture in an encounter with the landscape. In the sculpture installation, traces of this encounter assume abstract and spatial dimensions with the extended sleeve meandering in patterns like a “drawing in space.” This implied movement and the tenuous memory of the cloaked figure on the coast inform the work. *Buried Treasure* alludes to an intangible but latent state of “being there and not there,” and it is imbued with paradox. In this intriguing work, as in Semmes’s other sculptures, the absent body is present by inference, and

the presence of absence figures prominently in our perception of the piece.

Eliciting the human presence through its absence, Semmes’s evocative fabric sculptures and installations explore the complexities of the self and its presentation within the wider social fabric. Calling on the power of clothing both to reveal and conceal, Semmes’s elegant fabrications present a delightful and provocative fusion of personal fantasy with social commentary.

Margo A. Crutchfield

*Assistant Curator, 20th-Century Art  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*

### Checklist

*Red Dress*, 1992

Velvet, wood and metal hanger

12 2/3' x 10 1/2' x 45 1/2'

Collection of Eileen and Michael Cohen, New York

*Famous Twins*, 1993

Crushed velvet, cotton

2 pieces, each 12 1/2' x 4' x 1 1/3'

Collection of Joel and Zoe Dictrow

*Buried Treasure*, 1994

Crushed velvet

Dimensions variable

Collection of the Artist

Courtesy of Michael Klein Gallery, New York

<sup>7</sup> Conversations between the author and artist, March 1996.



Video by Dara Freeman; video-still  
Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection.

# Biography

Born in Washington, D.C.; lives and works in New York City, New York

Yale School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut,  
M.F.A., 1987

Boston Museum School, Tufts University, Boston,  
Massachusetts, B.A., 1980, B.F.A., 1982

Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture,  
Skowhegan, Maine, 1982

## *Selected Solo Exhibitions*

1996 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
Washington, D.C.

1995 Kemper Museum for Contemporary Art and  
Design, Kansas City, MO

The Baxter Gallery, Maine College of Art,  
Portland, ME

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL

1994 Camden Arts Centre, London, England,  
James Hockey Gallery, Farnham, England, and  
Southampton City Art Gallery, Southampton,  
England

Gallerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris, France

Michael Klein Gallery, New York, NY

1993 Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art,  
Winston-Salem, NC

- 1992 Sculpture Center, New York, NY
- 1990 Artists Space, New York, NY  
Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S.1  
Museum, Long Island City, NY

### *Selected Group Exhibitions*

- 1995 *Currents 95: Familiar Places*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
- Mit Sicherem Griff*, Galerie Bugdahn und Kaimer, Dusseldorf, Germany
- Material Dreams*, Takashimaya Gallery, New York, NY
- Cathy de Moncheaux, Byron Kim, Beverly Semmes*, Todd Gallery, London, England
- 1994 *From Beyond the Pale*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland
- Bespoke*, Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- Bad Girls*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY, and Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles
- 1993 *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art*, Independent Curators Inc. Traveled to Neuberger Museum, State University of New York; Virginia Beach Center for the Arts, VA; University Gallery, Denton, TX; Art Gallery, University of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia; Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan; Gallery Stratford, Stratford, Ontario
- Fall from Fashion*, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT
- First Sightings*, Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO

*American Art Today: Clothing as Metaphor*, The Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami, FL

- 1992 *Susan Watkins Award Exhibition*, New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA
- In Praise of Folly*, Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI
- 1991 *Plastic Fantastic Lover (Object A)*, Blum Helman Warehouse, New York, NY
- 1990 Drawings, Althea Viafora Gallery, New York, NY
- 1989 *Eccentric Natures*, Art Awareness Gallery, Lexington, NY

### *Awards*

- 1994 National Endowment for the Arts, Sculpture
- 1991 Mid-Atlantic Foundation Fellowship, Sculpture
- 1989 Artists Space Grant
- 1988 Art Matters Grant
- 1987 Alice Kimball English Traveling Fellowship
- 1985-87 Yale School of Art Fellowship

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Printing by Benchmark Press, Inc., West Palm Beach, Florida.

A publication of the  
**NORTON**  
MUSEUM OF ART