



joan snyder

HAYDEN HERRERA

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ALTHOUGH JOAN SNYDER'S COMPELLING PAINTINGS ARE often placed under various art-movement umbrellas—Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Expressionism, and Feminist Art—her work has always been difficult to categorize. In the first major book on this influential artist, Hayden Herrera brings new insight to Snyder's beautiful mixed-medium works and their combination of female imagery, dynamic brush strokes, and accomplished formalism. While Snyder's paintings offer a revealingly intimate perspective into her personal experience, they also speak to us through a universal iconography that taps into the collective unconscious, transcending circumstance and our experience in the process.

Snyder's introduction into the New York art world began with a series of stroke paintings completed in the 1970s, which, as she describes them, let us look "at paint and painting from a different angle," one that "speaks of human needs." The works quickly garnered critical praise and in 1971 and 1972, Snyder was featured in three solo shows in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. These early exhibitions were quickly followed by her inclusion in the Whitney Biennial in 1973 and the Corcoran Biennial in 1975. The constantly evolving nature of her work has kept her in the art-world spotlight ever since.

Through rich illustrations and illuminating text, *Joan Snyder* details the complex evolution of the artist's works, from her evocative brush strokes in *Symphony* and *Summer Orange*, which drip with "rivulets of feeling," to her slow progression toward the formal structures of grid landscapes like *Symphony III*, to her bold historical and political works like *Women In Camps*. Since the 1980s, Snyder's paintings have taken on an autobiographical and often deeply personal tone, as expressed in *Love's Pale Grapes*. Her latest paintings, such as the majestic *Women Make Lists*, represent a culmination of the grief, jubilation, and, finally, transcendence that reside in the heart of Snyder's work.











joan snyder

hayden herrera | with an essay by jenni sorkin

introduction | norman l. kleeblatt

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jacket front: *Should You Wonder*. 2002. 40 x 68". Oil, acrylic, herbs on linen (detail).

Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Johnston. Photograph by Stephen Sloman

jacket back: *The House*. 1970. 17 ¼ x 22 ¼". Graphite and pastel on paper (detail).

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pages 6-7: *And Always Searching*. . . (detail), 2000. 10 x 14". Watercolor on paper

pages 8-9: *Lines and Strokes*, 1969. 40 x 52". Oil, acrylic, and spray enamel on raw canvas

page 78: *Shapes of Lines* (detail), 1970. 8 ½ x 11". Pastel on lined paper

page 102: *Blue Drawing* (detail), 2004. 14 x 17". Acrylic and ink on paper

page 136: *Women Make Lists* (detail), 2004. 14 x 17". Acrylic, pencil, watercolor on paper





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sighting joan snyder / citing her critics

norman l. kleeblatt

susan and elihu rose curator of fine arts

THE JEWISH MUSEUM, NEW YORK

NEW YORK: FEBRUARY 18, 1977. I HAD PREVIOUSLY encountered works by Joan Snyder, yet opening night of Snyder's exhibition at the Patricia Hamilton Gallery remains etched in my memory as my first sustained engagement with Snyder's art. I was in a particularly antisocial mood. Had I fixated on the works to protect me from personal interactions? Or were the emotions evoked by the paintings so exquisitely private that they forced me to retreat into a psychological cocoon? My responses were mixed. I shuttled between attraction and aversion, emotive accord and stylistic confusion. The wild surfaces and rowdy materials that made up pictures like *Symphony IV* or *Resurrection* (pages 140–41), both 1977, seemed to fly purposefully in the face of good taste. How could garish color, glitter, and gooey collage elements capture my (then) reserved aesthetic attention? How could there be such intense intimacy in pictures so monumental in scale? Surrounded by a world in thrall to a severe 1970s industrial aesthetic, the cultural *flâneur* in me longed for order, clarity, and restraint. My art historian side sought some overarching rubric, a secure stylistic position, or some emergent canon into which I might situate Snyder's pictures.

I was certainly not alone in trying to position Snyder's art. The writings about it are full of attempts—sometimes allusive—to connect her with sources in works by other postwar artists, to place the oeuvre in some historical frame, and, not least, to read it as precedent for later movements. We are told time and again in the literature that her work has negligible connections to either Minimal or Pop art, aside from the association with her teacher, Robert Morris. These movements of the previous decade still resonated well into the 1970s, and Snyder's paintings have been discussed as a repudiation of them. In the wake of that February 1977 viewing, I considered locating her pictures as either Pattern and Decoration or New Image Painting. Although they contained trace elements of both, they were neither. How about the School of London, the other side of the Atlantic where painting was said to be more vital than on these shores? Early David Hockney came to mind, but his intimate subjects were ironic and voyeuristic. Howard Hodgkin's delight in color and pattern or R. B. Kitaj's patchwork of literary imaginings also might offer painterly points of reference.

motherlove (detail)
1999
73 1/2 x 85 1/2"
oil, acrylic, paper-mâché, and wooden
dowels on canvas

However, all these British examples were too concerned with the centrality of the image—a holdover of the Renaissance window on the world—to make any comparative sense. Contrasts often seem more useful, and they abound in the writing about this work. That her art has been read as a female response to the heroic intentions and lofty, tragic themes of Abstract Expressionism was certainly as evident to me as it was to many early writers on the subject. While such an assessment may seem too self-evident, a number of critics have offered cogent distinctions between Snyder's tactile expressionism and the masculine cant of that so-called triumphal movement. For example, Marcia Tucker presciently differentiates the intimate, less formally controlled, all-over nature of Joan Snyder's pictures and the tightly formal, iconic quality of Abstract Expressionism.¹ Ruth Iskin draws our attention to the artist's metaphorical use of brushwork as wound in contrast to the power-wielding painterly strokes of male Abstract Expressionist masters.²

There are also heraldic readings of Snyder's art. We are told frequently—including in the essays in this book—that her paintings can be seen as precedents for the bravado gestures and emotive parodies of Neo-

expressionism.³ However, that movement, often hastily credited with the reemergence of painting in the early 1980s, did not enter art-world parlance until two years later, and would not have played a role in my personal deliberations that February 1977 evening.

As the sole male contributor to this catalogue, I am all the more aware that my desire for classification, for order, and for control may result from latent sexist baggage based on the male invention and domination of the art history I was taught.⁴ Yet I am 100 percent sure that a self-critical evaluation of any such covert chauvinist tendencies—based, for example, on my later exposure to the writings of such social critics as Michel Foucault and Homi Bhaba—could never have affected my thinking during that first heady encounter with Snyder's painting. Am I barking up the wrong proverbial tree in my attempts at art historical classification? Are even feminist writers led astray in trying to corral the work of an important first generation feminist painter by trying to apply to it male-formulated criteria?

Despite all the efforts to search for connections, to find similarities, and to reveal influences, Snyder's art resists easy categorization. This is certainly part

of its uniqueness and may be the core of its power (there I go, another male-associated term).⁵ Contrasts and oppositions may offer a better lens through which to examine the work. “Contradictory” and “disjunctive” aspects in Snyder were astutely observed by Hayden Herrera in 1978 and elaborated a year later by Michael Walls in his essay about her.⁶

For an artist who is often discussed in connection with musical inspirations and dramatic ambitions, such a literary paradigm might prove extremely useful. A number of literary theorists, discussing authors as diverse as Kafka and Shakespeare, consider the contradictory impulse or conflicting characterization as premier principles of drama.⁷ Time and again critics call our attention to these qualities, phenomena that seem embedded as much in Snyder’s every brushstroke as they are in her social and political conscience.

Interpretations of the conflicting characteristics of her painting have been served up with tragic, poetic drama worthy of the classic male critics who championed Abstract Expressionist art. A particularly resonant example of such prose is Bill Jones’s near biblical staging of “Snyder’s work [as] a continual sacrifice of modernism on the altar of feminism.”⁸ Her structural

reliance upon the grid and her gestural resistance to its constraints remains another oft-cited example of the contradictory aspects of Snyder’s practice.⁹ Likewise, the dual nature of the artist’s work, as both representational and abstract, surface in numerous commentaries. Oppositions like “order and abandon,”¹⁰ “intuitive and analytical,”¹¹ “emotive and rational,”¹² “angry and pastoral,”¹³ “shamanistic and religious,”¹⁴ intellectual and visceral, pepper the writings about Joan Snyder’s work. Her art is continually described in dialectical ciphers. Ruth Iskin’s observation of Snyder’s achievement as political art presented in the unlikely form of lyrical painting¹⁵ and Bill Jones’s portrayal of her art combining the implausible dynamic of “Catholic transubstantiation and Jewish mysticism”¹⁶ present yet other examples.

A new connection presented in Hayden Herrera’s thoughtful and comprehensive essay for this volume is one I want to explore along a different route. Herrera relates Snyder’s frequent use of a *mélange* of additive surface elements and viscous paint handling with the rich surfaces and collage rudiments of the early work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. It is the first time to my knowledge

that the connection between these two artists and Snyder has been made. Herrera's comparative basis rests upon the materiality of the art of these two male artists and in the interstitial position between sculpture and painting they pioneered. There is great validity to these observations.¹⁷ However, I would like to consider the radical difference in the way each generation deploys not only materials and images, but also symbols and meanings. In this instance, Snyder's overt political activism and revelatory personal symbolism contrast sharply with the purposefully hermetic codes and cloistered meanings in Johns's and Rauschenberg's early work. The clandestine associations and the hidden sexual significations embedded in the imagery of the two gay artists (at one time a couple) required intricate decoding.¹⁸ Art historian Kenneth Silver shrewdly reexamined the iconography of these and other gay male artists of the 1950s, probing well beyond the more standard examinations of their formal inventions and material innovations. In doing so, Silver demonstrated how these men cleverly concealed the personal allusion and emblematic subtext of their symbols and metaphors in the face of their fear of homophobia. By contrast, the feminist move-

ment, which coincidentally provided the impetus for subsequent gay liberation, insisted from the start on visibility and clear, open rhetoric. Its members refused to succumb to fear or intimidation. Snyder, the pioneer feminist and feminist artist, struggled for women's rights—including their right to expression. Thus Snyder insisted on lucid, direct references to both her personal situation and to the conditions of oppressed women and other minorities. By no means did this obviate the poetic handling of that expression which she achieved in a combination of paint, text, and image. Instead, her painted poetry served as handmaiden for her political agenda, and she refused to sacrifice the intimacy of her practice to political rhetoric. Her paintings had to remain highly personal.

Today, looking at the trajectory of Snyder's oeuvre provides a view that is at once intimately diaristic and overtly operatic (now I have succumbed to the dialectical urge). It ties together four threads. The oeuvre in its entirety serves as a barometer of the broad movements of her emotional life—it reflects the different environments in which she has lived, and it demonstrates her keen awareness of (and commitment to) urgent needs of contemporary society. Not least—

though least discussed in the literature—the course of Joan Snyder’s art over the last forty years demonstrates how she continually draws upon internal resources toward formal experiment and self-reinvention.

notes

I would like to extend a special thanks to Ella Levitt, intern in the Fine Arts Department at The Jewish Museum, who was exceptionally helpful with the research and as a sounding board for this essay.

1. Marcia Tucker, “The Anatomy of a Stroke: Recent Paintings by Joan Snyder,” *Artforum* 9 (May 1971), 45.
2. Ruth Iskin, “Toward a Feminist Imperative: The Art of Joan Snyder,” *Chrysalis* 1 (1977), 106.
3. See Jenni Sorkin, “The Geography of the Surface,” and Hayden Herrera, “Speaking with Paint,” both in this volume.
4. For example, Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *Artnews* 69, (January 1971), 22–39, 67–71. Griselda Pollock’s observation that “the Story of Art is an illustrated Story of Man.... The canon is politically ‘in the masculine’ as well as culturally ‘of the masculine’” is a paradigmatic statement of feminist thinking about the discipline of Art History, as discussed in Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 24. See also, Laura Cottingham, *Seeing through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art* (Australia: G and B Arts Publishing, 2000), 47ff.
5. The term *power*, and the reclamation of power, has of course been the keystone of the feminist movement and its discourse from the beginning. This is evident, for example, in the title of an important edited volume by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard: *The Power of Feminist Art* (New York: Abrams, 1994). However, in social criticism of the past several decades, the term is connected with those who control societal structures, and usually associated with white, male, often Christian Europeans

and their U.S. counterparts. I greatly appreciate the discussion I had with Ella Levitt about my use of this term.

6. Michael Walls, *Joan Snyder* (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1979), 11.
7. For example, Columbia University literature professor Edward Taylor is well known for his discussion of paradox and contradiction as key elements of drama, particularly Shakespearian. See *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964). Formalist art critic Clement Greenberg—who railed against literary painting—noticed similar contradictory impulses in Kafka, stating: “But it is probable that Kafka had no message more explicit than a personal sense of life that included *contradictions* without resolving them” (emphasis mine). See his “Introduction to ‘The Great Wall of China’ by Franz Kafka,” as reprinted in John O’Brien, editor, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 103.
8. Bill Jones, “Painting the Haunted Pool,” *Art in America* (October 1994), 122.
9. Marcia Tucker, 43. See also Hayden Herrera, 22–36, and Jenni Sorkin, 64–73, in this volume.
10. Jed Perl, “Jed Perl on Art: Abstract Matters,” *The New Republic* (June 10, 1996), 26.
11. Michael Walls, 13.
12. Gerrit Henry, “Joan Snyder: True Grit,” *Art in America* (1986), 97.
13. Bill Jones, 122.
14. Ibid.
15. Ruth Iskin, 102–3.
16. Bill Jones, 175.
17. Hayden Herrera, “Speaking with Paint,” 40.
18. Kenneth Silver, “Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art,” in Donna De Salvo and Paul Schimmel, *Hand Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–65* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1992). The original version of this article was presented at the College Art Association Annual Meeting in 1986.



joan snyder: speaking with paint

hayden herrera

LOOKING OVER FOUR DECADES OF JOAN SNYDER'S paintings, I am struck by a vibration of light, color, and texture that is to the eye like sound reverberating in the ear after music has stopped. Her paintings pulsate with energy. The feelings that propelled them are right there in the lick and churn of paint. Snyder often uses the word "magic" when talking about her creative process. The making of her paintings is at once wildly physical and incantatory: the rhythm and momentum of decisions and gestures sweeps her up in a kind of visual chant. All of her work carries a sense of wonder about what she calls the "wild wake of the brush." Painting, Snyder says, is her religion. "It is the altar I go to to face myself."¹ Her paintings are bold and tender, intimate yet magisterial. Always, they are urgent and true.

Joan Snyder was born in 1940 in Highland Park, New Jersey. Her parents were lower middle class, but her school friends were, she recalls, "upwardly mobile." Being less well off than her companions was a strain. Home life made her anxious, too. Her mother, Edythe, was the child of Russian-Jewish immigrants. She was, Snyder says, often angry and critical. Her employment in the sales department of various

stores; as manager of a department at Sears, Roebuck and later as a bookkeeper meant that Joan and her older brother and younger sister were often left alone. Joan was expected to take care of household chores and to care for her sister. Snyder's father, Leon, was born in the United States to parents of German-Jewish descent. Her paternal grandfather, a rich man, committed suicide in 1928. "He was one of the founders of the temple we belonged to in New Brunswick, but by the time I was a teenager we couldn't afford to attend." Her father was a toy salesman. Once each week he drove to New York City to pick up merchandise—hula hoops, balloons, fake sheriff's badges, and other such novelties—which he sold to newspaper and candy stores in the New Brunswick, New Jersey, area. Joan often accompanied him on his route. "He was a sweet, gentle guy. He told a lot of stories and jokes." But neither parent was aware of their children's emotional needs. "I was a survivor," says Snyder. "I basically raised myself."

In contrast to her stressful home life, at school she had many friends, played in the band, and had a serious boyfriend throughout high school. In 1958 she entered Douglass College, the women's division

my life (detail)
1996
48 x 54"
oil, straw, velvet, silk,
and plastic grapes
on linen



farm landscape, yellow house

1963
32 x 18"
oil on canvas

of Rutgers University. At first she majored in mathematics, but thinking that she wanted to be a social worker, she soon switched to sociology. In her senior year she took an elective course in art, a choice that changed her life. “When I started painting it was as if I was speaking for the first time.” She had found her language and, she recalls, art became her obsession. “I knew I was doing what I had to do and that I would do it for the rest of my life.”

Her choice to study painting did not come out of the blue. Although she had never visited museums or looked at art books, her father had, as a young man, painted. He not only encouraged his daughter, but when she started to paint, he took up painting again, this time painting Grandma Moses–style primitives until his mid 80s. Joan had loved to paint when she was a young girl, and by the time she was in her late teens she had set up a studio in her family’s basement. “I used to copy things from magazines. I copied a snow scene from a magazine cover. I copied Utrillo. Plus I used to make portraits of people. I was pretty good at making people look like themselves.”

In college, Snyder’s first paintings were expressionistic portraits of people close to her. “I didn’t know anything about color or form. I had never looked at painting. I was painting what I felt.” Her art teacher saw her promise. He took Snyder up to a slide room and showed her paintings by German Expressionists. Her portraits, he said, were especially close to portraits by Aleksey von Jawlensky, whose work she had never seen. After graduating in 1962 Snyder

moved to Englishtown, New Jersey, where she lived on a farm belonging to a couple who had headed the committee to save the Rosenbergs. They became like surrogate parents, except that Joan’s emotional attachment to the couple became confusing. The wife had been her sociology professor during her senior year in college. The husband was a writer. Both were intellectual and highly political—they opened up a new world to Joan, who had always felt stifled by the bourgeois values that prevailed in Highland Park.

While living in Englishtown, Snyder continued to paint in her riverfront studio in New Brunswick, which she had rented after graduating from college. The turbulent hills in works like *The Barn* and *Farm Snowscene* seem to embody the upheaval she was feeling with the move to the Alman farm. The animistic houses in these small but somewhat crude landscapes from 1963 recall paintings by Burchfield and Vlaminck, artists whose work she still did not know.

In the fall of 1963 Snyder enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program at Rutgers. Because she had taken only one undergraduate painting course, she was accepted as a non-matriculated student for the first year. “I walked into the office of the chairman of the art department with seven paintings, and he decided to let me enter Rutgers and test me out.”

In graduate school Snyder was exposed to art history. “I remember looking at Vlaminck, Jawlensky, Nolde, Kandinsky, and Klee. I saw Hans Hofmann and I looked at Modigliani. I made a portrait of



the barn—snow scene i
1963
26 x 36"
oil on canvas

my best friend's mother that came straight out of Modigliani." In 1964, in response to the death of her maternal grandmother, to whom she felt extremely close, Snyder painted a landscape with a dark sky, snow-covered hills, and a forlorn group of mourners defined by broad, black strokes. But that was not enough to assuage her grief and her anger over the lack of expressed feeling she had witnessed at her grandmother's funeral. Shortly after Dora Cohen's death, Snyder saw a Max Beckmann retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York. "His *The Death Scene* meant so much to me. I took Beckmann's splayed crouching nude mourner and put it in one of my paintings." The squatting splayed female mourner embodied the primal grief that Snyder was unable to release in her own life.

One of Snyder's teachers at Rutgers was the Minimalist Robert Morris. Snyder could not under-

stand why an artist would eliminate so much from his work. From the beginning her attitude was inclusive: more was more, she thought, not less. Purity was not her aim, so she made a plaster torso of an angel with splayed legs and plywood wings. The angel sat on a wheeled platform decorated with purple plastic flowers. This was the beginning of Snyder's defiance of good taste and contemporary convention, and her love of outrageous and vulgar materials. The enormous variety of materials deployed in Snyder's later work, many of them found in flea markets and five-and-ten-cent stores, might have something to do with her memory of accompanying her father on his toy-selling route. Morris was both horrified and amused by his student's sculpture. He said, "That is something I would like to put in my attic and look at it every six years to make sure it is still there."²

As she kept working, Snyder's paintings became more symbolic and surreal. Years later she spoke of her development: ". . . to get from one place to another I had to do certain kinds of work which didn't always get my message out, but I was always struggling to get it across. Over the years, I built a visual language which now allows me to say anything I need to say."³ In graduate school she began to use acrylics and her paintings became flatter, sometimes recalling the Pop artist Tom Wesselmann's early Matissean nudes in interiors. In 1965 and 1966 she painted a series of what she calls "altar" paintings. Art, she says, "became a form of worship. Those were my shrines." Her later work includes a number of paint-

**grandma cohen's funeral
painting**
1964
18 x 24"
oil on canvas



flock painting i
1969
49 x 61"
acrylic and flock
on canvas



ings that seem to embody the concept of reverence and that she likewise calls altars.

Most of the early altar paintings are abstracted versions of the female body. Sometimes Snyder pasted on funky materials like gold fringe, pink flowered wallpaper, or fake leopard skin. Her flaunting of such tacky materials was part of her rebellion against Minimalism, which dominated the art scene

at the time. Such materials also appealed to Snyder because they carried an anti-elitist message. Breaking social and aesthetic hierarchies was to become a feminist goal. The use of vulgar non-art materials was part of a rejection of mainstream formalist taste, a rejection that Snyder would share with many women artists in the 1970s.

From the beginning, Snyder was bold enough to

altar iii
1965–66
48 x 36"
acrylic on canvas with
fringe



flaunt the female body as well. *Altar III*, 1965–66, for example, shows a flat bright pink nude (Snyder says it is a generalized self-portrait) with splayed legs and with gold fringe attached to her breasts. Such splayed nudes, whose original inspiration was Beckmann's crouching mourner, recur in Snyder's work decades later. Sometimes, as in *My Life* (1996), the spread-leg nude is a self-portrait. Other times, although the figure is not identifiable, they appear to be depictions of a lover. These full-bodied women are clearly conceived by a woman. They can be erotic, even lascivious, but they are not objects of male lust. Instead they themselves luxuriate in their own pleasure and desire. Always these nudes convey Snyder's insistence on openness, on revealing the most intimate and often physical truths in her work. They could also point to her principle of acceptance, of being inclusive in her work, rather than paring down or eliminating in an effort to reduce painting to its essentials.

