

Joan Snyder has never developed a 'signature' style. What is constant in her work is its passionate intensity

Painting from the Heart

By Susan Gill

JOAN SNYDER CREATED THE MAJESTIC painting *Waiting for a Miracle* over a three-month period in the summer of 1986. The title refers to the anguished time in Snyder's life when her friend the painter Porfirio DiDonna was experiencing the last ravaging effects of brain cancer. "I originally conceived of the painting as a simple, meditative work," Snyder says. "As the painting progressed, it became more and more complex; I realized that there was a direct relationship between the struggle I was having with the painting and Pro's struggle for life. Thus the title *Waiting for a Miracle*. I had just painted the last small bright green plants in the field and had sat back in my chair, and I was dozing when the phone rang. Pro had died."

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Waiting for a Miracle, one of five of Snyder's paintings currently being shown in this spring's biennial at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., is a somber painting of a beanfield, rendered in deep shades of crimson and brown, with a brilliant red cross that merges with an indigo-colored tree behind it. The cross/tree image is built up of many layers of paint mixed with straw and is outlined with flecks of gold. The painting is a synthesis of two recent series: the lyrical 1984-85 paintings of beanfields and the paintings of apple trees the artist worked on during the first half of 1986. These recent works are marked by a deep emotionality, a freedom of expression and a virtuoso painting technique, qualities they share with the "stroke" paintings that first brought the artist national attention.

Recognition came to Snyder in the early '70s, when she



COURTESY HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN

was just over 30, at the time a very early age to achieve acclaim in the art world. Even before her first solo show in New York in 1971, she was the subject of a major article in *Artforum* by Marcia Tucker, then a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her celebrity came just as the women's movement was gaining momentum. She appeared in a special issue of *Time* devoted to "The American Woman" and in dozens of other magazines and newspapers. "For a long time, I was *the* token woman," says Snyder. "Whenever a college wanted a woman to talk, they would call me." Snyder is sitting in her large loft in Little Italy, which has been her New York home since she came to the city in 1968. Trim and agile, with short hair and a clear, penetrating gaze, Snyder is a no-nonsense person. She is also deeply emotional and empathic and has a wry sense of

humor, a combination that draws people to her like a magnet. On a given morning, it is not unusual for four or five friends to call just to touch base.

It is a rainy April day, but the kitchen of the loft is bright and cheerful. With a large table in the center and a couch, this room is clearly the heart of Snyder's home. The artist's seven-year-old daughter, Molly, is playing on the floor with an elaborate array of dolls and doll furniture. Her drawings mingle with Snyder's work on one of the kitchen walls. I am offered herbal tea and honey, and Snyder and I retreat to her studio, leaving Molly with her babysitter.

Snyder begins to talk about the "stroke" paintings, in

The deeply emotional *Waiting for a Miracle*, 1986, 78 by 120 inches, was painted during an anguished period when a close friend of Snyder's was dying.



The Orchard/The Altar, 1986, 72 by 96 inches. The work was inspired, says Snyder, by old apple trees in a Pennsylvania orchard that were "filled with struggle and life."

In the catalogue of her exhibition at the Neuberger Museum in 1978 she is quoted by critic Hayden Herrera: "I knew that I had made a breakthrough. I was painting paint strokes. The strokes became a physical reality, not an illusion."

Snyder began making her "stroke" paintings after her marriage to photographer Larry Fink in 1969. A celebration of art and of an emotionally fulfilling period in the artist's life, *Love Your Bones* (1970-71) is among the largest and most powerful of these works. The structure of the painting is established by a lightly penciled vertical grid, upon which the artist wields her vigorous brush. "Each work started with a grid," says Snyder, "which had to do with the rhythm I wanted to establish, like a piece of music." Strokes of all colors, shapes and densities are stacked vertically; many drip into each other, creating a strong vertical axis. This is countered by a band that zigzags across the work horizontally and through which the strokes move. The eye is thus drawn across the work as well as up and down. There is a tremendous sense of movement; the work cannot be taken in all at once, as can a Pollock, but must be looked at in parts, over a period of time, like a musical score.

