

Grit and Vitality, Daniel Sturgis on Joan Snyder at Blain Southern, London

In 1992 the American painter Joan Snyder published an article “Not Neo To Us” in *The Journal of Rutgers University Libraries*. The Douglass Library at Rutgers had been important to Snyder as she was an MFA student studying on the Douglass campus in the early 1960s. Having then left the college, she later returned in 1971 to work with Daisy Shenholt at the library. Together they set up the hugely influential Women Artists Series—an exhibition and discussion platform in the library’s lobby—which is, remarkably, still ongoing and was the first program of its kind in the US. It was a move that in the early 70s had real urgency: A way to counter the blatant bias against women artists and painters that Snyder saw in all US art departments at the time, as the faculties then were notoriously male-dominated. Snyder’s own professor at Rutgers was Robert Morris, but there was a lack of female role models. If women were teaching they appeared, as Snyder then did after she became better known, as a very occasional part-time sessional visitor.

The 1992 article remembers this moment, but it also pointed to something else at stake. Namely, that the so-called Neo Expressionist return in painting at the time the article appeared—personified in the US by artists like Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, and David Salle—had well-developed roots in the practice of American women artists. According to Snyder, she and her female counterparts had tried to distance themselves from the “visual anemia,” in Snyder’s works, of the dominant art of Minimalism and Colorfield painting. Snyder maintains that she and others worked to fill up their canvases with life, “with everything we can lay our hands on [...] Nancy Spero did that, Faith Ringgold did that, Jackie Winsor did that. WE DID THAT.” It is precisely this plenitude (filling up), kicking against the “pricks” of Minimalism, that one sees so clearly on display in the exhibition “Rosebuds & Rivers” at Blain Southern in London.

“Rosebuds & Rivers” focuses on Snyder’s paintings from the last decade. These are multifaceted canvases that come from the gut. They are bright and brash—with a seductive, relaxed freedom—that seem to encompass both the tragic and comedic. That they were made when Snyder was approaching 80 is remarkable, for their spirit is youthful, passionate, and not beholden to anyone or anything. This does not mean that the paintings are somehow easy. They are not out there to be liked or please—but they do—through their vitality and grit.

*Proserpina* (2013) is one of the stand out works in this exhibition as it shows how Snyder can weave together complex layers of meaning in a single work. In a sense, it is a landscape painting. At over three meters in length it is long and thin. It is painted on raw linen in oils and acrylics but also stained with earth, drawn and written upon in charcoal, and scattered with poppy seeds and papier-mâché flowers. The format of the painting is mainly built through detached brush strokes. Strokes that are at once reminiscent of Snyder’s breakthrough “stroke” paintings of the early 70s, such as *Smashed Strokes Hope* (1971) that steals the show in the Metropolitan Museum’s current “Epic Abstraction” exhibition in New York. These are paintings that sought to use paint, all manner of paint—spray paint, oil

paint, acrylic paint—to physically and materially speak, as they broke through the Minimalist grid with freedom and new conditions all their own.

The strokes in *Proserpina* move from big, wide and dark umbers and earth colors to short, delicate pinks and reds. Within the darker left hand section Snyder has scrawled in charcoal, with a determined urgency, single words – “earth,” “stone,” “fields” — highlighting a heavy sense of land and ground. The use of watery drips, poppy seeds, and charcoal all add to this material and organic base. And then the lightness of the red passages, where Proserpina’s name is written garlanded by rose-like forms, provides otherworldly relief to the laden sobriety of the earth. Snyder has used the natural world to express emotion many times before, creating a remarkable and underrated series of paintings of beanfields in the 80s that, through wildness and a reflection on personal narrative, liberated her from the perceived confinement of the stroke works. *Proserpina* also connects to the way Cy Twombly used and saw landscape as a therapeutic and contemplative place attached to myth and renewal. Proserpina is after all the Roman name for Persephone, and the painting has a feel of that mythological story of a mother searching for her daughter and the connection between the living world and the underworld. Snyder had stumbled across the myth through a song of the same name by the US folk singer Kate McGarrigle, whose haunting refrain goes: “Prosepina, Prosepina, come home to momma, come home to momma.”

Reference to music and landscape return throughout the exhibition in *Heart of a Fugue* (2016), *Womansong* (2016), and *Little Bark Beach* (2018), where song in particular provides the genesis for many of the recent canvases. Snyder draws to music, often initially in concert halls, through being absorbed in what she sees as the “the most abstract of art forms,” that forms the basis of her paintings. In most cases, she is inspired by vocal classical music, which she plays on repeat while painting, enjoying the polyphony within the compositions, where opposites are held in tension with one another: joy and sorrow, beginnings and endings. It is this richness that Snyder draws upon as she couples her internal organic sense of being with the totemic, symbolic, and voluptuous painted world.

Snyder happily embraces the subversive element of camp as a means to add a profound “charge” to her paintings: to speak with humor about serious subjects. To create double and triple meanings by using and re-using the tropes of a feminist language of painting—a language which she radically helped to form many years ago. This fact perhaps gives Snyder a license to indulge (and get away with) a deadpan of the vaginal as “seed catchers” in paintings such as *Celadon & Silk* (2018), a work stuffed ceremonially with little glass beads. Snyder then often revels in the general abundance of landscape detritus: straw, twigs, and the like in *Fragments of a Soul* (2018). In other works, she points to the almost restorative and healing properties in paintings which are scattered with rosebuds and Chinese herbs. Finally, she can even call a painting *Really* (2015) as in, as she says in her catalogue interview, “Really, you must be fucking kidding me.”

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