The altars earned Snyder a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1966. After graduating she continued living and painting in her apartment in New Brunswick for a year. Then in 1967 she moved to New York City, where she rented and renovated a fifth-floor loft on Mulberry Street. Here she began to make symbolic abstractions, mostly of things placed in boxes in an attempt to juxtapose interior and landscape space. "I took Morris's minimal boxes and made them as crazy and decorative as I could. 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." Although the boxes may not have succeeded on an aesthetic level, they were the beginning of Snyder's fascination with the inside/outside duality. She has a persistent urge to penetrate the insides of things, to go deeper in order to see from the inside out. The boxes also gave Snyder a structure. In the following year she painted several canvases in which she placed a rectangle within a rectangle. In *The Yellow Room* (1968), for example, she put two broad brushstrokes inside a box that is surrounded by pink flowered wallpaper. But the brushstrokes defy structure by pushing their way out of the box. "It was a major breakthrough for me because I was painting paint strokes and I broke out of the rectangle."⁴ She was, she said, "thinking about transparency and being able to see through one of those paint strokes."⁵ Another time Snyder said painting *The Yellow Room* was "like going through the window and finally getting inside."

In the summer of 1968 Joan Snyder traveled to Israel, France, and Belgium, where she stayed in Louvain with her now-married sister, and where she says that she fell apart. This was not her first episode of emotional stress. When she was ten she stayed home from school for two months. "I remember sitting in the sunroom and watching the spring come. I was alone in the house." In Louvain she sat for days in a park near her sister's house feeling a kind of "internal shattering." She remembers being dissociated, paralyzed, incapable of doing much of anything.



stroke landscape
1968
8 x 10"
acrylic on canvas

"I had sketch pads and I drew and wrote during those times."

When she returned from Europe, Snyder made another important breakthrough. "I decided to look back at my early farm landscapes to see what it was that I felt I had lost in my work. Those paintings had strokes in them. I decided that what I wanted to do was to get back to the feeling of those paintings but without the content. I was feeling broken apart and I started making paintings with little strokes and gestures in them. I was putting those strokes in like they were broken apart, and I knew that I was on the way to something that I wanted to be on the way to." Like her earlier box paintings, the new paintings combine landscape and interior space. *Stroke Landscape* (1968) has eight separate strokes on a tan and white ground. Above is a pink sky that reminds us that this painting

is not only about the land, it is also about the female body and spirit. Pink, says Snyder, is always flesh, and certainly the flesh is female.

For all her exhilaration at having found a way to let strokes live on their own, Snyder did not immediately move on to what she calls her "stroke" paintings, the magnificent series of canvases that would, in the early 1970s, bring her major recognition. Instead she continued to explore the inside/outside duality and the idea of female sensibility in what she calls her "flock/membrane" paintings. It might not be coincidental that the heightened sensuousness of these canvases coincided with a period of courtship. In the fall of 1968, Snyder met the photographer Larry Fink

when he came to photograph paintings by a mutual friend that were being stored in her loft. Not satisfied with the results of his first photo session, Fink returned a few days later. "We made a date and nine months later we were married."

The flock/membrane paintings are imaginary inner landscapes that focus on women's sexuality. Snyder is certain that they are paintings no man could have made. Indeed, for Snyder they represent the beginning of a feminist dialogue, in spite of the fact that she made them before there was an active women's art movement. "I was conscious of taking materials and using them in a way that was erotic and that talked about female sexuality. The paintings are anthropomorphic. They are about the female body and the fact that women's lives and bodies were different from men's lives and bodies."



**flesh flock painting with
strokes and stripes**
1969
50 x 51"
acrylic, flock on canvas

To get her point across, Snyder deployed all kinds of sensuous materials such as flocking (a soft powder made of chopped rayon and most often used to decorate greeting cards), as well as seeds, thread, and lentils, all of which she imbedded in paste and gel. The membranes were usually rounded, fleshy, pink shapes. In *Circular Flock with Thread* the membrane, bounded by a ridge built up out of flocking, suggests a womb or some other penetrable orifice. In

Flesh Flock Painting with Strokes and Stripes a circle of peach-colored flock centered between two flesh-colored shapes could be seen as an abstract image of a woman's inner thighs or as a female torso. The surfaces of the flock/membrane paintings seem as sensate and vulnerable as flesh—flesh as it is felt and imagined by a woman from inside her body, not skin viewed by a man from without. Once again Snyder was driven by a need to go deep inside of things—to

imagine the inside of rooms, flesh, paint strokes, feelings, and, some years later, fields and flowers and the earth itself. As often in Snyder's work, there is a link between sensuous materials and sensuous feelings. The flock paintings might even be seen as a visualization of erotic arousal.

In the fall of 1969 Joan Snyder married Larry Fink. "We got a license, grabbed our friend Jackie Driscoll to be a witness, and drove upstate to find a pretty town that had a justice of the peace. In Amenia we found a wonderful James Stewart-type J.P. We drove back home the same day." As usual, changes in Snyder's life were soon reflected in her art. A 1972 notebook/diary entry says: "I have discovered that everything in my work relates to my life and all the important changes in my work are related to changes in my life, the most dramatic being summer 1969 when I was deciding whether to get married and was also struggling to do the grid layer stroke paintings. The transition was most clear in terms of life decisions." Snyder sees a connection between the emphasis on structure in the emerging series of grid-structured stroke paintings and the greater structure that marriage gave to her life.

Thus, leaving the emphatically biomorphic imagery of the flock/membrane paintings, Snyder now 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 read like a story line. The paint became the subject instead of something else." The transition can be seen in works like *Oval Shaped Layers* and *White Layers with Red*

Rectangle (1969) in both of which, compared to the flock/membrane paintings, the reference to the body becomes more discreet. In the former, the body reference lies in the egg shape and in the pinkish tone. In the latter, it lies in the red rectangle that forms a kind of inner frame that is a vestige of the membrane. In both paintings thick paint is slathered in horizontal overlapping bands. Snyder says this layering, which is seen in many of her later paintings as well, is an aspect of the female sensibility. But the layers are also just layers of pigment laid across the canvas. Snyder had begun to treat paint as paint, not as a means to creating illusion. Although they had emotional associations, the paint layers were an emphatically physical reality. In January 1969 she wrote in her diary: "Anatomy of painting—more not less—layers—not abstraction—not stripping away to make simple statement—image—finding richness inside—discovering anatomy of work." Years later, when she made a statement about what the female sensibility meant in a work of art, layers were the first on her list:

Female sensibility is layers, words, membranes, cotton, cloth, rope, repetition, bodies, wet, opening, closing, repetition, lists, lifestories, grids, destroying them, houses, intimacy, doorways, breasts, vaginas, flow, strong, building, putting together many disparate elements, repetition, red, pink, black, earth colors, the sun, the moon, roots, skins, walls, yellow, flowers, streams, puzzles, questions, stuffing, sewing, fluffing, satin hearts, tearing, tying, decorating, baking, feed-



white layers with red rectangle

1969

50 x 74"

acrylic and spray enamel on canvas

ing, holding, listening, seeing thru the layers, oil, varnish, shellac, jell, paste, glue, seeds, thread, more, not less, repetition. . . .⁶

This is certainly not the outlook of a purist. Always embracing more, not less, Snyder kept her list going as she moved into ideas about the women's art movement, and ending with the words "Trying to describe hot white flesh ties.

The layers in *White Layers with Red Rectangle* (1969) paved the way for *Lines and Strokes* (page 80), the first of the stroke paintings—those luminous works in which bold strokes of color are suspended against a penciled grid. In August 1969, while Fink was photographing the Woodstock Festival, Snyder was hard at work in her Mulberry Street studio. For the first time she decided to hang her stretched canvas on the wall rather than placing it on her easel. This gave her gestures a new amplitude, a freedom that recalls the vigorous swaths of pigment in paintings by the Abstract Expressionists. Although Jackson Pollock was, Snyder avows, a liberating force, she insists that her stroke paintings came out of her own self-impelled and necessary development. For all that, it is hard to believe that she could have achieved the breadth and spontaneity seen in the stroke paintings without the example of postwar New York painting. But Snyder does have a point. The first move in the direction of the stroke paintings came in the tiny *Stroke Landscape* painted in 1968 before she began the flock/membrane paintings. The next move was *White Layers with Red*

Rectangle, in which the horizontal layering predicts the brushstrokes stretching across the canvas one above the other in *Lines and Strokes*. But in *Lines and Strokes* paint is less dense and Snyder has opened up space so that air seems to circulate around her colored marks. At the top and bottom of the canvas straight-edged bands of color keep the momentum of red, orange, and flesh-colored strokes in check.

In *Lines and Strokes*, and in the stroke paintings that followed, brush strokes seem to sink into the canvas. This gives them a resonance that recalls Rothko's stacked rectangles of pure color. Her technique was to lay down a base consisting of brush strokes made with both acrylic paint and acrylic medium. Once the strokes made with acrylic medium (which was sometimes transparent) dried, Snyder would either spray-paint them to give them a kind of aura or paint over them with colored pigment, either acrylic or oil. Her method was highly physical. She was painting paint strokes the way a house painter paints a house.

She also allowed her strokes to drip: drips become rivulets of feeling. Each stroke is a thing in itself. Each sings a different note. They do not join together to form a single chord, and no one stroke dominates. Each part of the canvas is as important as any other. Snyder avoids synthesis and insists on multiplicity. The strokes may stand for feelings, sensations, or sounds. Paint moving across the canvas embodies the passage of time and suggests a story line. In *Lines and Strokes* each reddish stroke can also be thought of as a stretched-out membrane or

maybe even a wound. Indeed, Snyder identifies canvas and pigment so closely with her own skin that the viewer can almost feel the touch of her brush. This kinesthetic empathy is an essential part of Snyder's female sensibility.

Snyder was astounded by the boldness and poignancy of *Lines and Strokes*. She often tells students that she spent seven years struggling to make a good painting and that when she made *Lines and Strokes* she knew it was her first good painting. "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."

In *Lines and Strokes* Snyder began to lightly pencil a grid on her canvas. Grids had appeared in a few of the flock paintings, but now the grid became an essential framework for spontaneous gesture. It was like a musical staff upon which to place her marks, or, as Snyder once described it, the grid was like a writing pad on which she could set down the letters, words, and sentences of her painterly language.⁷ The idea to use a grid came, she says, from two different sources. One was children's art, which Snyder adores and which she knew well from having had various jobs teaching art to children in anti-poverty programs such as Upward Bound. The children often drew on lined paper. "The other amazing thing that happened to me just before I made *White Layers with Red Rectangle*, was that I was sitting in my studio on Mulberry Street looking at one of my paintings and trying desperately to figure out what I wanted and what I wasn't getting.

Then I looked at the wall underneath the canvas. The lower half of the studio walls was tongue and groove boards painted white. They made a vertical grid, and there were these little delicate drips coming down from my canvas. I looked at the wall and the drips and said, 'Oh my God, that's what I want my paintings to look like!' It was a revelation."

The grids do not make Snyder's paintings rigid. No two are alike. Some are vertical, some horizontal, bent, or even zigzagged. And the strokes move according to their own inner impulse unconstrained by the underlying lines. Drips and splashes are almost as varied as the strokes. They cluster in streamers hanging like octopus tentacles from larger shapes. They splatter and speckle, and creep under and across prior and subsequent strokes like antennae feeling their way through space. Compared to Pollock's drips, Snyder's do not seem to be caught up in an overall sweep of energy. Rather they are particularized, separate incidents belonging to a single moment in time and a single place on the canvas. As Marcia Tucker wrote in her groundbreaking 1971 *Artforum* article on Snyder, the painterly gestures made by Abstract Expressionists are usually "homogeneous" and "function as a totality." Whereas Snyder's strokes are arranged in a less formal way in terms of the whole canvas, they are "more carefully controlled in terms of each specific part."⁸ Because of this, Snyder's paintings are difficult to take in all at once. We look at one section and then at another, so that later, when we try to remember them, we find that we have not been

able to hold the whole of the canvas in our eye. In this, Snyder was rebelling against Color Field paintings that can be seen in a single glance.

The stroke paintings, like music, must be experienced through time. During their early years of marriage Fink introduced Snyder to classical music and to jazz. While she worked, she listened to Bach, Beethoven, and Bartók. Listening to music, she says, has taught her more about her own work than looking at painting. The stroke paintings have the improvisational quality of jazz, but their complexity makes one think of orchestral compositions. Snyder wanted her paintings to have music's richness. She also wanted a narrative. "I wanted to tell a story and I wanted there to be different sections. I wanted a beginning, middle, and end, many different parts, happy, sad, tragic parts, many things happening at once, different instruments, different sounds, rhythms. I started my stroke paintings in the upper left corner of the canvas and moved toward the lower right. And I wanted resolution . . . usually the resolution happened in the upper right section of the canvas." Reacting against the single-image painting that dominated the art scene at the time, she wanted to put more in her work. "I'm a maximalist, not a minimalist," she says.

Snyder's urge to see inside of things and to expose the inner structure of matter continued in the stroke paintings, but now, though the need to penetrate it was just as physical, it was more abstract. Instead of exploring body shapes as she did in her flock/membrane paintings, we now have what Sny-

der called the "anatomy of a stroke." Structure has become 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 grid lines, a range of stroke types, and successive layers of paint. Sometimes the paint is so thin that the viewer can see through it; sometimes it is heavily built up and hides the layers of strokes that went before. In a notebook Snyder wrote: "Attempting a further search into the anatomy of a painting—how strokes break down. How paint on the painting is used to make other strokes taking from one part of a painting and using it on another." A later notebook entry said: "My work has always been involved in exposure as in the anatomy of a stroke—showing exposing different parts different sections—looking at paint and painting from a different angle—the subject matter is the paint and the paint speaks of human needs etc. the paint exposes and the paint covers up."

Placed directly on the canvas, colored marks in the first stroke paintings appear to float in a luminous, open space. But their arrangement is architectonic. Strokes stack up in vertical columns like building blocks. These columns illustrate Snyder's need to analyze the way strokes behave and interact: she placed a stroke of fully saturated color on the canvas and then I would make the strokes more and more dilute until they become transparent. She also observed what happened when columns of strokes interpenetrated or when strokes abutted or overlapped each other. On a



big green

1970

72 x 120"

oil, acrylic, and spray
enamel on canvas

1971 drawing entitled *Paint the House* Snyder wrote words that reveal her current concerns: “The Illusion The Reality The Stroke.”

Big Green (1970) is a symphony of color. Vertical grid lines spaced at progressively wider intervals amplify the orchestration of marks as we move from left to right. On the left, short horizontal strokes arranged in stacks gently introduce the theme. The volume turns up with a large, round pink form that recalls the pink shapes suggestive of the female body in the flock paintings. Long strokes, ranging in color from pink to red, cascade down from this pink ball. The effect is like a burst of joyful sound. Moving to the right, after a brief diminuendo of stacked, medium-length white strokes (a reprise of the introductory theme), there is a section of percussive reds and purples set beside an area of short, black, staccato marks that convey a painful, agitated, perhaps angry mood. The painting’s final quarter, to the right, offers a return to joy. Here the strokes, again stacked vertically, become much broader, forming a crescendo that ends with a cymbal clash of copper pigment reaching upward in the upper-right corner.

Just as each cluster or stack of marks in the stroke paintings seems to stand for a separate instance of time or emotion, colors, too, are distinct markers of feeling. “I sometimes say I can hear colors,” says Snyder. “Different colors have different sounds and different meanings to me.” Snyder’s colors are not composed according to an overall plan, but rather they are chosen as the painterly story unfolds. “When

I made the stroke paintings I was picking my palette in a paint store. There is no overall color plan, but sometimes you know you are going to use certain colors predominately. I always have to let it happen. It’s like jazz, you can bring on a trumpet when you least expect it or some kind of little piano riff.” Snyder’s surprising color shifts keep the viewer’s eye activated. As our eye moves from one grouping of strokes to another we create new color clusters, new harmonies and dissonances. We absorb Snyder’s story bit by bit, just the way a person comes to understand the landscape or cityscape as he or she moves through it.

The first stroke paintings were mostly composed of columns of horizontal strokes. Over time the paintings became more spatially complex and they began to incorporate diagonals, curved strokes, and curved rows of strokes. The change is first seen in *Symphony* (page 83), in which Snyder bent the grid lines so that they are diagonals in the top two-thirds of the canvas and they turn into verticals in the lower third. “I was driving through a tunnel in New Jersey and saw a configuration of shadows, which suggested the possibility of using an irregular grid pattern,” Snyder recalls. Eight broad and dripping diagonal strokes in the painting’s center form a climactic moment worthy of Beethoven’s Fifth. *Love Your Bones* (page 85), is even more complex. Here Snyder added a long band that moves in and out of space like a stretched-out folding book. About two-thirds of the way across the canvas this band breaks, but then immediately resumes, its



summer painting
1971
60 x 60"
oil, acrylic, and spray
enamel on canvas

movement. This disjunction recalls the way the line that defines the back edge of a table in a Cézanne still life might be at a higher level on one side of a vase or bottle than on the other. The band zigzagging across the canvas is, Snyder says, a way of turning the grid around so that you can see the strokes as if you were looking at them from other sides. The first rows of short horizontal strokes are viewed broadside. As the band turns on a diagonal it acts as a magnetic force that twists the strokes onto a diagonal axis, so that they are now seen from an angle and are foreshort-

ened. "This is Joan Snyder discovering Cubism," says Snyder. It was her way of penetrating into things, of seeing from the inside out. "I had such an intense need to analyze things, so I took my paintings and went deeper and deeper."

In *Through the Flat Small* (1971), Snyder discovered that she did not need the band winding across the canvas in order to see several dimensions of a stroke or to penetrate "through the flat" (these words are written on the canvas). She could achieve depth and intervisibility by the movement of strokes alone. In August of the same year, when she took her canvas outside and painted *Summer Painting*, she made another discovery. She could eliminate the grid as well. "It was," she says, "the first painting in which I had complete freedom to move the lines around. The colors are very light. When you paint outside you keep adding white because in the sunlight you can't see the color." On this five-by-five-foot canvas she let thinly pigmented pink, yellow, and green strokes dash every which way. The result is a feeling of sunlit jubilation. Other works from the same period, paintings like *No Skeleton for Evsa* (page 87), have the same freedom and openness. The next liberating step was to warp the grid. In *Resolve in 4 x 8* (1972), vertical grid lines are no longer straight or even uniformly bent. Now they wobble back and forth, hardly attempting to discipline the mostly horizontal strokes whose staccato pattern looks like a cardiogram gone haywire or perhaps like the notations for some ecstatic dance. Snyder, however, sees the painting as meditative; it

reminds her of a Gregorian chant.

In the stroke paintings Joan Snyder found a full-bodied pictorial language. “The strokes in my paintings speak of my life and experiences,” she wrote in 1972. “They are sometimes soft . . . they sometimes laugh and are often violent . . . they bleed and cry and struggle to tell my story with marks and colors and lines and shapes. I speak of love and anguish, of fear and mostly of hope.”⁹ Her language was heard. The stroke paintings brought her public recognition, exhibitions, and sales. Snyder found the publicity disrupting. She felt that people liked her paintings for the wrong reasons. In her diary she said: “No one (except Marcia [Tucker]) has yet to mention my explorations and discoveries of space. My desire to go beyond into the stroke to turn the picture around w.o. [without] working with imagery but only paint as the subject matter.” In any case Snyder was too restless an artist

to keep on doing the same thing, even if that thing was successful both in her terms and in the terms of public approval. “I’d get bored if I did the same thing over and over. My work changes a lot, which to some people is shocking and upsetting.” Of the stroke paintings Snyder said, “I did them. Everybody loved them, and I stopped doing them. They had become easy. They were Snyders. I had to move on.”

Snyder was sometimes able to finish a stroke painting in a day. Now she wanted a more extended interaction with her canvas. “The paintings had to be richer. I wanted to fill in the spaces, to put more paint on, to spend more time on a painting.” The change can be seen in *Desmoiselles* (1972). Like *Resolve in 4 x 8*, *Desmoiselles* is structured by a zigzagging vertical grid, but now the intervals between the grid lines are filled in with flesh color. This creates tall irregular shapes that resemble nude figures pressed together in a com-

resolve in 4x8
1972
48 x 96"
oil, acrylic, and spray
enamel on canvas





desmoiselles

1972

72 x 144"

oil and acrylic on
canvas

pacted space. It was only after she finished this canvas that Snyder recognized its connection with the angular, primitive-looking nudes in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. In February she made a perfunctory sketch for *Desmoiselles* in her notebook and wrote: "I want my new pictures to have a different rhythm than the others—less staccato—not working themselves out by dissipating down. I want them to run horizontally from one side to the other with a more even flow but then end up more complex because the color running over and under it would probably be different and make the picture complex. . . ."

Just as in 1968, in a moment of dissatisfaction, she had looked back to her early landscapes and come up with *Stroke Landscape*, now that she no longer found fulfillment in making stroke paintings, Snyder again

delved into her earlier work. "I had nowhere to go but into my past again, into my own iconography. It was either less strokes and minimizing the image, or it was going backwards and maximizing the image. And that second choice is what I did." *Houses* (1972), which, says Snyder, depicts "all the houses I've ever lived in," recapitulates a subject that she had first painted nine years before in her expressionist landscape entitled *The Yellow House*. Perhaps because she felt her yearning for a house's protection was childlike, she borrowed the simplified drawing style of

children's art. As if they were X's and O's in a game of tic-tac-toe, the houses are placed in squares marked off by a grid. In *Squares* (page 90), Snyder filled in her grid to create a checkerboard of vibrant color. At the time, she thought of this kind of composition as a mav-

houses
1972
48 x 48"
oil and acrylic on
canvas



erick, but two years later she did two more paintings with filled-in squares, one called *Symphony II* (page 68), which seems to aim for the clarity and transcendent beauty associated with culminating moments of symphonic music, the other called *The Storm*. In many subsequent works one section of the painting is composed of rectangles of color. She calls these grid-structured sections “resolves” because they offer resolution to the more turbulent panels that precede them.