First manifested in the "stroke" paintings, Snyder's love affair with music continues to this day. "Music gives me ideas; it can bring me to tears. There are not many paintings that have this strong an effect on me," says Snyder, who was introduced to classical music by Fink. When she works, she usually listens to a tape of a vocal composition or an opera. The titles of her paintings reflect her love of music: *Symphony* (1970), *Resolve in Four by Eight* (1972), *Beanfield with Music* (1984).

Snyder worked on the "stroke" paintings for about three years. Since then her

Moon Theater, 1986, 60 by 72 inches, reflects Snyder's kinship with nature, which is also revealed in her recent series of "Beanfield" and "Moonfield" paintings.

which she was investigating the nature of painting by exploring the possibilities inherent in the making of a stroke. "Of course, I learned a lot from the Abstract Expressionists. The freedom they gave my generation of painters meant everything to us," she says. "But I can also safely say that I discovered the 'strokes' on my own. I remember very distinctly sitting in this studio in 1969 and looking at a painting I had done and then looking at the wall below the painting. The wall was made of vertical wooden planks, and on that gridlike surface there was a gorgeous series of delicate drips. I said to myself, that's it, that's what I want."

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art has evolved into a multifaceted body of work with seemingly contradictory styles. In her October 1985 show at Hirsch & Adler Modern in New York, for example, she showed such sublimely beautiful abstract landscapes as *Beanfield with Snow* (1984) with such abrasive, autobiographical, expressionist paintings as *Ancient/Night/Sounds* (1984-85). *Beanfield with Snow* exhibits the lyrical quality and gridlike structure of the "stroke" paintings. In contrast, *Ancient/Night/Sounds* is composed of primitive totems surrounded by discordant rectangles, including one on which a shrieking face is painted. As Michael Walls wrote in a catalogue for a traveling exhibition of 1979-80, "Snyder is full of qualities which would strike many as contradictory. Because her work flows directly out of her, it contains contradictions too, and that is—in one sense—at the core of its richness and vitality." Says Snyder, "I take a lot of chances. I have to go beyond what might be a pretty painting or a good painting or even a beautiful painting. *Ancient/Night/Sounds* may not be pretty, but to me it's magnificent." Although Snyder may not have an instantly recognizable style, like some of the

younger crop of Neo-Expressionist painters, she is an expressionist in the true sense of the word, attempting in her art a sincere representation of her deepest thoughts and feelings.

BORN TO PARENTS OF MIXED RUSSIAN AND German descent in Highland Park, New Jersey, in 1940, Snyder had originally planned a career as a social worker. She majored in sociology at Douglass College of Rutgers University and became interested in art as a senior, when she took it as an elective. "My first painting teacher, Billie Pritchard, looked at a portrait of my brother and sister-in-law," says Snyder. "He said to me, 'What do you think of Jawlensky?' I said, 'Who's Jawlensky?' He then took me to the slide room and showed me a Jawlensky so similar to my own work in both imagery and mood that I was stunned. That gave me an excitement and support that would be a benefit to any young artist." *The Barn—Snowscene I* (1963), one of a series of loosely painted landscapes that Snyder worked on in the early '60s, calls to mind German Expressionism, Fauvism and aspects of Kandinsky—all work Snyder was yet to see. A startling woodcut

