

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Joan Snyder: *To Become a Painting*

By Norman L Kleeblatt

Regulars of New York City's contemporary art scene have recently been treated to two doses of Joan Snyder's paintings. *Joan Snyder: To Become a Painting*, currently on view at the Franklin Parrasch Gallery on the Upper East Side, includes seven recent works whose combined energy and elegant, clear installation in the gallery's domestic-scale spaces contribute to the rewards of such a modest presentation. Those intrepid denizens who also attended the Frieze Art Fair at the Shed got an additional dose with a broader spectrum—at least in chronological terms—of Snyder's canvases. This included one early work from her breakthrough series of stroke paintings, titled *Birth* (1972), which received significant attention.

With a contemporaneous article in the May 1971 issue of *Artforum* by the legendary Whitney Museum curator and subsequent New Museum founder Marcia Tucker, Snyder's stroke pictures have become iconic, even historic, within the ever-changing, expanding and contracting canon. Dare I even use the term "canon," with all its chauvinist and colonial implications, in this context? But however paradoxical a position the stroke pictures may hold within the larger discourse of postwar art, they have become highly visible during the last several years.

A work from this series, *Dark Strokes Hope* of 1971, was purchased by the Tate Modern in 2020; *Smashed Stokes Hope* of the same year was made a promised gift to the Metropolitan Museum in 2017 and was installed in strategic position in Randall Griffey's 2018 *Epic Abstraction: From Pollock to Herrera*. In even more categoric an historical position, Snyder's monumental stroke picture *Love Your Bones* of 1970–71 appeared in Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, Tonio Kröner, and David Joselit's *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age* presented in 2015 and 2016 at both the Museum Brandhorst in Munich and mumok, Museum of Modern Art in Vienna. There Snyder's work was situated under these curators' newly coined stylistic moniker, "Affective Gestures." This characterization was one of the subsets they used to expand Lucy Lippard's 1960s term "Eccentric Abstraction," which they reframe as "Eccentric Figuration." Affective Gestures embraced mainly women, including Mary Heilmann, Eva Hesse (her early paintings), Joan Jonas, Martha Jungwirth, Joan Mitchell, Ulrike Müller, as well as David Reed and Cy Twombly.

The curators explained that Affective Gestures encompassed painters whose body, bodily actions, or visceral effects were inherent in the nature of the work, proposing a more permeable, expressionistic membrane between abstraction and figuration from the 1960s to the 2010s. Such a reading provides a useful angle for looking at Snyder's post-stroke paintings in general and certainly the lush, sometimes purposefully rugged, recent pictures in *To Become a Painting*. In fact, the analytic nature of Snyder's stroke series quickly gave way to references to nature—landscape and the body itself—sometimes including texts. Snyder's paint handling has only become more and more visceral, more impassioned. Most importantly for the artist, as well as the women painters with whom she feels closely connected, is the inclusion of personal narrative itself: for Snyder, women had stories to tell which men did not go near. It may well be that this ability to confront highly personal emotional states has given her permission to be at once more expressive and more experimental. Not least, and evident in this exhibition, is that her painterly approach continues to become increasingly fearless.

Take *Duet in Three Parts* (2021), its title characteristic of Snyder's obsession with music and her frequent synthetic collisions between the visual and the aural. Yes, this diptych still contains strokes as well as other rectilinear forms on the left panel, yet they drip ferociously down to each subsequent area of color, creating a precarious frisson, the sensation of being out of control. This manner of paint application might seem a clear recipe for failure until viewers realize how carefully Snyder controls each paint stroke, each area of bleed, and just how intentional are even areas that appear soiled. At first glance, such passages seem like canvas discoloration or evidence of accidental stains, but they are purposeful. The right panel of this picture is even bolder, freer, more expressive with bodily inferences of a large, dark, gooey, seemingly two-headed creature (or is it four?), composed of bleeding crimson discs within a central white bodily form, and a vertical blue rectangle which might be read (in Rorschach mode) as a thigh. This is clearly Snyder's liminal state of affairs. She deploys ciphers, stick figures, fleshy bodies, strokes, drips, and bleeds which hover in the no-woman's-land between abstraction and representation, between gesture and feeling, between image and meaning. In its seeming compartmentalization of body parts, *Duet in Three Parts* is reminiscent of Mark Rothko's figurative hieroglyphs of the early 1940s. In those works, Rothko refers to classical myths' basic, mostly tragic, human dilemmas, while Snyder's feminist approach refers instead to intimate, highly personal states of self.

By comparison, *Symphony of Pain and Joy* (2022) is a much lighter toned canvas with more evenly spaced and autonomous incident that might almost be read, given the contrasting emotional states identified by its title, as a pictograph. The red rectangular strokes in the mid-left range of the picture seem to be hemorrhaging wounds with drips partially covering a drawn flower. Might the wounds also be dying flowers? Is the flower a symbol of sorrow or joy? That enigmatic yellow double cruciform shape in the upper right quadrant: is it figurative? Is it a crucifix? Where does the pain stop? Where does the joy begin? Snyder keeps such painterly modes and emotional distinctions purposefully ambiguous and multivalent. It's up to the viewer to extract the wide range of feelings and emotional states that are embedded in Snyder's art.



Joan Snyder, *Duet in Three Parts*, 2021. Oil, acrylic, ink, paper mache, burlap, paper, twigs, leaves on linen in two parts, overall: 60 x 64 inches. Courtesy Franklin Parrasch Gallery.

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Joan Snyder, *Symphony of Pain and Joy*, 2022. Oil, acrylic, paper mache, paper, pencil, ink on linen, 54 x 66 inches. Courtesy Franklin Parrasch Gallery.



Joan Snyder, *Ode to Monet*, 2021. Oil, acrylic, paper mache, burlap, dried flowers, flower stems, paper, wooden hoop on canvas in two parts, overall: 32 x 96 inches. Courtesy Franklin Parrasch Gallery.

ON VIEW

Franklin Parrasch

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Norman Kleeblatt is a curator, art historian, and critic. Formerly chief curator at The Jewish Museum, New York, his exhibitions included *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940–1976* (2008) and *From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945–1952* (2014). He has contributed to *ARTnews*, *Artforum*, *Art Journal*, and *Art in America*, among other publications.