The paintings that came after the stroke paintings show a return to symbols and themes drawn from Snyder’s early work. Some 1972 paintings hark back to the visceral imagery of the flock/membrane paintings. *Soft Pocket Song*, for example, is composed of horizon-

tal flesh-colored bands rather like the layers pulled across the canvas in *White Layers with Red Rectangle*. It is almost as though *Desmoiselles* had been turned on its side. But now there are small, mostly round shapes scattered among the layers, and the layers are not just made of pigment, they are actually strips of canvas glued to the canvas surface. Here and there the strips form pockets that Snyder filled with paint. “I wanted to extend the painting out and make it almost three-dimensional,” she recalls. “I wanted the paint to sit perpendicular to the canvas and drip through.” From now on Snyder would enrich her surfaces in such radical ways that many of her paintings could almost qualify as sculptural reliefs.

Soft Pocket Song is, Snyder says, a playful painting. *Flesh Art*, also 1973–74, is more serious. In this small, square canvas she transformed the stacked brush strokes seen in her stroke paintings into three columns of curved gashes filled with paint and set against a flesh-colored field that is sprinkled with seeds. “I put two layers of canvas down and cut into it and pulled sections out and sewed some of the openings open. I began to think about my relationship with women at this time.” *Flesh Art* makes the identity between canvas and palpitating flesh more obvious than ever, but Snyder once insisted 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.”

In 1973 Snyder moved with Fink to a farm in Mar-

flesh art
1973–74
24 x 24”
oil, acrylic, thread,
needle, seeds on
canvas





soft pocket song

1972

79½ x 108½"

syntheticpolymerandoil
on canvas

tins Creek, Pennsylvania. Both she and Fink wanted to experience the country but she also left the city because fame had made her anxious. "I was collecting people in my life like you collect butterflies. I didn't know who was who, who was a friend and who wasn't a friend. It was very confusing." Just after moving to Martins Creek, Snyder started *The Storm* (1974), a checkerboard composition that began as a lyrical stroke painting, but that, as she worked, became somber and abrasive. "Every time I painted a passage that was beautiful, I covered it with dark colors." 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." That glorious look is almost Wagnerian in

the brute romanticism of its anguished reds, its shattering glimpses of yellow and white, and its ominous blacks flailing against the confines of the grid.

Snyder stopped painting for six months after completing *The Storm*. "I fell apart completely." In August 1974 she began to paint again, producing her first two-part paintings, *Then and Now* and *Creek Square*. In the latter she juxtaposed a canvas with loose brush strokes and symbols with a canvas with a filled-in grid, a combination that was to recur in many of her later works. Later that fall, prompted by her engagement with the women's movement, Snyder painted a group of canvases that make explicit feminist statements. These are among her most vehement works. Her involvement with feminism had begun three years earlier when she took part in a consciousness-raising group made up largely of women artists. "In some of our discussions," she recalls, "we were asking, was there a female aesthetic or wasn't there? And I was one of those who was out to prove that there was, that our work comes out of our lives, and that women's experiences are somehow different from men's experiences, so our work is going to be different." Paradoxically Snyder's more lyrical stroke paintings were produced in gritty, tense Manhattan, whereas her tough, cacophonous, sometimes ferocious feminist paintings were made at the Martins Creek farm.

Snyder felt that many women, working in isolation and neglected, were exploring similar methods and themes. Later, when critics extolled the Neo-expressionists for their personal and emotional imagery

and their rich use of materials, Snyder was annoyed. “It was women artists who pumped the blood back into the art world in the ’70s and ’80s. . . . At the height of the Pop and Minimal movements, we were making other art—art that was personal, autobiographical, expressionistic, narrative, and political. It was women using words, cutting, pasting, building layer upon layer of material, experimenting with new material, and, to paraphrase Hilton Kramer, filling up those surfaces with everything we could lay our hands on. This was called Feminist Art. This was what the art of the 1980s was finally about, appropriated by the most famous male artists of the decade. They were called heroic for bringing expression and the personal to their art. We were called Feminist (which was, of course, a dirty word). They called it neo-expressionist.

Except it wasn’t neo to us.”¹⁰

From 1971 to 1974 Snyder helped arrange exhibitions of women’s art and panel discussions with women artists at the Douglass College library. She was thrilled with the program’s success, and when three hundred people attended a panel, she went home and sketched her plan for a small but passionate feminist triptych entitled *Small Symphony for Women* (page 67).

On the sketch, dated October 17, 1974, Snyder 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 times—much infuriated me—but nonetheless struck a good chord, one that has been simmering. I say to myself ‘Can symphonies be made out of this subject.’ I say let’s try. Symphonies

the storm
1974
72 x 144"
oil and acrylic on canvas



vanishing theatre/the cut
1974
60 x 120"
oil, acrylic, chicken wire
on canvas



of women, about women, for women . . . a symphony with words and marks, colors and squares.” On the left section of her sketch she wrote: “Can symphonies be made, can changes be brought, can the symphonies be read, Do marks have meaning, How deep the pain from my love of her. How he despises my weakness.”

The first panel of the painting itself has different words. Snyder says that what she wrote is a list of what she thought the female sensibility meant. It included things like “pockets, layers, seeds, landscape space, human space, marks and strokes.”¹¹ It also included, “feelings, ideas, material, names of colors, political ideas, personal ideas, ideas about making art.”¹² Snyder would continue to make lists in her drawings and paintings, culminating in the grand *Women Make Lists* (page 167). Besides the items listed, the first panel included a rage that was very much alive in the

women’s art movement at the time. In an effort to communicate clearly with her audience, Snyder wrote an explicit feminist complaint against the Douglass College art department’s dominance by men. In the future Snyder would use more and more writing in her paintings. The writing is graffitilike, rough and raw. She resorts to writing, she says, when she has something to say that cannot be said in pictorial terms.

Small Symphony for Women’s second panel is a visual listing of the ideas set forth in the first panel. It includes a breast, membranes, strokes, a house, a grid, and a few words. The third panel, a grid filled in with color, offers a resolution of the first two. For all the disjunction and the difficulty in seeing the three parts as a whole, visual and thematic links between them give this triptych the unity of a symphony.

In *Vanishing Theatre* (1974), the symphony

becomes a tragic drama. The canvas is divided into three acts. On the left the program is announced in words: “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.” Beneath these words is a pink breast form and below this there is inchoate writing that communicates feelings of terror and rage. Part II, the large red central section, has the impact of a murder scene. Here Snyder cut a long gash across her canvas, then pulled open the flaps and stuffed the opening with chicken wire, cheese cloth, and papier-mâché. A diary entry from December 12 has a perfunctory sketch of the painting and the words: “set up my canvas.” Then she drew two arrows, one indicating that the section of writing should be on paper glued to the canvas. (For writing, Snyder preferred the easier flow of the brush over paper to the resistance of canvas.) The other arrow indicates that a piece of canvas should be glued to the painting’s middle section. Below this she wrote: “I looked at the center glued rippled canvas section this AM and it was undulating. Moving as if alive. I will cut it open soon.” After cutting, she tried to sew up the opening, but the wound could not be healed. The red field that surrounds the gash is painted with violent brush strokes. A heart cut out of fur is, Snyder avows, a vaginal image. As in *Small Symphony for Women*, the third section, made up of rectangles of color bounded by papier-mâché ridges, is a resolve.

In using such a rich variety of collage materials,

Snyder was returning to the funky, often vulgar, materials seen in her student work. The relief-like surfaces of her paintings bring to mind certain paintings and combines by Robert Rauschenberg, for example, his *The Bed* (1959). “Rauschenberg was a liberating influence on me,” she says. “I love Rauschenberg and Johns, but I swear to God these paintings were coming out of me.” Confronting the almost grindingly physical, in-your-face *terribilitá* of *Vanishing Theatre*, one is certain that what Snyder asserts is true, but the way these two proto-Pop artists broke down the barriers between painting and sculpture may have encouraged her assertive use of collage material. In any case, Snyder always insists that she is a lone wolf: “I have no dialogue with anybody. I talk mostly to myself.”

The wound in Part II of *Vanishing Theatre* refers to Snyder’s severing of a long and painful relationship. The title of this act and of the painting itself was inspired by a line in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, about the death of a close friend: “The theatre of all my actions is fallen.” Even without such privileged knowledge, *Vanishing Theatre* speaks clearly of conflicts about female sexuality. The painting is also about cutting open, exposing, and excising a myth. In Part III the demand that the lady take off her clothes is a reference to the story of the emperor’s clothes: it is the artist’s confrontation with a lie. A December diary entry says: “Only as the theater 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 and painting *Vanishing Theatre* was a catharsis.

Early on Snyder recognized that she was an autobiographical painter. “The painting always had to do with my life,” she said in a lecture at Yale summer school in 1973.¹³ Part of the power of *Vanishing Theatre* and other works from 1974 comes from the feeling that a real event is being worked out on the canvas.

It is the absolute congruence of formal and autobiographical discovery that distinguishes Snyder from lesser painters in the diaristic mode. In spite of the almost shocking intensity of her self-revelation, her art is not indiscreet. The feelings she talks about are personal, but they are feelings shared with, and recognizable to, many people. Her work is about human, not just individual, experience. And when she is working, she is thinking as much about form as about content. Because the message is conveyed through abstract language as well as through images or words, self-exploration never becomes trivial self-display.

Snyder usually works out ideas for paintings in small casual drawings frequently accompanied by verbal notations—for example, about what colors and materials to use—and often done on the backs of envelopes. She makes very few finished drawings. “I’d rather paint than sit down and spend hours and hours on a drawing.” Also she feels that if she carefully worked out a painting idea in a drawing, “the energy for the painting and the spontaneous things that happen while I paint would be dissipated.” 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. In July 1988 Snyder wrote a formal statement about the function of drawing in her art:

I think about drawing and realize that for me it is really only a means to an end. I draw to make studies of paintings, to make lists of ideas, materials and colors, to talk to myself.

I rarely think of a drawing as something that will be displayed. My drawings are the skeletons upon which I plan to add muscle and bones and flesh. But sometimes, because pencil and paper doesn’t keep my interest for too long, I add more and more to the simple drawing and it turns into a painting on paper. The drawings, done quickly, roughly, almost unconsciously, can and frequently do precede my painting ideas by two or three years.¹⁴

Snyder has a never-ending supply of ideas, but she edits herself carefully. “I’m a big-time editor, which is why I only make about fifteen paintings a year, or even less.” Certain ideas keep coming back to her, and those are the ones she chooses to explore. “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.”

When she begins a painting, she says, she has a pretty good idea of how she wants it to go, but along the way things shift, and she makes drastic changes. “I can be very spontaneous and very much in control at the same time. There’s not a mark or drip on that painting that isn’t meant to be there. I know that that accident is going to happen that way. That’s going to drip that way and as that drips, I’m going to wipe that off. I’ll block that drip, or I’m going to add water to that drip to make it go further. I’m controlling what’s happening.”

When she starts working on a canvas there are certain basics she has to go through. “I have a lot of building up to do before I can really let go with the painting. Then it reaches a point when you know that you are about to peak with it, and you really fly with it. That’s when the magic happens and that’s when I’m not thinking anymore. I’ve done all my thinking. I’ve done all the really hard work. I’ve done the plotting and planning and then I’m just riding on automatic pilot and that’s when the beautiful, magical things happen and when they happen I’m so excited. It’s like being on a drug or something. You are no longer present with the thinking about mechanicals

or even content, you are just painting, like pure painting.” This kind of creative euphoria occurred while she was working on *Vanishing Theatre*. “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.”

Vanishing Theatre was the most violent of the paintings with cuts. The slashes in the white middle section of her next painting, *Symphony III* (1975), are more decorous in spite of the fact that she filled some of them with red paint that drips over the white background like the blood gushing from Christ’s wounds. The first and the third movements of this symphony are filled-in grids, giving a feeling of order and control. A study Snyder made for this painting suggests her intentions. Above the gridded left panel she wrote “from majestic deep colors.” Then she drew an arrow to the words over the second panel: “square cut with ragged sewn parts gel paint edges and shadows of squares etc surrounding cuts.” (The square she refers to is discreetly indicated by three cuts in the canvas in the middle of the central panel.) Below this she wrote, “a transformation,” and over the right-hand panel are the words, “Gold with color bursting, tight coming flowing.” She also noted which of the rectangles in this final panel should be gold. At the bottom of her drawing she summed up the painting’s overall dynamic: “from heavy deep rich color to Part II shadowed hints of square w large cut out square in middle—end gold squares triumph w colors seething



symphony iii

1975

60 x 120"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
thread on canvas

getting larger and gold ending." After the word "ending" she drew an arrow to the largest gold rectangle in the lower right corner of the third panel. Clearly she thought of this symphony as ending with triumphal sounds. And the painting is itself a triumph of emotion contained by resplendent order.

Another 1975 painting that features cuts is *Heart On* (page 66). Compared to *Symphony III* it looks almost perversely scruffy and soiled, but soiled in a female way, having to do with women's bodies. The canvas is full of collage elements, including surgical gauze, which makes one think of bodily fluids. "I like cheesecloth," says Snyder, "because it's transparent, delicate, and very common. I like to dip it in glue and build it and let it harden." To the right, the satin heart decked with a ruffle and a fake flower corsage and slathered with sticky-looking syrup is, like the black fur heart in *Vanishing Theatre*, symptomatic of Snyder's

sardonic humor, humor relished even in the midst of pain. "I bought a big valentine heart at a country auction and it ended up being part of *Heart On*. If I hadn't got that heart I would not have made the painting, because it is the focus of the painting."

Heart On was painted at time when Snyder was having what she calls a "female identity crisis." She wanted to "line those symbols up side by side and put them in a grid and make a painting about my involvement with women. . . . *Heart On* is a palette of female pain, anger, and needs." But in the final square on the lower-right side of her canvas, she placed a golden heart that is cut off by the painting's edge. Like the copper stroke that is the final note in *Big Green*, the gold heart moves beyond the space of the canvas, offering the possibility of release.

Mom's Just Out There Tryin' to Break That Grid (1975), suggests emotional tumult, but its exuberant,

almost rococo lightness and movement express more ecstasy than agony. A swirling cloud of white paint and gauze “breaks” a group of collaged papier-mâché rods that had once formed a grid. This is exultant destruction: “I wanted *Mom’s Just Out There Tryin’ to Break That Grid* to be about release, opening up, freedom, and flying,” says Snyder. The painting is the opposite of *Vanishing Theatre*. Instead of gory anguish, it looks back to the soft, erotic imagery of flock/membrane paintings such as *Two Bodies Merging* (1969).

After *Mom’s Just Out There Tryin’ to Break That Grid*, Snyder stopped painting almost entirely for a year. Then in July 1976 she made *Small Symphony for Women II* (page 138), a triptych with furious scribbled strokes in the central panel where she actually burned a hole through the canvas. “For years I’ve been collecting articles about rape and murder. One of the things that some men seem to like to do to women is to set them on fire. In *Small Symphony for Women II*, I burned the middle panel. It was a violent act.”

Snyder’s rage over this kind of cruelty expressed itself again in *Resurrection* (page 140), a huge multi-paneled painting that begins with violence and ends with peace. Snyder felt that she had to make this painting because she kept imagining the life of an old woman who had lived in the Martins Creek farmhouse and whom she believed had been murdered there.¹⁵ She made several false starts, but found these early versions too angry and too much about violence, so she put them aside as she rethought her theme. “The idea of the angel and of burying the old lady and of

her transcendence allowed me to do the painting.”

Resurrection begins on the left with a handwritten list of the names of women, plus a few children and men, who had been raped, murdered, or violently attacked by men. Then come three larger sections with collaged newspaper articles about violence inflicted by men on women. The middle part of the painting, full of sweeping, thrusting movement and lots of red, orange, and pink paint, refers to the rape. The final three panels deal with death and resurrection: beneath the moon lies the dead woman (complete with black dress and hat); beneath the sun a rainbow arches over a house with wallpapered walls. At the end, the victim becomes an ascending angel. As Snyder tells it, “The last panel is full of sweet pastel colors and collaged with netted veils taken from ladies’ hats. It is heavenly old age.”

Starting with *Mom’s Just Out There Tryin’ to Break That Grid*, Snyder’s paintings become more open and free. *Resurrection* seems to recap this development.

The panels on the left composed of collaged newspaper clippings are structured with a grid that gradually gets disrupted. After the bloody tumult of paint and collaged textiles in the center, comes an upward movement where the feeling and the color become lighter and lighter. Snyder has discovered that resolution does not need a grid to create harmony.

Resolution can be open and free. After she finished this painting, she felt a change of atmosphere on the Martins Creek farm. The murdered woman’s ghost had been put to rest, and Snyder herself experienced

a feeling of redemption and release. Footnote: Later Snyder found out that the woman in fact had not been murdered but had herself murdered a man who had been working for her at the farm.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s Snyder continued to build her artistic vocabulary. Since she had new experiences and feelings about which to speak, she invented new symbols and forms. Dead trees make their appearance. “In 1978 I had a miscarriage; I went straight into my studio in New York, and I started making a painting of the Martins Creek farm. It had a pine tree that looked

like a stick figure in it. I took that pine tree and turned it into a totem.” About this time, in a book about the collective unconscious, Snyder discovered that this tree totem was a universal symbol of death. She was pleased that what she had invented turned out to be an existing archetype; it validated the language she had chosen.

In the small square *Black Totems* (1978), dead trees that look like stick figures, fish bones, or crosses and a yellow moon rimmed in red are set against a night sky. “During that whole period,” she says, “I was somewhere between death and birth.”

black totems
1978
24 x 24"
oil on canvas



Snyder's joy at the birth of her daughter Molly in 1979 burst forth in a painting called *Welcome to This Land Molly Fink*. This large, amazingly open canvas includes leafless trees/totems, but now they are cloaked in pink and they appear to be symbols of hope, not death. Soft clouds of pale, thinly pigmented colors flow over the canvas without defining forms. Here and there space is articulated by groups of straight, dark, vertical lines that act like visual chimes heralding a clearing after a storm. A few months later she made *Altar Painting* (1980), in which the menacing totems are pushed to the painting's borders, leaving the center a luminous field of white and gold. Along the painting's upper edge, a

band of simplified totems that look like out-of-kilter crosses signifies transcendence.

These two paintings show how feelings of gratitude and of being blessed that came with Molly's birth impelled Snyder, who is not a believer in any conventional sense, to turn to the altar of her art. Although she is one of the most down-to-earth people I have ever met, Snyder's intense emotionality can transport her into states of mind that feel sacred and reverential, and these states find their appropriate outlet only in the ritual making of art.

Snyder's marriage collapsed soon after Molly was born, and the cruel-looking totems regained their dominance. Painful imagery would keep flowing for

altar painting
1980
72 x 96"
oil, acrylic, and papier-mâché on canvas



the next five years. Snyder left the farm and moved with Molly back to her Mulberry Street loft. During this period several new images enter her work. One is a stick figure inspired by watching her two-year-old daughter drawing in the sand. In a four-section 1982 woodcut entitled *The Tearfulness of Things* the stick figure appears twice, once below the words “Longing for You” and once below the same words seen in mirror image. On the two outermost sections appear words taken from Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “Lachrymae Rerum,” the tearfulness of things, again once seen straight on and once in mirror image. Snyder’s fierce chisel cuts convey her despair and recall her early love of German Expressionism. The other new image is a huge open mouth lined with sharp teeth. Sometimes the mouth is part of a primitive-looking head that is based on an African idol that Snyder acquired in the late 1970s. The open-mouthed head has all the bone-chilling intensity of the shriek in Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. About the open-mouth image, Snyder explains: “I had a disconnected, emotionally abusive mother, so I removed myself in a certain way. The reason I relate to the screaming mouth image is that that’s who I was for years. I was that person making a scream that wasn’t heard.” The screaming head appears twice in the sunset sky of *Savage Dreams* (page 146–47), a seascape with a huge yellow sun sinking behind a choppy sea. The zigzag strokes in the water and sky convey a feeling of anxiety that borders on frenzy. In the middle of the sun you can just make out the pink stick figures of a mother and

child. The mother seems torn in two directions by the magnetic pull of the ferocious idols. “*Savage Dreams*,” says Snyder, “is about Molly and me being alone and the end of my marriage.”

Snyder’s unhappiness over her broken marriage is expressed again in *Apple Tree Mass* (page 149), painted soon after visiting the Martins Creek farm, where Fink continued to live. Moved by an apple tree’s struggle to survive despite its great age, she painted the tree leafless, but with powerful, life-seeking roots, and she placed it under a canopy made of dark purple strips of cloth as if the tree were a pagan altar. To the right, a stick figure is framed by a red archway that must be another sanctified space—this is, after all, a mass. The painting’s two left sections are full of writing interspersed with strokes. “Lachrymae Rerum,” Snyder wrote, and then went on to voice her grief over the plight of children, a concern that would be expressed even more emphatically in her paintings of 1987 and 1988. “But our children are being kidnapped and raped and going crazy—wandering the streets, committing suicide. Our marriages are dissolving—we are mothers raising our children. We are afraid. AFRAID.” Next Snyder lists all the things that she loved in the home that was no longer hers, among them, her old bedroom, lying in the hammock, the fence that Larry built. Near the bottom of the list she wrote, “I loved him,” for though she could not live with Fink she never stopped loving him. The word “garden” is spelled out in Molly’s wooden play letters. Above the letters a green arbor surmounts a sepulchral tablet upon which



love's pale grapes

1982

24 x 48"

oil, acrylic, pencil, water-color, paper, papier-mâché, plastic grapes, and fabric on linen

she has written, like words carved on a gravestone, "Lachrymae Rerum." For all the lamentation, there is hope. The dark, angular cross-like shape in the center of the canvas, and reiterated in other parts of the canvas, is, Snyder says, a symbol of transcendence.

