

Joan Snyder: True Grit



Joan Snyder: Bedeckt Mich mit Blumen, 1985, mixed mediums on canvas, 72 by 72 inches. All photos courtesy Hirschl & Adler Modern.

Audacious in pigment, stroke and gesture, Joan Snyder's recent paintings show no slackening in painterly brio. Yet a new urge toward horizontality indicates a classicism absent in her work since the 1960s.

BY GERRIT HENRY

Joan Snyder first came on the scene in the late 1960s with her "stroke" paintings—horizontal stripes, loosely brushed, over membranous canvas treated with flocking. These works concerned themselves, as did so much art of that day, with the picture plane, the grid, the edge—all the conceptual and plastic issues of reductive formalism.

A lot of paint has flowed under the bridge since those "stroke" works, and Snyder has proved in show after show throughout the last decade that her interests are far broader than those initial "trademark" canvases might have suggested. She was simply not content to go on painting horizontal bands; they were, as she remarked, "too easy."¹ Increasingly, she felt she had a statement to make that was perhaps a formal, deeply emotional, feminist. Thus, her paintings of the '70s became intensely expressionist: they got messier and meatier, and more and more meaning made itself felt. In *Vanishing Theatre* (1974), an oil and collage piece, there are abstracted crusty rectangular shapes, Mondrianlike, to the left; a center that contains a fault or rift (overlayers of paint perhaps *creating* the rift); and, to the right, over words in a kind of Snyderesque Sanskrit, words that you can read: "PART I LAMENT W WORDS PART II VANISHING THEATRE THE CUT PART III TAKE YOUR CLOTHES OFF LADY AND LET'S SEE WHO YOU REALLY ARE." Feminist Expressionism—it was, in its day, a coup. Yet the painting has a certain brutal timelessness that has kept its impact from diminishing even now, when the work of many of her feminist peers from that time has come to look a little quaint.

Snyder was beginning to be convinced that if formalism alone was not enough, pure expressionism was too much.² A tightwire between the emotive and the rational had to be walked, but without excessive wariness. Increasingly, Snyder took big chances with her stroke and color, frequently gridding off a painting—with a clear backward glance at reductivist credos—into areas of color and stroke that explode and implode with painterly dash and brio, sometimes virtually smothering the canvas with paint. *The Storm* (1974) is 18 squares of nothing but paint and gesture, a surprisingly evocative, earthy rendering of such an empyrean event. Meaning was ultimately left to the viewer, but there is a lot of painterly action in those squares, and *The Storm* feels like a storm, or possibilities on the theme. You came away from these paintings of the '70s convinced that Snyder knew what she was talking about.

In the '70s, too, Snyder experimented with cliché images quite separated from her feminist fervor—stick-trees, stick-men, children's doodles, houses, hearts—as if to emphasize the silly but tender side of her (and possibly Expressionism's) nature. But always, what she said was engendered by how she said it, with



Can We Turn Our Rage to Poetry, 1985, mixed mediums on canvas, 60 by 144 inches.

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her Pollocky drips and splashes and splatters of paint placing her firmly in the Abstract-Expressionist tradition, although her subject matter was singularly less metaphysical and more earthly than that of her Action Painting predecessors. These paintings from the 1970s all display a kind of meditative outspokenness, an artist conversing with herself on what to do next, then making that conversation her further subject and style.

The results could be harrowing: the 1977 *Resurrection* is a multipaneled Grand Guignol of from-the-gut Expressionism, dealing with collaged newspaper items on rape, the depicted

rape and murder of a woman, and her subsequent ascension into heaven. Here is Snyder at her most hard boiled, dredging up materials we'd rather not think about, yet persuasively holding our attention.

In her latest show, however, the 45-year-old painter, who lives and works on a farm in Pennsylvania, seems to have reached a newly peaceful accommodation with her subject matter, itself newly tranquil. In the childlike vivacity of her domestic paintings Snyder proved she would much rather be a kid than lady of the house—so she has become, with these new paintings, lady of the bean patches that grow near her home, a fittingly earthy role for a painter of her tenacity and grit. Reproducing these bean patches in paint, she applies pigment to the canvas with all the authority and guts of some farmer-cum-construction-worker. When she gives us a *Beanfield with Music*—endless, edge-defying horizontal patches of green and yellow, dizzy with bean sprouts, with purple posts at intervals—we don't have to ask



where the music is. It's possible, though, to view those purple posts as some sort of musical staff. Or the painting can be read as one big abstract riff on the theme of music paper, with staves and bars and notes making it considerably more evocative than a mere hill of beans.

