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Life reflected in rage, grief, gratitude

Joan Snyder's lush visions tell powerful stories

“Field of Flowers” by Joan Snyder at Boston University.

By Cate McQuaid GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 25, 2011

An early woodcut made in 1963, while Joan Snyder was in her first year of grad school, signals the themes of the painter's life's work. She made “Portrait of Emily” the night President Kennedy was assassinated. Deeply gouged and starkly black and white, it captures sorrow and horror on the face of the teacher with whom she heard the news. It's a remarkably accomplished woodcut portrait for one so young. An echo of German Expressionism, it captures grief's power with detailed nuance.

Yet it's nothing like what we have come to think of as a Joan Snyder work. “Dancing With the Dark: Joan Snyder Prints 1963-2010,” a survey organized by the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University (Snyder's alma mater) is now on view at the Boston University Art Gallery.

It begins with a clutch of woodcuts, including “Emily,” featuring portraits and a landscape. But it quickly moves away from more traditional formats into the lush, gooey, ruminating, largely abstract visions Snyder is known for (and for which she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2007). Grief, though, is a constant. When exultation comes in later, Snyder's work pulses between the two.

These days it seems rudely reductive to call her a feminist artist, but in the 1960s and 1970s, when Snyder came of age, she made proudly, defiantly feminist work. Sexuality, deep feeling, and a reverence for nature all entwine in her paintings and prints. They are unabashedly expressive, claiming a woman's experience - of her body, of her relationships, of her yearning or outraged heart.

Snyder's prints testify to her authority and inventiveness. She's a restless and thorough technician, always trying out new approaches and working at different print shops. “Dancing With the Dark” is a swift, smart chronicle of nearly 50 years of work, noting new threads as they make their way into the tapestry of Snyder's oeuvre.

For instance, the etching “Report Card” from the “Yale at Norfolk Prints, 1973” portfolio (featuring work by Yale faculty and students, and Snyder was teaching there) is a ledger full of text in which she scrawls comments such as “Earl / black and minimal.” The piece is an early use of words, which later came to murmur and scream over Snyder's surfaces, and an early implementation of the grid, which also became a major player.

Both words and grid appear in “Resurrection Etching,” a 1978-81 project that followed up the artist's massive 1977 painting about violence against women, “Resurrection” (in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts). Several working proofs for “Resurrection Etching” are on display at BU, so we can savor her process of experimentation and layering.

The piece begins with names of victims and photo etchings of newspaper clips, then explodes in slashing gestures, blocks of color, and mythic narrative. Snyder had heard rumblings of a murder in the distant past at the farm she lived on in Pennsylvania, and took it to be the murder of a woman. This provides the bones of the narrative, which ends with a rising sun and a sense of hope.

There's a lot of rage, though, especially in the first 20 or 25 years of work. “Mommy Why?” a hand-inked woodcut from 1983-84, is a harrowing, nails-on-a-chalkboard image of a mother and child, both with mouths gouged open and glaring white. Snyder painted in the mother's flesh - dominant breasts and genitalia, shrieking red hair - but the jittery cuts in the wood that outline the figures and bristle around them give this work its commanding energy. Other works bemoan the loss of so many to AIDS.

Then Snyder finds solace in the earth. “Field of Flowers” is a deeply layered 1993 monoprint made around the time of her father's death. It features a pale ground smudged and dappled with flowers like lipstick kisses, sprouting from and hovering over a blue ring in the earth. “Not to make us grieve,” reads text at top and bottom, “but display the changing nature of grief. Not to make us cry.”

The exultation comes out strongly in these years, as well. “My Work . . .” (1997), an etching and woodcut, has at its center a beating heart - which can also be read as a vulva. It's surrounded by drips and words emblematic to Snyder, and at the bottom she has scrawled “My work has been absolutely faithful to me.” The print reverberates with polish, depth, and gratitude.

The later work grows yet more lush and painterly. (For those interested, the BU Art Gallery has mounted a meaty, if brief, wall of Snyder's paintings in a side room.) The monoprint “Madrigal X” from “33 Madrigals,” a series inspired by madrigal singers practicing in a circle, was

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made in 2001 in response to Sept. 11. Yet this is no cry of fury or despair. Flat red circles form a ring around a field of Snyder's smudgy flower marks. There's chaos and splatter here, but there's also containment and patience.

Then look at "Wild Roses" a lithograph, etching, and woodcut from last year, which intersperses plump pink roses with boat-shaped, smoky brown smudges. The roses are generous; the arcs of brown might represent soil, or something more ominous. Whichever, the piece is lyrically composed, voluptuous, a dance of light and dark. The lovely mess of living.

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