Divorce was not the only cause for distress at this time. Snyder was involved in a tumultuous love affair with her psychiatrist, to whom she had gone to get help with the long process of separating from Fink. When she painted *Love's Pale Grapes* in 1982, Snyder was trying unsuccessfully to end this affair. "The painting is directly related to this person," says Snyder.

"*Love's Pale Grapes* has sad words written on it, but I thought of it as soft-spoken and sensuous. It says, 'I love you. Is it worth anything?' When I had the affair

with her I ended up falling apart." *Love's Pale Grapes* is like an inversion of *Vanishing Theatre*. Whereas the orifice-like cut in the red ground of the earlier painting spoke of the horrendous pain of severing a love relationship, the cut bursting with a cluster of grapes in *Love's Pale Grapes* seems a celebration of eros, the relinquishing of which was a prolonged agony. In both paintings Snyder's familiar circle (a female symbol, perhaps a membrane) appears, and both paintings end with a "resolve."

Two years later as the liaison continued, Snyder painted *Love's Deep Grapes* (page 150), which, like *Love's Pale Grapes*, has three sections with a bunch of plastic grapes attached to the painting's center. Snyder was drawn to the grapes because of their out-

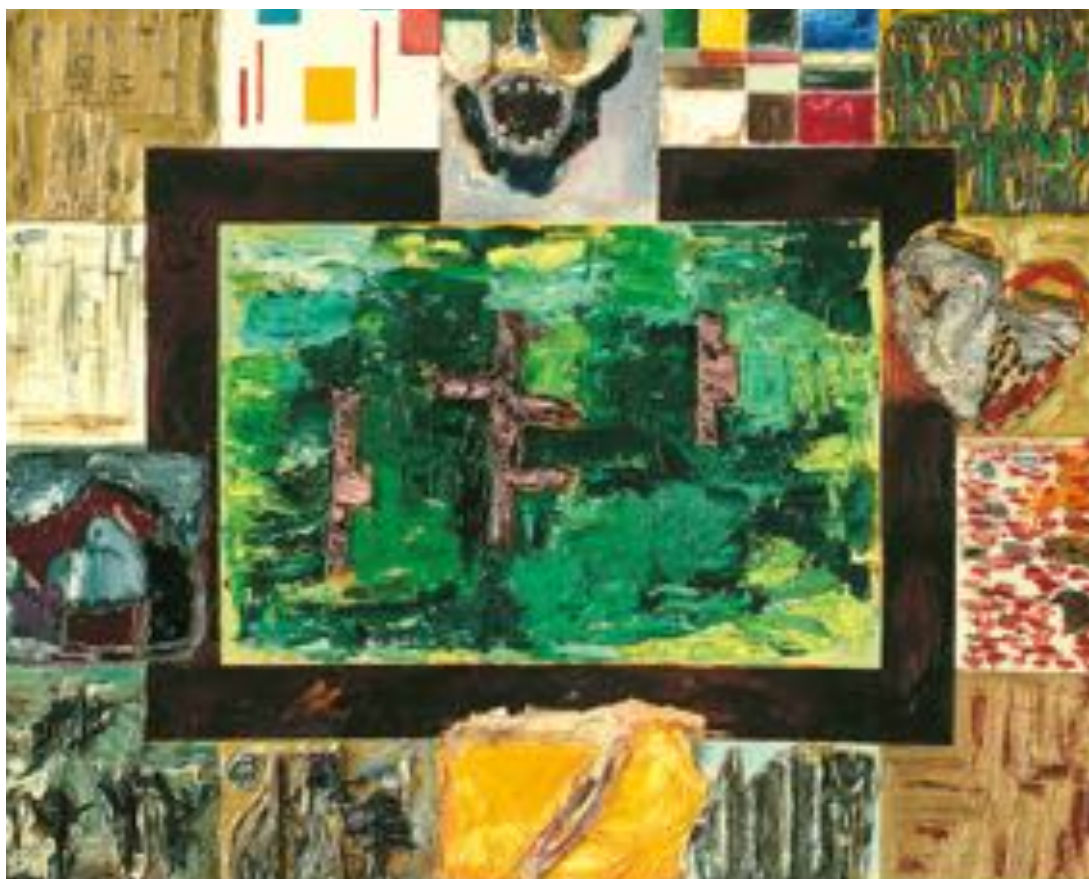
rageous tackiness. “Who would put plastic grapes in a really sad painting? But I did!” The grapes are not only funny, but they also suggest the tumescence of erotic love. “They are,” says Snyder, about “sex, plenitude, fullness, opening up. . . . They’re a symbol of life and passion.” Although she was not conscious that grapes also symbolize Christ’s passion, the reference is, she agrees, appropriate, for her love for this person was a kind of Calvary.

Love’s Deep Grapes is, says Snyder, about her relationship, but it is also about the breakup of her marriage and her fear that her fragile emotional state would make her unable to care for her child. Full of purples, resonant browns, and gold, the painting suggests a requiem. The right section is a carved woodblock and the left is a print pulled from that woodblock. It depicts stick figure children on the shore of a lake. “I saw stones weep,” Snyder wrote, again quoting Virgil. “There is a sadness in things apart from connected with human suffering.” In the central panel grapes are set in front of a rectangle of midnight blue velvet that has been glued and nailed (again one thinks of Christ’s passion) onto a panel of gauze-covered wood. “While I was doing all these paintings,” Snyder recalls, “Mozart’s *Great Mass* spoke directly to me, to what I was feeling. I was going through major kinds of life crises: acceptance, forgiveness, guilt, and happiness. You name it, I was going through it. How can that not be in the paintings?”

In 1984 Snyder began to spend the summer in

a house in Eastport, Long Island. Two years later she bought the house and made it her and Molly’s year-round residence. The move to Eastport helped to put both Fink and her relationship with her psychiatrist behind her. “The house was surrounded by beanfields and I desperately wanted to stop doing painful paintings. I wanted to go back to the feeling of the stroke paintings, but I didn’t want to make stroke paintings. I wanted that same feeling of liberation. So I started making beanfield paintings and it just totally took me away from those agonizing paintings.”

Snyder’s tremendous feeling of renewal revealed itself in a long and splendid series of field paintings—first beanfields, then weed fields, then pumpkin or even moon, sun, or most recently, breast fields. *Beanfield with Music* (page 104), has the exuberant sensuality of the stroke paintings: broad green brushstrokes nearly cover a glowing yellow ground, and the trees/totems have been transformed into fresh green sprouts signifying new life. No less sensuous, but full of winter colors rather than hues of spring, *Beanfield with Snow* (1984) rejoices in fertility, both nature’s and the artist’s: Snyder’s painting was going through a process of rejuvenation, just like the field. She expressed her identification of her body with the earth by planting her strokes and working her canvas as if it were soil. Thick, glistening paint suggests the smell of wet earth and the texture and force of upward-thrusting growth. Because of the all-over treatment of space, the painting has no one place for the viewer to focus upon, and because there is no



ancient/night/sounds
 1984–85
 48 x 60"
 oil, acrylic, cloth, paper,
 wooden dowels on canvas

horizon we are in the field looking down at the area in front of our feet. As a result we feel all the more immersed in Snyder's painterly richness. Two glorious field paintings from 1986 and 1987, *Moonfield* and *Ode to the Pumpkin Field* (page 110–11), respectively, take the field theme to a new level of ecstasy—a feeling of complete physical and spiritual belonging in nature. "When I painted the fields I really felt as if I were in a field. It's a very physical thing. I'm planting my canvas and arranging the rows and colors. I really did build a pumpkin field."

The Eastport years brought other kinds of paintings as well. Some are funny and light-hearted, like the sprawling pink nude covered with flowers in *Bedeckt Mich mit Blumen (Cover Me with Flowers)* (page 105) or the seated nude with spread legs in *I*

Felt Like a Virgin Again, both 1985. Others are more serious, like *Ancient/Night/Sounds* (1984–85), in which, says Snyder, she gave herself a retrospective with fourteen sections framing a central rectangle, each section showing a different aspect of her formal and iconographic language. "There is an African mask, a cut, strokes, a beanfield, totems, sprouts, a resolve, and a heart. I loved doing it." *Can We Turn Our Rage to Poetry?* (page 152–53) was Snyder's response to the homophobic murders of Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk in San Francisco. The structure of the painting is a rectangle within a rectangle. The outer rectangle is a sea of gray strokes and paint patches that, in the sensitivity of its handling, reminds me of Jasper Johns. The excruciatingly tender brushwork of Philip Guston might also come to mind. Beyond that, the way the gray is made up of patches of more or less parallel strokes recalls the way backgrounds are brought to life in paintings by Cézanne. In the middle of the gray area three connected squares form a triptych: the first panel is covered with rough, angry, black strokes; then comes a kind of resolve made up of rectangles of color; and finally, after a gold/brown vertical band that must signify transcendence, there is a panel with a diamond, a triangle, a circle, and a square set against a muted background. These geometric shapes are painted in primaries: red, yellow, green, blue, and the colors bleed downward into the surrounding gray area, thus merging the triptych to the ground. Perhaps Snyder was presenting the basic elements of painting, a sort

of dictionary of art, in order to ask the title's question. The answer is a resounding *Yes*.

The moment of exuberance during which Snyder focused mainly on field paintings was followed by more somber and more political works that cry out against cruelty to children with a vehemence that recalls the ferocity of Snyder's explicitly feminist works of the mid-1970s. She had been reading a series of articles in the *Christian Science Monitor* about the desperate plight of children all over the world. "I decided it just wasn't a year to make beautiful paintings. I wanted to make some kind of political statement."

Several of these works contain collaged photographs of mutilated or starving children. In others, like the huge *Morning Requiem (For the Children)* (1987–88), a barren vineyard is a metaphor for children's suffering. Like the trees/totems, the winter grapevines are anthropomorphized. They gesticulate like souls in distress. And like the grape paintings, the vineyard requiems present a pictorial passion play. They move from the agony of a crucified stick figure child in a winter vineyard on the left to blissful transcendence of another stick figure child on the right. The transcending child floats in a field of suns. On the painting's

beanfield with snow
1984
72 x 96"
oil and acrylic on
canvas



painful side, barbed wire and chain are attached to the canvas and nails are driven into it. “Those vines are crosses, but they will bear grapes,” Snyder explains. “The grapevine is an archetypal symbol of life.”

In the center of her requiem Snyder placed a resolve in which an altar built out of rectangles supports a white rectangle flecked by a few light strokes. This white panel recalls the open white area in the altar painting that she made soon after Molly’s birth. It appears to be a focus for meditation, an oasis of peace, or perhaps a place to which she can direct feelings of prayer and hope. Starting in 1980, Snyder began to put her resolve in the middle of her paintings, rather than saving it for the final section. Often the central section is just a luminous rectangle as in *Ocean/Moon/Crimson Symphony* (1987) and *The Ocean/Renewal* (page 113). Placing this area of stillness in the center diminishes the painting’s narrative thrust, but it gives a feeling of mystery and awe that is almost religious. The resolve functions like the still point in the center of a storm. “I think,” Snyder says, that “putting the resolve in the middle started in a small painting called *Meditation*. If you sit in front of this painting you can come into something very peaceful in the center.” Snyder sees a connection between this centeredness and her yoga practice. When she painted *Meditation* she was meditating twice a day, and, though in recent years her meditation practice has become a little less rigorous, it continues to be an important part of her life and no

doubt of her art.

An Offering for Pro, begun before and finished after the death of her friend, the painter Porfirio Didonna, in 1986, is a cruel-looking landscape in which Snyder lies naked and lamenting at the foot of a dead tree that is transformed into one of those tall, crosslike shapes that are symbols of transcendence. When she made this painting, Snyder felt she was making an offering of “the most beautiful picture I could think of.” That “picture” is a painting within a painting, a rectangular resolve that floats in the middle of the landscape. With its yellow and orange rectangles made all the more glowing by a black transcendence symbol, this section is indeed almost painfully beautiful. During this same period of apprehension, Snyder made a field painting with brown and yellow furrows and green and yellow sprouts, one of which forms a cross. Entitled *Waiting for a Miracle (For Nina and John)* (page 112), the painting is a votive image: Snyder was waiting for her friend’s miraculous recovery. On the left, a red and black stick figure/tree looks like a talisman summoned forth to transact salvation.

Another elegiac painting from 1986 is *The Orchard/The Altar* (page 107), a night scene with four leafless, uprooted, anthropomorphic trees that seem to dance in some magic rite. In the middle a red/black “altar” rises upward out of the red/black ground. The night sky is sprinkled with large snowflakes made of small pieces of linen pasted onto the canvas. Snyder painting was inspired by the orchard she passed one winter night

when she and Molly were driving home after visiting Fink in Martins Creek. Once again she was struck with the melancholy of loss, but what she painted was also ecstatic. The uprooted yet vigorous trees could be stand-ins for the artist herself.

In 1988 Snyder was bedridden for months with Lyme disease. Finally a friend set up a table near her bed and Snyder produced a series of small watercolors, which slowly drew her back into her studio. “Emerging from a debilitating case of Lyme disease last year,” she

wrote in a 1989 exhibition catalogue, “I found myself, after not thinking about painting for many months, bursting with ideas. I had a need to work with velvet and rust, with cloth and metal, with wood and nails, with sticks and wire and with paint. Images which I hadn’t been in touch with for many months began flooding in. I decided not to edit myself. I painted every idea I had. . . . I needed to paint requiems for our losses, to meditate and chant and to once again paint the fields surrounding my home which were now being

**ocean / moon / crimson
symphony**
1987
60 x 72"
oil on canvas



threatened by developers.”¹⁶ Snyder painted *This Sacred Field* (1989) on a carved wooden panel and she attached four rusty metal spikes to the panel’s surface. (During the last fifteen years Snyder has frequently painted on linen mounted on board or, more recently, she has painted directly on wooden panels.) A central rectangle made mostly of black velvet is overlaid with pale green horizontal lines. The painting is, says Snyder, “about the environment and treasuring the field. Molly calls the lines ‘lines of meditation.’ They are sounds, like chants.” In 1989 Snyder and her daughter left Eastport and moved to Brooklyn. The move was recorded in a painting called *Leaving Ducktown*, which has the same central velvet rectangle with horizontal lines as *This Sacred Field*. But this is a more optimistic painting. Wooden ducks (Eastport, Long Island was full of duck farms) attached to the painted wooden panel fly out of the darkness on the left toward a sunlit sky on the right.

After she returned to the city, Snyder began to live with Maggie Cammer, then the supervising judge of the Brooklyn Civil Court. This relationship, which began in 1987, has been a long and happy one. Today Snyder and Cammer share a house in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn. Cammer is warm, highly intelligent, and funny. With her feet firmly planted on the ground, she acts as a needed counterbalance to Snyder’s dramatic mood shifts. Starting in 1990 Snyder began to spend summers in Cammer’s house in Woodstock, New York. Here she made paintings with central ovals. Some paintings have dark vertical

lines. Snyder came to realize that these shapes were the result of living in a landscape full of trees and ponds, a landscape very different from the open fields of Long Island. But the oval is a shape that Snyder had used in her flock paintings and even before. In *Rose in Rose* (1991), the oval is full of promise, like an egg. And like a pond it is rich with reflections.

Ovals recur in the next few years, but now they look more like open graves than like ponds. Many of Snyder’s paintings from the 1990s are requiems or altars for the dead. Her parents died in 1992 and 1993. Cammer’s parents died in 1995 and 1996. Also during this period several friends died of AIDS. It was losing those friends combined with the tragedy of the AIDS crisis that prompted *Journey of the Souls* (page 161), in which faces of the deceased printed on silk and looking as fragile as Veronica’s veils have replaced beans, pumpkins, and suns as the field’s harvest. The souls are linked together and linked also to a black velvet egg-shaped pool by colored lines squeezed straight from the tube. Snyder describes these lines as “strings of paint.” The black hole recalls the screaming, devouring mouths in earlier paintings about loss. *The Cherry Tree* (1993) was inspired by a cherry-laden tree that she saw in a Brooklyn yard as she was driving to visit her dying father in his nursing home. There was fruit on the tree and fruit on the ground. To Snyder it was “a metaphor of life and death.” In her painting she built up the tree’s trunk with papier-mâché and attached straw to its slender leafless limbs. At once vulnerable and thriving, the tree is perhaps a kind of



the cherry tree
1993
66 x 57"
silk, papier-mâché, rice
paper, straw, oil, acrylic
on linen

self-portrait. But the way it is set in front of a broad vertical band of light turns it into an altar. “It hit the right note,” Snyder says. “As I was painting it, it began to vibrate before my eyes. Later, when I walked into my studio and saw it, I gasped.”

Over the next several years Snyder revisited the theme of the cherry tree. *Two Cherry Trees* (1994) has a light and a dark tree, each one backed by a vertical band (a pale band in the case of the left tree, and a dark band in the case of the right-hand tree). Again the subject is the duality of life and death. *Cherry Fall* (page 125) and *Green Cherry Fall* (1997) are more abstract. The band of light is still there, and so are the cherries, but the tree itself has dissolved into a light-filled area that conveys a feeling of sublimity very like that in the final panel of *Resurrection* (1977). The pale colors and the misty floating forms also recall Snyder’s paean to motherhood: *Welcome to This Land Molly Fink*.

The sense of release from grief expressed in the cherry fall paintings informed many other canvases from the second half of the 1990s. “Suddenly I looked at my paintings and I realized I hadn’t used what I consider to be real color in my paintings for years. After all the death and darkness I wanted to bring color back into the work, so I said, ‘Come on, you’ve got to make a red painting.’” Snyder painted a number of joyous, brightly colored works, including *Red Field* (page 71), *Mom* (1994), and the wonderfully ecstatic *Carmina* (page 95). Like *Carmina*, and like a number of works from the mid-1990s, *My Life* (1996) has small squares of color floating against a soft,

painterly, cloudlike background. (Perhaps Snyder’s early admiration for Hans Hofmann was at work here.) This time the swirling cloudy color occupies only part of the canvas. Beneath it, and partially hidden behind it, is a spread-leg menstruating nude with plastic grapes placed on her vagina. “I put myself in it, me splayed as a nude, and I put a lot of other little symbols of things that relate to me or my work or my life.”

As Snyder wrote in 2000 in the catalogue for her show at Boston’s Nielsen Gallery, “1999 was a time of great upheaval for me.”¹⁷ She and Cammer sold their house and bought another one that had to be renovated. For nine months Snyder did not have a studio, and during this time she made a series of prints entitled “In Times of Great Disorder.” The structure of these prints consists of an inner square with a loosely painted grid framed by another square articulated with circles. This format grew out of a series of paintings with wide borders surrounding a central square or rectangle upon which Snyder painted a thickly pigmented, brightly colored grid. Whereas the grid in the stroke paintings was lightly penciled and served only to give structure to the strokes, the grid is now a dominant feature. Snyder pasted round wooden dowels and plastic and glass beads in the middle of spots of color that punctuate the framing border. As the series progressed, these spots became circles whose circumferences are built up out of papier-mâché. She called these circles “mandalas,” and she filled their cavities with dried medicinal Chinese herbs, a large quantity of which was given to her by an acupuncturist neighbor. Filling in the

**lacrymae antiqua
(ancient tears)**

2000

72 x 78"

oil, acrylic, cloth, mud,
herbs on canvas

circles felt like a primitive ritual. She believed that the paintings had healing powers: painting was becoming a form of witchcraft. In her catalogue preface she stressed the ritualistic character of these paintings: "My newest body of work, done over the last three years, has been . . . I want to use the words 'pure' and 'magic' with all of the meanings that the words 'pure' and 'magic' imply. . . . I am still seeking clarity, a purity, an essence, but have never been willing to sacrifice the ritual, the need for the deep, the rich, the dark—the wild

wake of the brush and the often organic application of materials—and always working consciously to be in control and out. . . ."

By the end of the year 2000, Snyder had moved beyond the highly structured paintings with herb-filled circles. *Blue/Moons* (page 62), in which irregular circles that look like ripe fruits are scattered over an inner rectangle to create a kind of field painting within a field painting, shows her loosening up her structure. Structure is even more relaxed in *She Is the Earth* (page 129). Here there is no grid and no rectangle within a rectangle. Circles that could be flowers, breasts, fruits, or even suns and moons, float over and settle on a lush and fertile landscape. Above an area of subterranean darkness is a place of sunlight and blue sky: the duality gives the painting a narrative thrust, for light and dark stand for different states of being. *Ghosts* (page 131) and *And Always Searching for Beauty* (page 6) are both landscapes that, in their glorious sensuality, look back to both the stroke and the field paintings. The circles are here transformed into breasts, flowers, hearts, or just plain spots of color. In *Lacrymae Antigua* (*Ancient Tears*) the herb-filled circles have become sunflowers, eloquent like those painted by van Gogh but well beyond their prime. Like her flailing, leafless trees, Snyder's sunflowers signify sorrow, struggle, life and death. Earlier they had appeared in *Ah Sunflower* (page 122–23), which is about aging and her parents' demise.

