

# Art in America

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## Joan Snyder

NEW YORK,

at *Betty Cuningham*

by Jeff Frederick

What if you weren't aware of Joan Snyder's history as a feminist artist, going back to the early 1970s? As you stepped through the doors of Betty Cuningham Gallery this fall, the first thing you might have thought was "Monet." Snyder's *Oh April* (2010), at 17 feet long the largest work in the exhibition and immediately visible at the back of the gallery, is a flower- and rain-filled triptych that offers an immersive experience akin to that provided by Monet's *Water Lilies*. A vibrant and incident-filled work in scarlet, hot yellow and pink-purple, with the titular phrase written on it in chartreuse, *Oh April* handily anchored a show of 12 amply sized pieces that represent "A Year in the Painting Life," as the exhibition was titled.

Snyder's surfaces run to extremes, from the viscous gobs of paint and encrusted plant matter that have become her signature materials to thinly dripped washes that stain her gray-brown linen grounds. Herbs, twigs, seeds, papier-mâché and dirt, clotted and congealed with the paint, give the works a bodily, physical resonance, and set up a tension between nature and culture. Like Anselm Kiefer, Snyder seems to bring the mown and harvested field to the canvas. Snyder's earlier motifs return, such as the pond, an enclosed ovoid that can be interpreted as a self-reflective pool of paint or as the world navel. Strings of berries (sometimes glass beads) cradled in paint-covered fabric generate forms that are ambiguously but deliberately vulval.

Several works in the show—*Oh April*, *Summer Fugue* (2010) and *The Fall With Other Things in Mind* (2009), a virtuosic accumulation of matter in autumnal oranges and ochers—could be candidates for inclusion in a four-seasons cycle. And this is not the only affinity Snyder's work shares with Cy Twombly's. Her thick horizontal strokes with their torrents of drips remind one of Twombly's boats—and, indeed, specifically boatlike forms in collaged fabric appear in *Ode To B* (2009). Like Twombly, Snyder strews her paintings with flowers, scrawls them with words, and favors the emotional, the handmade and the immediate.

When I visited, a tour guide leading a large group was suggesting that women viewers might respond to Snyder's works more than men. While women's specific experiences may never be far from Snyder's mind (one title, *WOL*, stands for Women of Liberia), the paintings remain strong abstract statements, rooted in the intensely personal but open to appreciation by all. Snyder makes extensive use of secondary colors, as did Joan Mitchell, but she also subverts primaries toward jewel tones, like Twombly. These are not exclusively women's colors or women's pictures. Like her exact contemporary Mary Heilmann, Snyder is willing to push the limits of modernist reserve and good taste. Her paintings' lack of self-restraint may make a viewer uncomfortable, as she challenges him to follow her example and wear his heart on his sleeve.

*Photo: Joan Snyder: Oh April, 2010, oil, acrylic, burlap, dirt and mixed mediums on linen, 54 by 210 inches; at Betty Cuningham.*