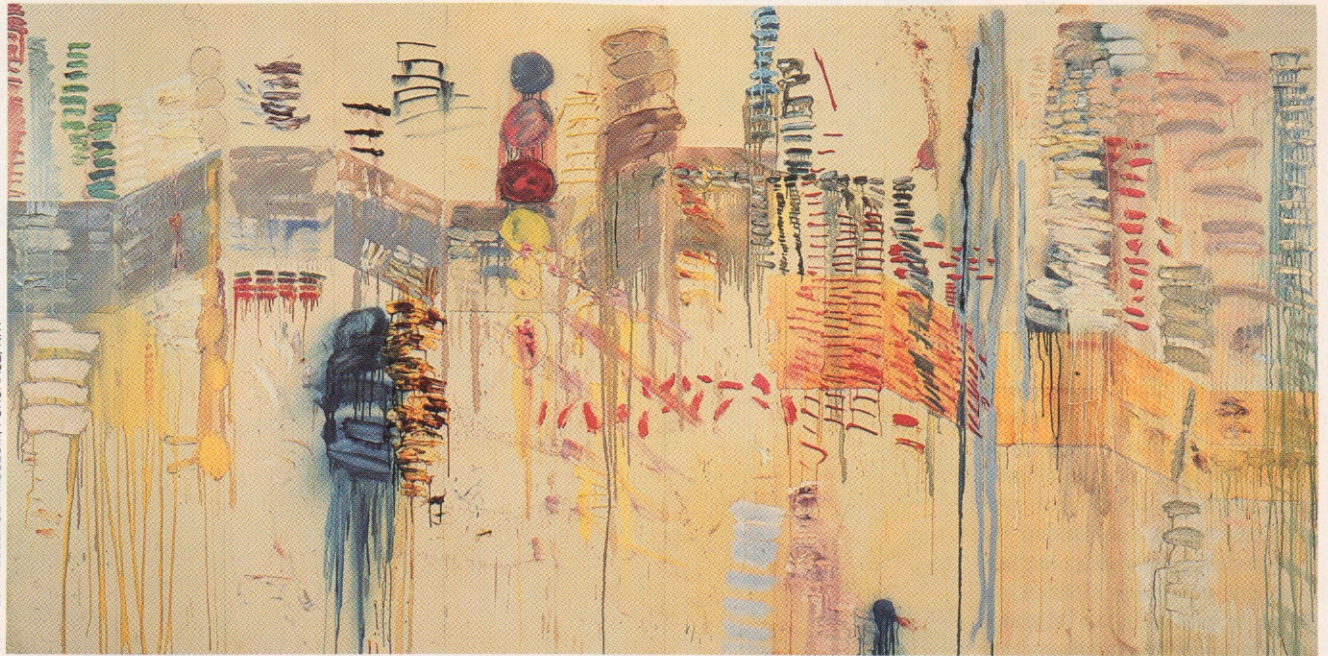


Joan Snyder in front of her 1987 painting *The Pumpkin Field*. In the foreground is an African sculpture the artist has represented in many of her works.

of 1963, done on the night of John F. Kennedy's assassination, shows how strong is her link with German Expressionism. The anguished portrait *Emily* could have been done by the young Käthe Kollwitz. "I was coming out of a complete cultural vacuum," Snyder says. "Yet I believe my Russian and German heritage had a profound impact on my art. The German angst is a part of me."

Snyder went on to complete an M.F.A. degree at Rutgers. During this time she created a series of flat, decorative images that were very different from the earlier expressionistic landscapes and portraits. In *Altar III* (1965-66) and *Angel* (1966) Snyder used kitschy collage materials like imitation leopard skin, wallpaper and plastic flowers. Although one of her teachers was Robert Morris and most of the students were "making tiny boxes," says Snyder, "I knew that wasn't my sensibility at all: I felt very strongly that my work was the first important thing I had ever done. I wasn't making a statement against Minimalism, I was just making art that I had to make." *Angel*, which was part of her thesis project, was a nearly life-size sculpture composed of a headless plaster torso with red fringe around its waist and painted wood legs and wings. It rested on a pedestal

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The celebratory *Love Your Bones*, 1970-71, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 by 144 inches, is one of the largest and most striking of Snyder's "stroke" paintings, the works that first brought her recognition.

studded with plastic flowers and mounted on wheels. In its use of gaudy materials, *Angel* prefigures the pattern and decorative movement of the early '70s.

