

Contemplating the Work of Joan Snyder

by

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In 1971 there was an exhibit in San Francisco of the paintings of Joan Snyder—a relatively new, up-and-coming painter from New York, not that long out of graduate school but clearly an exciting artist that was not to be missed. This was a time when the feminist movement was cracking open the doors of the male-dominated art scene with serious determination. The new ideas from such writers as Betty Freidan, Germaine Greer, Tillie Olsen, and Simone de Beauvoir in the sixties had initiated an extraordinary awakening, and with that awakening, women artists were finding new strength in their work and new recognition in the exhibition world.

The energetic work of the Abstract-Expressionist painters in the late fifties, 99% male, had inspired many of us to enter the painting field without thought of the gender handicap. The seventies became a time when we as women finally took possession of the "room of our own" and were struggling to get to work, wrestling with the demons of doubt and the commanding dictates of the male art manifestos. The strong new women artists beginning to be exhibited at that time spurred us on and gave us heart.

Joan Snyder was an emerging artist who led the way in the heady seventies. Now, in 2008, we are looking at the remarkable, sustained development of this artist. Her commitment is all the more inspiring for the fact that she has persevered for over forty years, evolving her work and her independent voice with impressive conviction. Most

fittingly, she is the recipient of a 2007 MacArthur Fellowship, the “genius award” as it is sometimes called. This is an outstanding and well-deserved achievement.

Before I venture to comment on Snyder's paintings that are represented here in *Persimmon Tree*, I feel that it is important to state a disclaimer: While I experienced the richness of Joan Snyder's paintings in the 1971 San Francisco exhibit, I have primarily kept up with her work through reproduction, most recently in the excellent book, *Joan Snyder*, with essays by Hayden Herrera, Jenny Sorkin, and Norman Kleeblat published in conjunction with Snyder's retrospective exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, (Abrams 2005). But it is important to remember that the difference between a reproduction of a painting and the actual painting in the flesh is considerable. And this is particularly so for Joan Snyder's work since its physicality is such an outstanding feature.

In Snyder's early paintings she explored the dripping brushstroke as if she were looking underneath and around, and actually bucking up against, the art influences of the day, wishing to discover, for *herself*, the very essence of applying paint to canvas. While these paintings—in fact, most of her work—may appear to be abstract, we can see her affinity for expressive narrative and an association with the female body and nature. These figurative elements, strong components of her work, are used as metaphor. Snyder is painting from her personal experience, yet her narrative touches upon the very condition of our own lives—our sorrow and joy, our struggles, and our inevitable confrontation with life and death.

Snyder's early work includes her "stroke" paintings, which almost appear to be lines of words that are blotted out. She returns to using these strokes time and again. We see examples of this in *Untitled* (2007), *Ghosts* (2000), and *New Moons* (2008). Snyder's

work also includes the use of the grid, as can be seen in *Oratorio* (1997) and *Healing* (2004-06). These underlying structures act to hold, or contain, the emotional narrative of the painting. They gradually give over to the raw, visceral power of Snyder's emotional content, spilling beyond any suggestion of confinement. For emotional content is indeed the driving force throughout Snyder's painting. The grid and the repetitive line reappear as if to steady the course. Yet if these structures do act as stabilizing elements, they also seem to carry poignant, personal coded messages, free of exclusively formal concerns.

In *Oratorio* (1997), the title implies a dramatic musical composition. Here the grid gives way to an arrangement of diverse separate pictures., rather like a pot-pourri notating various meaningful incidences. And a pot-pourri it almost literally is, for the painting is composed of oil, acrylic, plastic grapes, feathers, fabric, nails, herbs, mud, papier-mache, graphite, and paper on canvas.

Joan Snyder's use of a broad range of unconventional materials is another example of her desire to break out of any traditional category of "easel" or "fine art" painting. All the images presented in this brief glimpse of Snyder's immense *oeuvre* are constructed (aside from oil and acrylic) with a wide array of unusual materials, which include wooden balls, cheesecloth, burlap, dried flowers and wooden dowels.

In the painting . . . *And Acquainted with Grief* (1997), the inclusion of words, along with flower-like forms, gives the appearance of a listing of loss. But what seems to carry the true weight of Snyder's expression is the direct, no-holds-barred manner in which she states her message. She has no interest in displaying technical virtuosity as a painter, something quite revered in this culture. Instead, the raw, visceral grit of her

approach shows a strength that seems to transcend our attachment to polished pictorial representation.

And yet Snyder is a storyteller. Her interest in narrative and metaphor is central to her work. While the raw and almost awkward use of imagery might be interpreted as a cacophony of haphazard visual events, Snyder is in control of her form. And she is very dedicated to making beautiful paintings. With her sensitivity to how the physicality of the materials enact to embody emotion, we are brought to the awareness of the primal matter of this earth out of which we emerge.

In a painting like *Healing* (2004-06), there is the graphic grid surrounding what appears to be the square, open wound in the center, very raw, very dark, and a powerful metaphor of a central motif in Joan Snyder's work. In the diptych *Untitled* (2007), we see a frail and rather barren tree on the right, with the large oval opening (filled with rusty nails!), or wound. And on the left panel the horizontal lines of paint read as if to be a narrative of the cycles of nature, or the process of healing, the tree a metaphor of growth and decay, or possibly the cycles of our own growth and decay.

The painting *My Life* (1996) may well encompass most of Joan Snyder's vocabulary. Here all the radical elements, and the unconventional use of flotsam, abound: The uninhibited, splayed female legs with plastic grapes at the vagina; the great cloud of unbridled white; the little esoteric markings; the repeated strokes; the carefully-delineated floating squares of color; the splatter and the angst; the straw and the blackened runs—all gorgeously shifting their weight off-center in a precarious display of, yes, feminine energy.

In the examples of Joan Snyder's work presented here, the more lyrical and even tender side of her *oeuvre* can be seen in the paintings *Summer* (2002), *Cherry Tree* (1993), *Cherry Fall* (1995), and *Sweet Golden Clime* (2002). Such lyrical titles, and the use of flowers and herbs, velvet, silk and papier-mache, may be interpreted by some as sentimentality. However, Snyder's fearless allegiance to the body, her fierce honesty, and her independence of vision make this potential critique irrelevant. Joan Snyder is a painter who has committed herself to the openness and the honesty of the female experience. Her allegiance to feminism and the truth of her life experience has been a valuable contribution to the ongoing work of liberation—which continues as we look around the world and see that our work is anything but over.