

Joan Snyder



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Cover Illustration. *Love Your Bones*. 1970–1971. Oil, acrylic and spray enamel on canvas, 6' x 12'. Collection: Neuberger Museum, Purchase, N.Y.

Joan Snyder's paintings form a diary of emotion. Each is meant to be read not as a synthesis of experience that has been analyzed and distilled, but as a running narrative about life. The language of this narrative is resonant color, wildly sensuous paint handling, and emphatically physical surfaces that are sometimes built up, cut, stuffed, and sewn. Snyder realizes that visual coherence, like life, can include contradictions and disjunctions. In this collage aesthetic, elements are not merged into a single harmony but juxtaposed. Our eyes must travel through Snyder's paintings in every direction to discover sequential clusters of feeling and episodes of formal beauty. It is only as we turn away from a Snyder canvas that the whole painting rings in our eyes. This scanning and cumulative reading, with its anticipatory excitement and its retrospective impact, is a demanding aesthetic encounter. But it recapitulates the way we have our deepest experiences in life.

Snyder's artistic development is an autobiographical narrative, too. She is a restless, questing artist; no sooner does she master one form of visual expression, than she feels compelled to move on—and move on independently. She tends not to be strongly swayed by other art. Instead her momentum is impelled by her own paintings, her own life. Joan Snyder won her first critical success in 1971 with what she called "stroke paintings." In these large canvases she explored the expressive possibilities of brushstrokes, analyzing the linguistic variation of gestures and marks that are traces of immediate feeling. Hardly had she received the applause than, characteristically, Snyder lost interest in making more stroke paintings. "They were easy," she says. "I could do them in two days. They were 'Snyders'. I did them. I showed them. Everybody loved them, and I stopped doing them. I had no choice. I had to change."

Snyder changes by embracing, not rejecting; as she moves ahead, nothing is left behind. She began to fill in more of the canvas and to use images drawn from her earlier work.

By 1974 Snyder was making explicit feminist statements in many of her paintings. When she showed these works in 1976, some people were shocked. Viewers had come to expect Snyder to fit into the current trend of painterly abstraction. They relished the open, breathing, encompassing spaces of the stroke paintings. What they saw in the new paintings was more visibly autobiographical, less visibly beautiful. In fact, the works looked turgid and downright brutal. Drenched with personal pain, they stammered with rage. Urgent messages that could not be communicated through form were spelled out in words, forcing the viewer to come close and *read* the paintings.

Sometimes these written statements were militantly feminist. Snyder has been unabashedly political since 1973, when she publicly propounded the existence of an innate female sensibility, one clearly distinct from that of men. The paintings were full of images such as hearts, orifices, and circles that suggest female sexuality and vulnerability. But the feminist message in Snyder's art is broader than either these symbols or written statements. It lies in her discovery of an abstract female language that allows her to speak as a particular woman. And since the feelings about which she speaks are powerful and the language compelling, Snyder addresses not just women, but everyone.

Not that everybody listened. These new paintings bared her feelings about being a woman with such vehemence and pictorial audacity that many viewers (mostly men, according to the artist) objected. Yet Snyder feels that her art had not suddenly turned feminist. Though her paintings consciously engaged the issue of the female sensibility only beginning in 1974, they have always explored areas of personal feeling that are specifically female. To some viewers, however, the high-pitched belligerence of the political message in the 1974 paintings and the relentless exposure of raw emotion seemed indecent. Yet, like the stroke paintings, these 1974 abstrac-

tions are controlled by a sense of aesthetic and emotional discretion. And even if they seemed to represent a complete departure from the stroke paintings, they actually developed naturally out of them and their predecessors.

Joan Snyder began painting in 1962 when, as a sociology major at Douglass College, New Jersey, she took an elective course in art. Her first paintings were expressionist portraits that caused her teacher to point out their resemblance to portraits by Aleksey von Jawlensky. Snyder had never seen the German expressionist's work or, for that matter almost any other twentieth-century art. She simply wanted to paint her feelings about people who were close to her rather than merely to recreate their appearance. In 1963 she lived on a New Jersey farm with a family to whom she became extremely close. There, amid the fields and barns, she painted expressionist landscapes (fig. 1) whose animistic houses and turbulent hills brings to mind Burchfield or Vlaminck. (She had yet to see these painters' works.) While these early paintings are somewhat heavy-handed in style, they show Snyder's early discovery that her art had to come directly from her experience.

Gradually Snyder's paintings became more symbolic. The only major transition in her development that was directly triggered by other art came in 1964 when she saw Max Beckmann's *The Death Scene* in his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Snyder's grandmother had died that year, and she was strongly moved by Beckmann's squatting, nude, female mourner. This figure seemed to embody the primal grief that Snyder was unable to release in her own life. As a result, she recalls, "I went back and did a crouching nude. I began to express my agony." The paintings became flatter and somewhat Matissean; they also exhibited a Pop vulgarity reminiscent of Tom Wesselman's nudes in interiors, especially his early collages from 1959–62. The structure of



Fig. 1. *The Barn*. 1963. Oil on canvas, 26" x 36". Collection: Joan Snyder.



Fig. 2. *Altar III*. 1965–1966. Acrylic on canvas with fringe, 3' x 4'. Collection: Joan Snyder.

many of these works was bilaterally symmetrical; intimate interior spaces contained large, bright pink nudes or angels depicted with flat, filled-in silhouettes (fig. 2). Snyder called these works “altars,” because to her they expressed a kind of religious experience. But they were also full of sardonic humor. The artist used funky collage materials like gold fringe, imitation leopard skin, and pink flowered wallpaper. Snyder’s love or garishness recalls the imaginative “bad taste” of many popular religious images and commercial designs. This flaunting of tacky, sensuous appeal carries an anti-elitist social and aesthetic message. Breaking social and aesthetic hierarchies is a feminist goal. In art the use of vulgar, “non-art” materials is part of a rejection of mainstream modernist taste that Snyder shares with a number of other contemporary women artists.

The “altars” earned Snyder a Master of Fine Arts degree at Rutgers University in 1966. After remaining in New Brunswick for a year, she moved to New York City, where she produced symbolic semiabstractions that juxtaposed interior versus landscape space. Many of the paintings were of things in boxes. She had studied under the sculptor Robert Morris in graduate school, and she could not completely resist his influence. “I took Morris’s silly minimal boxes and made them as crazy and decorative as I could.” Snyder says. “I put a breast in them, things hanging off them, boxes in landscapes, trees and grass in boxes, pieces of bodies in a box under the ground. I wasn’t pleased with these paintings at all.”

The boxes were nonetheless important to Snyder’s development. She has continued to be fascinated by the “inside/outside” duality and has often chosen to have a structure out of which to break. In later paintings this structure became first a rectangle within a rectangle, then a grid, and finally a triptych or a series of panels.

The next change in Snyder’s art came after a trip to Europe. On her return she remembers looking afresh at her early

expressionist landscapes: "I tried to think what it was about those old landscapes that I used to love so much and that was missing from my work at the time. I began to realize that the barns and subject matter were not what was important to me anymore, but the way I had painted them was. I looked at the shapes of the landscapes, I looked at the gestures and the strokes, I looked at the feeling in them. I was feeling very broken up, and I started making tiny paintings with little strokes and gestures in them which felt to me like what being broken up was about." The paintings have a horizon line and a stroke-filled ground (fig. 3). Continuing Snyder's interest in "inside/outside," these abstractions combine the space of landscapes and the interior space of the rooms. The forms and colors in these modest cries of despair are not especially interesting, but works like *Stroke Landscape*, 1968, were the necessary precursors of the stroke paintings.

