

ArtReview



Joan Snyder *Womansong*
Parrasch Heijnen Gallery, Los Angeles, 30 April – 10 June

The New York-based painter Joan Snyder came to attention quite suddenly, in 1971, at the age of thirty-one, when she exhibited a body of work that she referred to as her 'stroke paintings'. These large canvases, both abstract and expressionist, through ambivalent towards the orthodoxies of the masculine Abstract Expressionist movement, arranged discontinuous strokes of different colours on horizontal grids. Snyder's *Spring 1971* (1971), which introduces her exhibition at Parrasch Heijnen Gallery, is a classic work from this pivotal moment in her career.

Compared to the contemporary works that follow it in the main gallery, *Spring 1971* is a difficult, jarring painting, and bracingly so. It is difficult because it refuses to cohere, or synthesise; like most of Snyder's paintings from this period, each painterly incident – trowelled daubs of oil paint, pooling stains of thin acrylic, faint mists of sprayed enamel – arises unexpectedly and independently. Snyder – who may be a synaesthete – has long been inspired in her art by sound and music. With its horizontal bars, *Spring 1971* is reminiscent of 1960s experimental graphic notations of composers such as Roman Haubenstock-Ramati or Cornelius Cardew. As a composition, it is discordant, arrhythmic and seemingly improvised.

Snyder's recent paintings in the exhibition retain some of those structural qualities, though their mood is quite different. In contrast to the rather cerebral painting from 1971, these seven works, dating from 2015 and 2016, are brimming with sensuous feeling, a consciousness of the body, of the artist's heart, guts and womb, and are encrusted with material culled from the external world, including mud, dried flowers and glass beads. During the 1970s Snyder became increasingly involved with feminism. She has sustained an avowedly female aesthetic ever since. *Heart of the Fugue* (2016), a panoramic painting made from conjoined canvases, has at its centre a scratched heart symbol and poppy stalks tied with silk ribbon embedded in puddles of glossy white paint.

As a man, I am perhaps not fully licensed to say that many of Snyder's indices of femininity – pastel colours, flowers, hearts, ribbons, etc – seem rather clichéd. If I were a woman I might resent having my gender so narrowly prescribed. Snyder does not use these signs lightly, however. For her, the dried flowers and seed heads that she cements to her canvases with thick paint or gloopy, transparent medium are profound symbols of germination, fruition and ultimate decay. Artists including Cy Twombly and Anselm Kiefer (both of whom are recalled here) have each used flowers to similar – though less overtly gendered – effect.

Snyder's fragmented paintings are never overbearing or hectoring, as Kiefer's can often be. Instead she presents us with moments of formal experimentation or traces from her life experience, arranged with space between, allowing us to explore them on our own terms. To let one's eye wander through the diaphanous *Field of Berries* (2016), for example, is to encounter all manner of unexpected gifts: veils of dripping, translucent acrylic; torn scraps of watercolour paper; crusty scabs of vivid, unmixed oil paint; twigs and clusters of tiny clay fruit.

- Jonathan Griffin