In Woodstock in early September 2001 Snyder was working on landscapes. She had three blank canvases, and she planned to go back to *Lacrymae Antigua*





elegy
2001
64 x 54"
oil, acrylic, paper-mâché, herbs on canvas

(*Ancient Tears*) as a starting point. "I had barely put on a few layers of underpainting when September 11th struck. . . . Access to the city was impossible and besides I desperately needed to stay put and make beautiful paintings. I kept painting." The paintings she made were odes to "nature and beauty and light." *The Nature of Things* returned to the sunflower theme, but the blossoms are less decayed and the stems are more upright. *The Fall* continues in the mood of *And Always Searching for*

Beauty. Now, however, the ripe fruits or flowers above and the fruits and flowers that have fallen to the ground speak of the life/death cycle, just as did the various versions of cherry trees. Scattered over the surface of *Elegy* (2001) are red shapes enriched with herbs and large leaves that seem to be falling through the sky. You can see this painting as a field painting turned into a sky painting or a cherry fall without the tree. The painting's mixture of joy in fecund nature and sorrow at what time brings is poignant, even heart-rending. In the lower right Snyder wrote in white, "Sept 11 2001."

When she returned to her Brooklyn studio later that autumn, Snyder focused on field paintings, ". . . this time pumpkin and sun fields, Hubbard squash fields in the blazing sun, Acorn squash left in a picked field (a meditation), and small round ripe orange pumpkins with dried up vines on a field of straw with a field of strokes sitting near it, making the whole resonate. The sun became a major theme—the desire for light and fruition and decay, but decay as a natural process."¹⁸ Besides the three paintings she did in Woodstock just after 9/11, these field paintings made up her 2002 exhibition at the Nielsen Gallery. Paeans to nature, the 2002 works radiate sunshine and bristle with fecund energy. Sometimes Snyder combined the field and stroke painting modes. *Ripened Fields* (page 134), for example, is a diptych with a stroke painting on the right and a field painting of pumpkins nestled in straw on the left. (Snyder uses straw in many of her canvases: one might imagine that she was inspired by Anselm Kiefer, whose work she greatly admires, but

Snyder says that she was using straw long before she knew Kiefer's work.) Paintings like *Should You Wonder*, *Sublime*, and *Earthsong* (page 138) from later in 2002 have broad swathes of pigment (even broader and more tactile than in the stroke paintings of the early 1970s) combined with a host of other kinds of marks, images, textures, and materials that entered Snyder's vocabulary in the last decade. With its layering of long horizontal strokes *Earthsong* looks back also to *Soft Pocket Song*, which was one of the first paintings in which Snyder built up her canvas in such a rich way that it almost became a sculptural relief.

For the last two years Snyder's art has once again explored her feelings about feminism and the female sensibility. She wrote in her 2002 sketch pad: "New ideas—more feminist imagery has to come back and flowers and fields could be incorporated into it but also very sensual sexual imagery. The Female has to begin enveloping the world." Accompanying these words is a drawing of a nude woman whose ample body is as fertile-looking as the prehistoric idol called the Venus of Willendorf. She sits with her legs open and does indeed appear to envelope the world. In some 2004 canvases, for example *High on Pink* (page 100) and *Women Make Lists* (page 167), both of which combine the field and stroke painting modes, the female aspect is seen in round shapes that may be membranes; in the suggestion of blood, in vaginal imagery, as well as in nests, breasts, and in clusters of grapelike beads placed in an orifice. *The Heart Is a Lake* from the same year is like a revisiting of Van-

ishing Theatre. Inspired by two passages in the novel *Fugitive Pieces* by the poet Anne Michaels, it began with a handful of hibiscus that Snyder put in the middle of a piece of burlap that she had glued onto her canvas. The undulating pink strokes surrounding this central image of a heart look both vaginal and nest-like. They are meant to be the heart's pumping, but not the heart itself. Under a nest/orifice, which Snyder says is a fist filled with dirt and sparkles, Snyder wrote: "The heart is a fistful of earth." On the right, beneath a similarly visceral shape that represents a lake, she wrote the painting's title. Of the central image, Snyder said, "It's like this open massive beautiful earth deep and rich and it has something to do with the heart. It's very open there. It's beating. It's all rhythm, open, vulnerable."

One of her most recent works, *Antiquarem Lacrimae* (page 169), meaning the tears of ancient women, is, says Snyder, about "the suffering of old and venerable women, how they would weep if they knew about our violent world." Again she has made a stroke/field painting, this one with pale green strokes interspersed with a harvest of round shapes that look like nests, breasts, or wounds. The words of the title written over and under the strokes resemble the sprouts in her 1980s fields. "I often repeat things in my paintings," says Snyder. "In *Antiquarem Lacrimae* I repeated that phrase over and over again, like an undercurrent. There's a field image on top of and beneath the words. The words running through the field create another kind of rhythm."



the heart is a lake

2004

42 x 84"

oil, acrylic, herbs, cloth,
glitter on linen

Snyder's compassion for human suffering sets the tone of this large and beautiful painting. Indeed, it sets the tone of most of her work. "There's a sadness that's always there. . . . I am touched by great beauty and I want that to be in my work, but I think the beauty always has this underlying pain to it. Sadness is the sound of my paintings. It's there."

About her return to feminist content, Snyder explained: "I couldn't do political paintings. There's so much horror going on in the world, so much devastation . . . but what I can do—I consciously decided to go back to a very feminist sensibility, to bring a feminine energy and some kind of beauty back into

the world, which I think we desperately need. I felt it was the only kind of offering I could make, and that's really what I've been doing for two years now. Male energy is killing us. I want my work to be an answer to some of that." Her recent paintings do not have the anger of her feminist works from 1974. They carry a broader political message: they aim to expand the viewer's soul by offering beauty of form, texture, and color. They ask the viewer to enter a state of being that includes a celebration of love, an acquaintance with grief, and a delight in nature's opulence. This ideal state would combine a heightened sensuousness with a meditative calm, for Snyder's idea of tran-

scendence always keeps its feet dug deep in the grit of reality. Painting remains Snyder's religion. Recently she told me that the paintings she is doing now are "seeking the sublime."

Snyder is one of the most emotionally responsive people I have ever encountered, and that sometimes joyful and often painful responsiveness, that passionate generosity, is right there on the wildly variegated, tenderly brushed surfaces of her canvases. She has said that one reason people look at her paintings is to have their own experience confirmed. Conversely, Snyder paints to confirm, expand, and come to grips with her experience. "Painting certainly keeps my life in equilibrium. I do it because it's one of the things that I do really well. I'm proud of myself when I'm doing it. When I'm painting I'm the healthiest person. I'm like a little kid. My paintings are full of hope." For forty years, as her message has changed and grown, Joan Snyder has been finding and refinding her pictorial voice. Her paintings never repeat themselves; their urgency and honesty never flags. Today she remains as obsessed with painting as she was when, as a college senior, she first took up the brush. On a recent notebook drawing of a heart she wrote: "My work has been absolutely faithful to me."

ENDNOTES

1. All quotations from Joan Snyder are from interviews by the author conducted in 1978, 1988, and 2004. Some passages in this essay are taken from catalogue introductions by the author, *Joan Snyder: Seven Years of Work* (Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase, 1978) and *Joan Snyder Collects Joan Snyder* (Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, 1988).
2. Ruth Iskin, "Joan Snyder: Toward a Feminist Imperative,"

Chrysalis, No. 1, p. 107 (1977).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

4. Joan Snyder, lecture at the Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, MA, August 15, 2004.

5. Joan Snyder, lecture at Kansas University, 1976.

6. Joan Snyder, artist's statement, 1976, Joan Snyder's personal archive.

7. Marcia Tucker, "The Anatomy of a Stroke: Recent Paintings by Joan Snyder," *Artforum*, vol. 9 (May, 1971).

8. *Ibid.*, p. 46

9. Joan Snyder, artist's statement, Joan Snyder's personal archive.

10. Joan Snyder, typescript of artist's statement, Joan Snyder's personal archive.

11. Joan Snyder, letter to the Wichita Art Museum, April 4, 1995.

12. Joan Snyder, lecture delivered at Yale University at Norfolk, 1973.

13. *Ibid.*

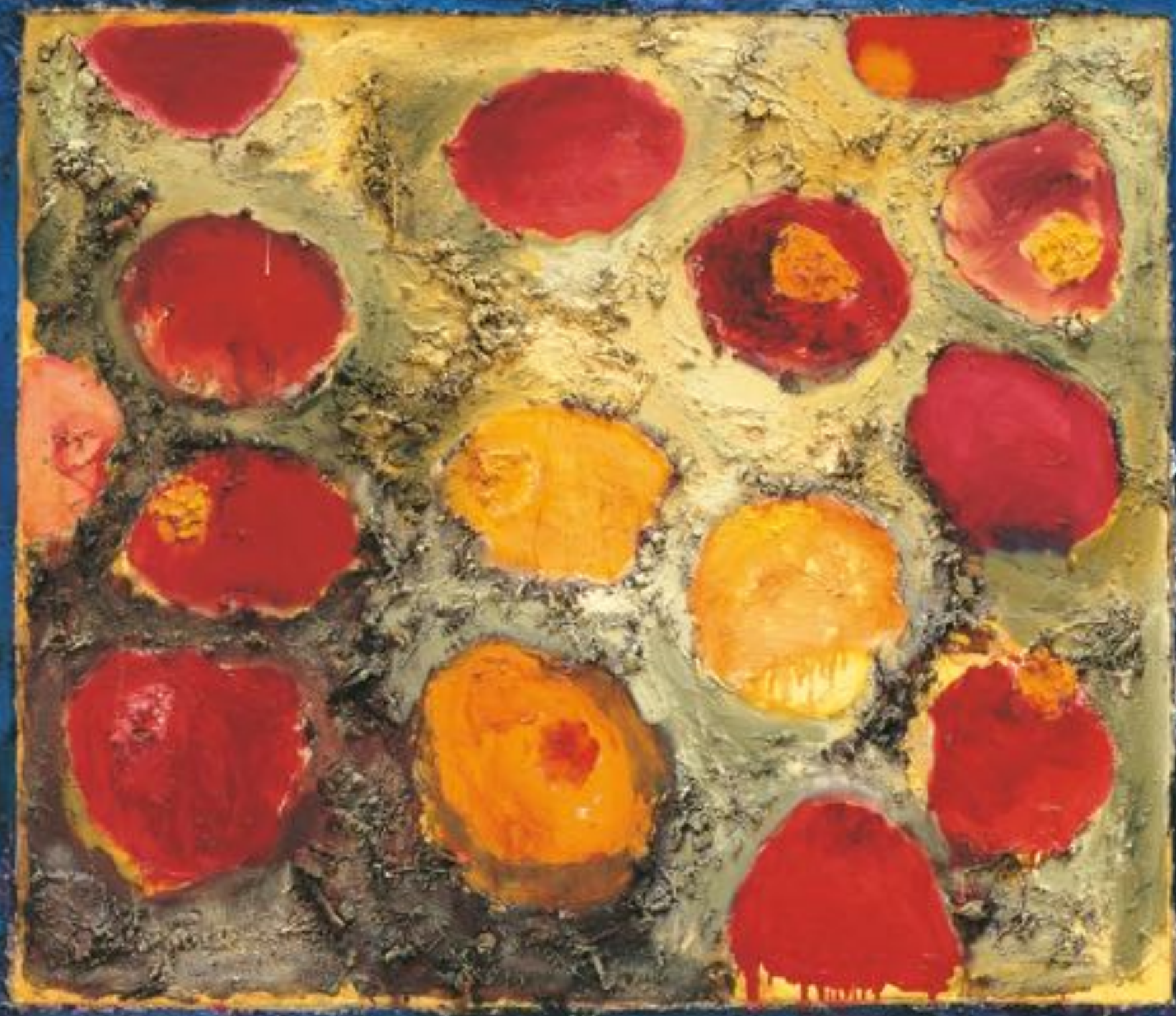
14. Joan Snyder, statement, Joan Snyder's private archive.

15. Recently Snyder told me that after she finished *Resurrection* she found out that the old woman had not been murdered but had murdered. "She had actually killed the male worker who lived with her . . . who knows what he did to make her do that."

16. Joan Snyder, exh. cat. preface (New York: Hirschl & Adler Modern, 1989).

17. Joan Snyder, exh. cat. preface "In Times of Great Disorder" (Boston: Nielson Gallery, 2000).

18. Joan Snyder, "The Nature of Things," exh. cat. preface (Boston: Nielsen Gallery, 2002), n.p.



joan snyder: the geography of the surface

jenni sorkin

YEARS BEFORE NEOEXPRESSIONISM HIT NEW YORK IN the mid-1980s, Joan Snyder was producing sensuous mixed media paintings that set a standard for the narrative potential of abstraction. Snyder is best known for the impulsive surfaces created in her first mature body of work, “stroke” paintings (1969–73), emanating from the most elementary gesture in painting, the brush stroke. An exploration of the continuity, surface, and texture of the single, repeated gesture, the stroke paintings were large, rectangular canvases made on a grid. Directly linked to the body, “stroke” is a term with strongly haptic associations. If stroking is an action of pressure and repetition, then an individual stroke is an utterance of touch. Curator Carl Belz has described the “stroke” paintings as “painting primers,”¹ emphasizing the primacy of Snyder’s material investigations. Snyder focuses on the sensory qualities of paint, its tactility, and range of expression. Her erotic grids balance seepage and absorption, alluding to bodily experience through layered articulations of paint.

Snyder came to prominence in the winter of 1971, when her work was first seen in a group show at the Bykert Gallery in New York, organized by owner

and director Klaus Kertess. Snyder was one of four painters exhibited; the other artists were: Howard Buchwald, Allen Sondheim, and Michael Venezia. That spring, her work was the subject of a feature by Marcia Tucker in *Artforum*, at a time when magazine articles on women artists were few and far between.² Tucker presented Snyder to the art world, writing the first in-depth analysis of her paintings. In fall of 1971, Snyder exhibited the stroke paintings on both coasts, at Michael Walls Gallery in San Francisco in August, and in November at Paley and Lowe in New York. Her work was subsequently included in many of the key museum exhibitions of the early 1970s, including *Grids* (1972), held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, *American Drawings, 1963–1973* (1973), at the Whitney Museum in New York, and the Whitney Annual (1972 and 1973).

Snyder’s sensual gestures can be seen as a reaction against the pervasive minimal tendencies of the mid- to late 1960s. To counter the long domination of Abstract Expressionism, a visible trend emerged among painters, one that rejected painterly qualities such as brushwork in favor of a new kind of materiality. Using symmetry, hard edges, and smooth matte

blue/moons (detail)
2000
54 x 66"
oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
silk, burlap, herbs on canvas board

surfaces to create monochromes, artists such as Brice Marden and Robert Mangold addressed the painting in space. Their canvases function both as paintings and as objects, emphasizing structure, opacity, and surface perfection. In contrast to these and other Minimalist painters, such as the deliberate geometric forms of Jo Baer and Frank Stella, Snyder's strokes were given full expression, where paint was allowed to spread, culminating in heavy drips, smears, and globs. Within paintings such as *Lines and Strokes* (page 80) and *Summer Orange* (1970), her brushwork combines densities to create evocative and richly textured surfaces. In her diaries from this early period, Snyder writes: "more not less . . . not stripping away to make a simple statement-image finding richness inside . . . marks-guts-ideas."³ The artist's assertion of the body establishes the visceral dimensions of her endeavor.

The process of drawing provided much of the framework for the stroke paintings. Through her own boisterous successions of primary-color slashes and scribbles, Snyder sought to loosen the constraints of the grid. Conceived in pastel on individual sheets of graph paper, many of these drawings leave large white spaces punctuated by sharp blows of color. *The Shapes of Lines* (page 78) dates from this era, a work in a warm palette in which slim red hatch marks become bolder, thicker, and more saturated in descending configurations, ending in a row of glowing orange stalks. *Stroke Watercolor* (1971) points to the same expansion of the line. Through stacking, Snyder amasses bands

of unbroken color, all of varying length and girth. Such inventories of the line are a way of accruing physicality and depth. This sense of expansiveness allows for permeability within the picture plane, often expressed through thin layers of wash, porous, half-formed spheres, and semi-obscured grids.

While seemingly resistant to Minimalism, Snyder's incorporation of the grid belies an interest in the placement of a framing device within her compositions. As a graduate student at Rutgers, Snyder studied with the sculptor Robert Morris. Recently, she has described herself as having had an urge to subvert what she has described as his "austere minimal boxes,"⁴ including them in her earliest canvases and filling them with body parts or patterns. What began as an intervention has evolved into a signature inclusion. Sometimes large and soft, other times constituting tightly penciled rows of a lone horizontal axis, Snyder makes continued use of the grid. As a malleable structure, it expands infinitely, encompassing the range of the artist's vast and irregular partitions.

Shifting from the horizontal orientation of the stroke paintings to a square format, *Woman-Child* (page 89) evokes a transitional moment when Snyder began introducing feminist content into her work. While a hard grid forms the ground of the canvas, *Woman-Child* is a stroke painting. Short and staccato, the strokes move rather than drip, forming a lattice over a nearly blank grid, interspersed with a few squares of full color. A triangular structure on the right-hand side of the painting offers the barest



summer orange
1970
42 x 96"
oil, acrylic, and spray
enamel on canvas

suggestion of a narrative. Almost a dripping lavender roof, it conjures the idea of a house, a site of domesticity and caregiving evoked by the title. *Houses* (page 35), which was made after *Squares* (page 90), continues this narrative strain. A whimsical, autobiographical canvas devoted to all the houses Snyder had ever lived in, she uses the stick-figure form of the house—the basic square with a triangular roof—as a symbol of constant relocation. The childish symbolism masks the adult weariness endemic to city life: the impermanence of renting, the fear of never settling down. The canvas is scattered with other kinds of structures, such as simple apartment buildings suggested by two rows of windows, but it is the repetition of the house that induces displacement and monotony. *Houses* also articulates the poignant

memories that one retains from childhood. Through plainly rendered architectural details, such as bare doorways and simple stoops, Snyder conjures the sensory details glimpsed at a young age.

An unruly checkerboard of textures, bleeding borders, and intentional drips, *Squares* is one of Snyder's most loved and reproduced paintings. A grid filled in solid shades of yellow, orange, cream, and red, it represents minimal slippage within the confines of the grid. By looking at the painting that preceded it (*Woman-Child*), as well as the one that came after (*Houses*), *Squares* fits neatly into Snyder's spate of square-format canvases. A curious formal experiment, *Squares* is a painting that comes closest to echoing the more rigid grid work done by peers such as Eva Hesse or Jackie Winsor.

heart on
 1975
 72 x 96"
 oil, acrylic, paper, fabric,
 cheesecloth, papier-mâché,
 mattress batting, and
 thread on canvas



Throughout Snyder's entire oeuvre, the grid functions as a metronome, a device of precision, a tempo upon which to rely, or, conversely, to transgress. This tension between caution and abandon allows for interruption, transforming and informing form. It is the kind of grid, filmmaker Molly Snyder-Fink, the artist's daughter, wrote, "that begs the image to have composure."⁵

The poised and sensible logic offered by the grid belies the intensity of emotion at the core of Snyder's work. Also done in square format, *Heart On* (1975) is an overtly feminist painting which Snyder has described as "a palette of female pain, anger, and

needs."⁶ Her suggestive title "heart on" is a play on "hard on," implicating the masculinity and sexism associated with the history of Western painting. But *Heart On* can also be read as female desire constrained within the grid, a coy literalization of pent-up sexuality. The hearts that fill the grid are mixed-media constructions formed from gauze, cotton batting, and satin. Inscribed into women's visual vocabulary from the time of girlhood, the heart is an emblem sustained throughout a woman's lifetime. But there is something deeply ironic about Snyder's hearts, a jibe critical of the disingenuous nature of the symbol itself. Often used as a stand-in for the word

“love,” the usage of the heart is frequently cavalier. Taken together, both the title of the painting and its symbolism seem to invoke a rather cautionary tale of love and its disappointments.

Fraught with bold, disparate sections and dynamic brushwork, Snyder created a loose series of paintings, each titled symphony, akin to musical compositions. The symphonies were ongoing, made intermittently between 1970 and 1987. Alluding to a harmony of sounds through the blending of disparate parts, Snyder is not the first painter to treat painting as a musical composition. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Vassily Kandinsky, whose paintings Snyder greatly admired as a young painter, used titles derived from music, most notably, his “composition” series (1913–15). Based on musical sketches, Kandinsky situated highly abstracted narrative forms, such as churches and figures, in the midst of tumultuous landscapes.

James McNeill Whistler’s *Symphony in White No. 3* (1865–67) is one of the earliest incarnations of the

usage of “symphony.” The suggestion that painting could somehow simulate a complex musical form incurred the wrath of the era’s leading critics. One such commentator, P. G. Hamerton, even insisted that Whistler’s work “was not precisely a symphony in white” since it contained additional shades of pink, blue, and green. Whistler’s sardonic response was to ask if a symphony in F should be a continued repetition of F, F, F.⁷

This anecdote opens up a few avenues. The composer John Cage might have been inspired by Hamerton to create a grating, single-note symphony. But in a male-dominated art form, a symphony of paint made by a woman is already a silent insurrection. In *Small Symphony for Women* (1974), a canvas in three parts, Snyder offers a corrective. Within the first panel, she scrawls both a question and a statement: “Can symphonies be made out of this subject? [women] Can I make symphonies out of this subject?”⁸ Another passage questions the lack of women faculty

small symphony for women
1974
24 x 72"
oil, acrylic on canvas





symphony ii
1974
72 x 108"
oil, acrylic on canvas

members in an all-women's college at the artist's alma mater. In various places, she spurts evocative phrases: "Yellow was so often anguish mixed with white anxiety" and "The politics are at once separated and integrated." Her diagramming creates seamless movement between feminist issues, the sensation of color. Throughout the remainder of the painting, strong yellow blocks mix with a cacophony of strokes and scratches. The second panel is a visual rendering of the phrases used in the first, while the third panel embodies resolution. Both celebratory and tentative, Snyder's painting dedicates itself to women through a lush reclamation of form. This is a tactic also used by Pauline Oliveros, one of the few female avant-garde composers working during the 1960s. In San Francisco in 1969, Oliveros both organized and composed for an all-female group of musicians, the ♀ Orchestra. Like Snyder, Oliveros' silent naming speaks to the reclamation of women within an artistic discipline.