There was an intervening stage, however, a period of highly sensuous, anthropomorphic work. In 1968 Joan Snyder met her future husband, the photographer Larry Fink, and characteristically her feelings found their way into her canvases. Of her biomorphic imagery at this time, she said: "I was involved with the female sensibility even though I didn't consciously know it. The imagery has to do with sexuality, with bodies, with the knowledge of a woman." In what she calls her "flock/membrane paintings" (figs. 4–6), Snyder uses flocking (a soft, feltlike powder made of chopped rayon) to make her surfaces as tactile as her own body. The membranes are usually rounded, fleshy, pink shapes. Sometimes they are bounded by a ridge built up of flocking that suggests the walls of a womb. In suspending these fragile membranes parallel to the picture plane, Snyder reexplores the idea of transparency that she had begun to chart in the "inside/outside" spaces of her symbolic landscape-rooms and boxes. The flock/membrane paintings are inner landscapes. The surfaces of the



Fig. 3. *Stroke Landscape*. 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 8" x 10". Collection: Larry Fink.



Fig. 4. *Two Bodies Merging*. 1969. Acrylic and flock on canvas, 51" x 60". Collection: Joan Snyder.



Fig. 5. *Circular Flock with Thread*. 1969. Enamel and acrylic on canvas, 4' x 5'. Private Collection.

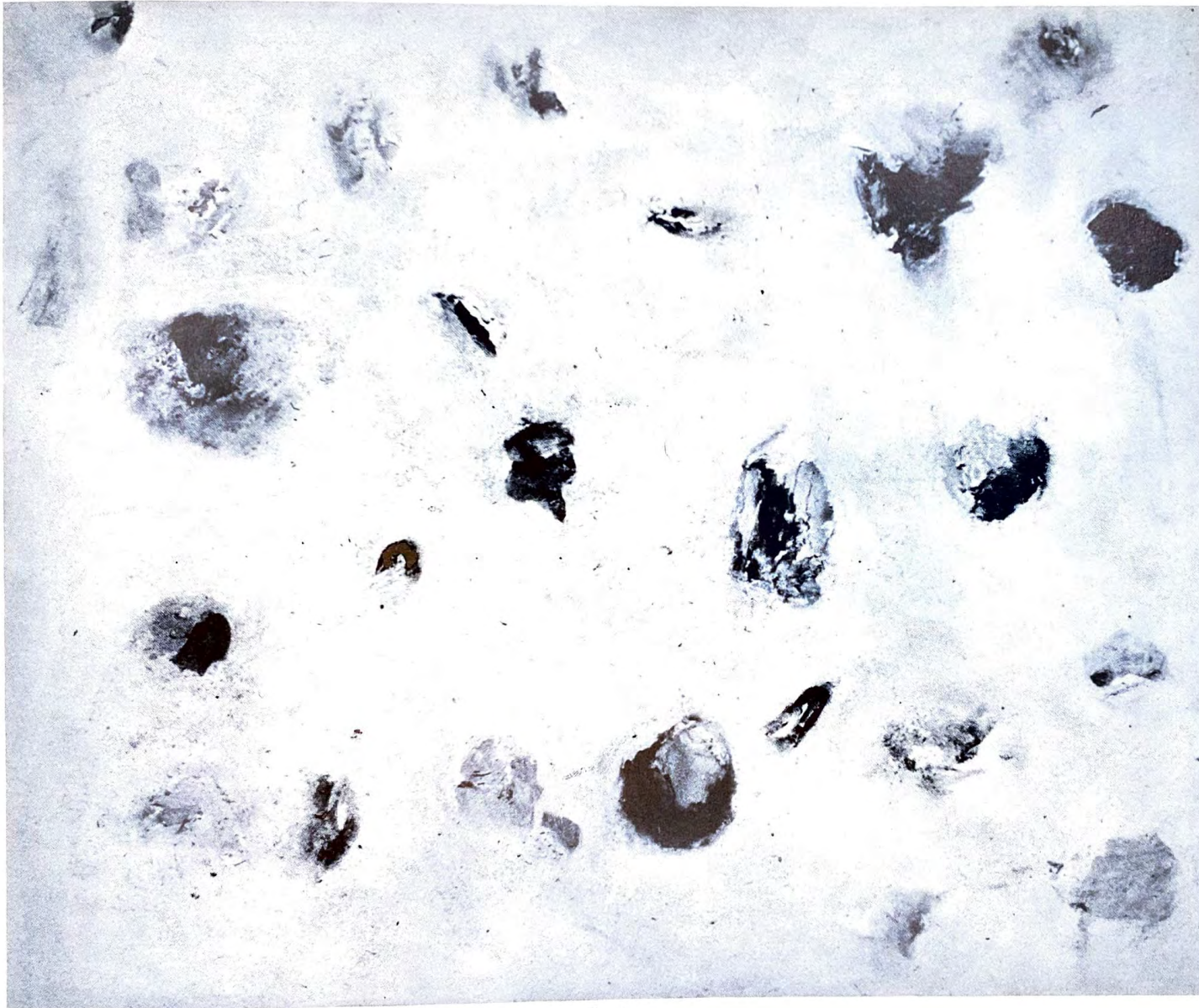


Fig. 6. *Flock Painting of Women*. 1969. Acrylic and flock on canvas, 4' x 4'. Collection: Joan Snyder.

“membranes,” enriched with flocking, gel, paste, lentils, and thread, seem as sensate and vulnerable as flesh. But it is flesh imagined and felt from inside the body, not skin seen from the outside. Snyder has always had an intense desire to penetrate and to see inside things—rooms, flesh, paint strokes, psyches. Her flock/membrane paintings often look like cross sections of breasts and wombs; vaginal imagery and fertilization are also implied, but the work is abstract, not explicit. The flock/membrane paintings show the strong and continuing link between sensuous handling of materials and sexuality in Snyder’s abstractions.

Leaving the emphatically biomorphic imagery of the flock/membrane paintings, Snyder next moved toward a kind of narrative abstraction. “I began to draw the paint across the canvas. I tried to make long horizontal layers that would be like a story line. The paint became the subject instead of something else.” This transition is seen in *White Layers with Red Rectangle*, 1969 (fig. 7), where thick white paint is slathered in wide horizontal bands from one side of the canvas to the other. Snyder has not yet let go of the membrane which, in the form of a red rectangular outline, floats on top of the stroked surface rather than being imbedded in it. Formerly the membranes were transparent to the inside of bodies; now a red membrane frames layers of white impastoed strokes.

Snyder’s *Lines and Strokes*, September 1969 (fig. 8), is the first of the “stroke paintings,” and the first canvas she painted with the stretched canvas hung on a wall rather than placed on an easel. “I knew while I was doing it that I had made a breakthrough. I was painting paint strokes. The strokes became a physical reality, not an illusion.” The intense physicality of the membrane paintings is not diminished in these airier, more open, light-imbued works; it is simply less dense. In *Lines and Strokes*, pigment is still spread in horizontal bands over the canvas; in a sense, the red strokes are stretched-out membranes. Because Snyder



Fig. 7. *White Layers with Red Rectangle*, 1969. Acrylic and spray enamel on canvas, 50" x 74". Collection: Joan Snyder.



Fig. 8. *Lines and Strokes*. 1969. Oil and acrylic and spray enamel on canvas. Collection: Joan Snyder.

so closely identifies the canvas with her own skin, the viewer can almost feel every touch of the brush. Through history, painters from Titian to Arshile Gorky have shared this sensuous approach, but it becomes literal and concrete in the work of Snyder. The strong kinesthetic empathy is, I believe, an essential part of the “female” sensibility in Snyder’s art.

Lines and Strokes opened new territory for Snyder by introducing the grid as a framework for the freedom of her gestures. Grids had appeared in a few of the flock/membrane paintings, but now Snyder uses it as a musical staff on which to place her marks. Her grids do not make her paintings rigid: each is different—vertical, horizontal, bent, or irregular. Today she is no longer dependent on a grid; it is a part of her vocabulary that she uses when she wishes.

