

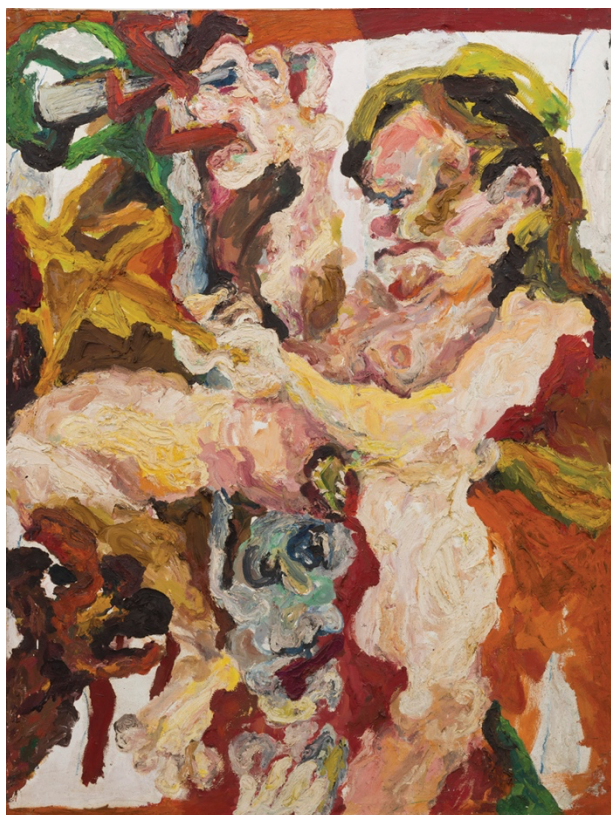
# ARTFORUM

## Sylvia Snowden

PARRASCH HEIJNEN GALLERY

“Sylvia Snowden: Select Works, 1966–2020” was the eighty-year-old artist’s first show at Parrasch Heijnen gallery in Los Angeles. Making up for lost time, this historical (but not chronological) survey of expressively rendered canvases with thickly encrusted surfaces—the paint troweled and

visibly mixed in the act of conjuring bodies from the obdurate material—was a contrast to the more focused “Sylvia Snowden: The M Street Series, 1982–1988,” which was concurrently on display for her debut presentation at New York’s Franklin Parrasch Gallery. The latter’s tight grouping featured portrayals of Snowden’s neighbors in Washington, DC, some intimates and others strangers, many of whom were unemployed and unhoused. The artist documents their plight in mostly abstract pictures of irradiating pain that frame splayed, long-armed figures staring at the viewer with palpable urgency. A piece from the “Men on M Street” series, 2001–2004, *Men on M Street—George Brown II*, 2001, a massive vertical canvas cleaved by the namesake figure, was included in the West Coast exhibition. In this painting, a black arm



*Sylvia Snowden, Betty, 1974, oil on canvas, 80 x 60 1/4"*

extends from the model's torso in a continuous hardened puddle of acrylic, similar in style to the right leg propping him up from beneath, in a warping of bilateral symmetry. Snowden articulates his left arm as so many gashes against a field of signal orange; the effect is something like a Futurist disarticulation of subjectivity into the penetrating light of sick industrial ambience.

This violent commingling of form and space is a Snowden hallmark. The artist sometimes rims the threshold where skin meets air with opaque passages of white, as if to articulate the edges of erasure, as we see in *Alice Shannon*, 1985. Also included here were *Shell 12*, 19, and 72, all 2010—nominal portraits of the artist's daughter that she considers a single piece—in which head and limbs cohere by virtue of their uniform color. These primarily red-silhouetted figures reveal emerald or cobalt at their outer limits, moments that are subsumed by the churning strokes that run across all three compositions. Taken together, they admit an observational intensity redoubled as rawness posing as, or perhaps even shielded by, pictorial irresolution. Exemplary in this effort is the astounding and elephantine *Shell aged 13*, 2012. In this roughly six-and-a-half-by-five-foot canvas, Snowden's daughter appears to be dancing exuberantly. We can find no single viewing distance at which these densely wrought images cohere without simultaneously falling apart. As the more abstract *Green III*, 2020, makes clear, these are paintings thick as sculptural reliefs, and their assertion of physicality, of presence, seems very much the point. (A 2016 show at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center in Washington, DC, was appropriately titled "The Feel of Paint.")

Relationality is quite differently modeled in *Betty*, 1974, the first work visible in the opening room at the LA space. Made with oils (Snowden shifted to acrylic after having children), it is a picture of bruised flesh, all muddled cream, brown, and salmon. It is also a none-too-subtle depiction of a white woman sexually abusing two Black men. They crouch under the toothy rictus of a vagina dentata amid roving peace signs and a swastika. Besides its brutal depiction of racism and rape, the work forms an allegory that addresses the exclusionary practices of American institutions witnessed by the artist. One major show in 2000 at Washington, DC's Corcoran Gallery of Art involved a series made after her son was murdered near their home (a monoprint, the verdant *Malik, Farewell III*, 1995–98, was included at Parrasch Heijnen); Snowden's insistence that the work was more a joyous remembrance of her son's life than a grueling meditation on his death was met with near mocking disregard in critic Michael O'Sullivan's review of the exhibition, published in the September 1, 2000, edition of the *Washington Post*. In recounting his disbelieving exchange with the artist, O'Sullivan writes: "So it's Eurocentric morbidity and Western art-historical baggage that makes parts of [your] art feel mournful or angry or funereal when it's really just a celebration of being alive?" "Yes," said Snowden. "I do believe it is."

In 2019, the artist received a Lifetime Achievement Award from her alma mater, Howard University in Washington, DC, recognizing her work for more than half a century. The rest of us need to catch up.

— Suzanne Hudson