After completing her degree in 1966, Snyder spent another year in New Brunswick working with teenagers in an "Upward Bound" poverty program. She saved enough money to move to New York, where, with Mark Berger, a former teacher at Rutgers, and Keith Sonnier and Jackie Winsor, fellow graduate students, Snyder rented the old lampshade factory on Mulberry Street that is still her home today. "When we moved in there was no plumbing," says Snyder. "We used the bathroom in the Chinese park across the street. We scrubbed floors until our knees ached. We worked the space for years." She supported herself with part-time work as an administrative aide for a poverty program sponsored by Yeshiva University and gave art lessons to young children in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

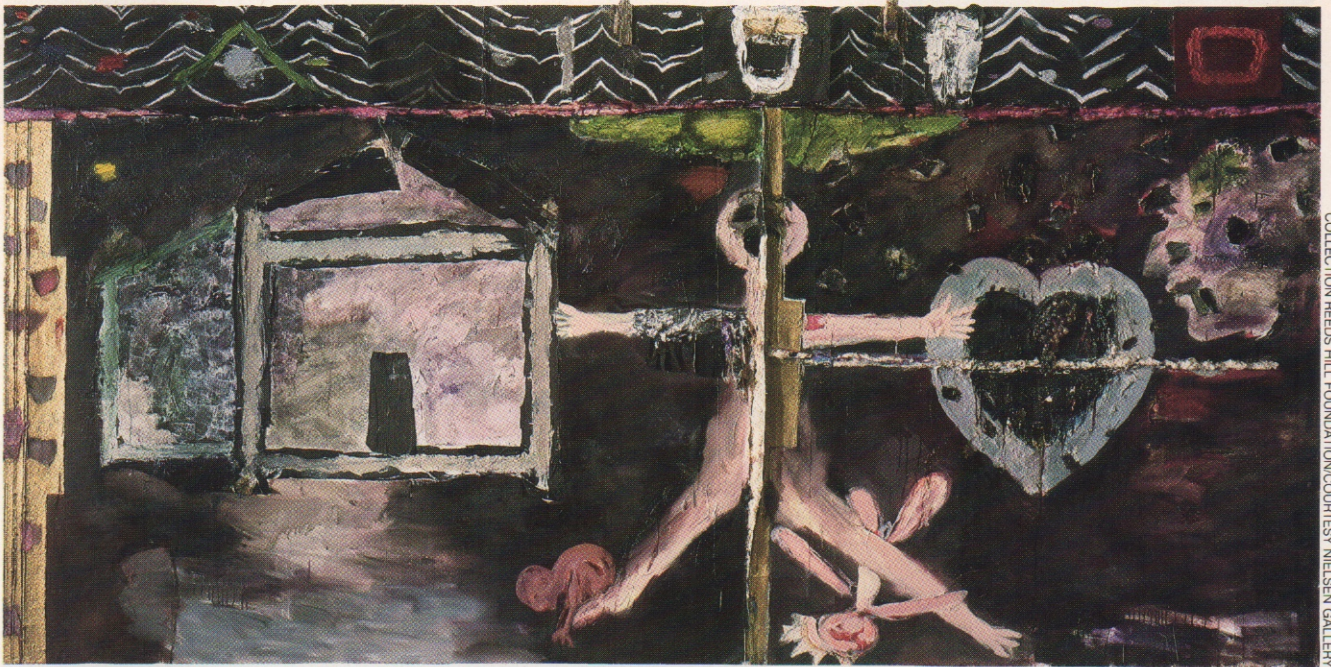
In 1969 Snyder made the breakthrough that led to the "stroke" paintings. "I was feeling a nostalgia for my early landscape paintings—not the subject matter, but the feelings

and gestures," says the artist. "I tried to think what it was about those old landscapes that I used to love so much and what was missing from my work at the time. I began to realize that the barns and subject matter were not what was important to me anymore, but the way I had painted them. I looked at the shapes of the landscapes, I looked at the gestures and the strokes, I looked at the feeling in them. I was feeling very broken up after a trip to Europe, and I started making tiny paintings with little strokes and gestures in them, which felt to me like what being broken up was about."

