

# ARTFORUM

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## Joan Snyder



Joan Snyder, *Symphony of Pain and Joy*, 2022, oil, acrylic, papier-mâché, paper, and ink on linen, 54 × 66".

Joan Snyder's abstractions, bold and delirious responses to nature, are imbued with intense feeling. Take *Symphony of Pain and Joy*, 2022—one of the seven canvases in "To Become a Painting," her exhibition at Franklin Parrasch Gallery—a prismatic, taxonomic display of exuberant mark-marking and sensuous form that is at once steadied and explosive. A kind of theatrical grandeur is evident in Snyder's work, some of which includes elements of the outside world (of course, she uses paint—oil, acrylic—but she also incorporated twigs, grasses, dirt, flowers, and other sylvan items into a few of the pieces here). In the center of *Symphony*, several patches of red bleed as though they are wounded hearts, the gore dripping to the bottom of the composition. Blood is thicker than water, but Snyder's gestural sang streams like a waterfall or gushes like endless tears, suggesting inconsolable suffering.

Contradiction and fragmentation also abound, as we saw in *Duet in Three Parts*, 2021. In this piece, the paint is fat and thin, solid and transparent, compelling and repulsive. Separate passages of color—azures, greens, oranges, golds—accumulate on the surface, like scars on flesh, carrying the woozy memory of their making. Indeed, Snyder's diptych keeps one on perceptual and emotional edge, in a state of excited uncertainty. This is especially true of the activity coursing throughout the work's right-hand panel, in which a heavy and gruesome brown blob, metastasizing over more lyrically applied swatches of coral, faded yellow, and light blue, comes on like a fearsome storm cloud darkening a beautiful day.

The emotionalism of Snyder's painterly abstraction, to use Clement Greenberg's term, epitomizes what he called the primacy of the material medium in modernist painting or, as Robert Motherwell so movingly put it, "the depth and the intimacy of the marriage between the artist and [her] medium."

If, as art historian Bernard Berenson wrote, the most consummate, satisfying painting is haptically as well as optically inspired, then Snyder's abstractions are a materialization of this idea, for the textures she uses that appeal to our sense of touch are just as visually seductive, paradoxically making her work even more abstract. Snyder's emphasis on the "skin" of her canvases indicates a kind of elemental sensitivity to her surroundings, even to her own being. The incessant flow of differentiated sensations in Snyder's art produces an open system of extrasensory surfaces, near to each other but autonomous and different—a rich matrix of emotions rendered via drips and rips, dashes and splashes, gritty encrustations and assiduous excavations.

In the press release for "Sub Rosa," Snyder's solo exhibition at Franklin Parrasch in 2015, the artist noted that "roses have been the main event in my work for the last several years." A rose has a long symbolic history and represents, among countless other things, seduction, danger, lust, and joy. Dante's Divine Comedy features the *rosa candida*, alluding to the Blessed Virgin, but then Eros also gave a rose to Harpocrates, the Hellenistic god of silence, so that he would not reveal the indiscretions of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Snyder's *Cameo*, 2022, is an erotic cosmic rose, a sky-blue sphere with green vulvar leaves growing in it, a triumph of nature in a bright-yellow aura suggesting, not least through the flickering angelic gestures around it, a heavenly sun. The work is an homage to fecundity, earth, birth, femininity, power. The vibrant colors of *Cameo* glow like an essential life force—a mysterious gift that Snyder endlessly venerates through her extraordinary art.