

Press Release

Joan Snyder

Body & Soul

28 November 2024—5 February 2025

Thaddaeus Ropac
Ely House, London



Joan Snyder, *Painting at the Pond*, 2024. Oil, acrylic, paper mache, burlap, rosebuds, rose petals, straw, paper and ink on canvas. 137.16 x 167.64 cm (54 x 66 in).

I wanted more in a painting, not less... to have a beginning, a middle, an end, joy and sorrow, and even resolution... to be able in one painting to have all of this. — Joan Snyder

Marking Joan Snyder's first solo exhibition with the gallery, Thaddaeus Ropac London will stage the most comprehensive presentation of the American artist's work outside of the United States to date. Over her career of six decades, Snyder has reimagined the narrative potential of abstraction, infusing her art with autobiography in a way that was distinct from

the male-dominated conventions of Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field painting, which were prevalent in the New York art scene into which she emerged. 'I wanted... to do something else, something much more intense, personal and complex,' she has explained. The result is a pioneering body of work that breaks down social, aesthetic and material hierarchies to assert the place of feeling and female subjectivity within contemporary abstraction. As art historian Hayden Herrera writes, 'It is this absolute congruence of formal and autobiographical discovery that distinguishes Snyder.'

Featuring more than 30 new and historic paintings, the exhibition traces the evolution of the artist's practice from 1964 to the present, culminating in eight major new works. Encompassing the guiding principles and themes of her practice, Snyder's oeuvre is structured around the development of three foundational groups of work: the *Stroke* paintings – with which she first garnered widespread recognition at the beginning of the 1970s when they were presented in the Whitney Annual Exhibition (1972) and the Whitney Biennial (1973) – the *Symphony* paintings and *Field* paintings. Their visual language extends into her expansive body of paintings beyond these categories, recognisable in her most recent works. Arranged chronologically, a pattern of recurring personal motifs emerges throughout the exhibition in a cyclical rhythm of return and renewal, encompassing love, joy, grief and desire expressed through colour, form and gesture in rich, poetic compositions.

The painting that gives the exhibition its title, *Body & Soul* (1997–8), encapsulates an overview of the artist's varied modes of working. Body and soul becomes a metaphor that brings into dialogue the figurative and the abstract, the painterly and the material, the gestural and the controlled – ideas that reverberate throughout the artist's wider oeuvre. For Snyder, painting is an expression of feeling in which diaristic autobiography and raw emotion intersect with rigorous formal investigation. 'I have to really act the thing out physically right on the canvas,' she says. 'It's happening while it's happening.'



Joan Snyder, *Body & Soul*, 1997–1998. Oil, acrylic, fabric, paper mache, glitter, straw and plastic grapes on canvas.
167.64 x 198.12 cm (66 x 78 in).

The *Stroke* paintings dissect the brushstroke – the most fundamental of painterly gestures – to explore the 'anatomy of a painting' through brightly coloured bars that dance across her canvases. In 1971, Marcia Tucker, then curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, wrote that '[Snyder's] work... has everything to do with the nature of painting itself, both as a process and as a visual language.' In important early examples on view, including *Whole Segments* (1970) and *Little Yellow* (1971), strokes of vivid colour and controlled drips of paint play out in themes and variations across loose grid structures, inviting the viewer to follow their sequence like a narrative.



Joan Snyder, *Little Yellow*, 1971. Oil, acrylic and spray enamel on canvas.
60.96 x 60.96 cm (24 x 24 in).

The earliest work on view, *Grandma Cohen's Funeral Painting* (1964), marks the artist's burgeoning interrogation of the relationship between representation and her approach to abstraction. Depicting either a huddled group of mourners or a body laid out for visitation in thick, black brushstrokes set against a dense cream background, it is as much through the gestural swathes of paint as the subject matter that Snyder conveys the emotion of the scene. Her *Flock* paintings of the same decade constitute imaginary inner landscapes, hinting at human anatomy and women's sexuality through colour and material, rather than symbolic representation, to centre what she calls 'the essence of feelings of a female body.'

