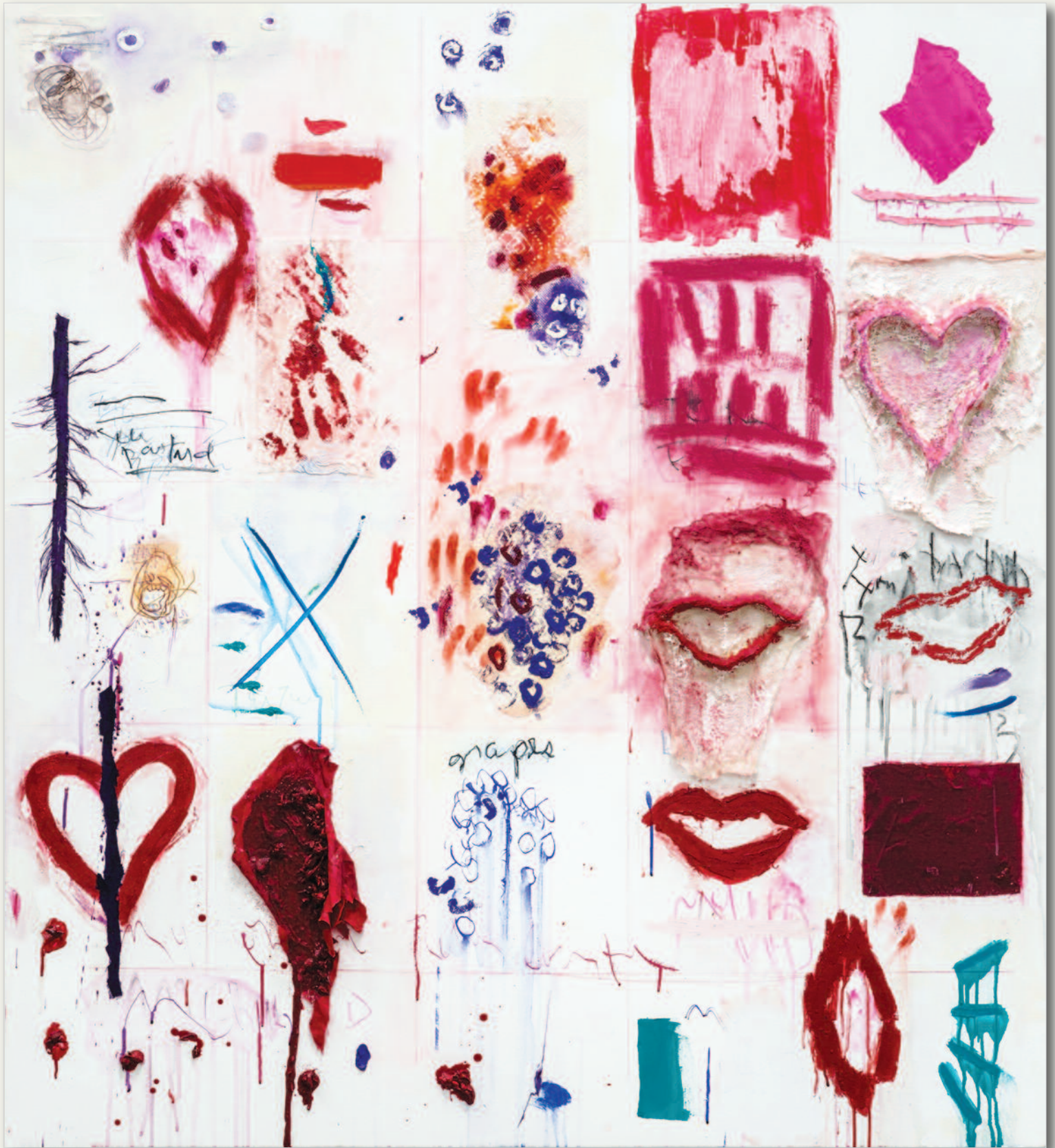


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MY MOTHER'S ALTAR

JOAN SNYDER PAINTS TO FACE HERSELF

By Molly Snyder-Fink

In the summer of 1969, Joan Snyder (b.1940), the renowned American artist, made what she considered to be her breakthrough painting. She painted *Lines and Strokes* (Pl. 1) in her New York City loft on Mulberry Street at the very same time that the Woodstock Music Festival was happening. Snyder was starting her own cultural revolution right in the center of her studio. With *Symphony* (1970; Pl. 2), which she painted during that same period, she was in part rebelling against Color Field painting, “macho Minimalism,”¹ and generally the male-dominated sensibility of the art world. But more significantly, she was in the early stages of creating her own iconic visual language and establishing herself as a bold, uncompromising creative force whose prolific career would later receive national recognition—as a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the MacArthur Fellowship. Snyder has remained in her studio for nearly six decades now, resulting in nearly eighty solo shows. As she recently told me, she is unlikely to “hang up her brushes” anytime soon. She is continually beckoned to the altars of her canvases to create, and in turn her paintings give life back to her with renewed meaning. I have the good fortune to say that Joan Snyder is my mother (Fig. 1).