Klaus Kertess, who ran New York's Bykert Gallery, began visiting Snyder's studio regularly at about this time. Kertess included two of Snyder's works in an important group show in February 1971. He then introduced Snyder to Jeff Paley and Jillian Lowe, who were opening a gallery in SoHo. They mounted her first New York solo show that November. Meanwhile, Marcia Tucker, who had also learned of Snyder's work through Kertess, had published in May the influential *Artforum* article "The Anatomy of a



In a number of mid-'70s works, like *Vanishing Theatre*, 1974, 60 by 120 inches, Snyder addressed "women's place in the world and women's pain and strength."



COLLECTION REEDS HILL FOUNDATION/COURTESY NIELSEN GALLERY

An overwhelming sense of grief is conveyed in *Mourning/Oh Morning*, 1983, mixed media on canvas, 78 by 144 inches. The literal cut through the splayed figure adds to the brutality of the image.

Stroke: Recent Paintings by Joan Snyder.” Snyder’s show was a sellout. “Major collectors came in and bought the paintings. There were waiting lists for my work,” she recalls, still amazed by her overnight success.

The acclaim given the “stroke” paintings proved overwhelming, and shortly after she became an art-world “superstar” Snyder retreated from the publicity and pressures of the city. She purchased a farm in Martins Creek, Pennsylvania, where she moved with Fink in 1973. “My dream was always to have a farm. It was magnificent. Isolated. Peaceful,” she says. “I needed to retreat. The art world had already exhausted me. When I got to the farm I felt like I wanted to hide.” In *The Storm* (1974), one of the first major pieces she made in Pennsylvania, Snyder created a multilayered work in which she initially created a “stroke” painting and then literally hid it behind lushly painted squares of red, brown and blue.

WORKING IN THE COUNTRY, SNYDER EXPERIENCED a freedom that led to a new direction in her art—“feminist” works began to emerge. The artist had participated in feminist consciousness-raising groups beginning in 1970, and in 1971 she initiated a series of shows for women artists at Douglass. “Douglass College was a women’s school, yet no woman had ever taught studio art there. I decided that the students needed to see some art by women,” she explained at a panel in New York last year. “I curated the shows on many different levels: I would choose an artist because I liked the work, or because I thought a woman who wasn’t being shown in New York really needed to have a show, or because I thought the students would really love the work.”

In an interview with Ruth Iskin for the now-defunct feminist journal *Chrysalis*, Snyder said, “In conjunction with the exhibition, we organized discussions with the artists. During the first year hardly anyone attended. But in 1974, at a panel discussion, 300 people attended! It was the most inspiring thing for me to see how suddenly the program that I had started—and which at the beginning we could

barely get anyone interested in—became so successful. It was at that point that I went home and did the painting *Small Symphony for Women I*. That painting was the beginning of a lot of my more conscious efforts toward talking about women, women’s place in the world, women’s pain and strength. I was trying to put in everything I was thinking about in terms of ideas and feelings about women and art.”

Small Symphony for Women I has three panels. The first, a verbal exploration of the theme, has the question “CAN I MAKE SYMPHONIES OUT OF THIS SUBJECT” written at the top and includes a list of some of the elements in her works of the time that Snyder felt were linked to a female sensibility: “lentil beans, seeds, thread, pockets, transparent drips, layers, landscape space, human space.” There is also a list of colors and mediums and fragments of poetry and prose. The second panel is filled primarily with loose strokes and splotchy areas of paint, a “visual listing,” says Snyder, of the phenomena in the first panel. In the third panel Snyder creates what she calls “a resolution” with a grid of rectangles that brings together structural elements of the first two panels.

