Joan Snyder

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Joan Snyder is an innovative painter who uses the world around her and the expressivity of materials at hand to create tactile mixed media paintings that explore issues of identity, politics, gender and a cohort of other present and past personal and societal issues. Her personal adage, “more is more,” defines Snyder’s work and provides the viewer with an entrance point from which to analyze and understand it (Chou). As a self-identified feminist, Snyder’s paintings are best judged using feminist criteria for art criticism (Langer 28).
Snyder began painting during a time of expansive artistic exploration. After Abstract Expressionists, Minimalists and Conceptualists were defining art in a variety of ways. Snyder rejected the cold male-dominated Minimalism, instead infusing her art with rich emotion, color and tactility (Boulanger 24). Also reacting against Abstract Expressionism’s inclusion of solely male artists, Snyder’s paintings fit within the general expressionist category because of her evocative brushstrokes and desire to translate the word through emotion (Campion 114). Snyder’s artwork stems from modernist tensions, and reflects Hans Hoffman’s thoughts about “push and pull” (Campion 114). Snyder’s first works were “stroke” paintings that utilized expressive brushstrokes on a predominantly white background (Boulanger 24). As she grew and developed as an artist, Snyder began to add mixed media and created more layered surfaces, a style which she still continues to work in.
Influences Continued...

Some critics compare Snyder’s mixed media paintings to Robert Rauschenberg’s. However, while Snyder’s work is autobiographical and emotionally charged, Rauschenberg takes a more distanced, cold approach to art-making. As he once said, “How can red be ‘passion’? Red is red” (Boulanger 25). Formally, however, the similarities are obvious in their mixed media choices and paint application. Yet while Rauschenberg utilizes more photographic imagery, Snyder includes more hand drawn abstractions.
Joan Mitchell is a painter who also shares many affinities with Snyder. Because Mitchell began painting before her, it is likely that she had some influence on Snyder’s artwork. Both artists tend to favor the use of secondary colors (Frederick 177). In addition, their painting techniques are very similar with thick impasto and a loose almost messy type of abstraction. Furthermore, their subject matter stems from their own lives and the world they see around them.
CY Twombly is another artist that Snyder can easily be compared to. As Jeff Frederick explains, “Like Twombly, Snyder strews her paintings with flowers, scrawls them with words, and favors the emotional, the handmade and the immediate” (Frederick 177). Furthermore, along with secondary colors, she also uses bright primaries like Twombly. Their styles are similar, although Twombly’s paintings are more of a direct mix between Snyder’s stroke paintings and her later mixed media works.
Formal Analysis
Snyder’s *Woman/Child* from 1972 is a six by nine foot painting from her “stroke painting” phase. According to Susan Boulanger, in Snyder’s stroke paintings, “Each stroke-distinguished by its unique balance of thickness, transparency, weight, lightness, solidity, drips, spatters, smears, or auras-replays the drama of human imagination, vulnerability, and transience against the comforting intransigence of an enduring order” (Boulanger 24). *Woman/Child* is a colorful painting that is subtly sectioned off into 20 even squares, each dominated by white with a variety of active brush strokes creating a mood of tension and contrast. The painting is meant to evoke the tensions associated with the cold war (Boulanger 24).
Snyder’s *Small Symphony for Women* from 1974 is a triptych that explores gender-bias in the art world. The left panel is composed of scribbled and scratchy writing that appears as if it came right out of Snyder’s sketchbook. The majority of it is free writing questioning the feasibility of creating a symphony through paintings about women, yet in a lower right square Snyder writes, “The politics are at once separated and integrated If there is a female sensibility language art emerging How can all male Faculty at Douglas choose select judge women artists who apply? They can’t they didn’t they only chose 4 in 20 in two years. They would protest of course.” In the center and right triptych it appears as if Snyder is illustrating the female sensibility within art, and the concept of the symphony through her incorporation of feminine colors, with a grid-like organization and thick sensuous paint application.
Snyder’s *Women in Camps* from 1988 is an approximately two by four foot painting that incorporates photography, wood, and wire to convey its message about the suppression of women. The painting is primarily achromatic, with only subtle hints of yellow dispersed evenly throughout the composition. As Snyder’s paintings often are, this work is well balanced with the visual weight evenly dispersed throughout. Thick obvious brushstrokes create atmosphere and space, and the photographs promote further depth through shifts in scale. While the imagery of women and the jagged wooden fence posts begin to tell a larger story, the writing around the edges further pushes ideas about how men are unfairly the predominant leaders of society while women are treated inferiorly. On the right edge of the painting Snyder writes, “the moon shone in Germany / the moon shines in Palestine / and men are still seeking final solutions.” This comments on the past horrors of Nazi Germany and the problems during 1988 in Palestine, which, both inflicted by men, are also being “solved” by men, when women should share this role.
Snyder’s Oratorio from 1997 is a 6 by 9.5 foot painting with a quilt-like composition that hints at feminist craft arts of the past, thus assigning them equal status to the fine arts (Boulanger 25). Separate squares with their own unique imagery are combined on the canvas to create organized chaos. Bright saturated primary, secondary, and tertiary colors move the viewer’s eye around the composition. Representational imagery of flowers, a face, and a house encourage the viewer to question the meaning behind the artwork. Thick impasto paint application contrasts against smooth areas of saturated color. While the surface is very busy there are several focal points that help to move the viewer’s eyes throughout the mixed media painting.
Snyder’s *She is the Earth* from 2000 is a six by eight foot mixed media painting that incorporates a quote from James Joyce’s notes on his play *Exiles* that describes a woman who was known as the “man-killer” (Barger). Considering the text, the abstract surface becomes a very obvious landscape, reflecting the beautiful variety found on earth. Water meets dessert, while grassland meets forest. Across the entire composition delicate colorful flowers seem to float. The formlessness of the painting reflects back on the quote; “She is the earth, dark, formless, mother, made beautiful by the moonlit night, darkly conscious of her instincts” (Barger). The painting is hauntingly beautiful, with bright contrasting colors interacting as they do in nature. The composition is well balanced and the text and abstract flowers help to guide the viewers’ eyes throughout the piece.
Analyzing Snyder through a Feminist Lens