Through squares, diptychs, triptychs, and series of panels, Snyder's flexible sectioning is utilized as a strategy of differentiation, a way to separate and draw distinct boundaries between spatial areas and webs of ideas. *Symphony* (1970) achieves momentum through strokes, while *Symphony II* (1974) traces a maroon path through a blockade of multicolored squares. The symphony paintings work toward abundance, where visceral forms and sensations activate the spaces inside the grid without descending into clutter or messiness. John Elderfield described this quality as "truly expansive painting—where the visible grid (sometimes denoted

by a filled-in square) though functioning to *contain* the separate units, is itself spread *by* these units to create a space opposite of contained."⁹

The artist draws upon a vast repertoire of painterly techniques—smearing, blending, bleeding—to convey both vastness of form and a strong material presence. Clearly, Snyder conceives of painting as a dramatic force. Through an intensity of gesture, the symphony paintings lead the viewer through an opulent and lyrical series of movements. This is relayed through both the titling and the enormous scale of two other paintings, *The Storm* (page 38) and *Vanishing Theatre* (page 39), both 1974, which have qualities similar to the symphony works. Both titles anticipate climax and resolution through a succession of events. During a storm, this occurs in the moments of calm between surges of thunder and lightning; within a stage production, through the process of an unfolding narrative. Snyder has described herself as giving both visual and textual instructions within the canvas, offering direction and guidance within the work.¹⁰ Such offers of guidance signify her dual role as both director and protagonist.

Named for a phrase within George Eliot's nineteenth-century novel *Middlemarch*, *Vanishing Theatre/The Cut* is a testament to female grief and bodily experience. Snyder builds surfaces of immense anguish, pairing suggestive language with materials such as chicken wire, papier-mâché, and fabric. The first panel, or "scene," of the painting is dominated by handwritten text. Part I declares itself

a “lament,” while the sinister taunting of Part III, “Take your clothes off lady and let’s see who you really are,” is, according to the artist, a challenge leveled at a specific individual during a devastating personal relationship.¹¹ The lower-left corner of the panel is dark red, staining the canvas with illegible language. There are near sightings of actual words, visceral utterances that resemble “orgasm,” “nude,” and “mouth.” These terms magnify the fuchsia gash that dominates the painting’s central panel. Snyder exposes a second layer beneath the first, cutting into her surfaces to create an interior, vaginal space. The rusty blocks of color in the last section resemble a bricked-up space, as if a structure had been abandoned, then cautiously covered over.

The Storm continues this trajectory of concealment, blotting out or cordoning off moments of light or hope. Painted in a dark palette of heavy violets and blacks, *The Storm* permits a richness of despair previously unexplored. While there are blades of blue and red, and some unbroken patches of white, the immense canvas is worked over and over again, resulting in an impenetrable density that seems burdened by its own mass. In her diary from this time, Snyder observed: “. . . covering, covering, covering—seeing beautiful passages and having to cover them. Who was I hiding them from?”¹²

During the 1980s, Snyder’s surfaces turned from interiority to outwardness, conveying emotive space through a body of landscapes collectively known as

beanfield with mud
1984
34 x 52”
oil and acrylic on linen



red field
1993
63 x 72"
silk, oil, acrylic, paper-
mâché on canvas



“fields” (1984–2002). In 1986, the artist left her Mulberry Street loft and relocated to more pastoral surroundings in Eastport, Long Island. Her fields series of works embraces the daily litany of responsiveness, keenly mapping nature and its cadences as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of human relationships. Through the rhythmic sequences of seasons, nightfall, and the ocean, Snyder narrates lived experience without the directed specificity of autobiography or storytelling.

Snyder’s first field painting, *Beanfield with Music* (page 104), is a closely rendered landscape painted

in bright greens and yellows, signaling harvest and abundance. The composition rushes by, as though seen from a car, a smear of autumn against the horizon. Her brushwork is dense and expressive, combining strokes from the earlier period with the movement of the symphony paintings. The field paintings initiate a commitment to looking intently, and registering, over time, the same farm, the same acreage, the same field, day in and day out. Later versions are *Beanfield with Snow* (page 51) and *Beanfield with Mud* (1984). *Snow* is a bitter palette of white,

cream, brown, and yellow. Thick white strokes blanket the withered bean stalks and clumps of frozen mud. *Mud* announces the new growth of spring. Tender green shoots poke up out of the thaw. Through rich color and texture, Snyder evokes the density of the sodden earth, accented with notes of mahogany, red, and chocolate.

Completing nearly one year, Snyder's paintings do more than simply document the changing nature of the landscape. The beanfield paintings emit a sensual cognizance, resisting illustration. Rather, they can be construed as a metaphor not for nature itself, but for the nature of impermanence.

Set loosely on a blue-black grid, *Moonfield* (1986) is a whimsical painting dotted with crescent and full moons. The artist creates an improbable sky of flat white moons in an undulating pattern, referencing the moon's monthly recurrence. Like *Heart On* (1975), it references femininity through a largely symbolic vocabulary. A planetary object of both the tide and the night sky, the moon has strong folkloric and mythological associations with women. Lush and corporeal, Snyder's multiple moons suggest female power and strength.

Much of Snyder's visual process is imbued with a strategy of accumulation. The tactility that began with her stroke paintings is enhanced and embellished by the breadth of supplementary materials, including beads, burlap, dried plants, herbs, velvet, silk, and papier-mâché. The additive quality of her canvases results in a growth and intensification of feeling

through layering and collaging. Working in a relief format, Snyder builds through disjunctive textures, accruing surface through external constructions of natural materials and fabric. *Red Field* (1993) overlays circular constructions of silk and papier-mâché upon a bed of flowers. The large pond forms become voids, consuming the landscape. With both field and flowers in shades of crimson, the concentration of the color red marks the field as a subjective site of passion, rather than a real world location.

Throughout Snyder's fields, the grid is submerged; there is no sectioning or partitioning of the canvas. The field paintings level out the compartmentalization of previous paintings, restoring the canvas to wholeness. Rather than fusing disparate spaces, Snyder's fields reclaim totality. This is not to be confused with monumentality, but rather something humbler, an intimate meditation on lived experience. The field enacts a larger expression of continuity, but accomplishes this only through attention to its smallest features, such as a twisted branch or flower stem.

More recently, Snyder has alternated between strict gridded fields and very loose, lush canvases. In *Crushed Green Light* (page 96), a grid with curved horizontal lines is imposed onto a textured lime field flecked with green beads. *Rough Chant* (2000) is a series of circles constrained by the grid, while *Ghosts* (page 131), done the same year, makes melodic turbulence of flowers and strokes, and afflicted scrawl.

As an articulation of fugitive states, Snyder's fields are perhaps best illuminated by French philosopher



primary fields
 2001
 72 x 132"
 oil, acrylic, herbs on
 linen, diptych

Gaston Bachelard, who wrote: “Each one of us should make a surveyor’s map of his lost fields and means . . . thus we cover the universe with drawings we have lived.”¹³ Bachelard argues for loss as a continual process of recovery, rather than an ongoing deprivation. Snyder’s fields, then, become highly symbolic of loss, renewal, and, ultimately, transformation.

There are strong affinities between the stroke, symphony, and field paintings. Snyder is an extremely process-oriented painter, and all three bodies of work overlap, sometimes within one painting. There are no clear divisions or applicable chronologies in determining where one leaves off and another begins. For

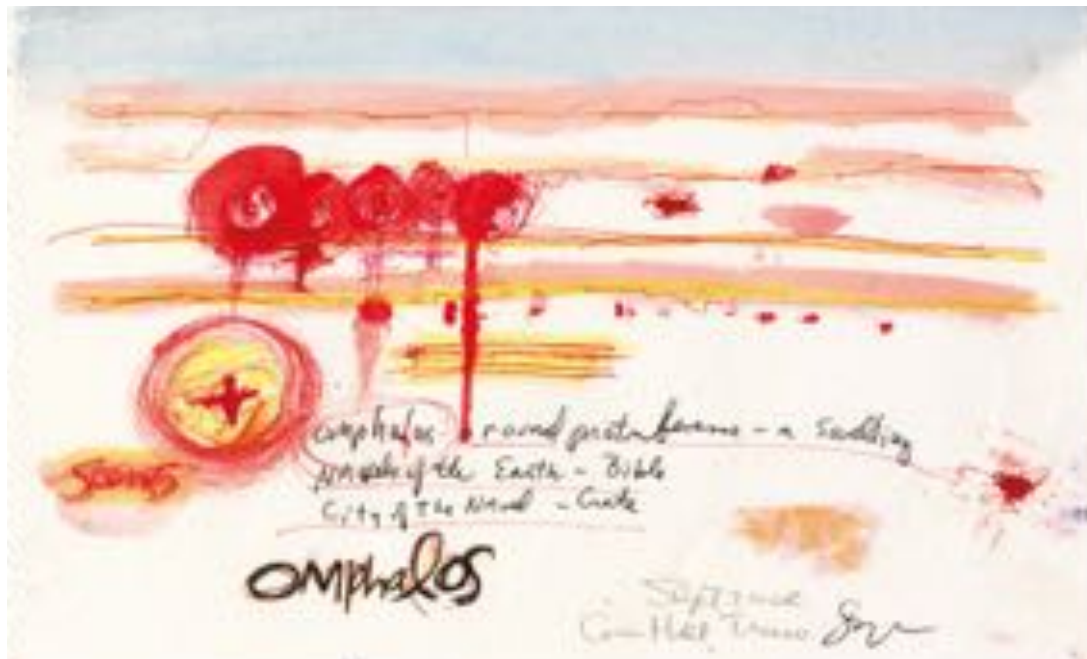
instance, both *Primary Fields* (2001) and *Ripened Fields* (page 134) are diptychs that function as combination stroke/field paintings. In both, the left panel is filled with short, dense multicolored strokes, while the right panel is mottled with tufts of herbage and pumpkins, suggestive of clumps of roots. While it is tempting to read the canvases left to right, as a gradual migration from flatter strokes to more three-dimensional, constructed surfaces, both disrupt the interpretation of Snyder’s oeuvre as progressive. Rather, the paintings offer fluidity as both a strategy and an opportunity for continuous return across bodies of work. Snyder reconfigures, borrows, and combines previous imag-

ery and brushwork, revealing a resolute commitment to her own narrative style. Throughout the stroke, symphony, and field paintings, the canvas is an arena of unbridled emotional opportunity, fusing feminist content with visual and material concerns.

Ranging from spare to sprawling, the process of drawing occupies a central place in Snyder's production, both as a formal and informal working through of ideas, recording many of her earliest forays and numerous attempts at charting emotive space through an abstract language. Writing is integral to the images set forth on paper, and account for the underpinnings of Snyder's narrative impulse. More apt to describe the world through language than figuration, large swaths of color are crisscrossed with itinerant scrawl. Text serves as a bridge, offering concrete information within an abstract terrain.

omphalos

2002
8 x 13"
watercolor and ink on
paper



As with writing, most of Snyder's work adheres to a horizontal configuration of the page. That her draftsmanship is marked by constant inscription is both a preoccupation and an assertion of territory, claiming space for everything from formal notations to diaristic asides. Her intonation of color, shape, and stray phrases offer a combination of densities that are simultaneously legible and nonverbal, creating movement and vehemence through a rush of words. In the drawing for *Women Make Lists* (page 136), Snyder examines internalized divisions through an agitated grocery-like list of sad categories—"people I think about but don't call" and "people who I worry about and call but they would never call me." The names tumble vertically down the page, nearly indecipherable, blotted out by abundant pink circles.

Writing is also mined as an important source of imagery. Associative titles often give way to organic forms, as in *Omphalos* (2002), in which a row of fleshy red circles protrude, five suns set amid gentle hues of pink and mint that grace the upper regions of the drawing like an evening haze. Installed below, compass-like, is a larger, freestanding circle with an emphatic red cross at its center. Set off-kilter, this is the drawing's *omphalos*. The word itself is a reference to a stone that ancient Greeks regarded as the center of the world, but Snyder's usage summons its metaphorical and corporeal potentials. The center as a compass, a directed experience, the center as a belly. Her phrases turn the stone into a navel, where the navel functions as the gut, or the heart of a city. A

long-time New Yorker, Snyder's suggestion of an urban soul, a city afflicted at its core, resonates with both the date, September 2002, the first anniversary of 9/11, and location of its origin—Truro, Massachusetts. Truro, rather than New York, signals temporary separation and rupture. Taken together, the cumulative experience of the drawing is one of profound loss.

Snyder makes explicit notations within her drawings, as in *Blue Drawing* (page 102). Here, she embellishes shapes with arrows and penciled annotations, suggestive words such as “transparent,” “under,” and “blackberries.” Evoking both the drawing's next incarnation and its unspecified longing, the text is interrupted by purple-black smudges, as if the berries themselves had appeared upon the paper. This trace, or index, of the fruit, taken together with the word “blackberries,” is a profound, inventive rendering of text and image, marking the human presence within the abstract gesture.

The act of painting can be equated with scoring a composition, which is the musical equivalent of writing. Critical writing surrounding Snyder's work has continually invoked its musical affinities. Journalists have remarked on Snyder's tendency to listen to opera or the dramatic concertos of Mozart and Handel as she paints,¹⁴ while critics have used musical metaphors to describe the cadences found throughout her oeuvre. In the review of her first exhibition in 1971, Knut Stiles wrote, “the rhythm and intervals seem akin to music, a chromatic score.”¹⁵ Reviewing her second

solo show at Paley and Lowe

in 1972, Lizzie Borden observed that Snyder's color was “grouped in perceptual configurations similar to motivic patterns in musical compositions.”¹⁶ Marcia Tucker wrote, perhaps most perceptively, that a work by Snyder is perceived “as much by its intervals and silences as by its notes.”¹⁷

While the musicality is undeniable, Snyder is actively engaged in a dialogue with the history of painting, both past and present. It is impossible not to think about the field paintings in relation to nineteenth-century French Impressionism, particularly *Haystacks* (1891) by Claude Monet, one of the first painters to introduce seriality, charting the effects of sunlight and its movement on the same hay field through numerous related paintings. Like Monet, Snyder emphasizes the persistent surfaces of objects through effusive texture. At times, her work also seems reminiscent of Odilon Redon's lush flowers, as in *And Always Searching for Beauty* (page 6), an extravaganza of cascading floral forms.

Snyder's work has continually been described as both abstract and expressionistic. The perilous combination of those words is, of course, Abstract Expressionism, although her work has been characterized under that rubric as well. Hans Hofmann was a frequent comparison, cited by nearly every curator who has shown her work. All have invariably wrestled with the enormous differences between Snyder's less formal gestures, and those of “Kline, de Kooning, Pollock, or Guston.”¹⁸ This stemmed from a certainty that

Snyder's work was neither minimal, nor fit comfortably with the rigidity of the previous generation of painters.

In 1974, in a catalogue essay for an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, in Philadelphia, Kenneth Baker slyly deemed Snyder as more evolved than her Abstract Expressionist predecessors:

Snyder discovers in her work what the Abstract Expressionists were looking for, as a way of evoking real experiences, or sensations, at least, without resort to images or symbolism of any kind.¹⁹

While her colors are suggestive of Philip Guston's pink-red palettes, or her brushwork reminiscent of Kline's, her work is much more organically inclined. Snyder is often anthropomorphic, but rarely figurative or symbolic. She uses representations of the natural world metaphorically, to express states of transformation. Admittedly influenced by Pollock and Hofmann, Snyder herself has spoken of Abstract Expressionism as motivating her ". . . to do something *else*, something much more intense, personal, and complex."²⁰

Throughout the course of her career, Snyder has been vocal in her opinions, actively engaged in a dialogue regarding contemporary-art issues. Certain that women artists were not receiving adequate numbers of exhibitions, as a graduate student at Rutgers she initiated a series of solo shows that continues to the present. Held within Douglass College's library, the Women Artists Series commenced in 1971, exhibiting

artists ranging from Louise Bourgeois to Nancy Spero. In 2004, she co-curated an exhibition of emerging women artists with her daughter Molly. In 1976, Snyder was one of the founding members of the Heresies Collective, an organization that published a journal devoted to feminist aesthetics.

In 1975, *Artforum* invited nearly twenty painters to respond to a series of intentionally provocative questions, beginning with the statement: "It appears that painting has ceased to be the dominant artistic medium at the moment. . . . [T]hose understood to be making 'the next inevitable step' now work with any material but paint."²¹

In response, Snyder wrote: "I am convinced that there is infinitely more to explore through the medium of painting than I have done or seen. . . . That statement is sickening. It talks about the market and competition, and art critics and dealers and collectors and art magazines. It doesn't talk about artists/painters. Serious painters are devoted to their work and frequently obsessed by their images. . . ."²²

An interest in heroic canvases resurfaced again in the mid-1980s. Dubbed Neoexpressionism, macho painters in both New York (Eric Fischl, Julian Schnabel) and Germany (Jörg Immendorf, Sigmar Polke) garnered critical attention for their sloppily impastoed, grandiose surfaces. Snyder has, however, long felt an affinity with another of the Neoexpressionists, Anselm Kiefer (German, b. 1945). Monumental in nature, Kiefer's paintings of scorched earth and bloody, expressive fields are ambivalent tracts that mine German mythol-

ogy as a simultaneously rich and oppressive heritage. Overall, though, Snyder's work has little in common with the aggressive figuration of Neoexpressionism. In 1992, Snyder published a contrarian essay, titled "It Wasn't Neo to Us," arguing that it was the feminists of her generation who had pioneered unadulterated narrative and personal expression in painting.²³

Abstraction is one of the most fugitive concepts in art production. During the past thirty-five years, Snyder's complex investigations of female subjectivity have redefined traditional notions of non-representational painting. A profusion of repeated forms, strokes, and textures, Joan Snyder's paintings establish a searing lyricism through a fearless engagement with the body. Her intricate compositions chart emotive space through intensive color and persistent gestures; her charged, tactile surfaces maintain the sanctity of the grid. Without overt image making, she achieves intimacy on a large scale. Original and passionate, Snyder's production has left an indelible mark on American painting.

ENDNOTES

1. Carl Belz, "Joan Snyder: Woman at Work," *Joan Snyder: Painter, 1969 to Now*. Exh. cat. (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, 1994), 8.
2. Marcia Tucker, "The Anatomy of a Stroke: Recent Paintings by Joan Snyder," *Artforum*, vol. 9 (May 1971), 42–45.
3. Joan Snyder, "Painting Notes," January 1969, unpaginated.

4. Conversation with the artist, Brooklyn, New York, October 17, 2004.
5. Molly Snyder-Fink, "Introduction," *Joan Snyder: In Times of Great Disorder* (Boston: Nielsen Gallery, 2000), unpaginated.
6. Hayden Herrera, *Joan Snyder: Seven Years of Work*. Exh. cat. (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum, State University of New York, 1978), 26.
7. Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 165.
8. I am grateful for a 1974 article by Sally Webster in the *Feminist Art Journal* (vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 1976) that makes reference to this particular passage of text.
9. John Elderfield, "Grids," *Artforum*, vol. 10, no. 54 (May 1972).
10. Conversation with the author, October 17, 2004, Brooklyn, NY.
11. Ibid.
12. Joan Snyder, "Painting Notes," 1974, unpaginated.
13. Allan Schwartzman and Kathleen Thomas, *Ree Morton: A Retrospective 1971–1977*. Exh. cat. (New York: The New Museum, 1980), 25.
14. Susan Gill, "Painting from the Heart," *Artnews*, vol. 86 (April 1987), 130.
15. Knute Stiles, "San Francisco," *Artforum*, vol. 9 (November 1971), 87.
16. Lizzie Borden, "New York," *Artforum*, vol. 10 (January 1972), 89.
17. Marcia Tucker, "The Anatomy of a Stroke: Recent Paintings by Joan Snyder," *Artforum*, vol. 9 (May 1971), 45.
18. Ibid.
19. Kenneth Baker, "Joan Snyder," *Joan Snyder & Pat Steir*. Exh. cat. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1974), unpaginated.
20. Conversation with the artist, October 17, 2004, Brooklyn, NY.
21. "Painters Reply," *Artforum*, vol. 14 (September 1975), 26–36.
22. Ibid., 34.
23. Joan Snyder, "It Wasn't Neo to Us," *Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries*, vol. liv, 1992, 34–35.