Growing up with an artist for a mother meant that wherever we lived, a studio was attached, and she would consistently go to work in that studio, permeating our lives with stability and purpose. She was a then single parent, having left my father, the photographer Larry Fink, when I was just a toddler, and her paintings plus her decades-long artist teaching gigs were our bread and butter. Her career had taken off in the early seventies, before I was born, when the



Fig. 1. Molly Snyder-Fink and Joan Snyder (2018). Photo: Maggie Cammer.

prominent New York art dealer Klaus Kertess put three of her large stroke paintings in a group show at Bykert Gallery. That opportunity helped to secure her first solo show, in 1971, at Paley & Lowe, a newly opened gallery in the Soho district of New York City. As a child, I distinctly remember gloating adults hovering over me with my mother’s paintings behind them on the white, sterile walls of high-end galleries. I was overwhelmed. But at home, I took refuge in her studio. The smell of turpentine was comforting to me, and I’d wander into her work space just to be reminded of it. There was always something new to look at. At the age of six, I recall my mother inviting me to fasten white squares of silky fabric around ghostlike trees in *The Orchard/The Altar* (1986; Fig. 2), rendering an eerie, wintry scene. And at

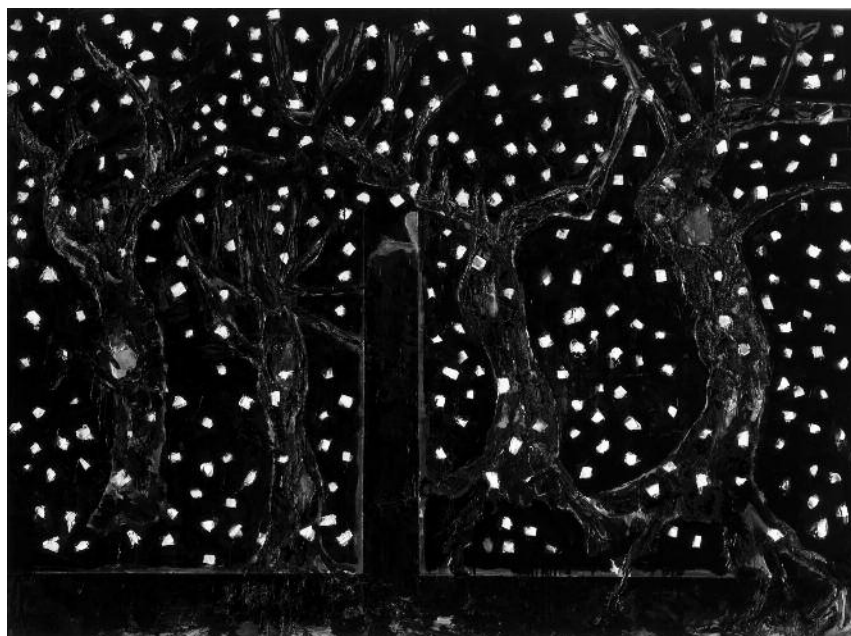


Fig. 2. Joan Snyder, *The Orchard/ The Altar* (1986), oil, acrylic, linen, paper mache on linen, 60” x 96”. Photo: Steven Sloman.



Pl. 1. Joan Snyder, *Lines and Strokes* (1969), oil, acrylic, spray enamel on raw canvas, 40" x 52". Photo: Alan Zindman.



Pl. 2. Joan Snyder, *Symphony* (1970), oil, acrylic, spray enamel on canvas, 72" x 144". Photo: Lee Stalworth.



Pl. 3. Joan Snyder, *Vanishing Theatre/The Cut* (1987), oil on canvas, 48" x 72". Photo: Steven Sloman.



Pl. 4. Joan Snyder, *Love's Pale Grapes* (1983), oil, acrylic, pencil, watercolor, paper, paper mache, plastic grapes, fabric on linen, 24" x 48". Photo: Robert Walch.



Pl. 5. Joan Snyder, *Sweet Cathy's Song* (1978), oil, acrylic, crayon, paper mache, children's drawings on canvas, 78" x 144". Photo: Jack Abraham.

Pl. 6. Joan Snyder,
Storyboard (2017),
oil, acrylic, cloth, burlap,
paper, glitter,
plastic jewels on canvas,
50" x 70".
Photo: Dawn Blackman.



Pl. 7. Joan Snyder, *Apple Tree Mass* (1983), oil, acrylic, paper mache, wood, paper, cloth on linen, 24" x 72". Photo: Steven Sloman.



Pl. 8. Joan Snyder, *Beanfield With Music* (1984), oil, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 144". Photo: Steven Sloman.



Pl. 9. Joan Snyder, *Heart On* (1975), oil, acrylic, paper, fabric, cheesecloth, paper mache, mattress batting thread on canvas, 72" x 96", 1975. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Pl. 10. Joan Snyder, *Floating Soul* (2018), oil, acrylic, ink, paper mache, paper, herbs on linen, 52" x 48". Photo: Dawn Blackman.