Snyder’s artwork is best judged using a Postmodernist criteria, specifically feminist art criticism, as she herself is a self-pronounced feminist (Langer 28). As Snyder once noted, “The whole idea of female imagery has always been important to me. For me the explanation is very simple. Women’s lives and experiences are very different from men’s and therefore their art is going to be different” (Hammond 38). Taking into account the views of several feminist art historians, Snyder’s work is almost the epitome of feminist artwork.
Feminist artwork denies the hierarchical distinction between crafts and fine arts and often includes both in their artwork (Barrett 49). Snyder does this with her repeated references to quilt-making in the compositions of her paintings. Furthermore, feminist art supports “narrative, autobiography, decoration, ritual, and craft-as-art” which are all categories easily recognized in Snyder’s artwork (Barrett 49). Elizabeth Garber, an art historian, notes that feminist art should attempt to change the status quo and combat the oppression of women which Snyder tackles in Women in Camps, Small Symphony for Women, and many of her other paintings (Barrett 50).
Lucy Lippard, a well known feminist art critic, argues that some qualities often found in work made by women are, “a central focus (often ‘empty,’ often circular or oval), parabolic baglike forms, obsessive line and detail, veiled strata, tactile or sensuous surfaces and forms, associative fragmentation, [and] autobiographical emphasis” (Barrett 52). Snyder’s work fits perfectly within this description, often having a central focus in her pond motif paintings, having tactile/sensuous surfaces and forms, associative fragmentation and an autobiographical emphasis.
Self-Reflection

