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Joan Snyder: *The Summer Becomes a Room*

OCT 2020

By [William Corwin](#)



Joan Snyder, *Paint A Pond*, 2019. Oil, acrylic, burlap, paper on canvas, 32 x 64 inches. Courtesy Canada Gallery, New York.

On View

CANADA

The Summer Becomes a Room

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There is a hieroglyph in the Egyptian alphabet that is a representation of a pool with lotuses: the pictograph is a horizontal rectangle with a few stylized flowers and buds emerging from its top surface. There is something comforting about this cool little pool, the idea that it was part of a visual language, appearing in a text here and there, offering a phonetic component (“sha”) to words, but also reminding the reader of a place where they might seek refuge. Joan Snyder’s current exhibition *The Summer Becomes a Room* is about this idea as well, both the image of fecund and vibrant life and the use of that notion as a kernel or symbol to accent large expanses of the artist’s own image-glyphs that populate her diptychs and triptychs. The horizontal rectangular form also is a recurring theme in Snyder’s work, in *Paint a Pond*, *Inner Green*, *Black Lake*, and *In Woodstock* (all 2019). As is clear from the titles, the rectangle/pool/field form straddles a wide spectrum of significations for the artist: of life, multiplicity, encompassing, as well as a stand-in for the art object itself, but certainly shares many of the implications of its Egyptian antecedent.



Joan Snyder, *Anatomy of a Summer Painting*, 2019. Oil, acrylic, paper mache, burlap, paper on linen, 32 x 128 inches. Courtesy Canada Gallery, New York.

Snyder wraps this body of work in an overwhelming sense of acceptance and gratitude for the cycles of nature: the seasons, life and death, day and night, morning and dusk. Overall this seems a positive reckoning; her palette is bright and harmonious, and it’s hard not to get a boost from looking at it. Many of the paintings are broken into diptychs or triptychs, though, following a very traditional format for displaying the two sides of the coin, Snyder’s paintings often imply a pair of oppositional readings, a down for every up. In *Field Marks* (2019), a thickly painted field

of drippy oval forms, predominantly orange, light gray, and pink/fuchsia is played against a patchwork of Hofmann-esque rectangles and squares, a mass of blossoms against an imperious pink and purple textured square. Is there balance between the uproar of life and the control of measured geometry? The question comes up again and again: In *Black Lake* and *Anatomy of a Summer Painting* (2019) Snyder is able to present this question with a sense of humor—an argument over the selling points of French versus English gardens—but she allows for a serious reading, too. The control inscribed in the painting *Anatomy of a Summer Painting* is that of culture: there is a flag-like format to the right-hand panel of the diptych with collaged elements—a photograph and text—that depicts the early Neolithic culture at Çatalhöyük. This plays against the natural and chaotic sensibilities in the left-hand panel, in the form of a green field of strokes and silhouettes. In this process of order and chaos in bright color she harnesses the same amicable delivery system as Cy Twombly, lacing seductive forms with sharper meanings we only grasp after we've focused on the image as a whole.



Joan Snyder, *SHE*, 2017. Oil, acrylic, watercolor, paper, cloth, colored pencil, pastel on canvas, 60 x 42 inches. Courtesy Canada Gallery, New York.

Reading Snyder's lexicon is a much more personal experience than scanning a stele carved with ancient hieroglyphs. Her symbols are hand-picked and come with the artist's baggage. Handprints appear with some regularity and seem an empty reference to the artist's presence, but most of Snyder's symbols are effective. In *Ode to Summer* (2019) the artist riffs on John Keats and unabashedly engages in the time-honored tradition of propitiating the season of warmth and growth. A giant spotted red and yellow gourd lounges on the leftmost panel of the triptych, papier mâché blossoms spill from a burlap cornucopia in the center, while the right-hand panel depicts a nocturnal shower of blossoms. *SHE* (2017) is a vertical canvas depicting a feminine presence composed from a combination of both painterly and natural components. A bunch of deep purple painted grapes dangle between two massive circular mauve bosoms; above these a series of violet strokes designate a stern maternal face. *SHE* owes a compositional debt to Willem de Kooning's "Woman" series, but possesses an infusion of natural symbolism and forms that pushes it from the personal into the monumental. Snyder enjoys playing with the notion that a glob of paint or a brushstroke can lie in indeterminate territory between abstraction

and biomorphism. She heightens this effect by coating her paints with high gloss or texturing them by embedding them in the burlap she applies to the canvas. She also adheres dried stalks, seed pods, and expanses of dirt to heighten the tension between the natural materials and painted media in her work. In the end, all of their colors originate from the earth. And like the hieroglyphs, which we admire so much for their frequent onomatopoeic literalness, in that the sound they represent is the picture we see, Snyder also toys with the interstitial territory of where the nature stops, and the art begins.

Contributor

William Corwin

is a sculptor and journalist from New York. He has exhibited at The Clocktower, LaMama and Geary galleries in New York, as well as galleries in London, Hamburg, Beijing and Taipei. He has written regularly for *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Artpapers*, *Bomb*, *Artcritical*, *Raintaxi* and *Canvas* and formerly for *Frieze*. Most recently he curated and wrote the catalog for *Postwar Women* at The Art Students League in New York, an exhibition of the school's alumnae active between 1945-65, and *9th Street Club*, and exhibition of Perle Fine, Helen Frankenthaler, Mercedes Matter, Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner and Elaine de Kooning at Gazelli Art House in Mayfair. He is the editor of *Formalism; Collected Essays of Saul Ostrow*, to be published in 2020, and he will participate in the exhibition *Anchor/Roots* at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor Cultural Center in 2021.