Fig. 3. Joan Snyder, *Can We Turn Our Rage to Poetry* (1985), color lithograph, edition of 20, 30 1/2" x 44 1/2". Photo: Zindman/Fremont.

the age of ten, she offered that I write a catalogue essay for a Joan Snyder exhibition at Hirschl & Adler Modern. An excerpt read:

As I go to my mom's studio each time, I watch it develop, paintings popping up in different areas of the wall. As I watch our life develop, I think of how paintings and life relate. Over the years, our life developed just like her paintings did.²

Joan Snyder would agree. She has been reflecting upon how her paintings mirror her personal life from as far back as the early 1970s. In 1972 she wrote in a journal: "I have discovered that everything in my work relates to my life and all the important changes in my work are related to changes in my life, the most dramatic being summer 1969 when I was deciding whether to get married and was also struggling to do the grid layer stroke paintings." The entry continues: "The strokes in my paintings speak of my life and experiences. They are sometimes soft ... they sometimes laugh and are often violent ... they bleed and cry and struggle to tell my story with marks and colors and lines and shapes. I speak of love and anguish, of fear and mostly of hope." These insights are included in a longer essay by the art historian Hayden Herrera, in *Joan Snyder*, a 2005 monograph of my mother's work.³

In the introduction to that book, Norman Kleeblatt wrote:

Today, looking at the trajectory of Snyder's oeuvre provides a view that is at once intimately diaristic and overtly operatic.... it ties together four threads. The oeuvre in its entirety serves as a barometer of the broad movements of her emotional life—it reflects the different environments in which she has lived, and it demonstrates her keen awareness of (and commitment to) urgent needs of contemporary society. Not least—though least discussed in the literature—the course of Joan Snyder's art over the last forty years demonstrates how she continually draws upon internal resources toward formal experiment and self-reinvention.⁴

Joan Snyder is a self-made person. The choices she made as a young woman strayed from the norm. Yet her gravitation towards painting as an undergraduate student in her last year of Douglass College, Rutgers University (she graduated in 1962 and completed the MFA at Rutgers, 1964–66), wasn't a complete anomaly. Her father, a toy salesman, had painted when he was a boy and then again in his older age. Having tried her hand at painting while growing up, my mother never thought that it could become her occupation, because women of that time became teachers or often social workers, which is the direction she seemed to be heading. But during her last year of college, she took an art elective that changed her life. She has said that the experience of painting in those early days was like "speaking for the first time." My mother was made from a different kind of cloth than most people whose conventions she was expected to follow as a child in the small, upwardly mobile community of Highland Park, New Jersey. She has often characterized her feelings of alienation growing up in the 1940s and 1950s by pinning some of it on her mother's insistence that she wear matching outfits "like all the other girls." The idea of conformity, she has acknowledged, made her anxious. She often felt that somehow she was different. And she *was* different, in search of her true self, as she was becoming a pioneering feminist artist. Embarking on this journey, she would soon find kindred spirits that aligned more closely with her sensibilities and values. She would also find herself.

I'm in my mother's Brooklyn studio, light streaming in through the skylights. It's April 2018, just months before my 39th birthday, the same age my mother was when she gave birth to me. It's also the month she was born. She often calls April "the cruelest month" because it was during this month in 1978 that she had a late miscarriage, a baby boy who was to be named Oliver. I came into the world about a year after this painful loss. For every failure to create there is another creation on its way. As I look around the studio today, I write:

You get the sense that you are amidst a witches' den sitting in this studio. I'm studying a recently started small painting lying flat on its back. A piece of wheat-colored burlap is freshly glued to the canvas with an oval of bark, roots and dried rosebuds atop the cloth embossed by poured layers of green acrylic paint and topped off with golden glitter, creating a majestic, nest-like relief image. Dragonflies come to mind or butterflies, spring, the renewal of life, beauty. And yet, these are dead things encased in paint and chemicals. My mother leverages organic matter and toxic elements to express her ideas about being alive. The materials themselves infuse new meaning into old, deeply human stories.

Can We Turn Our Rage To Poetry (1985; Fig. 3) is the title of a lithograph that surmises Snyder's artistic sensibility to transform the negative into the positive; her work is her organizing principle much like the concept of God enables people of faith to find meaning and even joy from life's challenges. When you are an artist at work, you are assuming the role of the creator. You are your own Goddess.

Thinking about this, I write:

Her work delivers her, and likewise, if we study it, we too are delivered. That is the witch at work, with her brewing pot, throwing in everything from the baby to the bathwater; she stirs a rigorous stew. All of her guts and the gore of living are mixed together, but by some miracle (that is in fact highly intentional and calculated) a pristine beauty emerges, levitating above the agony of birth. That is the good witch, the one who tries to heal us and cradle our sorrows by portraying flowers blooming rapidly across a battlefield.