With *Lines and Strokes*, Snyder’s painting takes on a narrative dimension. The strokes, like notes of sound, must be read through time. Larry Fink introduced Snyder to classical music which had a strong effect on her art. She wanted her paintings to have music’s complexity of structure—“different parts, a beginning, middle, and end, different layers, different instruments, motifs, sounds, rhythms, many different things going on at once.” Her urge to penetrate and expose the inner structure of matter continued. But instead of cross sections of biological shapes, we now have what Snyder calls the “anatomy of a stroke.” In her stroke paintings, the structure becomes as transparent as the structure of sound in music. She reveals the painting’s constituent parts and the process of its making by exposing unbleached canvas, ruled and measured pencil grid lines, a range of stroke types, successive layers of paint in different stages of finish. Sometimes the paint is so thin that the viewer can see through it, sometimes it is heavily built up and covers the layers of strokes that went before. By including process, Snyder includes time in her paintings.

Placed directly on the canvas, the colored strokes in the first stroke paintings appear to float in a luminous, open space. This quality recalls Rothko’s suspended rectangles and Miró’s ambient shapes. The grid can also make the strokes architectonic. In the 1970 stroke paintings, strokes stack up in vertical columns like rows of bricks. These columns illustrate Snyder’s need to analyze the behavior of paint strokes: she places a stroke of fully saturated color on the canvas and then builds down or up, progressively diluting the color as she proceeds, until the stroke is transparent. She also likes to see what happens when columns of strokes interpenetrate or when strokes overlap each other. The results can be measured in the vibrancy—the emotional resonance—of the works.

Although Snyder uses formal language developed by the abstract expressionists, she says she was too absorbed in her own momentum to be influenced by them or by any contemporary art. It is nevertheless hard to believe that she could have achieved the kind of breadth, freedom, and impulsiveness seen in her abstractions without the example of the abstract expressionists, most notably Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Snyder’s insistence on her artistic independence is not simply a posture. Creative activity, no matter how dependent on cultural context, tends to *feel* free and new. Snyder *absorbs*, she does not *borrow*. She feels she must generate her own painterly language, and the expansion of that language is always linked to personal feeling and experience. “One day I was sitting and looking at a painting of mine, trying desperately to figure out what I wanted and what I wasn’t getting,” she remembers. “I looked at the wall underneath the canvas. The wall has wooden boards, so it’s a vertical grid. And there were these delicate little drips—pink, red, and blue—beautiful, waterlike drips from my canvas. I looked at the drips and said, ‘That’s what I want.’ It was a motion that I needed in my work that I hadn’t gotten before.” Snyder’s drips and



Fig. 9. *Big Green*. 1970. Oil, acrylic and spray enamel on canvas, 6' x 10'. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. S. I. Newhouse, Jr., N.Y.C.



Fig. 10. *Symphony*. 1970. Oil, acrylic and spray enamel on canvas, 6' x 12'. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Marvin Gerstein, Washington, D.C.

splashes are almost as varied as her strokes. They cluster in streamers hanging from larger shapes, they splatter and speckle, and they creep down from the lower edges of strokes like supersensitive tentacles feeling their way through space. Compared to Pollock's drips, Snyder's do not seem to form part of an overall sweep of dynamism. Instead, they seem particularized, referring to a single moment in time and a single place on the canvas—a single narrative incident.

With *Big Green* and *Symphony*, both 1970 (figs. 9 and 10), Snyder has left behind her period of probing. She drips and strokes masterfully, orchestrating forms as a composer focuses and fuses music. *Big Green's* vertical grid lines are spaced at progressively wider intervals so that the painting grows in the size and force of its motifs from left to right. On the left, *Big Green* begins with columns of short horizontal strokes which gently introduce the theme. A round burst of pink (recalling pink membranes) opens the next section, which ends with a group of small, thick, dark strokes—a terse but percussive transition. Then comes the final crescendo of broad green strokes that ends with a clash of copper pigment in the upper right.

In the stroke paintings, colors are not harmonized according to a master plan. They group and regroup themselves, setting off new flares of energy, and new echoes as the spectator's eye moves about the canvas. There is something primitivistic about Snyder's color. When she is painting, she says, she is like a child putting down one color and then the next, thrilled by each new discovery. Colors have specific associations for Snyder. Yellow can be a house, anxiety, the sun, ecstasy. Red is always passion, and pink is flesh. "I can hear the colors," the artist insists. "They're like notes in music. I know when they're just off and I know when they're just on. For example, that coppery square in *Symphony IV* [1977; fig. 29] was too dull. I said, 'Not enough, it has to be brought up.' It's like saying, 'violins,



Fig. 12. *Through the Flat Small*. 1971. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 2' x 2'. Collection: Allan Stone, N.Y.C.

play a little louder.' I'm like an orchestra leader, standing back and directing this thing." Given all these musical metaphors, it is not surprising that Joan Snyder listens to music when she is painting. Her favorites are Bach, Bartók, and Beethoven, because they seem to stimulate new ideas for paintings—new arabesques of color, staccatos of gesture, new empty spaces, fortissimos, and diminuendos. The development of the stroke painting has more to do with exploring space than color. They become, over time, spatially more complex. In *Symphony*, Snyder bends her grid lines, making strokes move in and out of depth. This elaboration of the spatial concept is carried further in *Love Your Bones*, 1970–71 (cover illustration), where Snyder has added a broad band that zigzags across the canvas. The band, says Snyder, is a way of turning the grid around so you can see the strokes as if you were looking at them from other sides. Strokes seen from the front move down the canvas in columns and twist as they move through the band because the band acts as a magnetic force and as an X ray of the strokes. "This is Joan Snyder discovering cubism," says Snyder. But it was not Picasso who led the way to spatial complexity; it was Snyder's abiding need "to get further into something, to penetrate it deeper and deeper." *Through the Flat Small*, 1971 (fig. 12), was another breakthrough. Here Snyder discovered that she did not need the band to penetrate "through the flat" (these words are written on the painting) or to see more than one dimension of a stroke. *Summer Painting*, August 1971, eliminates the grid as well, and strokes move every which way in space. Painted out-of-doors in the sunlight, *Summer Painting's* new freedom of structure is heightened by the artist's sense of jubilation, expressed in bright colors, openness, and light. The next liberating step was to warp the grid. In *Resolve in Four by Eight*, 1972 (fig. 13), vertical grid lines wobble back and forth, creating an even freer motion in and out of depth. The strokes—spare, clipped,

and sure—seem like notations for dance steps across the painting's surface. Strokes of the same color are arranged in horizontal rows which, together with the large amount of canvas left visible, give a feeling of clarity and peace after the commotion of strokes in earlier paintings.

A comparison of *Resolve in Four by Eight* with *Demoiselles*, 1972 (fig. 15) shows Snyder's growing urge to fill in more of the space. Both paintings use irregular, zigzagging vertical grid lines to create a jostling movement in space. But *Demoiselles*, with its vertical intervals filled in with fleshy color, suggests a more primitive, shuffling kind of dance. Short strokes laid horizontally on top of the figurelike verticals suggest ritual ornament such as bracelets, ribbons, or feathers. Only after it was finished did Snyder recognize its connection with the angular, flesh-colored primitivistic nudes of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

What is evident in most of the 1972 works is that after the stroke paintings, Snyder wanted to have a more extended and more physical interaction with the canvas's surface. There is a new kind of primitivism in her work and a return to symbols and themes that come from her early symbolic landscapes and interiors. *Houses*, 1972 (fig. 14), for example, treats a subject that emerged in 1963 in *The Yellow House*, an expressionist farm landscape. Perhaps because Snyder recognizes as childlike her yearning for the feeling of being protected in a house, she borrows the simplified drawing style of children's art. As if the canvas were a game of tic-tac-toe, she fills the squares of a grid with a list of all the houses she has ever lived in. *Squares*, 1972, is a grid filled in with checkers of bright color recalling Klee, an artist who Snyder admits did influence her. At the time that she painted it, *Squares* seemed a maverick, but it turned out to be a transition. From 1972 to the present, Snyder has painted a number of filled-in grids, and she has also used them as sections in larger paintings.

