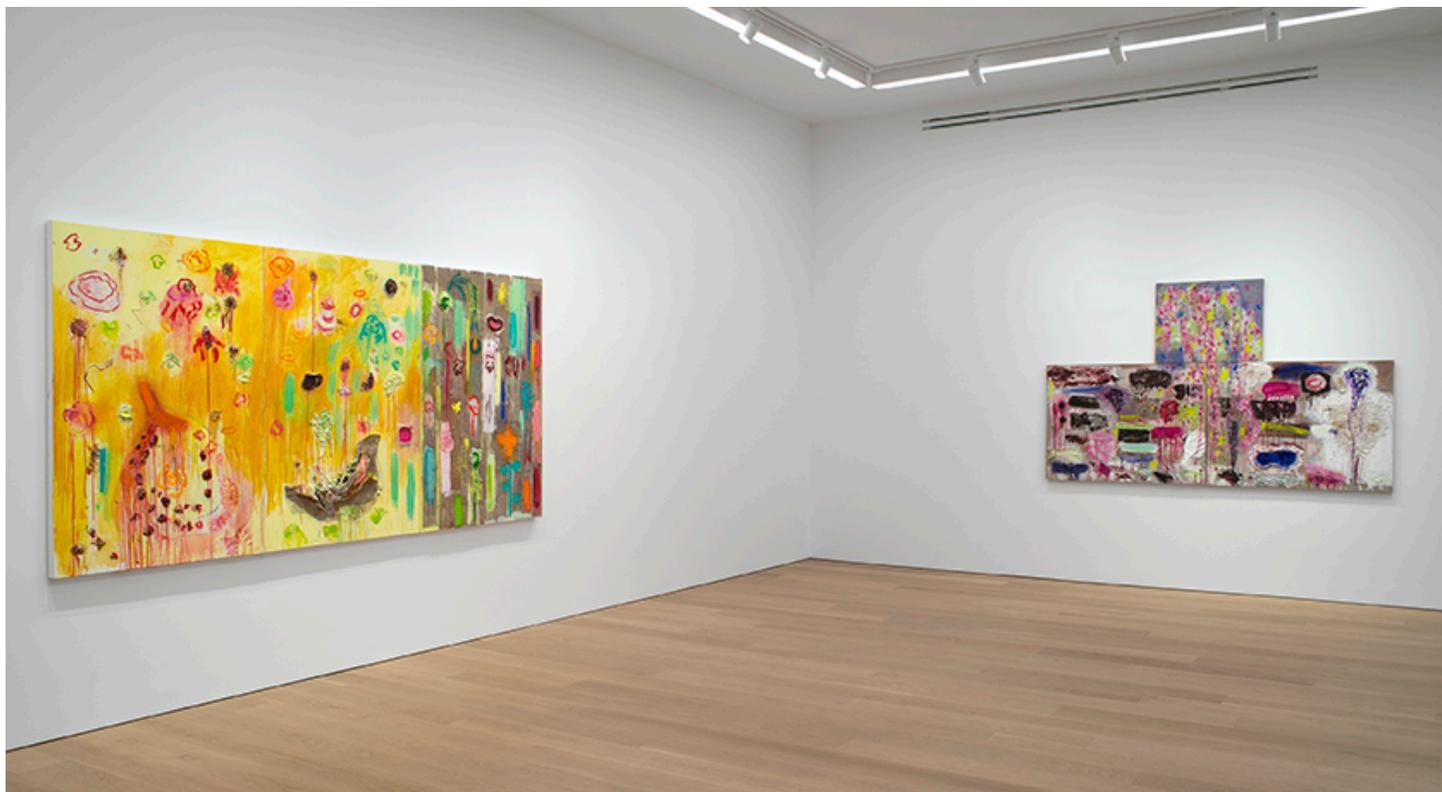# TWO COATS OF PAINT

September 18, 2020

Joan Snyder: Painting from the inside out

2:00 pm by Editor

Joan Snyder, installation view. Left: Ode to Summer (2019); Right: Weeping Cherry Tree & Thee (2020) / Courtesy CANADA

Contributed by Jason Andrew / In a 1976 *Cincinnati Enquirer* review of Joan Snyder's paintings, the reviewer, Owen Findsen, surmised that she had "picked up a little of this, a little of that … and made it all uglier." While he found her work offensive, even questioning it's validity, for those like me who have come to love Snyder's work, it couldn't be a bigger compliment. Joan Snyder paints her world from the inside out.

Unabashedly expressive, her paintings are born of sorrow and moods, loss and struggles, and yes, peace and love as well. The new paintings now on view at CANADA echo a familiar cantata – an unapologetic narrative.