My mother has spoken about being at an altar when she paints. "It is the altar I go to face myself." And "Art," she says, "became a form of worship. Those were my shrines," speaking about her altar paintings made in the mid-sixties.⁵ Her work is her self-created spirituality. It is her calling. She reaches new levels of comprehension about the meaning of life by throwing down herbs upon canvas, awash with glossy green paint and golden glitter. In the 1960s, when "the personal is political" became a rallying cry, my mother was in step with the times. Her early altar paintings from that decade were abstracted versions of the female body, and she would often add tacky materials like gold fringe or fake leopard skin. As Herrera wrote, "The use of vulgar non-art materials was part of a rejection of mainstream formalist taste, a rejection that Snyder would share with many women artists of the 1970s."⁶ My mother's 'spiritual expression' at that time was political too. A good example of the use of these materials is a painting from the 1970s, *Vanishing Theater/The Cut* (1974; Pl. 3), where she incorporates thread, chicken wire, fake fur and cheesecloth into the painting. The use of 'kitsch' materials offers Snyder another tool for conveying meaning: the unexpected quirky object showing up in an otherwise stately painting can be humorous. As in *Love's Pale Grapes* (1982; Pl. 4), there's both a pleasing color palette and an ironic, sultry feeling because of the presence of the plastic grapes. In a 2015 interview about a solo show at the Franklin Parrasch Gallery, Snyder said, "My work has a sense of humor and is often playful as when I put plastic grapes or beads or glitter in a work, but just because a work has glitter in it doesn't mean that it's not dead serious."⁷

On a recent trip to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I visited the contemporary American painting section, hoping to gain new insights into my mother's work. I found little to reflect on. There were some usual male greats, Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly—"the boys' club," as women artists of my mother's generation might call them. It was only when I ascended to the second level and was among the South East Asian exhibit, which focuses on gods, goddesses, and divinity, that I found meaning that resonated. My mother is not a religious person, despite her upbringing with a devoted and



Fig. 4. Joan Snyder, *Waiting for a Miracle* (1986), oil and acrylic on canvas, 78" x 120". Photo: Steven Sloman.

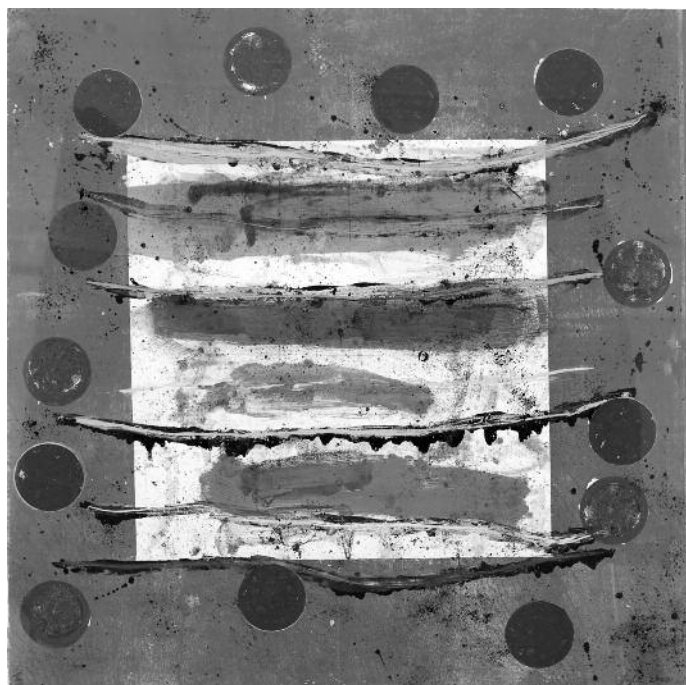


Fig. 5. Joan Snyder, *In Times of Great Disorder V* (2000), monoprint with lithography, woodcut and relief printing on paper, edition of 19 variable prints, 29 1/2" x 29 1/2". Photo: Bryan Whitney

loving Orthodox Jewish grandmother who shared her faith in subtle and intimate ways. But it was her discovery of painting that, for my mother, was like finding her God. Her work has always beckoned for a higher existence, borrowing ancient symbols like mandalas and totems, and expresses an affinity with nature. In a review of "Joan Snyder: A Painting Survey, 1969–2005," an exhibition at the Jewish Museum, Mark Stevens wrote, "She's one of our pagans ... she seems to call upon something visceral, vital, and ancient, as if she just



Fig. 6a. Joan Snyder, *Apple Tree Mass* (1983), oil, acrylic, paper mache, wood, paper, cloth on linen, 24" x 72". Photo: Steven Sloman.