STROKES / GRIDS



LINES AND STROKES

1969

40 x 52"

oil, acrylic, and spray enamel
on raw canvas



SUMMER
1970
22 x 36"
oil on canvas



► RST ANNIVERSARY

1970

72 x 96"

oil, acrylic, and spray
enamel on canvas



SYMPHONY
1970
72 x 144"
oil, acrylic, and spray
enamel on canvas



LOVE YOUR BONES
1970–71
72 x 144"
oil, acrylic, and spray
enamel on canvas





STROKES FOR ► NK
1971
22¼ x 30"
watercolor and
graphite on paper



NO SKELETON FOR EVSA

1971

78 x 108"

oil, acrylic, and spray
enamel on canvas



DARK STROKES HOPE

1971

78 x 108"

oil, acrylic, and spray
enamel on canvas



WOMAN-CHILD

1972

72 x 108"

oil, acrylic, sparkle
paint, and spray
enamel on canvas



SQUARES

1972

48 x 48"

oil, acrylic, and flock
on canvas

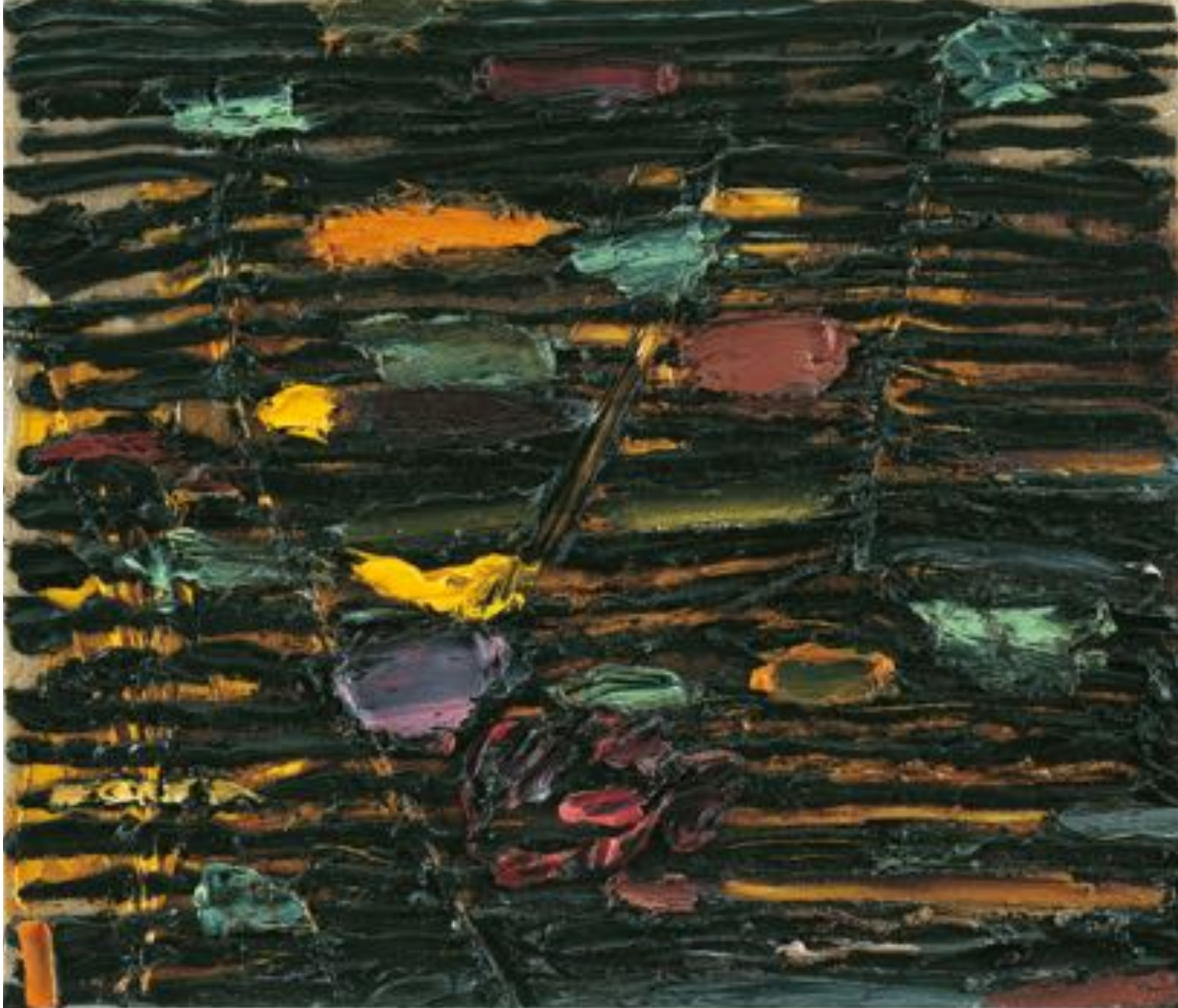


A LETTER TO MY FEMALE FRIENDS

1972

60 x 60"

oil and acrylic on canvas



BLACK WELLSPRING MASK
1988
12¹/₃ x 14"
oil, acrylic, straw on linen



SYMPHONY V
1982
72 x 96"
oil, acrylic, wood, fabric
on canvas



THE YELLOW CORNER

1995

60 x 72"

oil, acrylic, pastel, wood,
papier-mâché on canvas



CARMINA
1995
66 x 108"
oil, acrylic, herbs,
cloth on canvas



CRUSHED GREEN LIGHT

1998

40 x 40"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché, charcoal,
wooden dowels, plastic beads on canvas



SUMMER PAINTER
1994
17 x 20"
oil, papier-mâché, wooden
dowels on linen



LANGUAGE OF THE SEA

1999

39 x 90"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
wooden dowels, and glass
beads on canvas



MIAMI
2000
60 x 54"
oil, acrylic, wooden
spools and balls on
linen mounted on
wood panel



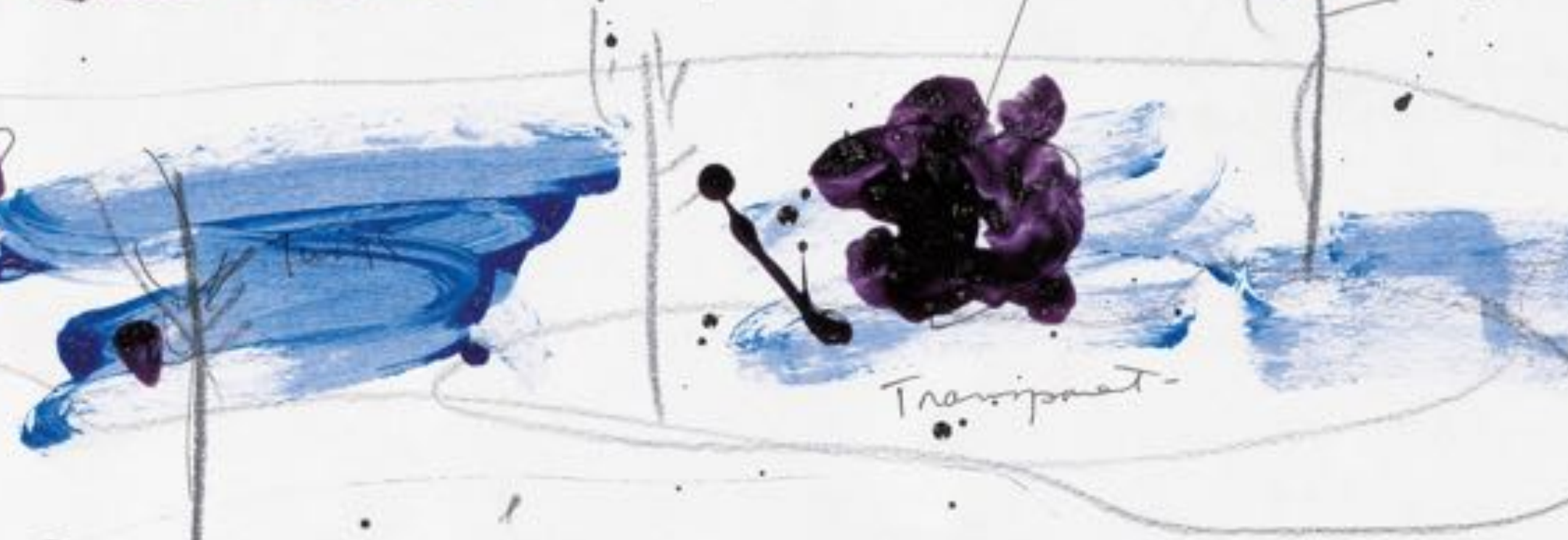
HIGH ON PINK
2004
44 x 50"
oil, acrylic, herbs,
wood, cloth on panel



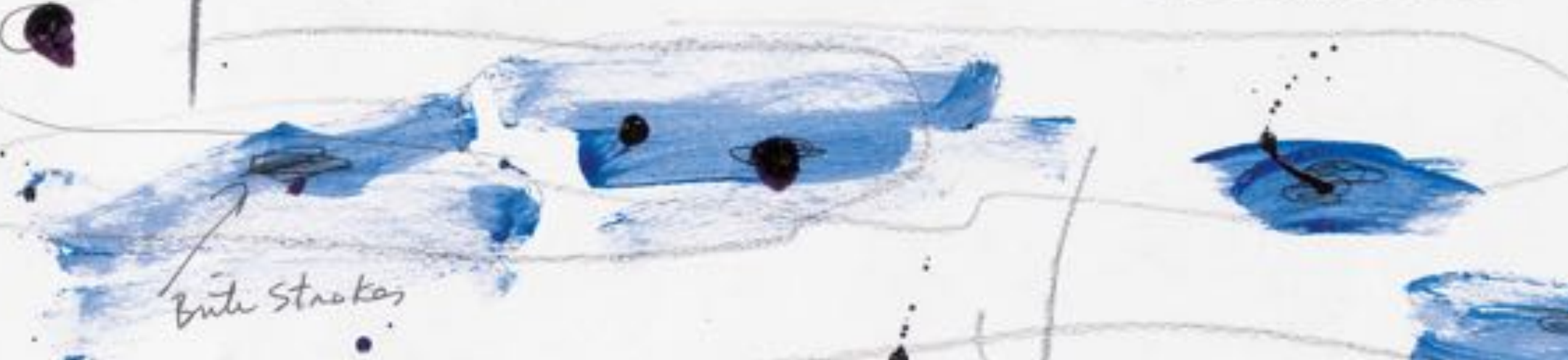
MADLY IN LOVE
2003
70 x 102"
oil, acrylic, herbs,
fabric on linen

MEERS

Pod Type w color
Bute



Transparent



Bute strokes



BLACK Bute

under

04

FIELDS



BEAN ▶ ELD WITH MUSIC
1984
72 x 144"
oil and acrylic on canvas



BEDECKT MICH MIT BLUMEN
(COVER ME WITH FLOWERS)

1985

72 x 72"

oil, acrylic, cloth flowers on canvas



TO TRANSCEND/THE MOON

1985

60 x 96"

oil and acrylic on canvas



THE ORCHARD/THE ALTAR

1986

72 x 96"

oil, acrylic, linen, papier-
mâché on linen



THE LIFE OF AN APPLE TREE / CAN ANYONE HEAR THE SYMPHONY?

1986

60 x 72"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché on canvas



CANTATA IN THE WEED ► ELD

1988

60 x 84"

oil and acrylic on linen



ODE TO THE PUMPKIN ► ELD

1987

72 x 144"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
cheesecloth on canvas





WAITING FOR A MIRACLE (FOR NINA AND JOHN)

1986

78 x 120"

oil and acrylic on canvas



THE OCEAN/RENEWAL
1988
24 x 36"
oil and acrylic on linen



MY CHANT

1988

18 x 36"

oil and acrylic on linen



SOFT SQUARES / > OATING MOONS

1989

18 1/4 x 18 1/8"

oil on linen



EXALTATIONS

1993

66 x 120"

oil, acrylic, pastel, silk,
papier-mâché on linen



BLUE ► ELD
1993
66 x 72"
papier-mâché, pastel, oil,
acrylic on canvas



DISTANT ▶ ELD

1990

48 x 60"

oil on canvas



WINTER 1992 FOR MOM AND POP
1993
78 x102"
silk, straw, oil, acrylic on linen



NOCTURNE

1992

72 x 96"

oil, acrylic, wood, silk,
papier-mâché on linen



MUD, SILK, CHERRIES

1993

36 x 72"

oil, acrylic, mud, silk,
wood on linen



AH
SUNFLOWER
Wearry of Time
Who covets the
Steps of the
SUN

Seeking After
That sweet
Golden Clime
where the Travellers
Journey is
done

where the
youth
pined away
with desire
And the pale
Virgin shrouded
in Snow



AH SUN-OWER

1995

74 x 111"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
cheesecloth, herbs, and
wood on canvas



CHERRY FALL
1995
57 x 66"
oil, acrylic, herbs,
cloth on linen



POSTMARDENGARDEN
1995
66 x 72"
oil, acrylic, papier-
mâché on canvas



GREEN ▷ FLOWERS WITH KADDISH

1997

28 x 38"

oil, acrylic on linen

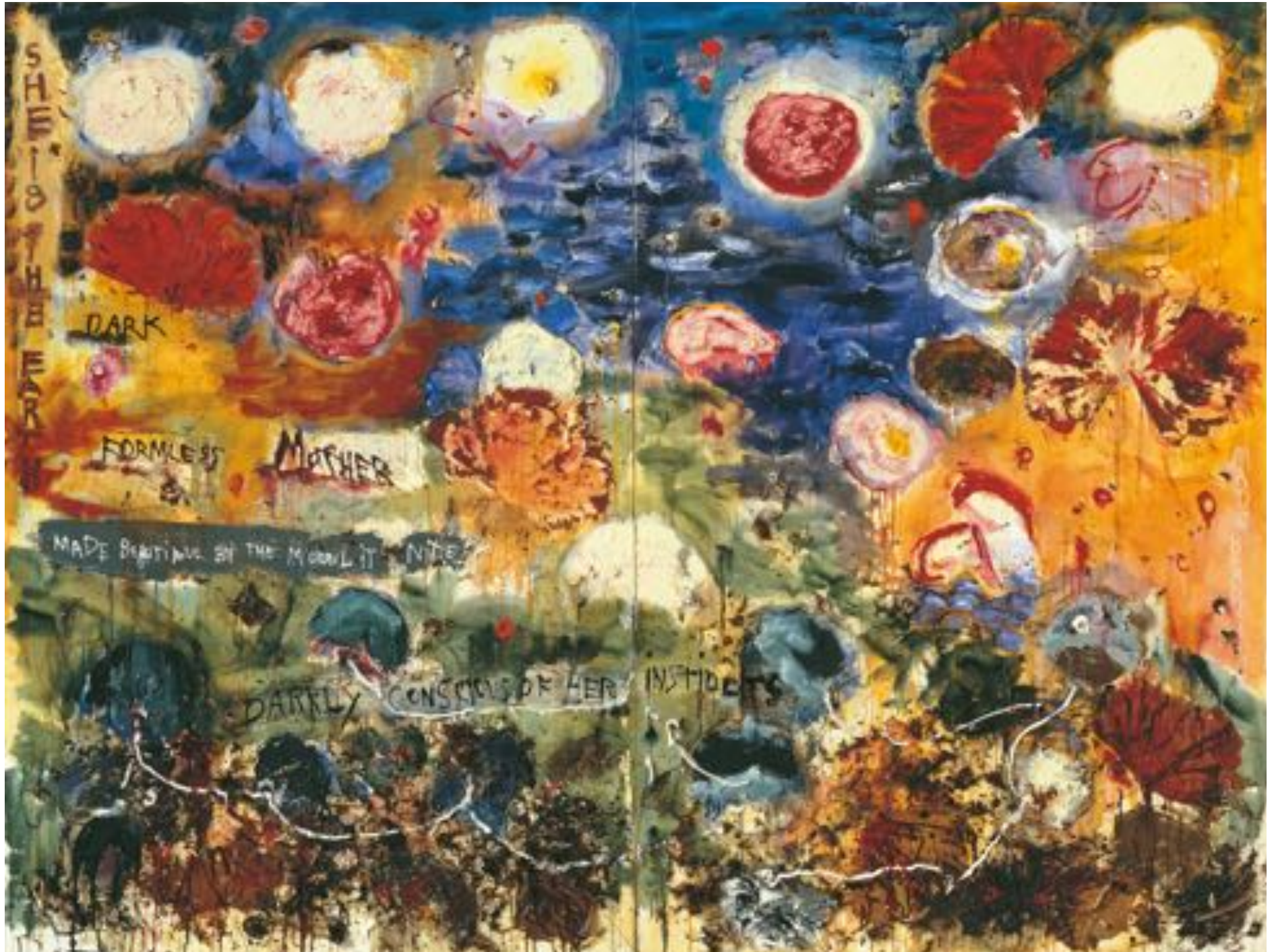


THE SOUND OF THE GARDEN

1996

66 x 72"

oil, acrylic, herbs, papier-
mâché on canvas



SHE IS THE EARTH

2000

72 x 96"

oil, acrylic, herbs on canvas

on wood panels



EARTHSONG

2002

42 x 84"

oil, acrylic, herbs, fabric,
marbles on linen



GHOSTS

2000

72 x 96"

oil, acrylic, papier-
mâché, silk, burlap,
straw on canvas panels



AND ALWAYS SEARCHING FOR BEAUTY

2001

78 x 102"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché, herbs

on linen



VINES/SUNLINES

2002

50 x 90"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
herbs on linen



RIPENED ▶ E.L.D.S

2002

50 x 132"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
straw, herbs, ink on linen,
diptych



PUMPKIN ► ELD WITH SEVEN SUNS

2002

66 x 96"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,

herbs on linen

People who worry about and call
but they ^{would} never call me

IDA
MAKSH
JACKIE

People who think about but don't call

- Nancy
- Lucy
- Daisy
- Lucy
- Betsy
- Alex
- Hill
- Conrad
- Jessie
- Hayden
- Quilala
- Ken
- Mary
- Steph
- Jill
- Debra
- Hayden
- Jillian
- Nina

[Faint scribbles and text]

receiving
from
Doris
Katie

[Faint scribbles]

Get by Feb 2 2000 "Women Make Lists" # Seeds + B Turn out

NARRATIVE



SMALL SYMPHONY FOR WOMEN II

1976

23½ x 23½" each

oil, acrylic, paper, graphite

on canvas, triptych



DOUBLE SYMPHONY

1981

24 x 48"

oil on canvas



RESURRECTION

1977

78 x 312" with a total
of eight panels oil and
collage on canvas





SMALL ELEGY

1978

24 x 48"

oil, acrylic, cloth, wooden
dowels, twigs on canvas



CHILDREN'S CROSS
1982
48 x 48"
oil, acrylic, children's
drawings, sparkles
on canvas



BURIED IMAGES

1978

48 x 96"

oil, acrylic, twig

on canvas



SWEET CATHY'S SONG
1978
72 x 144"
oil, acrylic, crayon,
papier-mâché, and
children's drawings
on canvas



SAVAGE DREAMS

1982

66 x 180"

oil, acrylic, fabric on canvas





APPLE TREE MASS

1983

24 x 72"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
wood, paper, cloth on linen

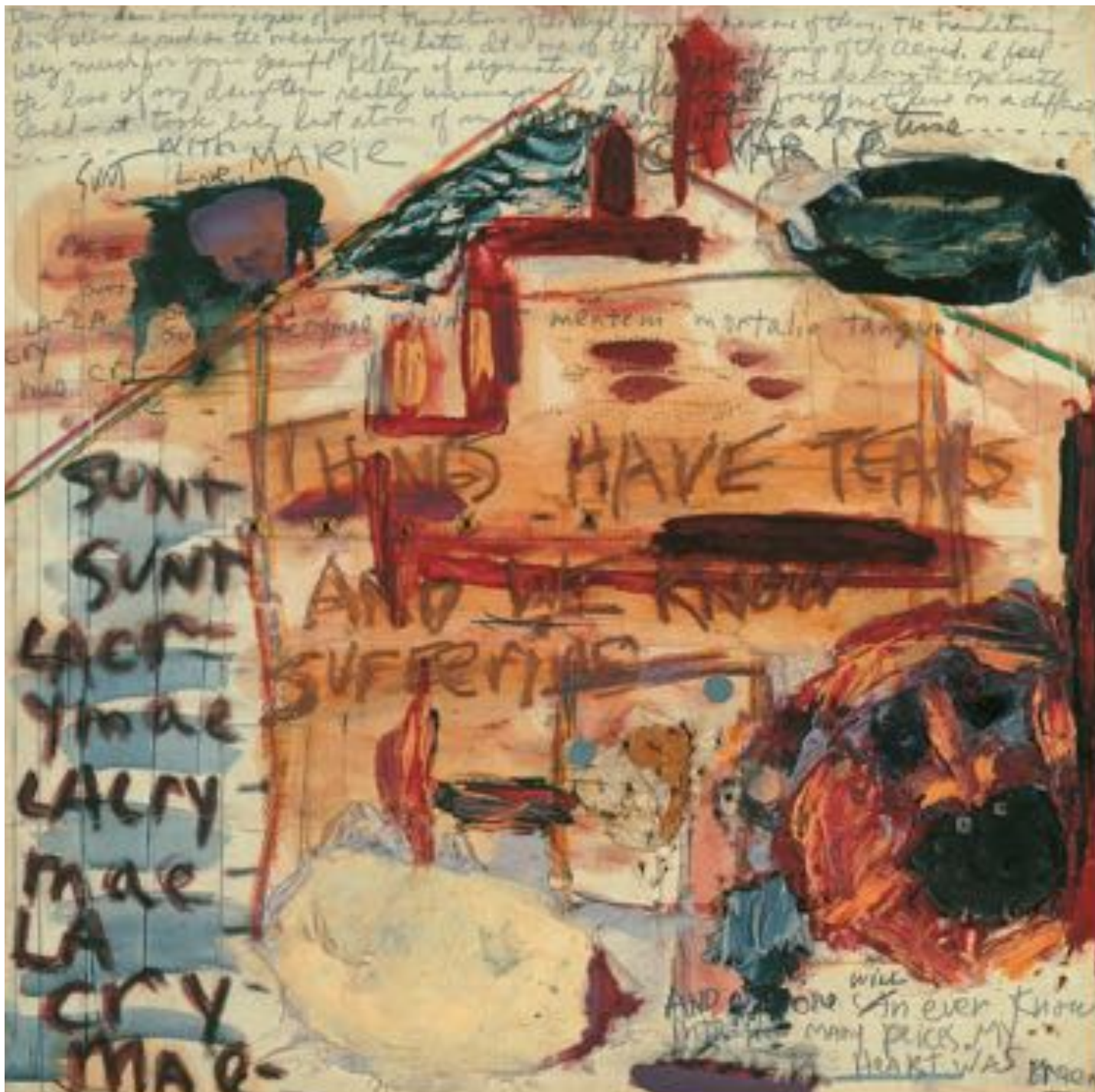


MOURNING/OH MORNING

1983

78 x 144"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
cloth, plastic grapes,
wood on linen



OH MARIE

1984

17 7/8 x 18"

oil, acrylic, pencil,

papier-mâché,

nails on wood



LOVE'S DEEP GRAPES

1984

24 x 60"

oil, rice paper, velvet,
cheesecloth, wood,
plastic grapes, nails on
woodblock





CAN WE TURN OUR RAGE TO POETRY?