The vocabulary of motifs and symbolic imagery that emerged in the 1970s, beginning with her strokes, continued to develop over the subsequent decades to find enduring resonance in the artist's later works. Trees and flowers signify cycles of life, death and rebirth, casting nature as an expressive vehicle for the most fundamental of human experiences. The natural world takes on a transcendental quality in Snyder's paintings, as if body and soul are entwined with the earth, the trees, the sky. In *Lovers* (1989), the bodies of two women glow in peachy tones against a black night sky peppered with flowers to offer a surreal scene rich in feeling and desire. Other works align the natural world with the sublime or the spiritual, such as *The Orchard / The Altar* (1986), with its painted ledge running along the bottom, as if a shrine meant to accept votive offerings.

Reimagining this natural imagery within an abstract visual language, the artist's *Field* paintings were inspired by the agricultural landscapes surrounding her studio in Eastport, Long Island in the 1980s. The canvas is cast as a site of experimentation that is simultaneously a plane for abstract mark making and a muddy field planted with beans, weeds, pumpkins and celestial bodies, as in *Moons in Mudfield* (1989). Elsewhere, screaming heads throw open their mouths in existential howls of pain, while bodies, breasts, hearts, wounds and roses speak to fleeting moments of sensuous bodily experience.



Joan Snyder, *To Transcend / The moon*, 1985. Oil and Acrylic on canvas. 152.7 x 245.1 cm (60.1 x 96.5 in).

In paintings from the 1980s and 1990s, these symbols are brought into dialogue with material experimentation in full-blown maximalist compositions. Straw, plant stems, seed pods, twigs, rose hips and dried herbs are

collaged with silk, burlap, beads and, as in *Love's Deep Grapes* (1984), even plastic grapes in a nod to the wry humour that surfaces frequently across Snyder's work. The imagery, painted gestures and materiality of these works give way, in moments, to language. Scrawled, overlapping and partially obscured, the handwritten text stands as its own form of mark making – an outlet for raw emotion when 'there's no other way to say what I want to say.'



Joan Snyder, *Come to Pearl Pond*, 2024. Oil, acrylic, burlap, paper mache, poppy pods, rose buds, dried flowers, straw, paper and ink on canvas in two parts. 121.92 x 121.92 cm (48 x 48 in).

The most recent body of work on view, created in 2024, revisits and reimagines the concerns that reverberate across the decades of Snyder's practice. 'I am looking back because, needless to say, everything here somehow relates to things I've done before,' she says. Impasto roses, straw, controlled drips of paint, breasts and bared teeth, mud and lace sit beside written dedications to literature and family members. Ponds emerge as a central motif in several works, including *Painting at the Pond* (2024) and *Come to Pearl Pond* (2024). Poured directly onto the canvas, dried flowers float in pools of paint, which symbolise portals that traverse the natural, human and spiritual realms in moments of alchemical transformation. This new body of work speaks to Snyder's continued compulsion to engage in painterly experimentation. 'My painting is my religion,' she reflects. 'It's the altar that I go to and it's where I face myself and find out who I am.'



Portrait of Joan Snyder. Photo: Marni Majorelle.

About the artist

Joan Snyder was born in Highland Park, New Jersey in 1940, and now lives and works in Brooklyn and Woodstock, New York. First exhibiting her *Stroke* paintings in the early 1970s, she has since shown work in numerous institutional exhibitions, including solo presentations at the Brooklyn Museum, New York (1998); The Jewish Museum, New York (2005; travelling to Danforth Art Museum, Framingham, MA); and the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Jersey (2011). She participated in the Whitney Biennial in 1973 and 1981, and the 34th Biennial of Contemporary American Painting, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. in 1975. More recently, her work has been included in group presentations at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, MA (2023–25); Tate Modern, London (2023); Brooklyn Museum, New York (2020); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2018–20); The Met Breuer, New York (2016); mumok, Vienna (2016); and Brandhorst Museum, Munich (2015).

In recognition of her pioneering contribution to contemporary American art, Snyder's work is held in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Dallas Museum of Art, TX; Harvard Art Museums, Massachusetts; The Jewish Museum, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts Boston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; and Tate Modern, London, among others.

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