Whatever the symbology, this is Snyder in a new key—still deliberating, right there on the canvas, in paint, still luxuriating in pigment, stroke and gesture. But today, in these splendid *au naturel* paintings, there is a certain classicism that has been more or less absent from her work since the early, more rudimentary stripe paintings. These new works can, of course, be read both representationally and abstractly; Snyder is generous in the leeway she allows the eye. Nowhere is this breadth of reading more vividly laid out than in *Beanfield with Snow*, a canvas entirely crusted over with bright white and brown and black impastos—and, yes, the bean sprouts shooting through the

snow, little yellow reminders of nature's provision even during her harshest season. In a way—although Snyder might not cotton to the idea—these bean sprout pictures lead us right back to the early stroke paintings. Once again she is going in for horizontal structuring; separate patches might be read vertically, creating a grid. Snyder has not rejected reductivist strategies so much as redeployed them to her own forcefully figurative advantage. Still, the bean paintings go much further than their “stroke” predecessors in their audacious use of pigment, their variegated areas of color, and the rhythms of the brush—a *felt*, and not entirely visual, phenomenon.

For those who may fear that, with the bean paintings, we have lost “our” Joan Snyder—she *is* something of a cult phenomenon—there were pictures aplenty in this latest show that still held fast to the Expressionist credo that mess is more. *Apple Tree Mass* is a work in three parts. To the left, against a scumbled icy violet ground, is a little red stick figure pressed into

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what seems to be a tombstone. Next to it is a barren apple tree, under a black arch. Snyder gets down to business in the two panels to the right: in the middle is a repetition of the tombstone form wreathed in green block letters in various colors spelling GARDEN. Written on the tomb is the Latin phrase "lachrymae rerum," referring to the melancholy felt at the prospect of death. The left-most panels go on—accentuated by stripes of brown, red and green along their edges—to explore the themes of love, loss and death, all in the artist's handwriting. The mundane is mixed in with the lyric: "I loved lying on the hammock and looking up at the apple and pear tree. I loved to prune in the cold, early spring." Another inscription is washed in blue, "The sky big"; yet another in reds, "I love you." To the far left we get a repeat of "lachrymae rerum," and this little shocker: "But our children are being kidnapped and raped, going crazy." Snyder could have *invented* graffiti.

But there's just no getting cozy with her. Hers is a tragicomic mode that mocks and cajoles and considers and exposes, leaving neither artist nor viewer completely comfortable. *Ancient/Night/Sounds* features some little trees (or bean sprouts), pink, on heavily impastoed greens, these within a rectangle itself framed in brown, the edges scumbled, gridded reminders of her earlier work. Included also is an item that has almost become a Snyder trademark—a skull-like head based on an African mask, its mouth wide open, in terror, horror or supplication. Yet the same sensibility that created this bit of *terribilità* can come back at us from that point to another, radically different one. *Bedeckt Mich mit Blumen* is a garden of painted sprouts with a Matissean nude, her head cut off by the edge of the canvas, lolling about in fragrant concupiscence. Dozens of fake flowers cover her stomach, hips and breasts—the vagina, floral in its own right, is left exposed.

All this veering from contemplative abundance to morbid excess may mean that Snyder is at a crossroads of sorts in her career, but given her maverick nature, it would be foolhardy to predict what direction she'll take next. In the meantime, she herself has suggested the one real constant in her work: one of the gilded inscriptions across a big painting of Greek temples (and more) admonishes the viewer to "*Tell me in any way you can.*" It is this obsession—this *rage*—to tell us in any way she can, helter-skelter or pacifically, through the painterly and the fantastic and the coloristic and the magical, that seems to have possessed Joan Snyder for half a lifetime. As she said in an interview with Michael Walls, "When I started to paint, it was like speaking for the first time."³ Now, her work is a discourse on the vicissitudes and sublimities of a life lived on the edge—a life at once cultivated, like the bean fields, and somehow, like the screaming head, unpredictably out of control. □

1. Quoted in Hayden Herrera, *Joan Snyder: Seven Years of Work*, Purchase, N.Y., Neuberger Museum, 1978, p. 2.

2. See Michael Walls, *Joan Snyder*, San Francisco, San Francisco Art Institute, 1979, p. 16.

3. *Ibid.*

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**The Field/May, 1985,
oil and acrylic on canvas,
72 by 96 inches.**