1985

60 x 144"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
velvet, glass on canvas



WOMEN IN CAMPS

1988

22 x 48"

oil, acrylic, wire,
wooden dowel,
photograph on linen
mounted on board



BLACK MARBLES BOY

1989

10 1/2 x 7"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
sparkle, marbles, metal nut,
nails on wooden panel

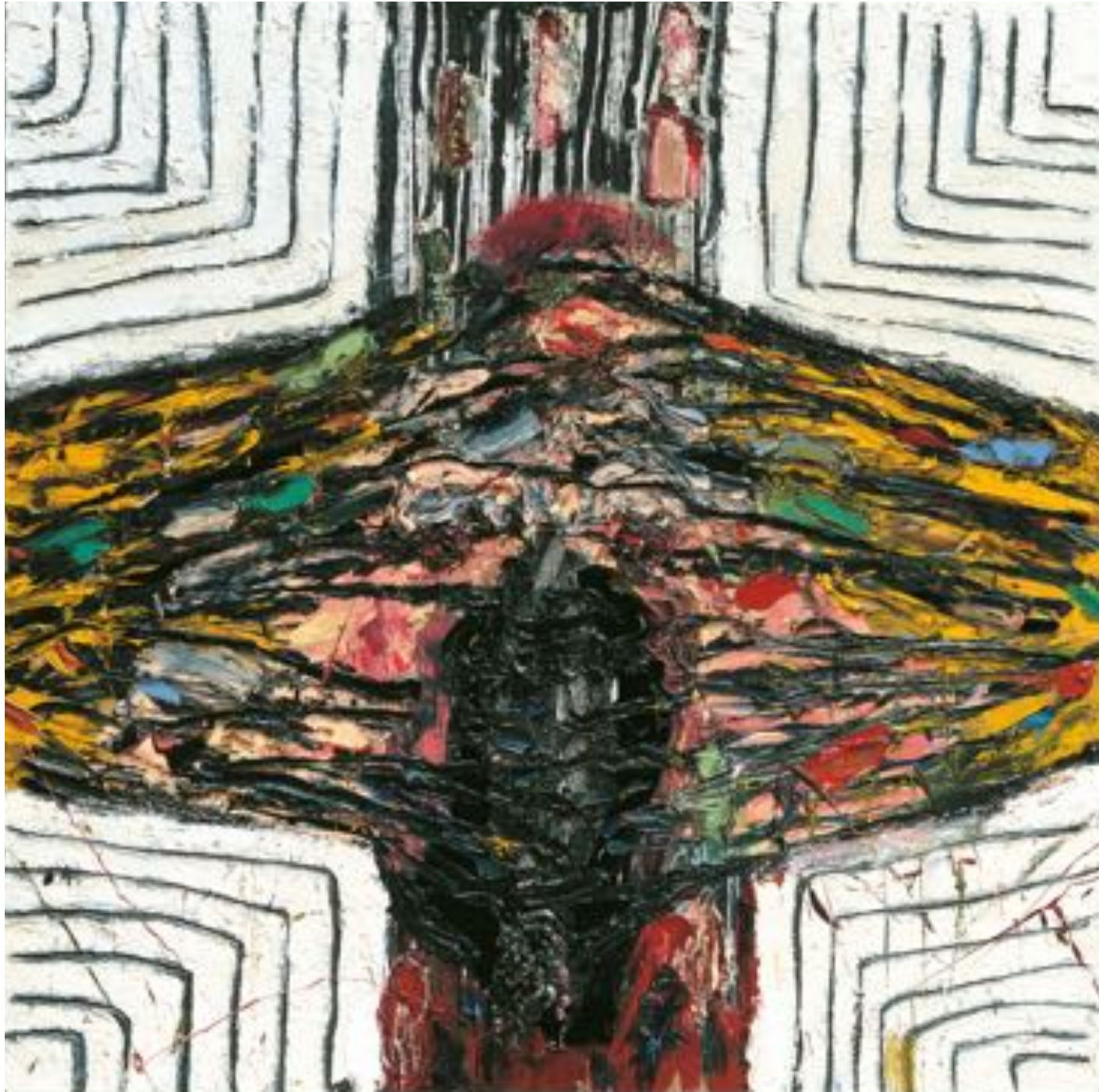


LADY BLACKLINES

1989

12 x 12 1/2"

oil on linen

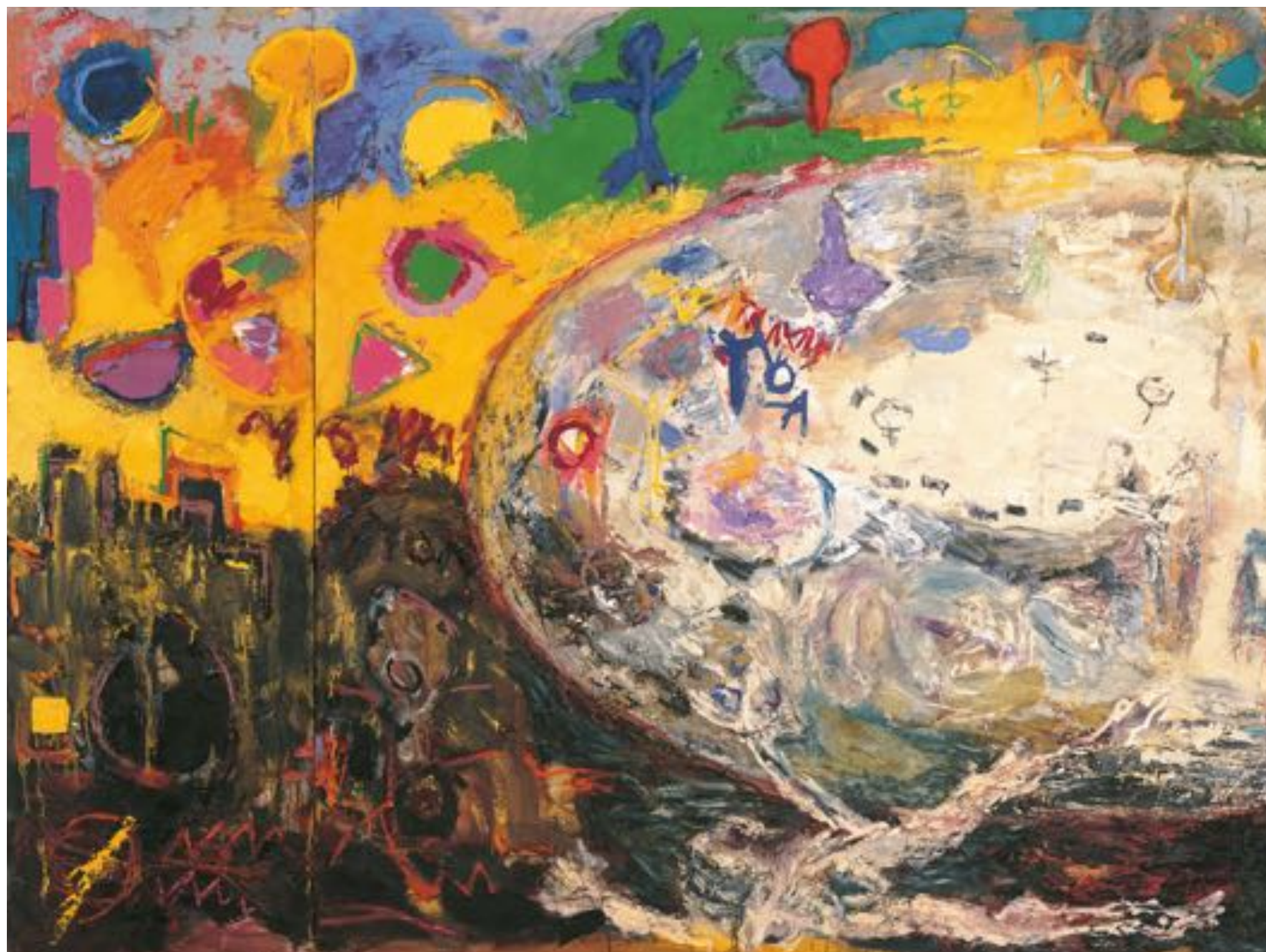


LADY LABYRINTH

1989

60 x 60"

oil, acrylic, papier-mâché,
and cloth on linen





SONG CYCLE FOR CHILDREN
1991
66 x 157 1/2"
oil, acrylic, velvet, gauze,
papier-mâché on linen



FACES
1993
36 x 36"
oil, acrylic, pastel, woodcut
prints on silk, papier-mâché
on canvas



JOURNEY OF THE SOULS

1993

60 x 120"

straw, velvet, oil, acrylic,
wooden dowels, print on
silk, rice paper on linen



ORATORIO

1997

72 x 114"

oil, acrylic, plastic grapes,
feathers, fabric, nails,
herbs, mud, papier-mâché,
graphite, paper on canvas



...AND ACQUAINTED WITH GRIEF

1997

48 x 108"

oil, acrylic, velvet, linen, silk,
papier-mâché, and charcoal
on canvas



ALL THE WAY

2003

20 x 26"

oil, acrylic, herbs,
seeds, wooden balls,
cloth on wood panel



PERPETUO
2004
42 x 84"
acrylic, papier-mâché,
buds, seeds on linen



NIPPLES, LAKES, ETC.
2004
32 x 24"
acrylic, papier-mâché,
herbs on panel



WOMEN MAKE LISTS

2004

78 x 120"

oil, acrylic, herbs, glass
beads, glitter, papier-
mâché on linen

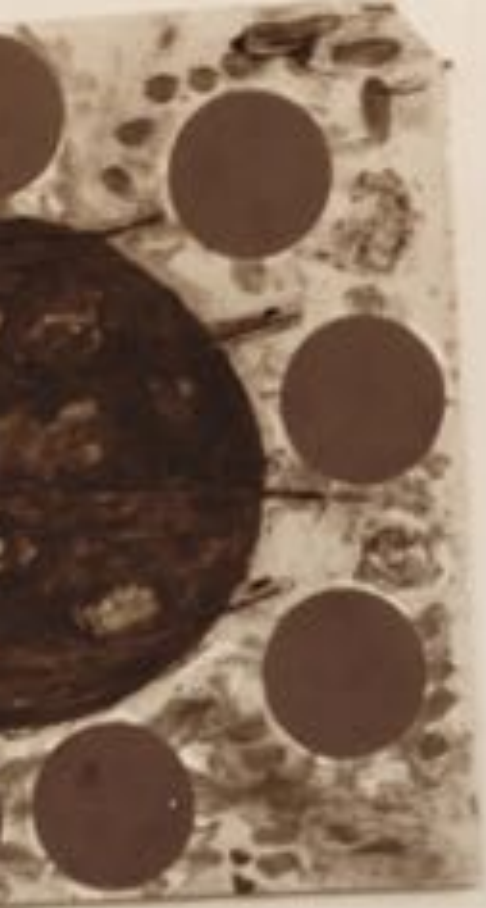


MAMILLA IMMORTALIS
2004
42 x 84"
oil, acrylic, papier-
mâché, herbs on linen



ANTIQUARUM LACRIMAE
2004
78 x 120"
acrylic and dried
flowers on linen





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- 71 *Red Field*. 1993. Private collection. Photograph by Zindman/Fremont.
- 73 *Primary Fields*. 2001. Courtesy of Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA. Photograph by Steven Sloman.
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CHRONOLOGY

1940 Born, Highland Park, New Jersey, April 16

1962 A.B., Douglass College, New Brunswick, NJ

1966 M.F.A., Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
Lives and works in Brooklyn and Woodstock, NY

AWARDS

1983 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship

1974 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2006–2005 The Jewish Museum, New York, NY; Danforth Museum of Art, Framingham, MA. *Joan Snyder: A Painting Survey, 1969–2004*.

2005 Sawhill Gallery, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA. *Joan Snyder: Sigh and Selected Works*.

2004 Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York, NY. *Women Make Lists*.
Alexandre Gallery, New York, NY. *Joan Snyder: Works on Paper 1970's and Recent*.

2003 Elena Zang Gallery, Shady, NY. *New Work*.

2002 Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA. *The Nature of Things*.
Muroff Kotler Gallery, Ulster County Community College, Stone Ridge, NY. *Joan Snyder: In Love with Paint*.

2001 Robert Miller Gallery, New York, NY. *Joan Snyder: Primary Fields*.
Revolution Gallery, Ferndale, MI. *Joan Snyder: Paintings and Works on Paper*.

2000 The Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art, Philadelphia, PA. *Kaddish/Requiem*.
Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA. *In Times of Great Disorder*.

1998 The Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY. *Joan Snyder: Working in Brooklyn*.
Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, NY. *New Paintings*.

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Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, NJ. *Joan Snyder: New Works on Paper*.

Quartet Editions, New York, NY. *Joan Snyder, New Monoprints*.

1995 Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, PA. *Joan Snyder, New Paintings*.

1994 Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, NY. Selections from an exhibition curated by Sarah Anne McNear at the Allentown Art Museum, Allentown, PA. *Joan Snyder: Works With Paper*.

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Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

1992 Hirschl and Adler Modern, New York, NY.

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1990 Hirschl and & Adler Modern, New York, NY.

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1988–1989 Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Monica, CA., Traveling exhibition: Brown University, Providence, RI; SUNY/Stonybrook, Stonybrook, NY; De Saisset Museum, Sonoma State University, Rohnert, CA. *Joan Snyder Collects Joan Snyder*.

1988 Compass Rose Gallery, Chicago, IL. *Cantatas and Requiems*.

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1981 Matrix Gallery, Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, CT. *Resurrection and Studies*.
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The Patricia Hamilton Gallery, New York, NY. *New Paintings*.

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- 1971** Michael Walls Gallery, San Francisco, CA. *Joan Snyder: New Paintings*. Paley & Lowe Gallery, New York, NY. *Joan Snyder/Paintings*.
- 1970** Paley & Lowe Gallery, New York, NY. *Three Paintings*. Little Gallery, New Brunswick, NJ.
- 1966** Douglass College, Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ. *Joan Snyder, Paintings, Sculpture: Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition*.
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- 2003** Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion Museum, New York, NY. *The Art of Aging*. National Academy of Design, New York, NY. *178th Annual Exhibition*. Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA. *March Winds April Flowers*.
- 2002** Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY. “*Personal and Political: The Women’s Art Movement, 1969–1975*”. Curated by Simon Taylor and Natalie Ng. The Painting Center, New York, NY. *Painting: A Passionate Response*. Curated by Michael Walls.
- 2001** Dan Galeria, Sao Paulo, Brazil. *Underfoot*. Curated by Bob Nugent.
- 2000** Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA. *In the Spirit of Landscape V*. The Jewish Museum, New York, NY. *The Perpetual Well: Contemporary Art from the Collection of The Jewish Museum*. Traveling exhibition: Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL; Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE; The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; and The Huntington Museum of Art, Huntington, WV. DC Moore Gallery, New York, NY. *The Likeness of Being: Contemporary Self Portraits by Sixty Women*. Curated by Judith E. Stein.
- 1999** Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion, Stamford, CT. *Contemporary Narratives in American Prints*. Parsons School of Design, Aronson Gallery, New York, NY. *Drawing in the Present Tense*. Traveling exhibition to Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, CT. Hunter College Art Galleries, New York, NY. *Immediacies of the Hand: Recent Abstract Painting in New York*. Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA. *Then and Now: 35th Anniversary Exhibition*. Fine Arts Center Galleries, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI. *Unlocking The Grid*. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. *Reflections of Monet*. Art Complex Museum, Duxbury, MA. *Immortalized*
- 1998** The Riva Yares Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ. *Theatre of Art III*. The Parrish Art Museum, Easthampton, NY. *Dreams for the Next Century: A View of the Collection*. Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH. *Master of the Masters*. Exhibit of MFA faculty of the School of Visual Arts, 1983–1998. Curated by David Shirey. Ashville Museum of Art, Ashville, NC. *Beyond the Mountains: The Contemporary American Landscape*. Curated by Michael Klein. Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, PA. *Flowers in Mind*. Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York, NY.
- 1997** Gallery 128, New York, NY. *Material Girls: Gender, Process and Abstract Art Since 1970*. Curated by Harmony Hammond. Elena Zang Gallery, Shady, NY. *Joan Snyder, Judy Pfaff, Mary Frank*. Jan Abrams Fine Arts, New York, NY. *Women Artists of the 70s*. Curated by Michael Klein. Rider University Lawrenceville Art Gallery, Lawrenceville, NJ. *Abstract Tendencies*. Curated by Deborah Rosenthal. Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA. *In the Spirit of Landscape II*. The Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor, NY. *After the Fall: Aspects of Abstract Painting Since 1970*. Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara, CA. *20/20: CAF Looks Forward and Back*. The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, FL. *American Art Today: The Garden*.
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- 1995** O’Hara Gallery, New York, NY. *A Romantic Impulse: Seventeen American Artists*. The Painting Center, New York, NY. *Painting: The Intimate View*. Curated by Betty Cuningham. Marsh Art Gallery, University of Richmond, *Repicturing Abstraction*, Richmond, VA
- 1994** Center for the Fine Arts, *Abstraction: A Tradition of Collecting in Miami*, Miami, FL. On Crosby Street, *Isn’t It Romantic?* curated by Michael Walls, New York, NY. Parrish Art Museum, *Mirrors*, Southampton, NY. Art Initiatives at Tribeca 148 Gallery, *Poetic Heroic: Twelve American Artists*, Curated by Michael Walls, New York, NY. Bixler Gallery and Cynthia McCallister Gallery, *To Enchant (blue)*, curated by Michael Walls, New York, NY
- 1993** Victoria Munroe Fine Art, *Works on Paper: Lyric with an Edge*, New York, NY. Nielsen Gallery, *Insight/Incite/Insite*, Boston, MA
- 1992** Gibbes Museum of Art and The School of the Arts, College of Charleston, *Painting Self Evident: Evolutions in Abstraction*, Charleston, SC. Nielsen Gallery, *In the Spirit of Landscape*, Boston, MA
- 1990** Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, *The Image of Abstract Painting in the ’80s*, Waltham, MA
- 1989** The Cincinnati Art Museum, *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream 1970–85*, Cincinnati, OH, traveling exhibition
- 1987–1989** Beijing Art Institute and Nielsen Gallery, *Beijing/New York Works on Paper*, traveling exhibition, Beijing, China to Boston, MA
- 1987** Corcoran Gallery of Art, *Corcoran Biennial*, Washington, DC. Hirschl & Adler Modern, *Therese Oulton, Norbert Prangenberg, Joan Snyder*, New York, NY. Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, *A Graphic Muse*, South Hadley, MA, traveling exhibition. Nielsen Gallery, *Seven Women Artists*, Boston, MA
- 1986–1987** Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Boston Collects: Contemporary Painting and Sculpture*, Boston, MA
- 1986** Simard, Halm, and Shee Gallery, *Painterly Abstractions: Eight New York Artists*, Los Angeles, CA
- 1985–1986** Stamford Museum and Nature Center, *American Art: American Women*, Stamford, CT
- 1984** Sidney Janis Gallery, *American Women Artists: Part II The Recent Generation*, New York, NY. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Brave New Work*, Boston, MA
- 1982** Institute of Contemporary Art, Virginia Museum, *American Abstraction Now*, Richmond, VA
- 1981** Museum of Modern Art, New York, *New Works on Paper I*, New York, NY. Whitney Museum of American Art, 1981

- Whitney Biennial, New York, NY
- 1979 The New Museum, *The 1970's: New American Painting*, New York, NY, traveling exhibition, New York, NY
Nielsen Gallery, *The Implicit Image: Abstract Painting in the Seventies*, Boston, MA
- 1975 Corcoran Gallery of Art, *34th Biennial of Contemporary American Painting*, Washington, DC
- 1973 Whitney Museum of American Art, *American Drawings 1963-1973*, New York, NY
Whitney Museum of American Art, 1973
Whitney Biennial, New York, NY
- 1972 Whitney Museum of American Art, *1972 Annual Exhibition: Contemporary American Painting*, New York, NY
- 1971 Bykert Gallery, *Howard Buchwald, Joan Snyder, Alan Sondheim, Michael Venezia*, New York, NY
Paley & Lowe Gallery, *Joan Snyder, Paintings; Laurence Fink, Photographs*, New York, NY
- SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**
- Allen Art Museum, Oberlin College, OH
Allentown Art Museum, Allentown, PA
Ball State University Museum of Art, Muncie, IN
Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY
Chase Manhattan Bank, New York, NY
Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas TX
First Church of Christ Scientist, Boston, MA
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, MI
The High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
The Jewish Museum, New York, NY
J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.
Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College/SUNY, Purchase, NY
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.
- Reeds Hill Foundation, Carlisle, MA
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA
The Tang Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY
Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, KS
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA
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ABOVE: Joan Snyder and Hayden Herrera, 2004. Photograph by Maggie Cammer

JACKET FRONT: *Should You Wonder*. 2002. Oil, acrylic, herbs on linen. 40 x 68" (detail). Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Johnston. Photograph by Stephen Sloman.

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