# All That Glitters

## A CONVERSATION WITH JOAN SNYDER

By Jan Lhormer

I HAD THE GOOD fortune to visit with painter Joan Snyder in her Brooklyn studio in January. She greeted me in paint-splattered clothes as we made our introductions and continued into her living room, where some of her historic paintings, prints, and drawings sparkled. We then proceeded out the back door and through the backyard, past a small fishpond, and into her studio. A renovated carriage house held ample work space and various tables ordered with jars, bottles, tubes, cans, brushes, and other tools for art-making. Several skylights diffused cool light over a series of freshly painted canvases. The new pieces conveyed her signature iconography: luscious fields of color, heavy impasto contrasted by areas of bare canvas, gestural brushstrokes bleeding drips of paint, and embedded mixed media. Various combinations of glitter, silk, dried flowers, earth, burlap, and more were layered beneath a medley of acrylic paints, gel mediums, oil paint, and oil sticks, and spoke in chorus along the studio walls.

PHOTO BY FIONN REILLY

*Lady*, 2015, oil, acrylic, and dried flowers on canvas, 54 by 76 inches

Many of these paintings were destined to travel to the newly opened Parrasch Heijnen gallery in Los Angeles, which is featuring her work in a solo exhibition that opened on April 30. I asked Snyder if there's a certain point when she knows a painting is finished. "There are so many points when one of my paintings could be finished. It is often a tough decision," she explained, but she added that she values input from a few close people in her life: her partner of many years, her daughter, and an "extraordinary studio assistant" who has soon to forego working for Snyder to keep up with the demands of her own painting career. In this current body of work, surfaces are less built up, compositions feel more spontaneous or informal, and the color palette is relatively subdued and earthy . . . like a shift in seasons, or a variation on a favorite recipe.

At the same time, Snyder's pictorial language continues to combine elements of abstraction with autobiographical figurative and symbolic imagery. While her style is comparable to that of painters such as Anselm Kiefer or Robert Rauschenberg and their use of innovative materials and expressive surfaces, her content is more intimate and experiential—the palette is just plain prettier. She has mastered an elixir of sophisticated craft to tell her stories through musical references and rhythms of colors, visceral organic and synthetic means, and perfunctory inserts of automatic writing. Her practice is firmly rooted in the formal history and language of paint, yet catapults into the wild world of feeling.

A self-proclaimed "maximalist," Snyder states that music fuels much of her inspiration, and cites composers such as Bach, Arvo Pärt, Nina Simone, Laurie Anderson, and Philip Glass as just a few of the formative influences for her rich and tactile paintings. Lately, Snyder has been listening to Anderson's experimental work, which combines rhythmic sound, performance, and emotional narrative, drawing parallels to Snyder's operatic paintings. She cites classical music as closely aligned to her process of choreographing composition. At times, a grid, like a musical staff, functions as an underlying structure on which to build up forms and relationships. In preliminary drawing studies, Snyder combines diary-like sketches and writing to unearth themes that may precede a painting by two to three years—she often attends concerts, sketchbook in hand. Classical novels provide additional inspiration and Snyder maintains they are not as difficult to read as people assume. She enjoys reading the works of authors such as Tolstoy, George Eliot, Flaubert, and Proust, discussing their work at a book club in Woodstock, New York, where she and her partner have a second home.

Snyder adheres to a rigorous painting routine, which begins early with intensive mornings in the studio. Music unlocks creative doors, which she explains are rarely blocked. "One thing leads to another," she states succinctly, as is evidenced by a legacy of paintings that have evolved through five decades.

Snyder has been making prints since the mid-'60s. In her typical exuberant style, she layers various print processes, such as lithography, etching, and woodblock, and often adds hand painting, pastel, and glitter. These techniques were on display in a retrospective exhibition at the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, titled *Dancing with the Dark: Prints by Joan Snyder, 1963–2010*. This show, which ran from 2011 to 2012, showcased the artist's experimental techniques, exploring in bold color themes of nature, intimacy, love, and violence. The comprehensive collection traveled to the Boston University Art Gallery, the University of Richmond Museums, and the University of New Mexico Art Museum.