My work in self-portraiture, as well as my new series on rape and sexual abuse, share many similarities to Snyder’s artwork. My paintings are either autobiographical or stem from the world around me, as do Snyder’s. Furthermore, my work generally arises out of a feminist sensibility with a tendency towards decoration. My new series calls for the end of sexual abuse and exploitation of women, and women’s rights are a subject that Snyder touches upon frequently.
I, like Snyder, utilize a broad color palette that suites the emotional qualities of the individual painting at hand. In addition, I do not limit my paintings to one medium and I allow each specific painting to dictate the inclusion of other media. Sand, flowers, leaves, branches, spices, paper, cloth, clothing, bubble wrap, newspaper, and eggshells are just some of the items that I include in my own artwork.
However, while our work shares many affinities, there are also specific differences. The most glaring difference is that I tend to work in a more figurative manner. The majority of my artwork centers around self-portraiture. While my most recent work is abstract, it is a more controlled abstraction that incorporates figural elements; such as realistically rendered eyes. In general, Snyder’s only realistic elements comes from physical objects attached to the surfaces, except for in fig. 11, where Snyder includes a realistic figure. Overall, Snyder is an artist whose interests and style aligns closely with my own artwork.
Conclusion

Joan Snyder is an inspiring artist because she allows herself to be freely expressive. As a “maximalist,” she does not limit her paintings and instead allows each to dictate the path it needs to follow in order to achieve its intended meaning. Snyder’s work is colorful, textural, and full of contrast with an overall feminist sensibility. Through exploring her work I learned more about feminist art and became more self-aware about my art’s feminist aspects. I aspire to one day achieve the freedom and expressivity that Snyder infuses into all of her paintings.
Appendix

Fig. 1 Joan Snyder, *Symphony VI*, 2006. oil, acrylic, paper mache, fabric, straw, chalk, glitter on linen, 60" x 84".

Fig. 2 Joan Snyder *Oratorio*, 1997, oil, acrylic, plastic grapes, feathers, fabric, nails, herbs, mud, paper mache, graphite & paper on canvas, 72" x 114".

Fig. 3 Joan Snyder *Woman/Child*, 1972, oil, acrylic, sparkle paint and spray enamel on canvas, 72" x 108".

Fig. 4 Joan Snyder *She Is The Earth*, 2000, oil, acrylic, paper mache, herbs on canvas on wood panels, 72" x 96".
Fig. 5 Joan Mitchell, *Heel, Sit, Stay*, 1977. Oil on canvas (diptych), 110 x 126 inches (279.4 x 320 cm), each panel: 110 x 63 inches. Collection of the Joan Mitchell Foundation, New York.

Fig. 6 Cy Twombly, *Quattro Stagioni: Autunno*, 1993-5. Acrylic, oil, crayon and pencil on canvas, 127 X 188 inches.

Fig. 7 Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, ca. 1954. Freestanding combine: oil, pencil, crayon, paper, canvas, fabric, newspaper, photographs, wood, glass, mirror, tin, cork and found painting with pair of painted leather shoes, dried grass, and Dominique hen mounted on wood structure on five casters; 86 1/2 x 37 x 26 1/4 in. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The Panza Collection.

Fig. 8 Joan Snyder, *Small Symphony For Women*, 1974, oil, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 72".
Fig. 9 Joan Snyder, *Women in Camps*, 1988, oil, acrylic, wire, wooden dowel, photographs on linen mounted on board, 22" x 48".

Fig. 10 Joan Snyder, *And Always Searching For Beauty*, 2001, oil, acrylic, paper mache, herbs on linen, 78" x 102".

Fig. 11 Joan Snyder, *Bedeckt Mich Mit Blumen*, 1985, oil, acrylic, cloth flowers on canvas, 72" x 72".

Fig. 12 Joan Snyder, *My Life*, 1996, oil, straw, velvet, silk and plastic grapes on linen, 48" x 54".
Fig. 13 Rhiannon Throop, Layers of Acquaintance: A Chance Encounter, 2011, oil and mixed media on canvas, 30” × 40”.

Fig. 14 Rhiannon Throop, Sarah; Misguided Isolation, 2012, oil and mixed media on canvas, 36” × 48”.

Fig. 15 Rhiannon Throop, Under Pressure, 2011, colored pencil, 16” × 20”.

Fig. 16 Joan Snyder, Resurrection, 1977, oil and collage on canvas, 78” × 312”.
Works Cited