Describing her evolution from the stroke paintings, Snyder



Fig. 13. *Resolve in Four by Eight*. 1972. Oil, acrylic and spray enamel on canvas, 4' x 8'.
Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Stranahan, Toledo, Ohio.

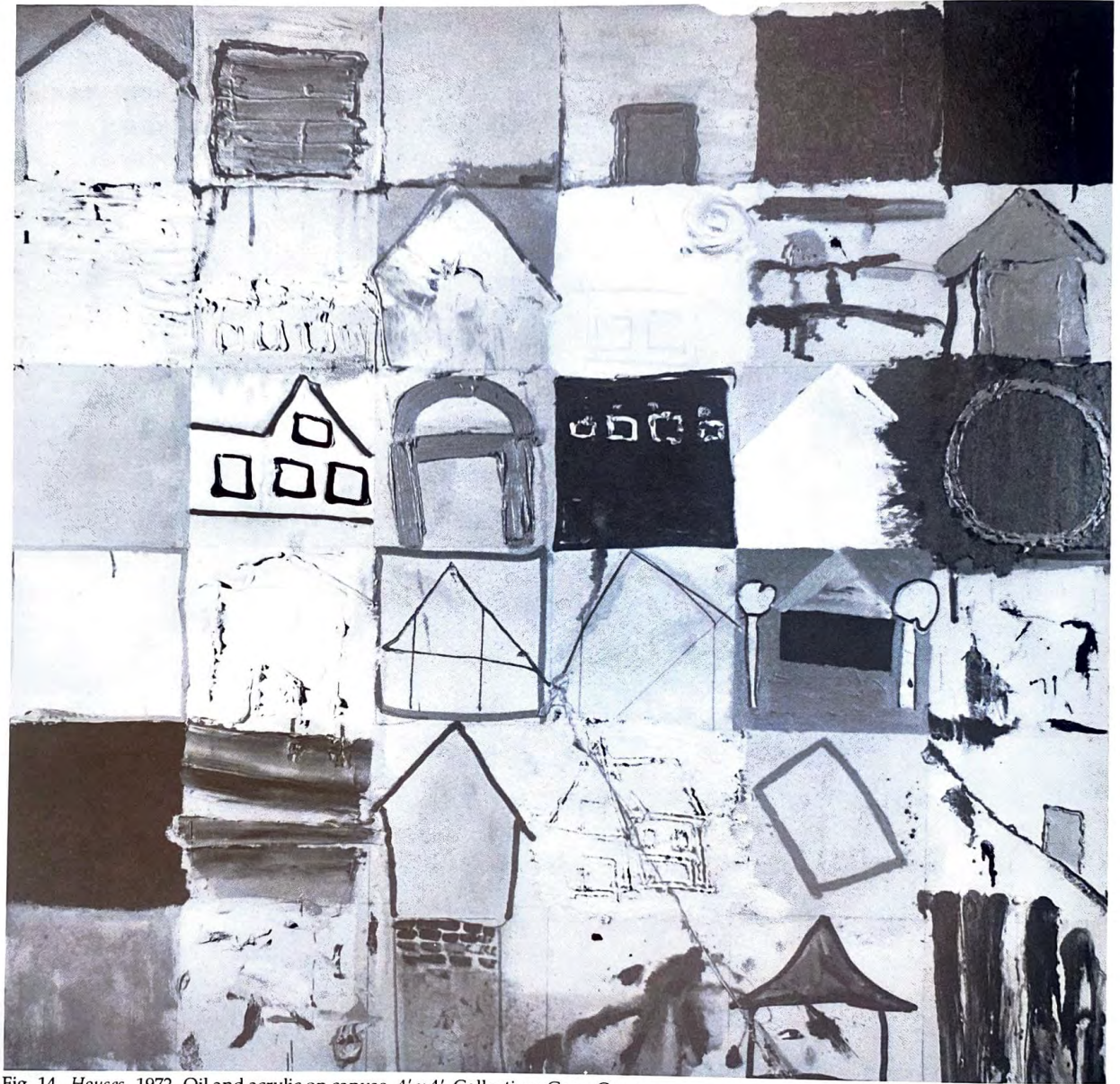


Fig. 14. *Houses*. 1972. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 4' x 4'. Collection: Gene Corman, Beverly Hills, California.



Fig. 15. *Demoiselles*. 1972. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 6' x 12'. Collection: United Bank of California, Los Angeles, California.



Fig. 16. *Soft Pocket Song*. 1972. Oil and acrylic on canvas 6' x 9'. Collection: Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y.C.

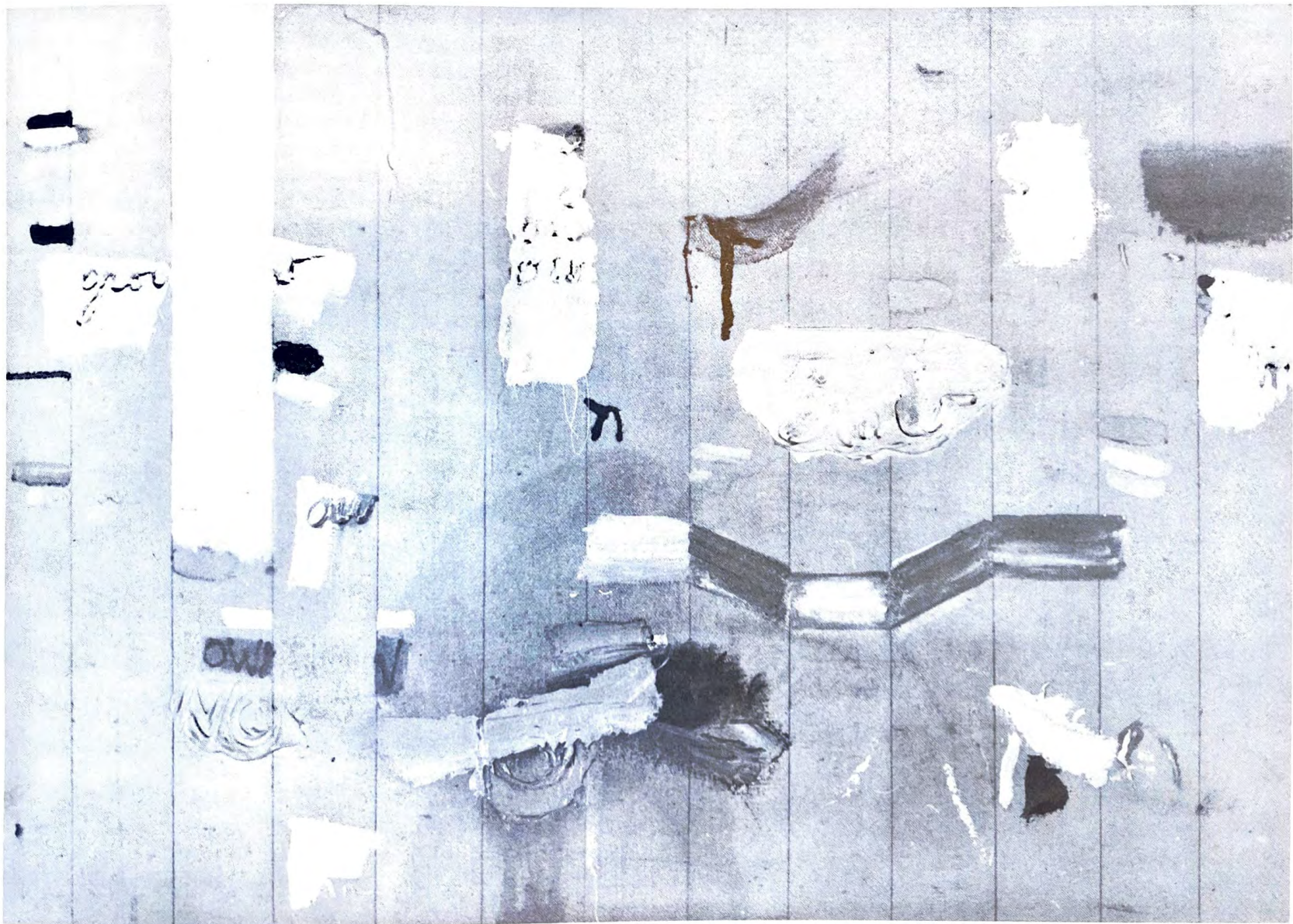


Fig. 17. *To Grow*. 1973–1974. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 19" x 26". Collection: Joan Snyder.