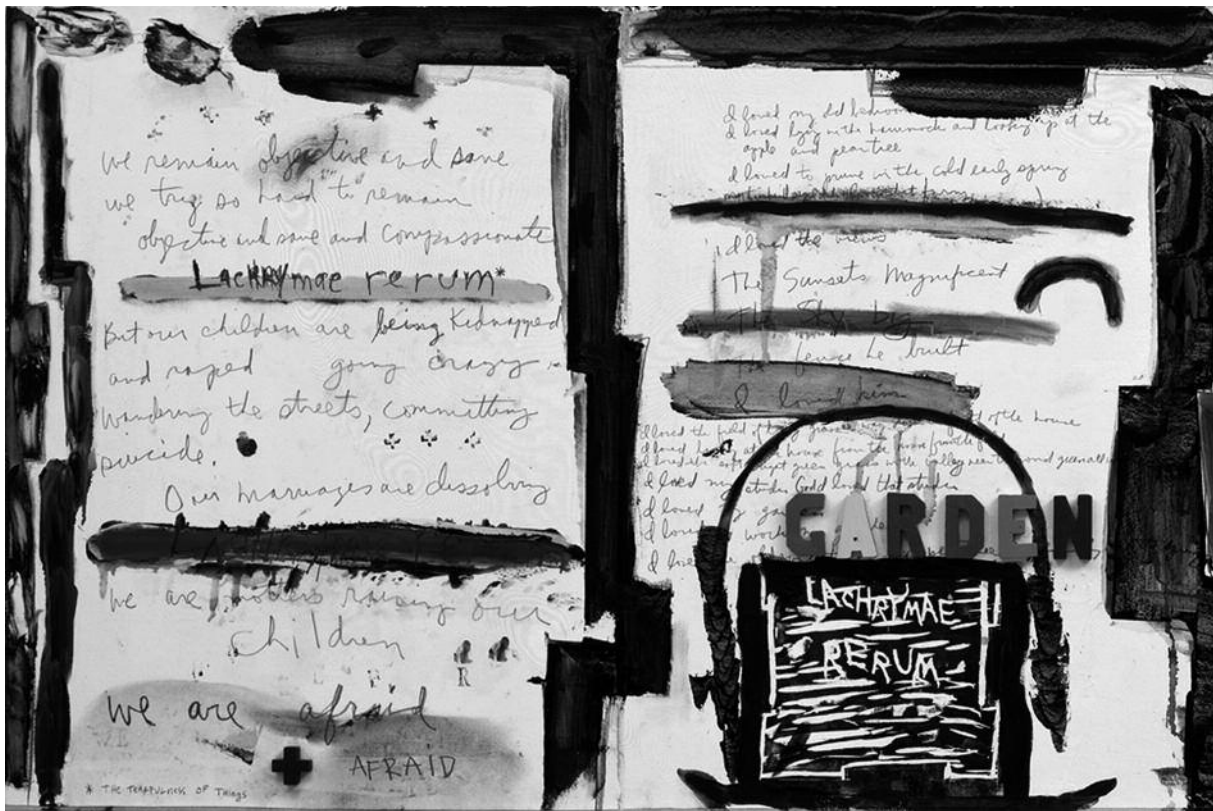


Fig. 6b. Joan Snyder, *Apple Tree Mass* (1983) (detail), oil, acrylic, paper mache, wood, paper, cloth on linen, 24" x 72". Photo: Steven Sloman.

doesn't have time for the ironies of the moment."⁸ A good example of this might be a painting called, *Waiting For A Miracle* (1986; Fig. 4) in which Snyder paints a huge iconic totem in a dark autumn field, a work that becomes like a prayer for her friend Porfirio Didonna who was suffering with a brain tumor and soon to die.

Many of the sculptures in the Philadelphia Museum's South East Asian exhibit were about the power of being female. It made me want to place my mother's work in the context of these cultures, to inquire into whether she would be called a "feminist artist" in that world. The answer, of course, was a

resounding "no"; her work is distinctly different from ancient Hindu sculptures. However, the stories she is telling through her visual language that employs female-centered narratives is akin to artistic representations of the goddess Durga, who represents the active power of the universe being triumphant over the demon of ignorance. It is only in the context of the American art world that a critic can remark that "Snyder's work [is] a continual sacrifice of modernism on the altar of feminism."⁹ I can't help but read this as the author's perception that white male entitlement is being challenged by my mother's paintings, which he speaks of with reverence but

also with the implication that modernism and feminism are worlds apart. Fortunately, Snyder keeps a healthy distance between her art practice and the reviews of her work. When she is at her altar, facing her canvas, she becomes entirely herself, able to block out art world speak.

Discovering the grid... Snyder's adoption of the grid was distinctly different from its use by minimalist artists. "The source of the grid began for many reasons," she told an interviewer, "one being the desire for narrative in the work. How to do that, structure that. And I had been very interested in music—the staff providing lines for notes—plus I had been working with children ... and had become very used to seeing children's drawings on lined yellow paper. Those drawings became one of my inspirations for the grid," she said in a 2014 interview with Cara Manes for the MoMA / PS1 blog, in which they discussed *Sweet Cathy's Song* (1978; Pl. 5). "I do think my use of the grid came from my own search, not from any minimalist theory, but that doesn't mean I wasn't affected by what was going on. I, though, wanted more in my paintings, not less ... and I wanted narrative."¹⁰

In 2000, I wrote gallery notes for her exhibition titled "In Times of Great Disorder," which featured a suite of eighteen monoprints (Fig. 5) that all employed grids with colorful, bold mandalas circulating around them. I wrote about her use of the grid in these monoprints as an organizing principle, a way to remain sane in the midst of chaos.

The grid that begs the image to have composure
An imagined sanity pushing through the havoc
Explosive tissues of ink
Some marks may rest.

We are living in times of great disorder. Nothing is permanent or ever completely still. Yet the intuitive marks and incessant circles do the healing and bring some order.¹¹

Also, at the time, I wrote about the job of a daughter being to learn her mother's pain, to learn her own pain, and to know how to distinguish between the two. Many aspects of our lives have changed in the last eighteen years, and yet I find that what I wrote then still resonates with my present experience of sitting with her work.