"They are a form of keeping time," Helen Molesworth writes in her witty catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition, "of remaining present, of acting as both observer and recorder." The catalogue also features commentary by Wallace Whitney and Sean Scully.

Consistent throughout her work since the 1960s is Snyder's use of a "stroke" – a heavy gesture succinctly pulled horizontally. Conceived as an alternative to the Great God Grid, this mark can be interpreted as a cancellation, a kind of crossing out. At first, at least, it was distinctly her own. Each stroke works in tandem with saturated orbs, scribbles, and textured elements of collage. While overtly physical, her paintings, often multi-paneled, are not lost to the oblivion of expression.

Snyder has always been outspoken, and her paintings are a kind of glorious outrage. When asked by Ruth Iskin, Lucy Lippard, and Arlene Raven to describe her art and its relationship to Feminism in 1977, she responded with an associative fusillade:

> *layers, words, membranes, cotton, cloth, rope, repetition, bodies, wet, opening, closing repetition, lists, life stories, grids, destroying grids, houses, intimacy, doorways, breasts, vaginas, flow, strong, building, putting together many disparaging elements, repetition, red, pink, black, earth feel colors, the sun, the moon…*

The exhibition features a return to a common theme for Snyder, that of her "Field Series." These works, painted in her studios in Woodstock and Brooklyn, continue to be about the sacred, the serene, fields of moons, moons in mud, rippling ponds, landscapes stretched out, and daily diaries exposed. These lush visions tell powerful stories.

Joan Snyder, *Anatomy of a Summer Painting*, 2019, oil, acrylic, papier-mâché, burlap, paper on linen, 32 x 128 in. (81.3 x 325.1 cm) / Photo: Jason Andrew

Detail: *Anatomy of a Summer Painting*, **2019**

Anatomy of a Summer Painting (2019) is a feast of a painting, stretching across two panels. The left is busy with a barrage of calligraphic marks, while on the right panel marks fall systematically into a distinctly incised grid. Like all of Snyder's work, there is a lot to unpack, including a collaged image of an ancient stone figurine discovered in 2016 at Çatalhöyük, a preserved site in central Turkey. Archeologists consider this object to

reflect a devotion to older women on account of their status as opposed to any celebration of fertility. Just as it was placed purposefully within a piece of obsidian, Snyder nestles an image from a news clipping gently into the painting's lower right corner. Its presence suggests a greater personal narrative.

Joan Snyder, *Weeping Cherry Tree & Thee* (2020), oil, acrylic, papier-mâché, burlap, straw, paper on linen (three panels), 60 x 96 in. (152.4 x 243.8 cm)

Weeping Cherry Tree & Thee (2020) hangs like a retable, with a central image depicting the cascading pink blossoms of a cherry tree. The painting is a devotion to time and place. "It was April 2020," the artist told me, "our weeping cherry tree was so beautiful in bloom … how could I not paint it!"

Joan Snyder, *Ode to Summer*, 2019, oil, acrylic, papier-mâché, burlap, poppy pods, dried flowers on canvas (three panels), 60 x 120 in. (152.4 x 304.8 cm)

A similar gut response can be seen in *Ode to Summer*, painted the year prior. It's the largest painting in the show, spanning three panels. Throughout the brushstrokes are pulled vertically downward, so as to ground the entire composition. Vibrant and resounding, the painting features a silhouette of a bird in the center panel. Knowing Snyder, I suspect that bird is only resting for a fleeting second, for it knows that despite the bucolic setting, it's not safe.

Paint a Pond (2019) features a water lily-like frame within a frame. Resonant blues and greens vie for attention – some sections come forward while others recede. Overall, the work is about reflection, framing, and reframing reality.

Joan Snyder, *Black Lake* (2019), oil acrylic, burlap, papier-mâché, leaves, herbs on canvas, 24 x 96 in. (60.9 x 243.8 cm) / Photo: Jason Mandella, courtesy CANADA

Black Lake (2019) is plain juicy. The right panel scripts like a diary: stanzas of thoughts muted, muffled, and mangled into an odd unison. In the left panel, a bright yellow flower sinks into a deep background of darkness. Blue and white pansy petals bud out in syncopated rhythms.

Nature is honest and so are these paintings – true to both the ugliness and the wonderment of life.

"Joan Snyder: The Summer Becomes a Room," CANADA, 60 Lispenard Street, New York, NY. Through October 10, 2020.

About the author: Jason Andrew is an independent scholar, curator, and producer. Follow him on Instagram at @jandrewarts

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