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BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ArtSeen

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JOAN SNYDER *Sub Rosa*

by Hovey Brock

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Joan Snyder's current exhibition takes its title from the ancient Roman code of party decorum, where the image of a rose on the banquet hall ceiling functioned as an emblem of confidentiality reminding merrymakers to keep secret the indiscretions made by tongues unhinged by wine—not unlike “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” Juicy roses of paint, a recurring theme in Snyder's work over decades, appear in the current show, as do references to grief, rage, and other powerful emotions. In the catalogue essay, Snyder makes frequent references to the grieving process, with allusions to the Kaddish, and a pungent quote from Proust on the paradoxical evanescence of grief. The rich metaphorical matrix of the rose as image, the poetry of the inscriptions on the paintings, as well as Snyder's mastery of collage materials, surface, scale, color, and mark-making add up to a rare experience of unmistakable power and, yes, beauty.



Joan Snyder, “Winter Rose” (2013). Oil, acrylic, paper mache, pastel, and glitter on linen, 64 × 30 .

Snyder has always painted in the first person,

which made her paintings so remarkable, revolutionary even, when she began to emerge in the late '60s. Abstract paintings that conveyed a personal point of view, grounded in everyday life, seemed unthinkable at the time, and amazingly, still do to many. In the late '70s a painting teacher of mine dismissed Snyder's paintings as "menses," referring no doubt to her overt feminist content. Yet it is precisely this sensibility grounded in life as it is lived, rather than in some theoretical construct, that gives her work such authority. Over a long career she has painstakingly developed a personal iconography that distills her experience.

In this exhibition of paintings from the last two years, roses of one form or another appear in seven out of the eight paintings. The rose iconography fans out, as all living metaphors should, to cover a range of associations. As the notes to "Symphony VII"(2014) in the catalogue show, Snyder lays out on a grid a series of "roses" across the top of the canvas, suggesting, in her words, a symphonic structure of theme and variations. Built of papier-mâché and acrylic modeling paste, each rose is a pulsating gesture whose material intensity and rich color push at the boundary of its container. There is a Dionysian intensity to the application of the paint and modeling materials that form the roses as well as the lines and dashes—harkening back to earlier iconographic tropes—that underscore the roses along the top row. Beneath the lines and dashes, Snyder has placed dried flowers and stems of plants covered over by a honey-colored resin. In the lower right corner floats the ghost of a rose, a pastel drawing on a sheet of silk. The mood this rose projects is elegiac, in sharp contrast to the vibrant roses along the top row. In "Symphony VII" Snyder appears to set up a narrative referring to burying the dead, grief, and remembrance. One of the features of the work that gives it such impact is the tension between the formal rigor of the design and the openness of the facture.

Where "Symphony VII" contrasts the worlds of the living and the dead, "Really"(2015) talks about those acts that separate the living. A central spasmodic gesture in blue paint stick anchors the center of the painting's ten-foot span. Just to the right of the gesture the inscription "of fatal consequence of rage" appears in charcoal, a phrase evidently lifted from the music Snyder was listening to when she was working on the painting. Snyder tells in the catalogue how she also wrote "you're fucking kidding me," to her partner's "dismay." Evidently she painted over that phrase, although the word "really" does appear a few times at various scales. The work has a clear musical reference in its frieze-like structure, as if Snyder were reproducing a sequence of

sounds as a series of gestures. Music as a theme makes sense with these paintings, given its potential to magnify the emotions, or even to unlock repressed feelings.

One of the most powerful pieces in the show is “Winter Rose” (2013). It has a stark vertical structure: a huge dark brooding rose occupies the upper third of the painting. Floating uneasily along the bottom quarter of the canvas is another much smaller rose, a child to an overbearing parent. The beautifully modulated cream-colored gulf that separates them is flecked with pale dashes of light green. Just above the child rose floats a dark violet dash, evidently separated from all the other dark violet dashes that encircle and isolate the parent rose up top. No reproduction can do justice to the sumptuousness of the color scheme. Here Snyder is at the height of her powers as a painter capable of conjuring a world of subjective experience with just a few simple elements. The title itself suggests an emotional winter—a frozen standoff between two alienated parties, the parent and the child.

Following the original meaning of “sub rosa,” there is much in this show that remains unsaid. Snyder never mentions in the catalogue for what or for whom she grieves. Indeed, she begins it with the impossibility of communication: “How often have I felt when speaking with others that we only scratch the surface of what’s truly meant and felt?” The paintings clearly bear witness to this Sisyphean task to try to communicate more fully when language fails, as it always does. The crux of Snyder’s accomplishment is finding joy in the very act of rolling the boulder back up the hill. This work invites us to the banquet of loss, misunderstanding, and all the things that come between us and the ones we love most—the inevitable passage she refers to in the catalogue, when the rose moves from Aphrodite to Eros, and then to Harpocrates, the god of silence.