A recent grid painting, *Storyboard* (2017; Pl. 6) consisting of sixteen rectangles, can be 'read' like a graphic novel. No matter how you are accustomed to reading—from left to right and top to bottom or from right to left, bottom to top—you can 'read' this painting. Even those words featured in some of the rectangles, scribbled in script or handwritten illegibly, can say something. As emerging readers are taught, try to derive meaning from the pictures. If you can't make out some letters or decode the words, keep going. Read the images: an



Fig. 7. Joan Snyder, *Powdered Pearls* (2017), oil, acrylic, cloth, colored pencil, glitter, beads on canvas, 50" x 78". Photo: Dawn Blackman.

outstretched hand, a face beneath a black curtain (or is it a scene of two people inside?), three vulvas—one of which is part of a body, ruby red lips printed upon a paper towel, an explosion that drips down the canvas like a rainstorm, and the echo of grapes. In 1971, Marcia Tucker, the founder and director of the New Museum, wrote about Snyder's early grid paintings:

Because no one part of the painting is less complex than any other, the visual confusion that results forces one to "read" the painting, stroke by stroke, and precludes being able to apprehend it as a whole. The grid, although it is a fixed system on which the elements of the painting thrash about, fails to offer visual stabilization. It offers visual *direction* instead, an indication of where to start, literally, "reading" the work. It is, according to Snyder, like a writing pad on which to place the letters, words or sentences that constitute a pictorial language.¹²

A good example of this would be an early 1970s work, *First Anniversary*, a painting made on the first anniversary of my parent's marriage. And as per *Storyboard*, I only know from my mother telling me that one of the boxes with the scribbly script says, "Your bruises darling." And I know that those words are for me.

It is a peculiar position to be in, knowing that my mother's latest body of work is, in part, a manifestation of her grief about the painful experiences I've gone through. Much like she chronicled the deterioration of her own marriage with paintings like *Apple Tree Mass* (1983; Figs 6a and 6b and Pl. 7) she is, in this latest body of work with paintings such as *Storyboard*, *Powdered Pearls* (Fig. 7) and *Love, Mom* (all 2017), processing complex emotional layers using her signature visual language. As my mother noted recently, "I feel free making them, making marks in a stream of consciousness, with



Fig. 8. Joan Snyder, *Beanfield With Snow* (1984), oil, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 96". Photo: Steven Sloman

messages that can't be read or spoken aloud to anyone, messages that break apart ... using all the iconography developed over 50 years of working. Totems, angels, female figures, nests, openings, breasts, strokes, lines, marks, words...stick figures, screaming mouths, red lips...." Marcia Tucker's 1971 words still apply to this current body of work: "Because no one image takes precedence over another, and because there are so many images in a single canvas, there is no *gestalt*, no holistic aspect to these paintings. For some artists, there is a desire to amalgamate the multiplicity of one's experience into a single image, to comprehend it and give it order. Snyder presents that multiplicity as it is experienced."¹³

Along with presenting multiplicity, a duality of voices is a frequent presence in Snyder's paintings. She is at once dealing with complex adult issues, while speaking through the voice of a child—the inner child if you will. Again, I am reminded of Marcia Tucker's writing about the 1970s work: "The disregard for formal perspectives (or for any single perspective or vantage point) in this work relates the painting to the way a child first makes objects larger or smaller according to a personal system of importance, rather than to an approximation of the 'real' values of the adult world. Similarly, Snyder appears to have disregarded the accepted values of formal-ordering in favor of a more personal, hermetic

arrangement of images."¹⁴ A current example of this can be found in another recent grid painting, *Lipshtick* (2017; front cover), that includes a number of boxes containing lips and hearts that are molded from paper mache. A set of words in chicken-scratch emerge next to the spine of a damaged tree: "you bastard." Four open mouths side by side create the sensation of being animated, as if the lips are speaking the words that are written on the painting. The other legible phrase is, "that's my child," written in a couple of places. And then, two hearts; one is of paper mache and the other in solid red paint with a purple line cut through it anchoring each side. These hearts and lips are elemental images that convey heartbreak. My mother's own voice within the realm of this painting comprises many voices speaking through her, like a manifestation of the human psyche on canvas.

In 1983, when she painted *Apple Tree Mass*, my mother was adjusting to being a single parent living in Manhattan. Just a few years before we moved back into our rented loft on Mulberry Street (in the cross section between "Little Italy" and "Chinatown"), a boy from a nearby neighborhood was abducted one morning. He was only six and at his insistence his parents had allowed him to go out alone and walk to the school bus stop—a mere two blocks from his parents' loft in

Soho. Needless to say, it was a different time. Parents across the city and the nation were jerked into a state of terror about protecting their children. I can imagine how this affected a newly single parent, just having moved to the area where this crime had occurred, knowing that a kidnapper was on the loose. I remember my mother holding my hand tightly as she walked me to school. At that time she also knew other mothers whose teenage children had committed suicide, and many women in her community had recently left their husbands. The world as they knew it was coming undone.

Written on the left side of *Apple Tree Mass*, in a loose hand script, it says:

We remain objective and sane. We try so hard to remain objective and sane and compassionate. *Lachrymae rerum*. But our children are being kidnapped. And raped. Going crazy. Wandering the streets. Committing suicide. Our marriages are dissolving. *Lachrymae rerum*. We are mothers raising our children. We are afraid. AFRAID.

