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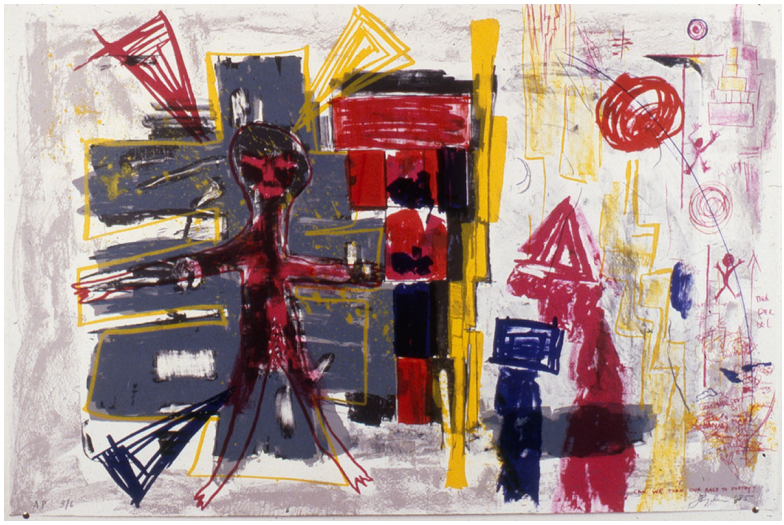
The Consciousness of a Feminist Expressionist

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER MAY 14, 2011

For many painters, prints serve as a place to try out new ideas, experiment in a different medium or circulate their images in a reproducible format, while earning some extra money. Sometimes, however, a print exhibition can feel like a vital key to an artist's career. Such is the case with "Dancing With the Dark: Joan Snyder Prints 1963-2010" at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick.

Ms. Snyder is most often described as an Expressionist and a feminist. Artists generally don't like being summed up by "isms" (who would?), but "Dancing With the Dark" underscores rather than challenges this formulation. And Ms. Snyder doesn't dispute these designations.

"I was a German Expressionist!" she is quoted as saying in the catalog accompanying the exhibition. "It's in the blood. My ancestors were Russian and German." (Ms. Snyder, who lives in Brooklyn and Woodstock, N.Y., was born and raised in Highland Park, N.J., and attended Douglass College in New Brunswick, then received a Master of Fine Arts degree from Rutgers, making this a homecoming show of sorts.)

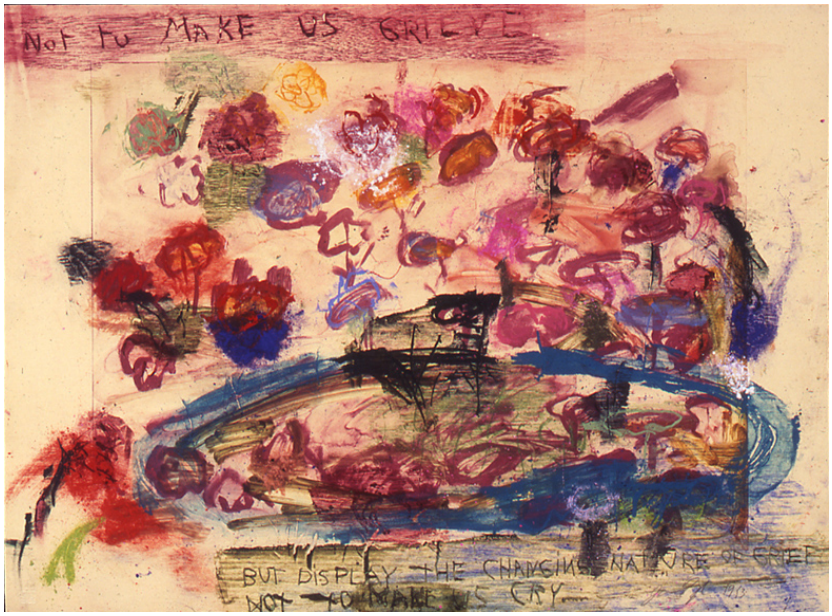


"Can We Turn Our Rage to Poetry," a 1985 color lithograph. CreditBryan Whitney

Black and white woodcuts from Ms. Snyder's Rutgers days show her working firmly within the German Expressionist lineage, particularly the early-20th-century group Die Brücke (the Bridge), based in Dresden, which saw woodcuts as a way of reviving German

medieval and folk art traditions. “Portrait of Emily,” “Portrait of Jona Mach” and “Moe” from 1963, with their rough outlines describing gaunt, haunted faces, uncannily resemble Die Brücke prints. A reproduction of Emil Nolde’s 1912 woodcut “Prophet”in the catalog bears this out.

But even these early graduate-student works show the stirrings of what might be called a feminist consciousness. Where Nolde’s gape-eyed figure is an anonymous but grandly titled “Prophet,” Ms. Snyder’s prints portray people she knew, sometimes on specific occasions, predicting the feminist drive toward the personal-as-political.