Fig. 18. *Flesh/Art*. 1973–1974. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 2' x 2'. Collection: Joan Snyder.

says: "The stroke paintings ended. I had nowhere to go but into my own past again, into my own iconography. It was either less strokes and minimalizing the image, or it was going backwards and maximizing the image. And that second choice is what I did. I worked back to the flock imagery. The fleshiness and the breast shapes came out in *Soft Pocket Song*." This horizontally layered, flesh-colored abstraction is a conflation of landscape and recumbent nudes (fig. 16). It is as if *Demoiselles* had been turned on its side.

The zigzagging horizontal grid is strongly narrative in effect. The viewer's eye bumps into small symbolic shapes that move across the superimposed colored strips like creatures marching across a child's drawing of receding hills. There are also "soft pockets," canvas patches full of paint, which Snyder has attached to the surface. She sees these pockets as a formal device: "I wanted to pull out the paint and make it sit perpendicular to the canvas." But the pockets are one more example of her identification of the canvas with flesh. Like the strings in *String Band* or the canvas strips in *Stripper* (both 1972), the pockets reveal Snyder's increasing urge toward a sculptural, emotion-charged tactility.

To Grow and *Flesh/Art* (figs. 17 and 18), two small canvases painted concurrently in 1973–74, show aspects of Snyder's vocabulary that were to be brought together in the later tripartite feminist paintings. *To Grow*—one of Snyder's most tender and beautiful works—has a grid with strokes dispersed upon it. But the paint strokes are not as flowing, luminous, and ringing as those in the stroke paintings. Opaque patches of pigment are mute and pale. Words and letters etched in white are so fraught with urgency they almost seem whispered: "grow, ow, no, n, o." In her diary, where she often comments on works in progress, Snyder wrote: "To grow having to do with stopping and starting words—creating anxiety—but also with a certain rhythm to it." Perhaps the painting refers to the private pain of

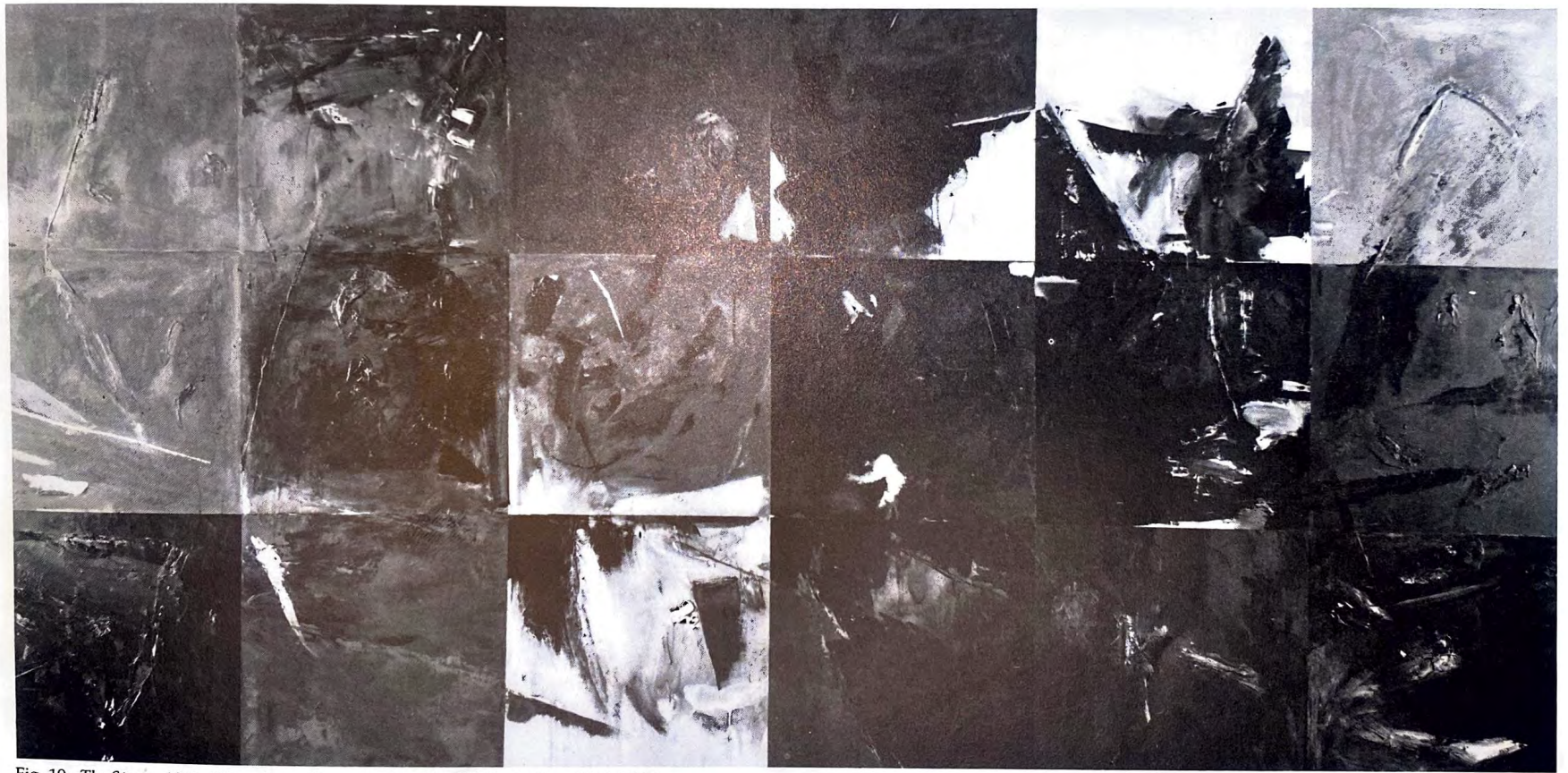


Fig. 19. *The Storm*. 1974. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 6' x 12'. Collection: Nick Wilder, Los Angeles California.

psychic growth during this period when Snyder was deeply involved with feminism and her own confusion about what it meant to be female. The anxiety in *To Grow* is desperately subdued when compared to the loud outcries that were to follow. One detail, an upward curving, pointed stroke, hints at quiescent pain. Indeed, this curved paint stroke is like cut flesh, for red paint dribbles like blood down the canvas.

Flesh/Art does not simply represent a cut, it literally cuts the canvas. Skin-colored canvas is first slashed, then the cut canvas is turned out, so that the insides show. The insides are painted different colors, making the slashes into a vivid image of pain. "My idea was to pull art out of flesh," Snyder says, and *Flesh/Art*'s relieflike surface makes the identity between canvas and palpitant flesh more obvious than ever. Snyder insists, however, that the cuts here and in later works are not sexual symbols. They are part of her formal language. "I mean, when I'm doing it to canvas, I'm doing it to canvas, not to anything else." However, it is difficult for the viewer not to associate these cuts brimming with paint with vaginal imagery, especially as they recall the sexual images in the flock/membrane paintings. (See, for example, *Flock Painting of Women*, fig. 6.)

