

Joan Snyder: A Conglomerate of Love
Sean Scully

The real Artist pursues a vision, and accepts the consequence, because it is true.
Lesly Naucs

You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.
Friedrich Nietzsche

I was 26 in 1972 and managed to scrounge my way over to Boston on a Harvard Scholarship for a year. Wide-eyed, I was up for America and its exuberance. I brought with me, coming from a more reserved culture, at least before Damien Hirst, my tightly woven paintings. But I was up for it for sure: the freedom, the extremes (some of which I don't like now: like guns) and pretty soon I saw some images of paintings that I loved. They were by an older lady: she was 31.

They and she fascinated me. I naturally thought of the disconnected scribbles in paint of Cy Twombly, who's a wonderful artist. But Joan's marks were not European, not grey, not refined, not pushed through the scrim of culture in order to get out into the world. Joan's were brash, Joan's were neon, Joan's were American.

I was using all the same stuff as her: spray guns, sprayed lines, with their photographic edges and paint put down first time, making drips. She liked the grid, but I seemed to like it a lot more. I seemed to be stuck in it. She seemed to wander in and out of incarceration at will. Everything I used was in the service of a net. Everything she used hung in and on an invented air, just being itself. Nothing in these mark paintings seemed to be working for anything else. The blurring marks, these tough lines, were here for themselves. They approached the possibility of a society that made a structure, but they never quite submitted. It seemed existential to me, as if they represented themselves in the independence of being there. Just being there. Simultaneously.

Leonard Cohen sings in one of his great songs: "crucifix uncrossed," resulting in two bars. So there it was, in these glamorous and highly original paintings, characters of forceful color made by hand, bumping into each other occasionally but resisting closure and asserting individualism. So there I was up in Harvard, near New York, at 26: looking at a free grid.

Joan gathered around her a significant fan base; what I didn't know was that like the marks in the mark paintings, she wasn't going to serve it. Because she had a bigger love in mind. She stepped in and out of abstraction because abstraction wants to remove itself from the temporal world and make a separate reality. But she looked at the world and its material. She exited and dissipated in equal measure. In a climate dominated by American Minimalism and conceptualism, an artist whose devotion to the pro-found truth of Nature that overwhelmed issues of strategy would become an outsider.

She made Beanfield paintings that I saw on Madison Ave. They seemed to be the field itself upended, remade on a rectangle. Her identification with the root of growth, its vitality, and its mess and materiality, was

rendered new. These paintings were extraordinarily physical, as if the artist was consumed by panic and anxiety. To preserve, to show, to hold and to make a painting: once again the real thing. That air invented for the mark paintings had disappeared. Now the marks, the matter, the materiality was piled up into a bean field, in an art gallery. Then Van Gogh comes to mind. Where everything in the painting, is a thing. He felt the threat of the 20th century just up the road and all the harm it was going to do to his pastoral world. And the panic caused by this is so powerful that every mediating space has to be pressed out of his art and thrown overboard.

Joan was willing to be unpopular for a higher purpose. And the higher purpose was to close the space between her art and the majesty of nature. She paints flowers in gray pink, dark pink, bright pink, pale red, blood red, back again to dark pink, and then to red. This is an artist whose identification with the subject is so earnest that there is no space for in and out looking. This is passion and immersion. An identification with the thing loved. As in Jackson Pollock, who was on and in the paintings, she is on the painting and in the subject, or with the subject, in such a way that reconsideration and correction are not helpful, in fact they pollute the immediacy of the embrace.

Joan paints an homage to her fallen friend Mary Hambleton, who I also knew. Mary was a beautiful woman. The degree of lament and grief that Joan is willing to exhibit, with colors that are light and delicate, flirts with the edge of taste in our lexicon of high-minded Art. But she doesn't care. She cares more for the subject, and that deep sincerity, based on friendship and loss, will overpower taste.

She has been described as "confessional," but she doesn't confess. There aren't mistakes, only desires, only what inspires. She liked the grid. But she didn't want to live in it. She has the key to the cell door, so she opens it and dances outside. She might come back for a break, but that's all.

Yellow was Blue (2013) is a painting where space is allowed to return. The items on the paintings, such as blobs, words and a figure, bang into each other, molest each other, but they're also free, to some extent, to serve themselves. She even goes so far as to tell us that blue is blue. It's a more intellectual painting than many of her densely worked and overlaid paintings, that insist on the primacy of Mother Nature.

As we stand now, in an existential crisis caused by our lack of reverence for where we live, namely Nature, the world has changed since the 70's when I first saw her work. Now the extraordinary identification with nature, that she has manifested in passionate and physically radiant rectangles over the decades: makes her look like the Oracle. The one who knows things first.

America, the land of the signature. The United States of Litigation. Conquered first by settlers and then the settlers were conquered by lawyers, who've taken all the soul out of the law, and filled that hole with details. This is the land of the signature style. The biggest Art Market in the world, it loves Art, and loves Art to walk the line. The artist that steps off the line, as Joan Snyder does, just whenever she wants, steps onto the land where there are no art collectors.

Her child, the one who lives within, has an omnipresent guiding hand: and the Mother, without, rarely says "No, I shouldn't paint that." Her access to the subjects of her world is not clouded by strategy, ideas about profit, and she serves her impulses and her loves of the subject with a clear bright light and a tactile attachment.

The fall of Modernism has allowed and provoked many artists to step in and out of signature styles. This has allowed painting to make an unlikely and prolific return to prominence. Joan has been doing this all along. Now it is time, since she approaches 80, for us to honor her.

Joan made a painting titled *Nature Remains* (2018). Rilke wrote the poem "Nature Survives." If Nature remains, so do we.

Who says that all must vanish?
Who knows, perhaps the flight
of the bird you wound remains,
and perhaps flowers survive
caresses in us, in their ground.

It isn't the gesture that lasts,
but it dresses you again in gold
armor—from breast to knees—
and the battle was so pure an Angel wears it after you.

Rainer Maria Rilke