

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

The Lady of the Wild Things

By LANCE ESPLUND

Updated April 27, 2011 12:01 a.m. ET

New Brunswick, N.J.

'All the totem-societies in ancient Europe,' Robert Graves wrote in his book "The White Goddess," "were under the dominion of the Great Goddess, the Lady of the Wild Things: dances were seasonal and fitted into an annual pattern from which gradually emerges the single grand theme of poetry: the life, death and resurrection of the Spirit of the Year, the Goddess's son and lover." No other contemporary artist more deserves the title the "Lady of the Wild Things" than the abstract painter Joan Snyder, who is being honored with two concurrent retrospectives (one large show of prints and one of three-dozen small paintings) at Rutgers University, her alma mater.



"Landscape" (1970) JOAN SNYDER

A 2007 MacArthur Foundation fellow, Ms. Snyder (b. 1940) is an autobiographical and confessional artist—a hot-blooded romantic and a no-holds-barred expressionist who embraces anything and everything (crafts and children's art; Mondrian and graffiti). Her subjects range from love, death, sorrow, motherhood, sex and disease to feminism, war, politics, the body and the landscape. Although primarily a painter, Ms. Snyder works in bas-relief with collaged materials—herbs, earth, straw, sticks and flowers; plastic fruit, silk, spikes, plaster, papier-mâché, velvet and glitter. As a devout traditionalist who believes that content is expressed through form, however, she rarely allows her passions to overwhelm her pictures.

Ms. Snyder's work is as much about the rituals and inwardness of man as it is about the movements and appearances of nature. Her forms resemble moons, pools, jewels, nests, blossoms and wounds; every part and fluid of the human body; and her pictures suggest totems, altars, masks, fields and illuminated manuscripts. An alchemist at the easel who transforms her feelings into works of primitivistic power, Ms. Snyder is probably the closest thing we have in Western art to a witchdoctor or shaman.

In 2006, Ms. Snyder was given a painting retrospective at the Jewish Museum. That well-deserved show had its merits. But it was too small and included no prints, which is why these two exhibitions are so welcome. Both commence in 1963, during the artist's student days, before she was an abstract painter. Installed chronologically and thematically, the print show includes unique hand-colored monoprints, progressive prints and variant impressions. The exhibition, beautifully chosen and arranged by Marilyn Symmes, is accompanied by a lavish monograph (DelMonico Books/Prestel and the Zimmerli Art Museum) devoted to Ms. Snyder's print oeuvre.



"My Work. . ." (1997) JOAN SNYDER

The print show opens with early woodcuts reminiscent of German Expressionism, as well as Matisse's spare, linear ink drawings. Quickly, however, she makes a leap, seemingly through Kandinsky, to the synesthetic, abstract world of pure color movements. Working against the medium of printmaking (more as a painter than a graphic artist), Ms. Snyder incorporates words, images, colors and symbols until they are subsumed and then resurrected in a pictorial world that is solely her own.

In the series "My Work. . ." (1997)—which utilizes multiple printmaking techniques—Ms. Snyder conflates figure, heart, insect, fruit and vagina-dentata into a potent and iconic form surrounded by text, including the phrase "My work has been absolutely faithful to me." In another group of prints, "Souls Series" (1993), Ms. Snyder creates a commanding installation made up of two-dozen faces printed on paper and fabric, thumb-tacked and occasionally overlapping, in a corner of the gallery. The linear, melancholic, ghostly impressions recall children's art and the Veil of Veronica.

The painting show was curated and installed by Judith Brodsky and Ferris Olin, in collaboration with the artist. Many of its works are from Ms. Snyder's own collection and were chosen for personal or watershed reasons, which gives the grouping (one of the best and most representative of the artist I have ever encountered) the aura of a self-portrait.

Gathering momentum from beginning to end, this intimate collection of paintings is extremely vibrant and engaging. Here, as in the print show, you can feel the artist at a crossroads between representation and abstraction—especially in "Landscape" (1970), an accomplished yet conventional painting over which she has scrawled, wet-into-wet, the word "Landscape." You sense here the artist's desire to make not merely important pictures of things, but important and visceral things—powerful objects in and of themselves.

A compelling storyteller with many voices (lyric, operatic and diaristic), Ms. Snyder is often provocative; occasionally didactic or off-key. Lately, some of her work has veered toward being merely decorative. But her tone is sincere; rarely sentimental. Even when she incorporates "bloody" handprints or photographs of Holocaust victims in political works, she deftly balances charged images with formal rigor.

The functions of Ms. Snyder's art, first and foremost, are to further the tradition of painting and to explore the most serious aspects of the human condition; to connect us not only to one another and to nature but to ancient rites and myths. She reminds us that no matter how modern and civilized we are, art can still be raw, primitive and talismanic. Without apologies or decorum, Ms. Snyder's work awakens all of the things still wild within us.

Mr. Esplund writes about art for the Journal.