Another important painting from this period is *Vanishing Theatre* (1974), also a triptych. At the top of the first panel Snyder describes the three parts of the painting: “PART I LAMENT W [with] WORDS, PART II VANISHING THEATRE/THE CUT, PART III TAKE YOUR CLOTHES OFF LADY AND LET’S SEE WHO YOU REALLY ARE.” Below this is a pink breastlike circle and a mass of unreadable words that look like angry scrawlings. In the second panel, the largest and most dramatic in the triptych, a blood red field of paint is broken by black markings and, in the center, a huge tear in the canvas. “I cut the canvas, stuffed it with cotton and then sewed it up again. It is a big wound,” says Snyder. The last section of the painting, like the third part of *Small Symphony for Women I*, conveys a sense of resolution after the drama of the first two. It is composed of harmonious rectangles painted in colors seen in the first two sections. Snyder has said that the painting is about the severing of an important relationship with a close woman friend. The



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A view of Snyder's studio in Eastport, Long Island. "The country gives me a sense of peace," says the artist.

title comes from a novel (Snyder for forgotten which one), in which a woman laments the death of a good friend with the words "The theatre of all my ideas has vanished."

In 1977 Snyder created *Resurrection*. "I was traveling all over the country at the time, giving lectures," she says. "I began to read local newspapers, and in every one there was always a story about a woman being raped, burned or hurt in some way. Soon I began clipping stories about violence towards women, towards the elderly and towards children. At about the same time, I began feeling as if the farm

was haunted, as if an old woman had been murdered there. With my involvement in the violent stories, I became obsessed with the idea. I wanted to make a major painting about rape and murder, but one that also, somehow, was going to lay this old lady to rest."

Monumental in size, strident in tone, this huge painting—it measures 6½ by 26 feet—is composed of eight panels. The first is a list of the names of women who have been the victims of men's violence—attack, rape, murder. The next three panels include collaged newspaper photos of women and children who have died violently, together with painting around the clippings that becomes more chaotic as the panels progress.

The last four panels allude to rape, death and resurrection. In one panel the old woman whose spirit had haunted the artist is transformed into an angel. The last panel, collaged with lace and veils, is about transcendence, says Snyder. "It is heavenly old age."

Not long after the completion of *Resurrection* Snyder experienced profound personal grief when, after five months of pregnancy, she had



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In lyrical landscape paintings like *Beanfield with Snow*, 1984, 72 by 96 inches, Snyder combines a gridlike structure with expressionist brushwork.

a miscarriage. In such works as *Small Elegy* and *Black Totems*, both of 1978, she mourned the loss of her unborn child. "After I had the miscarriage, I suddenly began making trees, fishbones and totems. I believe they are all symbols of the collective unconscious. At that time, I felt I was somewhere between death and birth."

A new visual language began to evolve in Snyder's work. The totems—squat treelike images with branches shooting out in irregular patterns—were among the most important motifs. Over the last eight years they have stood for different things—life, death, transcendence. In *Sweet Cathy's Song* (1978) Snyder combined the totems with children's drawings that she had begun to collect many years before as an art teacher. "I devised a way for children to draw and paint using art as a language. I saved a lot of the drawings and I collaged them onto the painting." Created after Snyder had become pregnant again (Molly was born in 1979), it is a celebratory work and the first painting in which Snyder's longtime interest in children is evident.

Soon she began to produce paintings of a more primitive quality, combining the childlike images with those drawn from Pre-Columbian and African art. In 1980 the anguished face that would become a recurring image in several major works of the next four years first appeared. It was based on a small wooden African sculpture that Snyder acquired from a show of African art in the mid-'70s at the Susan Caldwell Gallery. She traded two drawings for the evocative sculpture, which now sits prominently on a worktable in her studio. Another persistent image is the stick figure, inspired by drawings made in the sand by Molly and the artist Mary Hambleton, a friend of Snyder's. "The stick figures come right out of the trees and the totems," says Snyder.