She translates the Latin phrase that's repeated twice at the bottom of the canvas, "the tearfulness of things." Both phrases are encased in different shades of purple oil paint strokes. In her writing, she assumes the collective voice for these women, elevating the content to more than just personal. Just to the right of that panel, she makes a list of all the things she loved about living at the farm (a property in Pennsylvania she and my father had purchased in the early 1970s) and her marriage and what she has lost. Underneath a soft washed pink stroke, she writes, "I loved him." In an etched square at the bottom of this list she repeats yet again, "*Lachrymae Rerum*." Big block letters, each a different color, glued onto the canvas overlaying some of the writing, spell the word "GARDEN." The block letters infuse the word with a child's perspective, and in all of the dizzying madness of society with its social ills, my mother seems to be insisting on preserving innocence.

The Garden of Eden must prevail... In the righthand, double panel of the painting are a landscape with a tree and a figure standing in what looks like an arched doorway. It appears that my mother is juxtaposing her former life in the country with her challenging new life in the city. In the mid 1980s we moved again. This time from our Mulberry Street loft into a small farmhouse in Eastport, NY, surrounded by bean fields. These fields inspired Snyder to abandon the heavy-hearted paintings she was making at the time and begin a series of bean field paintings, the first, *Beanfield With Music* (1984, Pl. 8) followed by *Beanfield with Snow* (1984, Fig. 8) and then *Beanfield with Mud*. All of her field paintings, and there have been many over the years, harken back to the energy and spontaneity of her early stroke paintings.



Fig. 9. Joan Snyder, *Lovers* (1989), oil on wood panel with fabric, 18" x 24". Photo: Zindman/Fremont.

A pervasive philosophy in Snyder's work formed in the 1970s when she began to explore what she calls the 'female sensibility.' In *Heart On* (1975; Pl. 9), whose title she came up with during one of her daily studio visits with my father, two gold hearts, shrouded flesh-like paint and crimson drips of menstrual blood fill some of the squares that are part of a larger grid composition. For her this painting was about "female pain, anger and needs."¹⁵ In her artist's journal (1976)



Fig. 10. Joan Snyder, *Lady Labyrinth* (1989), oil, acrylic, paper mache, and cloth on linen, 60" x 60". Photo: Steven Sloman.

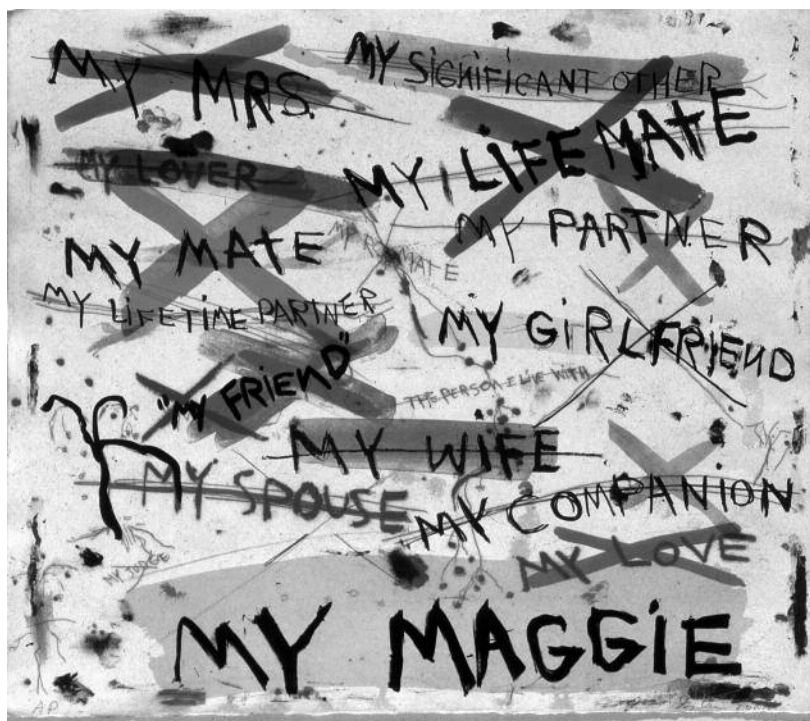


Fig. 11. Joan Snyder, *My Maggie* (1997), etching with watercolor on paper, edition of 60, 9" x 11". Photo: Zindman/Fremont.

she created a definition of not only what she was doing in her art at that time but also what then seemed a common theme among women artists: "Female Sensibility is layers, words, membranes, cotton, cloth, rope, repetition, bodies, wet, opening, closing, repetition, lists, lifestories, grids, destroying them, houses, intimacy, doorways, breasts, vaginas, flow, strong, building, putting together many disparate elements, repetition, red, pink, black, earth colors, the sun, the moon, roots, skins, walls, yellow, flowers, streams, puzzles, questions, stuffing, sewing, fluffing, satin hearts, tearing, tying, decorating, baking, feeding, holding, listening, seeing through the layers, oil, varnish, shellac, jell, paste, glue, seeds, thread, more, not less, repetition..."¹⁶ She wanted to put all that it was to be female in one painting, and to celebrate her gender using all of the visual and material strategies she had developed thus far.