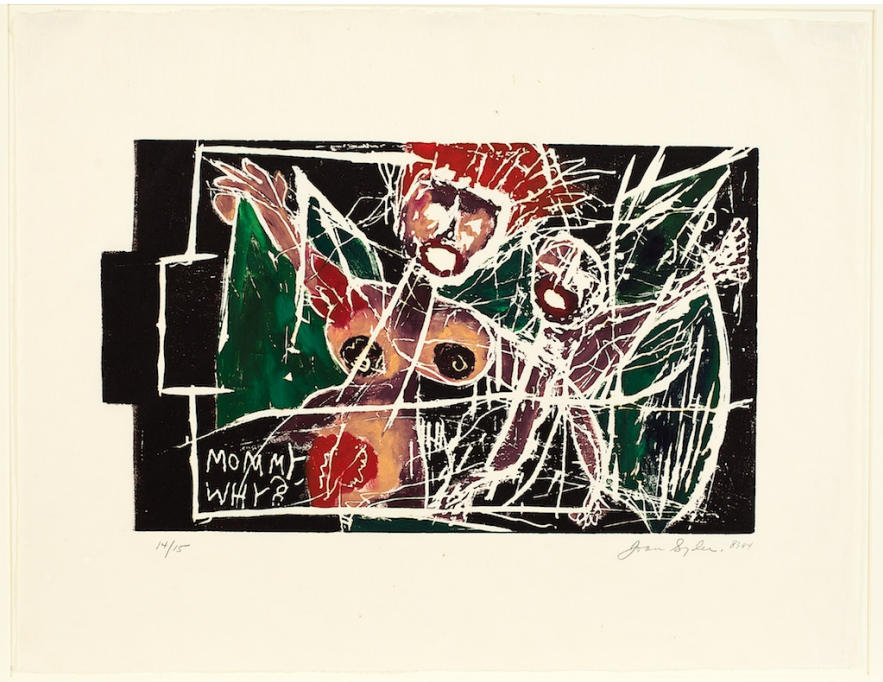
EMOTIONS Among the artworks in “Dancing With the Dark: Joan Snyder Prints 1963-2010” are “Field of Flowers,” a 1993 monoprint. CreditBryan Whitney

A year later, Ms. Snyder unveiled a freer line and racier subject matter. “Woman Undressing,” from 1964, is a lithograph with the curvy outline of a female nude whose expressive shock of pubic hair becomes the focal point of the image. In “Lithograph of an Angel,” from 1966, a spread-eagled woman becomes a mythical, mystical flying creature.

Once Ms. Snyder’s feminist consciousness was uncorked in the mid-1960s, there was no returning to polite woodcuts inspired by art history. The title of “Whispers/Screams,” a large, colorful abstract screenprint from 1972, reflects the manic, exuberant approach of her gestural “stroke” paintings from the same period.

Many of the prints on view document or parallel events in Ms. Snyder’s life. A miscarriage is memorialized in “FMSWNL [For My Son Who Never Lived],” a nine-color lithograph that was begun four months after a happier event, the birth of her daughter, Molly. “Dancing in the Dark,” a woodcut from 1984, includes naïvely rendered figures inspired by one of her daughter’s drawings. “Woodcut for Love’s Deep Grapes,” from

1983, alludes to the affair Ms. Snyder had with the female psychiatrist she consulted after the breakup of her marriage; “My Maggie,” a color lithograph and etching from 2000, commemorates the 10th anniversary of her meeting Maggie Cammer, her longtime partner.



MOTHERHOOD “Mommy Why?,” a 1983-84 woodcut by Joan Snyder. CreditBryan Whitney

Along with prints on the themes of motherhood, autobiography and sexuality — leading tropes of 1970s feminist art — are those that suggest the ways in which larger cultural and political events intersect with the personal. In 1975, Ms. Snyder began collecting newspaper articles about the rapes and murders of women. That source material served as the background for “Resurrection,” a 26-foot mural, now at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the “Resurrection Etching,” from 1978 to 1981, which is on view here. Reprinted newspaper fragments, handwriting and smears of color that evoke a crime scene appear in the print next to a sketchily drawn rural scene that refers to another murder: that of the woman who once inhabited the farmhouse where Ms. Snyder and her husband were living in Pennsylvania, and whose spirit she felt was haunting them.

“Soul Series,” from 1993, is an ode to loss, including the deaths of Ms. Snyder’s parents and those of friends who died of AIDS. The work is meant to be displayed alongside an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem, “Dirge Without Music,” from 1928, which includes a line that resonates with the exhibition’s title: “Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned/ With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.”

The inclusion of text in — rather than just alongside — a work becomes itself a ground of contention. Ms. Snyder is quoted in a wall label saying that instead of being praised for writing on her work, “I get nailed, usually being called a ‘feminist’ who ‘wears her heart

on her sleeve.' " In contrast, she said, when male artists like Cy Twombly, Julian Schnabel or Robert Rauschenberg use text, "they are considered very sensitive."

Later works read almost like a flagrant rejoinder to this criticism. A color etching and woodcut from last year, when Ms. Snyder turned 70, consists entirely of a passage from an 1842 journal entry by Henry David Thoreau. It is both a meditation on mortality and a celebration of nature and beauty: "See what a life the gods have given us set round with pain and pleasure it is too strange for sorrow it is too strange for joy."

Then there is the issue of hearts. Like the sunflowers and ponds that have become guiding motifs for Ms. Snyder in recent years, hearts are plastered throughout her recent paintings — although they are somewhat less prevalent here. The implication seems to be that Ms. Snyder is doing what good feminists have always done: appropriating criticism and using it to productive ends. With that in mind, she is not only wearing her heart on her sleeve, but inserting it where it will be seen by the largest public: in her work.

"Dancing With the Dark: Joan Snyder Prints 1963-2010" runs through May 29 at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 71 Hamilton Street, New Brunswick. Information: (732) 932-7237
or zimmerlimuseum.rutgers.edu.