Joan Snyder graduated from the Rutgers University MFA program in 1966 and received almost immediate attention in the art world with a 1970 solo show in New York City of her signature stroke paintings. She has sustained a forceful presence ever since. While the '60s and '70s were dominated by art with a cool Minimalist, geometric style, Snyder's work embraced qualities from German Expressionism infused with personal narrative and symbolism.

As Pop and Minimalist movements defined the continuation of a male-dominated art world in the mid-'70s, Snyder, along with other women, was making art that was autobiographical, political, visceral, and overflowing with experimental materials. She explains in *Joan Snyder* (Abrams, 2005), in an essay written by Hayden Herrera, that the style, originally dismissed as feminist art (then a dirty word), was appropriated by male artists and came to be known as Neo-Expressionism, the defining style of the 1980s.

*Winter Rose*, 2013, oil, acrylic, papier-mâché, pastel, and glitter on linen, 64 by 30 inches

Snyder continues to explore and develop her virtuoso vocabulary, focusing on all things Mother Nature: images of fields, flowers, ponds, and themes of passion, death, grief, birth, and renewal cycle throughout her work. During our interview, she discussed a new canvas titled *Lady*: "The figure appeared magically and mysteriously and I let her be. This is as surprising to me as it might be to you—I've had figures in my paintings on and off over the years but not often at the bottom and in the midst of a serene field painting. There's a magic about *Lady* for me—the layers, the full palette over the serene field, and then the figurative elements, appearing in different areas of the painting."

This foray into a new series of paintings follows a recent body of work called *Sub Rosa*, which involved three to four years of profound and heartfelt engagement using the rose as "the main event." Snyder wrote a passionate essay for the catalogue to that show, which opened last May at Manhattan's Franklin Parrasch Gallery. The essay explains that the

title, *Sub Rosa*, refers to an ancient Roman code of secrecy, in which a rose painted on the ceiling of a banquet hall signaled that confidentiality be the rule for all things discussed behind the closed doors—and for all truths revealed under the influence of wine.

The *Sub Rosa* exhibition included a work titled *Winter Rose*, which displays all of the romantic power Snyder can deliver. It's a piece with great visual impact: the six-foot vertical image holds a looming, swirling rose built in relief out of papier-mâché and paint in purples, merlot accents, and echoes of blues sprinkled with glitter. The rose swells and hovers above what resembles a field of snow painted with white strokes of paint, revealing layers of pale, frozen earth. Near the bottom, a circular pool of deep, blood-like burgundy is entombed in a gel medium and framed by a few gestural dashes of violet. Starkly beautiful, the image suggests a burial, or a struggle between opposites.

Snyder writes about her creative process as being fraught with obsession, pain, and pleasure. She speaks of grief, rage, and mourning, without disclosing any details into any specific tragedy or event. The act of making the work seems to be cathartic for her, or at least transformative. She observes that "in the end they are about paint and material, about decades of personal iconography, about . . . rhythm and timing and color and form . . . and style . . . and not about loss."

If *Winter Rose* is about death and mourning, then *Amor Matris* signifies a renewal, and the "hallelujah" that Snyder acknowledges in her essay. The title translates as both "the love for a mother" and "the love of a mother," taken from a note the artist made to herself while reading *Ulysses*. Dashes of soft pinks, yellows, golds, and grays recall Monet's pastoral water lilies, yet the piece also harnesses Snyder's intensity through built-up surfaces, layered mediums, and confessional scribbles: "If not, know that I have loved you very much."