Lucy Lippard, responding to the trending "feminine sensibility," wrote at that time: "A central focus (often 'empty', often circular or oval), parabolic baglike forms, obsessive line and detail, veiled strata, tactile or sensuous surfaces and forms, associate fragmentation, autobiographical emphasis, and so forth ... [these] are found far more often in the work of women than of men."¹⁷ And in 1976, in *Art in America*, Hayden Herrera wrote of Joan Snyder's paintings: "They will continue to unsettle our notions about the quality of female experience as well as the pieties of abstract art."¹⁸ My mother's work was at that time exposing the complexities of being a woman in a way that was generally not understood by the male-dominated art world. She was also unearthing painterly constraints by her bold insistence of speaking in her own voice.

Part of her search in exploring the female sensibility

artistically was delving into her own sexuality. During the same era that she was making wildly courageous paintings about the female anatomy and psyche, she was seeking intimacy with women. Whether in the form of political gatherings to discuss greater visibility for women's art or seeking fulfillment sexually and emotionally with particular women, my mother was already in the process of leaving my father and their farm. Her paintings at that time expressed the agony she felt in her journey to come to terms with her sexuality. She later explained: "I was making paintings that were, for me, about being a painter and about being a woman, about trying to paint the internal, organic anthropomorphic sense of being a woman and also about my own sexual awakening."¹⁹

Not until the late 1980s would she meet her soulmate, Maggie Cammer, a New York State judge, whom she has been with for thirty-one years; Maggie is my other primary parent. In the early days of their courtship, she painted *Lovers* (1989; Fig. 9), an erotic scene between women unfolding on a black stage. The lovers are surrounded by flowers. The black strokes were painted with such vigor that a visceral sensation

can be felt, as if the bodies are swaying in a ship at sea. My mother's passion makes itself felt in this painting that is, unlike many of her other works, fairly uncomplicated. It conveys joy, pleasure, and relief. That same year she also painted *Lady Labyrinth* (Fig. 10) and *Lady Blacklines*, both which appear in the catalogue for the Hirschl & Adler Modern show mentioned at the beginning of this article. A passage from Snyder's artist's statement read:

This work reflects all of my concerns and moods, my sorrows, losses and struggles and a peace that has finally come into my life.

I can only assume that the "peace" she was referring to was finally having found a partner with whom to share a fulfilling life. But choosing to be with a woman was again stepping outside of societal conventions, much like her choice to become a feminist artist. And yet, this just gave her one more reason to put her life's journey into her art. In *My Maggie* (2000, Fig. 11) a monoprint with mostly words, she writes in caps, "My significant other, the person I live with, my Mrs., my life mate, my spouse, my companion, my love," etc. crossing all of them out with brightly colored red, orange and purple X's and "My Maggie" lands at the bottom of the print, highlighted in a happy sunshine yellow.

Preserving the Dance... Again I'm in the Brooklyn studio, studying a recent work, *Floating Soul* (2018; Pl. 10), a large square canvas whose central figure is part of the female body, her breasts and belly bulging out, suggesting pregnancy. Attached to her belly are wing-like thighs that seem to lift her in space, for she is swimming in a sea of deep blue water,

surrounded by paler shades of lavender blue and finally framed in a copper-toned, earthy circle of herbs and bark. The figure represents fertility, and she is created out of paper mache, that semen-like gluey substance bound up with its second incarnation, from tree to paper. Snyder's paintings are bound by the materials she chooses but their identity soars above what makes them. Their identity is formed by the story she is telling in the process of creating, I write:

... We are skin and bones and blood and muscle. We have a brain, and a heart and lungs and a tongue but does any of this define who we are?

Organic matter is mirroring the content, adding narrative force to an already pulsing, female image. Around this figure and her pond with its barky beach are strokes—light-filled pink and purple strokes, as if chosen by little girls to adorn their mother. My mother worries that the quality of the strokes will be changed with prolonged exposure to sunlight, and so she has sprayed them with an ultraviolet archival varnish to protect them. She has created the strokes out of a white ground carefully dried and painted over with colored inks. The effect is that each stroke has a light gradient to it, so that it dances off the canvas with greater dimensionality than would that of a flat matte paint stroke. Preserving the dance is critical.

My mother's journey as an artist, and her resulting body of work has taught me many lessons, and I am still learning. Foremost, she has taught me that if you are going down one path and another one presents itself that fills you with intrigue and hunger, take that one. It may be painful, but it will make you a stronger, clearer person. And although you are part of a world with influential forces all around you, follow your own voice and create your own language. Further, once you have found your calling, your spiritual and artistic duty, go to it each and every day. As Joan Snyder has written in one of her prints, "My work has been absolutely faithful to me." I think that perhaps she meant it the other way around. It will only be in that act of daily artistic devotion that the fruits which are yours to bear will make themselves known. ●

Molly Snyder-Fink is a documentary filmmaker and writer. She lives in Brooklyn with her son. Her work can be found at: www.mollysnnyderfink.com.

Notes

Additional artworks and writings by and about the artist can be found at www.joansnyder.net.

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