



## Snyder, Joan (b. 1940)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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An American artist working in abstract painting and mixed-media, Joan Snyder has given modern Expressionism a vigorous infusion of feminist purpose. Through restless successions of style and media, she demonstrates that there is such a thing as a female artistic sensibility.

Snyder was born in Highland Park, New Jersey, on April 16, 1940. Intending to become a social worker, she earned her A.B. in sociology from Douglas College in 1962. However, a senior year elective art class transformed her goals.

She began painting in the styles of Wassily Kandinsky and Alexej von Jawlensky before having seen their work. Her discovery of an affinity with Expressionism was both a personal and spiritual epiphany, providing her with a way to speak and be heard. She decided to pursue a graduate degree in art, and entered the fine arts program at Rutgers University. Her graduate project was a series of anti-hierarchical, Matissean, yet Pop-influenced "altar paintings." She received her M.F.A. in 1966.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Snyder established her signature approach to the making of art, which might be described as Expressionist bravado tempered with sardonic irony. Her "flock/membrane" paintings of this period introduced intimations of the body through transparent fleshy shapes that seem to float above other parts of the compositions, along with tactile elements constructed with flocking (rayon powder). Some compositions in this style attempt to view the body from inside-outward. The visual language she developed in these paintings reappear in later, more urgently feminist-inspired art.

Much of her work of this period was driven by a fascination with the properties of paint. Her "stroke paintings" are composed of horizontal swathes and small brushstrokes over a penciled grid. Busy accumulations of energy and color, they have the narrative quality of landscapes. These paintings were well received, but having satisfied an impulse, Snyder moved on to other forms, a pattern she would repeat in succeeding decades.

The feminist consciousness-raising movement of the 1970s provided Snyder an impulse toward ever-deeper articulations of primal emotion. The works she created under this influence are, however, disciplined with coherency, and even the most anguished pieces often incorporate imagery suggesting angels, children, and innocence.

Snyder's objective at this stage of her career became to "pull art out of flesh." A favorite technique was to slash the canvas, pulling the backing forward or stuffing the "wound" with other material, and sew it jaggedly back together. This method transformed the canvas from a merely supportive plane into an active agent in support of a bold symbology she invented for violation, rage, and grief.

Miscarriage, the loss of close friends, dissolution of her marriage, and violence against women influenced several of Snyder's thematic sequences in the 1970s. "Vanishing Theater" (1974), a cathartic triptych of reds and oranges, displays text, a large diagonal slash, and a panel of interlocking oblongs. "Resurrection" (1977)

merges text, strident visual movement, an apocalyptic landscape, and an ascending angel as a dramatic statement about rape.

"Heart On" (1975) arose from an identity crisis coinciding with Snyder's first lesbian relationship. Harmony Hammond notes that at the time Snyder was uncertain about labels regarding her identity. The work combines heart and oblong shapes in a composition that spills out of its grid, rejecting confinement.

In the 1980s, Snyder began producing expressive, often eroticized landscapes, as well as more issue-oriented pieces, such as a 1988 series on the suffering of children. Nature, raising a daughter, and recovery from illness inspired other paintings as her work matured into visual narratives of resilience and reconciliation. Motifs recur, such as child-like house drawings (suggesting a yearning for shelter), fishbones, and an African face sculpture that evokes the collective unconscious. In "Can We Turn Our Rage into Poetry" (1985), fields of dark and light tones and a mixture of defined and inchoate shapes achieve a confident balance of anger and optimism.

By the mid-1980s Snyder was moving toward a harmonious accommodation with her subject matter. Her "beanfield" paintings, which are filled with sprout-like motifs, with no horizons or limits, celebrate regeneration and growth. Garden-themed imagery persisted into the 1990s, as Snyder's canvases became tapestries of floral fragments incorporating collaged masses of painted straw and dried foliage. In "Beanfield with Snow" (1984), the artist's earlier experiments with strokes are summoned effectively to evoke a symbolic landscape.

In the 1990s, Snyder used oval shapes resembling ponds to focus her compositions, thereby drawing the eye into womb-like depths. In "A Place . . . For You" (1993), a ringed dark "pond" within a light textured background provides a centering destination.

Snyder's recent large-scale works, such as "Orchard" (1999), are assertively three-dimensional. In "Orchard" a five-inch-deep shelf piled with earth, paint, and straw merges seamlessly into the landscape on the canvas. In "Voyage" (2000) and "Rough Chant" (2001), Snyder uses grids of circles, each containing its own "field" or "world" of organic material or fluid-like masses that threaten to spill over the canvas into the viewer's space.

Work exhibited at the Betty Cunningham Gallery in 2004 shows Snyder synthesizing many of her earlier stroke, collage, and paneling formats, along with body and pool imagery, in new explosions of color. Other work may be seen in the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston); Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney (New York); and the Fogg Art Museum (Harvard).

Widely exhibited and recognized as a leading American contemporary artist, Snyder has been acclaimed one of the most significant Expressionists of her generation. She has taught at a number of universities, including Yale, Princeton, and the Parsons School of Design. She currently lives and works in Brooklyn and Woodstock, New York.

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### **About the Author**

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