Savage Dreams (1981-82) is the first major work in which Snyder combined the image of the African sculpture with that of the stick figure. The central image is of an incised stick figure who stands next to a smaller, more painterly figure to the right—representations of a mother and child—within a throbbing half-circle of a brilliant yellow sun. On either side of the sun, figures resembling Snyder's screaming African sculpture seem to gesticulate wildly. The harmony of the central sun motif with its two figures contrasts strikingly with the flanking African figures, the frenzied markings of red, purple and blue that surround them and the zebra-skin pattern of the horizon line below. Critic Gerrit Henry has aptly described the impact of the painting: "If the Action Painters were tagged early on as being painters of the apocalypse, Snyder has here turned out what seems to be an apocalypse of her own, one that ominously illustrates some cosmic finale."

Mourning/Oh Morning (1983) might be considered a companion piece to *Savage Dreams*. Painted after the dissolution of Snyder's marriage, it is a dark work that expresses her sorrow about her earlier miscarriage as well as her divorce. In the center of the painting is a splayed stick figure that is literally cut in two by a slash Snyder made in the canvas. Trapped beneath the left foot is a dead child, and at the base of the right foot is the image of a fetus, a reference, Snyder says, to an earlier abortion. The splayed figure stands between primitive drawings of a house and a heart. Above is a black band with the zebra-like stripes seen in *Savage Dreams*, and at its center is a face with a gaping black hole. Two sticks, symbolizing crosses, poke above the top of the canvas. One cannot look at this painting without wincing, so powerful is the sense of grief it exudes.

"That painting is all about loss: the abortion, the miscarriage, the loss of my home, my marriage, everything."

In another work of 1983, *Apple Tree Mass*, Snyder referred to her feelings about motherhood when she wrote on the canvas: "Our children are being kidnapped and raped.

We are mothers raising our children. We are afraid." When asked about the connection between her earlier "feminist" works, like *Vanishing Theatre* and *Resurrection*, and the more recent paintings in which the image of motherhood is so predominant, Snyder bristles. "When a woman makes a painting or writes a book about a child, it's called feminism," she says. "When a man writes a profound novel about his wife or child, we don't label that as masculine. We say that he's writing about humanity, about people, about life. That's what I'm doing with my art."

It is late June and we are sitting on the lawn of the artist's house in Eastport, Long Island. The gleeful sounds of Molly and her friends can be heard nearby. In both directions are vast fields of wildflowers. "When we first came here two years ago," says Snyder, "those were beanfields. They were magnificent." Snyder is clearly at home here. Next to her cozy white house is a garden that she has planted with herbs and vegetables, which she harvests daily. She has converted an old garage into a studio. "The country gives me a sense of peace I can't find in New York City and allows me to open up to what's important and necessary inside myself."

Over the past year, Snyder has been working on *The Orchard/The Altar*, a monumental painting of apple trees that she eventually showed at the Nielsen Gallery in Boston in October. (The show was dedicated to the memory of DiDonna.) Although the work was painted in New York, it was inspired by an experience in the country. "I took a trip to my old farm in Pennsylvania, where Larry [Fink] now lives," says Snyder. "There are some very old apple trees there that are filled with struggle and life. I was struck by the wounds in them, the way they seemed to stand up when they should have been dead 20 years before. When Molly and I were driving home, I found an apple orchard and it was snowing, and that's what I based the painting on."

The full force of Snyder's passion is unleashed in this work. It is composed of three trees on a black background with large white snowflakes falling against the night sky. The effect is that of trees dancing against a field of diamonds. Snyder has re-created the texture of tree bark with thick globs of burnished red, orange and gold and transparent hues of gray and brown. The snowflakes are pieces of cloth pasted onto the canvas and painted over. While strongly expressionistic, the work is balanced by Snyder's formal awareness. The crimson band at the bottom of the painting establishes a rigorous structural grid even as it bulges with the knotty roots of the trees.

There is an underlying vitality in the work, a kinship with nature that goes beyond ordinary experience to some deep primal source. Few artists have been able to achieve that kind of intensity. "One of the things that I'm always trying to do is to incorporate the primitive with the symphonic or classical elements of my art," says Snyder, with an intent gaze. "When you can take your life force and your formal ideas and walk into your studio and somehow they come together, that's when you make the magic." ■

Susan Gill is a critic and writer living in New York.