Like most artists, Snyder often sets out to create beauty. *Symphony II*, 1974, seems to aim for the majestic clarity and transcendence that is sometimes felt in culminating moments of symphonic music. But unlike most artists, Snyder also dares produce paintings that are dissonant and intentionally unlovely. In *The Storm*, 1974 (fig. 19), she obliterates pleasurable chords of color; her art is moving toward a new abrasiveness. In her diary Snyder wrote: "*The Storm* [is] a massive effort to create darkness covering the buds as in spring coming . . . not willing to have 'beautiful' painting—covering, covering—seeing beautiful passages and having to cover them. . . . I refused to allow the glorious look of the others. It had a glorious look of its own." Re-

turning to musical imagery, *The Storm* is almost Wagnerian in the brute romanticism of its drama—an epic of reds, whites, and blacks flailing within the confines of a grid. Snyder stopped painting for six months after *The Storm*. She and her husband had moved from Manhattan to a farm in Martins Creek, Pennsylvania in order to escape the tensions and demands of the city. And it was there that she began to paint again in August 1974. The result was her first two-part painting, *Then and Now*. After this she did *Creek Square*, another two-part work, which juxtaposes an area of painterly strokes and symbols with an area of relatively neatly filled-in grid. This combination continues into the work that Snyder is doing today.

Later that fall, she started *Small Symphony for Women* (fig. 20) and the group of paintings that make explicit feminist statements. Paradoxically, these tough, cacophonous canvases were produced at the Martins Creek farm, whereas Snyder's most lyrical, open, landscapelike paintings (the stroke paintings and some of the recent works) were done in New York City. Apparently the isolation of the country steps up the urgency of Snyder's dialogue between life and art. On October 17, 1974, Snyder sketched *Small Symphony for Women* in her diary and wrote: "Perhaps the beginning of what could be a long involved project, direct inspiration being the panel I attended last night at Douglass College. Much information behind the time—much infuriated me—but nonetheless struck a good chord, one that has been simmering. I say 'Can symphonies be made out of this subject.' I say let's try. Symphonies of women, about women, for women . . . a symphony with words and marks, colors and squares." Actually, Snyder had become involved with feminism three years before, while participating in a consciousness-raising group largely made up of women artists. From 1971 to 1974, she helped arrange exhibitions of women's art and panel discussions with the women artists at Douglass



Fig. 20. *Small Symphony for Women*. 1974. Oil and acrylic on canvas, triptych: each canvas 2' x 2'. Collection: Suellen Snyder, N.Y.C.

College. The program was a success, and when three hundred people attended a panel, she went home and thought out the plan for *Small Symphony for Women*. "My idea was to do something in three parts. The first was going to be a verbal listing of what female imagery was in my work. It contains some very political ideas, dreams, colors, material, angers, rage. The second part is simply a visual listing of what was on the first section. There are membranes, words, a house, grid, breast, strokes. The third panel is a resolve, a crescendo. I think of it as the resolution of the first two panels."

In *Small Symphony for Women*, Snyder was trying to speak more directly and clearly to her audience. For that reason she wrote an explicit feminist complaint on it, and she used different modes of communication on each panel. If the strokes dispersed on a grid structure had been hard to see all at once in the stroke paintings, the different types of marks that are used in the 1974 triptychs and tripartite paintings are even harder to see together. Nevertheless, visual and thematic links from panel to panel give the three movements of these canvases the unity of a symphony.

In *Vanishing Theatre*, 1974 (fig. 21), the symphony becomes a tragic drama. The canvas is divided into three acts. To the left, the program is announced in words on a white ground: "Part I Lament W [with] words. Part II Vanishing Theatre/The Cut. Part III Take your clothes off lady and let's see who you really are." Below this synopsis of acts is a pink breast form and some indecipherable words that are the visual equivalent of angry rasping noises. The central image of the painting occurs in Part II: a long, curved, bulging slash in a blood-red field. The field is also inflected with strokes, black smudges, a circle of black paint and a heart cut out of black fur (which Snyder admits is a vaginal image). But the long slash is clearly the drama's climactic moment, and compared to the cuts in *Flesh/Art*, it is truly hair-raising. Snyder has tried to sew the cut up, but the

chicken wire "pod" that she has stuffed into the cut is too large to allow the flaps of the canvas to meet: the wound cannot be closed.

On one level, the wound refers to the severing of a painful relationship that Snyder had with an older woman whom she had known for many years; indeed Snyder has said that several of these paintings deal with her thoughts about androgyny. Even without such privileged knowledge, *Vanishing Theatre* clearly conveys the artist's ambivalence about female sexuality. The title comes from a passage in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, where a woman says after the death of a close friend: "The theatre of all my ideas has vanished." The painting is about exposing and excising a myth. In Part III, the demand that the lady take off her clothes is the artist's personal confrontation with a lie. A diary entry from December 12, 1974, reads, "Only as the theatre vanished did it become more visible. The cut becomes an opening, the opening a closing, the closing an opening." Cutting this loved person out of her life meant a release. *Vanishing Theatre* was a catharsis. The final panel of *Vanishing Theatre* is a grid of colored rectangles whose edges are built up into papier-mâché ridges recalling the membrane's built-up edges. The grid's ordered rectangles offer a sense of resolution and harmony after personal crisis.

Many people have compared *Vanishing Theatre's* central image to giving birth or to having an abortion. To Snyder, it was both a birth and a death. She did in fact have an abortion six months after she made this painting. On one painting Snyder wrote, "the painting hauntingly precedes the life—and follows it." The *terribilit * of *Vanishing Theatre* and other works from 1974 to the present is especially powerful because it is not a stylistic or iconographic convention, but a real event worked out *on* canvas. It is this absolute congruence of formal and autobiographical discovery that distinguishes Snyder from lesser painters in the diaristic mode. Yet, for all its openness, Snyder's



Fig. 21. *Vanishing Theatre*. 1974. Oil, acrylic and collage materials on canvas. Collection: Carl Solway Gallery, N.Y.C.

autobiographical art is intimate but not indiscreet. It is about human—not just individual—experience, and it is as much about painting as about life. Because the message is conveyed much more through abstract language than through images and words, self-exploration never becomes trivial self-display.

According to Snyder, her artistic evolution is so self-propelled that even when her work strongly relates to that of a contemporary artist (Joan Mitchell, for example, or Rauschenberg), it is simply the result of coincidence of feeling and experience, not the result of influence. Her drawings are often one or two years ahead of her paintings, and she frequently uses ideas sketched in her diary at a much later date. Snyder never lacks ideas for paintings, but she edits them carefully. "Probably the seed of the idea comes from the preceding paintings. If I can keep an idea for a painting in my mind, if before I write it down it comes back to me four or five times, then I know it's for real. Then I'll start sketching little thoughts about it in my diary. The reason I don't do detailed drawings is that if I did, I'd never do the paintings. I'd get bored. I never do the same thing twice." Snyder sounds like the prototypical expressionist when she talks about her creative process: "I have to really act the thing out physically right on the canvas. It's happening while it's happening. When I'm painting, I'm thinking and feeling, and also responding to what's happening on the canvas in a formal way." While working on *Vanishing Theatre*, for instance, Snyder recalls that "the canvas started vibrating in front of my eyes. Something often happens when a painting is going well. It's alive, almost. And I go from one step to the next and I never know what's going to happen after that. I wrote in my diary, 'I'll cut it open soon.'"

Vanishing Theatre was "the last of the violent cuts." Snyder's next painting, *Symphony III*, 1975 (fig. 22), is, like *Symphony II*, the orchestration of resplendent beauty. It is as if all the

mess and wounds of life had been cleansed. Where writing was scrawled in *Vanishing Theatre*, there are now sonorous rectangles of browns, purples, and blacks. Where the sullied red screeched around the cut, there is now white. Even the cuts are small, neat, less open. To the right, golds sing of triumph and transcendence.