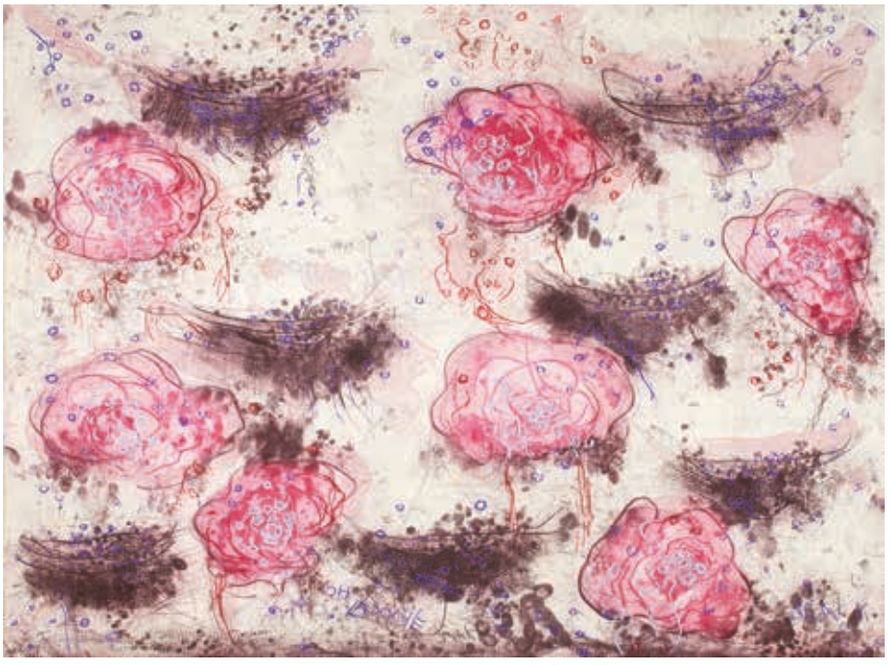

PHOTO BY BRYAN WHITNEY

*Wild Roses*, 2009, lithograph, etching, and woodcut on paper, edition of thirty, 28.5 by 38.5 inches

*Symphony VII* showcases her ability to build theatrics into large-scale canvases. Five roses encased in silky squares crescendo into dramatic color, underlined by strokes of white paint. There is a tension between the formal structure of the cubes and the unrestrained swaths below, where berries and dried sunflowers swim in resin. The palette and surfaces are undeniably beautiful, yet breathe with a moody sadness.

In a testament to her originality, long-standing influence, and success, Snyder was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 2007, also known as the genius award. Delighted by this honor, she acknowledges that although the award offers great affirmation for the tremendous efforts she has put forth, it has not specifically altered the course of her working life or career. Other prestigious awards she's received include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1974, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 1983, and, most recently, an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters to honor "artists of exceptional accomplishment."

Over the years, Snyder has held teaching positions at various universities and colleges throughout the country. More recently, her educational activities include short-term workshops or speaking engagements. Cherie Mittenthal,

*Symphony VII*, 2014, oil, acrylic, papier-mâché, pastel, silk, berries, and dried sunflowers on linen, in two parts, 54 by 18.25 inches

*Amor Matris*, 2015, oil, acrylic, papier-mâché, paper, etching fragments, rosebuds, twigs, and glitter on canvas, 66 by 84.5 inches

director of the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill, invited Snyder to be part of the center's teaching roster nine years ago, and the relationship continues to this day, with a weeklong master workshop and a two-person exhibition scheduled for this fall. Her work will also be featured in several group shows in 2016: *The Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts* at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York; *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*, the Met Breuer, New York; and *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age,* Brandhorst Museum, Munich, which traveled to Mumok in Vienna.

In the mid-1970s, much of Snyder's work contained strong feminist imagery aligning itself with the women's art movement of the time. Since then, she has defied all labels and considers her work to speak a universal rather than a political language. Paying homage to the earth and the heart, her voice has remained relevant and contemporary throughout changes in art world trends and advancing technology. Raw and authentic, eloquent and true, she challenges us to confront our demons yet indulge in the glitter.

In her *Sub Rosa* catalogue essay, Snyder speaks of requiems—Catholic Masses for the repose of the dead—and the "profound sadness of the Kaddish," the Jewish prayer associated with the mourning of the dead. In her master's thesis in the mid-1960s, Snyder wrote that painting offers her an altar where she practices her religion. That hasn't changed. Aligned with values of the ancient Great Goddess, who embodies all of the bounty of the earth, her studio ritual celebrates the regenerative potency of nature and offers the world an antidote for darkness.

*JAN LHORMER is a painter, art professor, and arts writer living in Falmouth, Massachusetts. Her large canvases combine abstraction with landscape imagery and have been exhibited in galleries and museums throughout the region. For more information, go to www.janlhormer.com.*