The next filled-in grid painting, *Heart On*, 1975 (fig. 23), is perversely scuffy and soiled. It is full of collage elements, including swaths of surgical gauze and (returning to her funky, sardonic humor of 1966) a satin heart decked with a fake corsage and slathered with sticky-looking syrup. Snyder uses lots of gold to heighten the gaudiness, and she strokes, dribbles, cuts, stuffs, and sews, deploying in a single canvas the entire lexicon of her abstract language. "Heart On is a palette of female pain, anger, and needs," Snyder says. It was painted at a time in which she was going through what she calls a "female identity crisis." In *Heart On*, "I wanted to line those symbols up side by side and put them in a grid and make a painting about my involvement with women."

Mom's Just Out There Tryin' to Break That Grid (fig. 24) was painted in the summer of 1975 after the artist had an abortion. But with its exuberant, almost rococo lightness and movement, it seems to contain more ecstasy than agony. A swirling cloud of white paint and gauze "breaks" some collage papier-mâché rods that were the title's "grid." This is jubilant destruction: "I wanted *Mom's Just Out There Tryin' to Break That Grid* to be about release, opening up, freedom and flying," Snyder says. It is the opposite of *Vanishing Theatre*. In fact, the painting looks back to the soft, erotic imagery of flock/membrane paintings like *Two Bodies Merging*, 1969 (fig. 4).

After *Mom's Just Out There Tryin' to Break That Grid*, Snyder stopped painting almost entirely for a year. (She often has long periods of inactivity followed by changes in her work.) Then, in July 1976, she did *Small Symphony for Women II*, a



Fig. 22. *Symphony III*. 1974. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 5' x 10'. Collection: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, Texas.

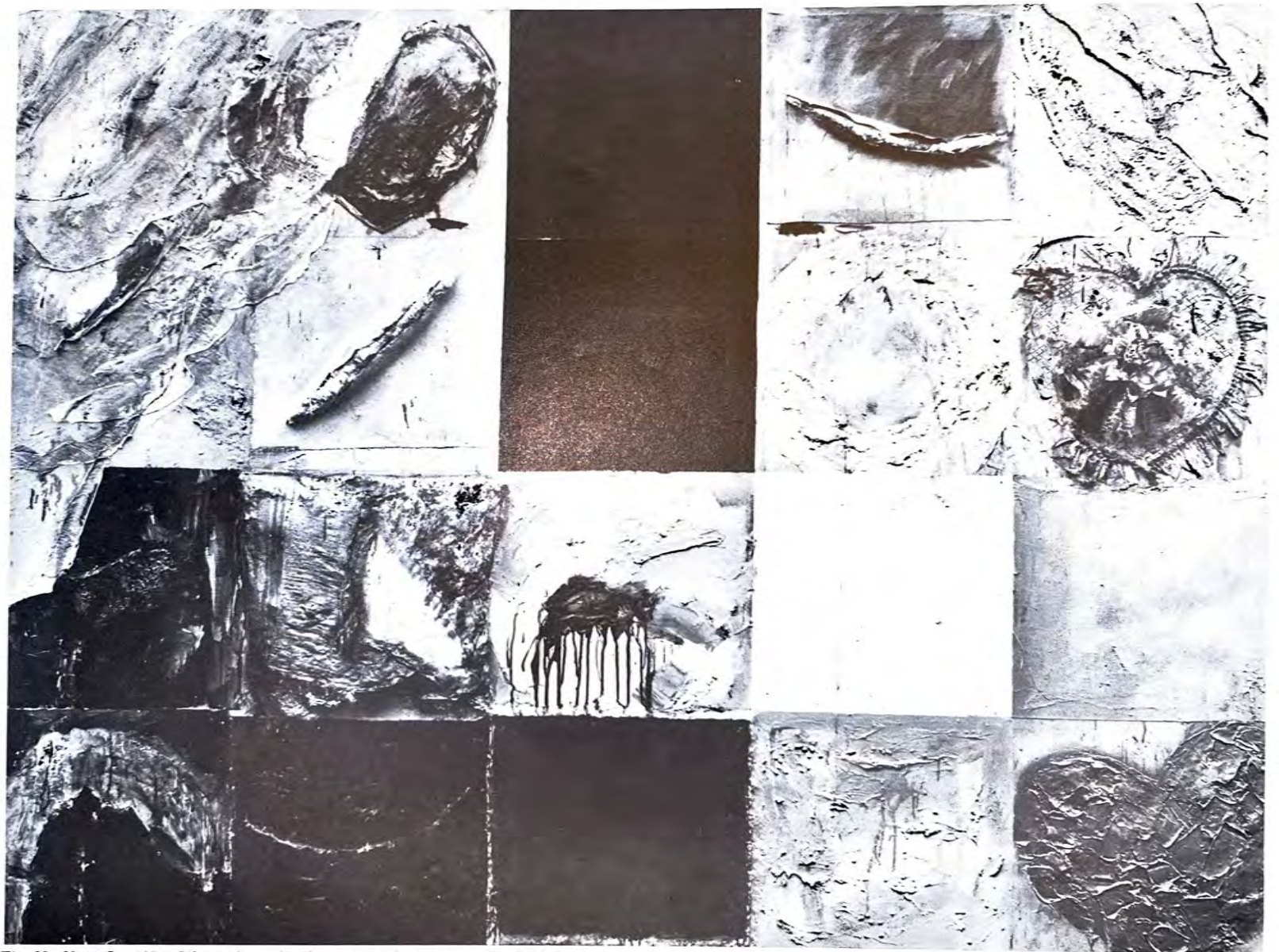


Fig. 23. *Heart On*. 1975. Oil, acrylic and collage material on canvas, 6' x 8'. Collection: Carl Solway Gallery, N.Y.C.



Fig. 24. *Mom's Just Out There Tryin' to Break That Grid*. 1975. Oil, acrylic and collage materials on canvas, 6' x 12'. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. S. I. Newhouse, Jr., N.Y.C.



Fig. 25. *Yellow Was a House*. 1976. Oil, acrylic and collage materials on canvas, triptych:
3 panels, one panel 24" x 24", two panels 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Collection: Joan Snyder.



Fig. 26. *Farm Landscape*. 1977. Oil, acrylic and collage materials on canvas, 32½" x 65½".
Collection: Joan Snyder.

violent triptych with furious scribbling marks in the central panel where she actually burned a hole through the canvas. She also returned to the figure in some of her paintings. In *Nude in Landscape*, for example, 1977 (fig. 27), a female nude is sprawled over a mountainous scene, becoming part of the hills. It is far from a bucolic vision. An ominous white gauze shape on the left represents Snyder's memory of an anesthetic mask that she saw during her abortion two years earlier. Indeed, this painting with its spread-legged reclining nude is partially about that experience. A pink-faced baby appears on the left; a collaged volute gushes forth from the nude, and there is a pool of red blood with a collaged strip of newspaper at the lower right that reads "Terror in D. & C." (Snyder added the ampersand to make the terror refer to her operation rather than to the nation's capital.)

In fact *Nude in Landscape* is both terrifying and exuberant. The grim event is full of rollicking movement and it takes place under a sunlit blue sky that is made up of collaged rectilinear shapes—a fragmented version of the filled-in grid that served as a "resolution" in earlier paintings. Moreover, Joan Snyder can summon up her sardonic humor even when the subject is extreme pain. Miniature peacocks (from the wallpaper over which she painted *Nude in Landscape*) strut about with spread tails and guard the flowered "lake/egg" that is surrounded by a field of red. Did these birds lay the egg? Are they symbols of male vanity, or (as in Christian iconography) are the peacocks symbols of resurrection?

Of her recent paintings, Snyder says, "They are opening up. They're lighter. They're personal but less autobiographical. Humor has come back." Humor is certainly much of the message in *California Dream House*, 1977 (fig. 28), a small painting wryly showing the predictable ostentation of a beach house plus driveway, garden, kidney-shaped pool, and palm trees all seen from the



Fig. 27. *Nude in Landscape*. 1977. Oil, acrylic and collage materials on canvas, 40" x 60".
Collection: Joan Snyder.

vantage point of a low-flying plane. In Snyder's latest works, color is more complex and materials more varied. *Rooms*, for example, is a raised papier-mâché grid filled in with collaged scraps of old wallpaper and fabrics—a wonderfully vulgar house, full of mess and memories. The development towards openness is easy to see by comparing two works on the same theme, *Yellow Was a House*, 1976, and *Farm Landscape*, 1977 (figs. 25 and 26). The neatly divided triptych gives way to a more loosely structured, freely brushed three-part painting on a single canvas. Snyder's most recent painting, *Resurrection*, 1977 (fig. 30), began as "Rape." Its genesis goes back two-and-a-half years to the time when Snyder began to notice newspaper articles about violence inflicted on women by men. After compulsively clipping out these articles for a year, she decided to make a painting on the subject. She planned a huge, multipaneled work, but her initial effort was too violent and ugly to satisfy her. So Snyder left it for a while, and then last summer she abandoned the problematic violent section and re-thought her theme. This time, everything "flowed." As Snyder tells it, the painting traces the story of a woman whom she imagines to have been raped and murdered at the Martins Creek farm. The painting was a way of laying this woman's ghost to rest: "Someone needed to be buried. The painting became the story of one woman and many women's lives. It was about rape and murder and rage. It was also about the rich life history of a woman aside from the fact that she was violated. Finally I had made a painting about someone else's experience. It was a great release to me." Snyder's most clearly narrative work to date, *Resurrection* begins with a simple list of the names of women who have been raped, murdered, or violently attacked by men; the names are spelled out against a beige ground. The next three panels are collages of newspaper articles about violence and rape, over and under which Snyder has



Fig. 28. *California Dream House*. 1977. Oil, acrylic and collage materials on canvas, 24" x 34".
Collection: Joan Snyder.

painted a kind of cubistic grid pattern. In the third newspaper panel, the grid's verticals and horizontals explode into a helter-skelter of lines in order to make a transition to the wild movement of the rape episode on the next panel. The following three panels deal with violence, death, and resurrection—themes which Snyder had explored earlier in her symbolic nudes and angels in the 1965 "altar" paintings. The dead rape victim becomes an ascending angel. To the right, the sun and moon appear together in an apocalyptic landscape. Beneath the night sky lies the dead woman wearing black; beneath the sun is a rainbow arched over a white house with pale wallpapered walls. "The last panel is full of sweet pastel colors and collaged with net veils taken from ladies' hats. It," says Snyder, "is heavenly old age."

The movement in this painting is from dark to light, from violence to peace, from rape to resurrection. It ends with a light, airy, abstract landscape, very different from the closed grid "resolve" of earlier works. Snyder has discovered that "resolution" can be open and free. This sense of freedom expresses not only the rape victim's resurrection, but also the artist's own feeling of redemption and release. She says that the sense of unrest that had pervaded the Martins Creek farm lifted after she painted *Resurrection*. Once again, the painting "predicts the life" and follows it. One could say of *Resurrection* what Joan Snyder said about the 1974 paintings that focused on a narrative of female experience: "I think they're ultimately very positive and healthy paintings, not rageful or vengeful or bitter. That's what the crescendo and resolve are about. I know what I want life to be—it may not be what my life is. The paintings are filled with hope."

In her art and in her life, Snyder struggles towards breaking free—"release" and "breakthrough" are words she uses often. The freedom she achieves in her paintings is especially affecting, because it leaves none of the grit of life



Fig. 29. *Symphony IV*. Oil and collage materials on canvas, 5' x 10'. Collection: Graham Gund, Boston, Mass.

behind. Her work from 1970 to 1977 is the story of her growth as an artist and as a woman. What is extraordinary is the close interconnection between her artistic and personal growth. This gives each painting a fierce, personal urgency. It also gives the evolution from one painting to the next a special kind of integrity and poignancy.

In retrospect, for all the growth and change, there is a great consistency to Snyder's work over the years. The paintings, regardless of when they were made, show her desire to penetrate and to see inside of phenomena, her obsession with sentient physical surfaces, her restless need to find a language that reverberates with the variety of her feelings and the complexity of her experience. That language is her best argument to prove the existence of an innate female sensibility; we are convinced that what she says could only have been said by a woman. Snyder also proves herself throughout as a bold artist. She tempts the edge where opulence becomes garish, freedom becomes sloppy, and passion becomes overstatement. It is a measure of her success that even in her most bravura performances, Joan Snyder stays completely in command, creating works that are as disjunctive, rich, and finally as coherent as life itself.

Hayden Herrera



Fig. 30. *Resurrection*. 1977. Oil and collage materials on canvas, 6½' x 26'. Collection: Joan Snyder.

Joan Snyder: Biography

- 1940 Born, Highland Park, New Jersey
- 1962 B.A., Sociology, Douglass College, New Brunswick, N.J.
- 1965 Visits Belgium and travels through Europe
- 1966 M.F.A., Rutgers University, New Jersey
- 1968 Returns to Europe and visits Israel
- 1969 Married to Laurence Fink
- 1973 Purchased farm in Martins Creek, Pa.

One Woman Exhibitions

- 1978 Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art, New York, February
- 1978 Neuberger Museum, Purchase, New York, *Seven Years of Work*, January–February
- 1977 Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, April–May
- 1976 Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Cal., August–September
- 1976 Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, Oregon, May
- 1976 Reed College, Portland, Oregon, April
- 1976 Carl Solway Gallery, New York City, February
- 1973 Paley and Lowe Gallery, New York City, April–May
- 1972 Parker 470 Gallery, Boston, Mass., April
- 1972 Douglass College, New Brunswick, New Jersey, April
- 1971 Paley and Lowe Gallery, New York City, November
- 1971 Michael Walls Gallery, San Francisco, Cal., August–September

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1977 "Twelve from Rutgers," University Art Gallery, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., November–December
- 1977 "Drawing on a Grid," Susan Caldwell Gallery, organized by Michael Walls, New York City, September–October

- 1977 "Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content," Brooklyn Museum, New York, October
- 1976 "23 American Women Artists" Mary McKay Koogler Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas
- 1975 34th Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., February–April
- 1975 "Fourteen Abstract Painters," Wight Art Gallery, U.C.L.A., Los Angeles, Cal., March–May
- 1974 "Women's Work—American Art '74," Philadelphia Civic Center, Philadelphia, Pa.
- 1973 "New York Avant-Garde," Saidye Bronfman Center, Montreal, Canada
- 1973 "Options 73/70," Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio
- 1973 "American Drawings, 1963–1973," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City
- 1973 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y.C.
- 1973 "Women Choose Women," New York Cultural Center, New York, January–February
- 1972 "Seven New York Painters," Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, Cal., May–June
- 1972 "Grids," Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Pa.
- 1972 Whitney Annual, Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y.C.
- 1972 "12 Statements; Beyond the Sixties," Detroit Institute of Art, September
- 1972 "Three Artists," Fine Arts Center, University of Rhode Island
- 1971 "Into the '70's," Mansfield Fine Arts Museum, Mansfield, Ohio
- 1971 Bykert Gallery, New York City, February

Recent Purchase

- 1977 Dallas Museum of Contemporary Art: *Symphony III*, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 5' x 10', 1974

Awards

- National Endowment for the Arts Grant, 1974

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- "Grids," *Artforum*, May 1972, John Elderfield, p. 53.
- "Portrait of Young Artists," *Newsweek*, Feb. 7, 1972, p. 79.
- Art International*, Jan. 1972, Carter Ratcliff, p. 68.
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- Time*, March 20, 1972, "Special Issue: The American Woman," pp. 72-77.
- "The Anatomy of a Stroke: The Recent Paintings of Joan Snyder," *Artforum*, May 1971, Marcia Tucker, p. 42.
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