Sylvia Snowden by Joe Bradley

Since her days as a student at Howard University in the ’60s, Snowden has produced striking sculptural and expressionist paintings that embody her approach to art: the integration of the intellectual with the emotional.

Shell, Glimpses 104, 2003, acrylic on paper, 39 × 27.5 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and Franklin Parrasch Gallery unless otherwise noted.

Sylvia Snowden's paintings come on strong. Standing before one of these extraordinary pictures, one is immediately struck by their intensity—the roiling impasto of the surface and the pyrotechnics of the artist's vivid palette. This formal bravado serves as a flashbang; when the smoke has cleared, the viewer is left with a stillness that is disarming.

Born into a tight-knit family in North Carolina and raised in Louisiana and Washington, DC, Snowden's artistic inclinations were encouraged by her parents from an early age—she credits her mother as the greatest influence on her aesthetic sensibilities. In the early to mid-1960s, Snowden attended Howard University, which was at the time led by the art historian and artist James Amos Porter alongside artists like Lois Mailou Jones, David Clyde Driskell, and James Lesesne Wells. Under their tutelage, Snowden developed the style of painting she describes as her "natural mode"—structural abstract expressionism. To this day, Snowden's style remains recognizably hers; she paints the body in all its vulnerability, with a tenderness and understanding that is deeply humane. Working in large series, Snowden pulls her subject matter from those around her—including her family, children, neighbors—and paints to "get into the whole guts of a person... without the packaging."

This fall, Snowden will exhibit a series dedicated entirely to her daughter, Shell Snowden Butler, at Franklin Parrasch Gallery in New York City. Snowden and I spoke over the phone earlier this summer between her longtime home in Washington, DC, and my own in New York City. We talked about her upbringing, her painting practice, and the long game of the artist's life.

Joe Bradley
I've encountered a number of your paintings in the last couple of years, and I have to say, I really love your work. It's a pleasure for me to get to talk to you and learn a little bit more about you.

Sylvia Snowden
Thank you for agreeing to talk with me. You certainly are pleasant. (laughter) I can tell from your voice. Not everybody is.

JB
There are unpleasant people out there, it's true! (laughter) Let's start from the beginning. Do you think you could tell me a bit about your background, where you grew up?

SS
I was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, but I grew up on the campuses of Dillard University in New Orleans and Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. When I was in the seventh grade, we moved to Washington, DC, where I went to Georgetown Day School and later to what was known as Western High School—it's now the Duke Ellington School

of the Arts. I then went to Howard University, where I got bachelor's and master's degrees in the art department. In between that, I went to la Grande Chaumière in Paris, and then I went to Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine.

JB
Were you drawing as a child?

SS
The earliest I can remember painting is at about the age of four at Dillard University. My parents—my mother in particular—would give me watercolor paints to paint with.

JB
That's incredible. What did your folks do? You mentioned you grew up on a campus?

SS
Yeah. My father, Dr. George W. Snowden, had a PhD in public administration from Indiana University, and my mother, Mrs. Jessie Burns Snowden, studied for her PhD in English literature at New York University. She finished all the classwork, but she got pregnant with me and didn't go back to get the degree. My father was the head of international housing programs at the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, but he and my mother both taught at many different universities as well.

JB
So a real intellectual family!

SS
People use that word, yes. (laughter) It is very true. My mother read everything that was ever written.

JB
And she encouraged your painting as a young child.

SS
Both of my parents did, all the way from an early age. My mother was very much interested in art and took my brother and me to many museums. She exposed us to many types of artistic influences, and her sense of aesthetics molded my appreciation for beauty. I grew up with prints decorating our home.

JB

That's a real gift to have parents who are supportive of your artistic endeavors. That's not always the case.

SS

In eleventh grade, I remember my father said, "I want to have a talk with you." I thought, Oh my goodness, what have I done?

JB

Uh-oh. (laughter)

SS

He said, "What are your plans? You're gonna graduate high school next year, what do you want to do?" I said, "I want to go into art." He said, "Oh, I don't know how much money you're gonna make there, but we're with you." And they bought paint for me forever. Forever. Their support and encouragement sustained me and my work.

Beverly Johnson, c. 1978, acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite, 48 × 96 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Franklin Parrasch Gallery, and Edel Assanti, London.

JB

Incredible. You mentioned Howard; did you study painting on the college level?

SS
Yeah. I got a bachelor's degree from Howard in design in 1963 and I got a master's degree in painting in 1965.

JB
What was going to Howard like when you were there? What was the art department like, and what kinds of things were you learning?

SS
The people I studied with were the most important thing about Howard for me—artists like James Amos Porter, James Lesesne Wells, Lois Mailou Jones, David Clyde Driskell. They were the pillars of Black art in America. They were very knowledgeable and extremely caring. They took their own art and the teaching of art as a very serious commitment. They taught us that it was an honor to make art, and they sensed my passion and attitude towards art. I've taught at many universities, but never have I seen more serious teachers and a larger collection of art on slides.

JB
Did their work influence you? Or was it more their teaching?

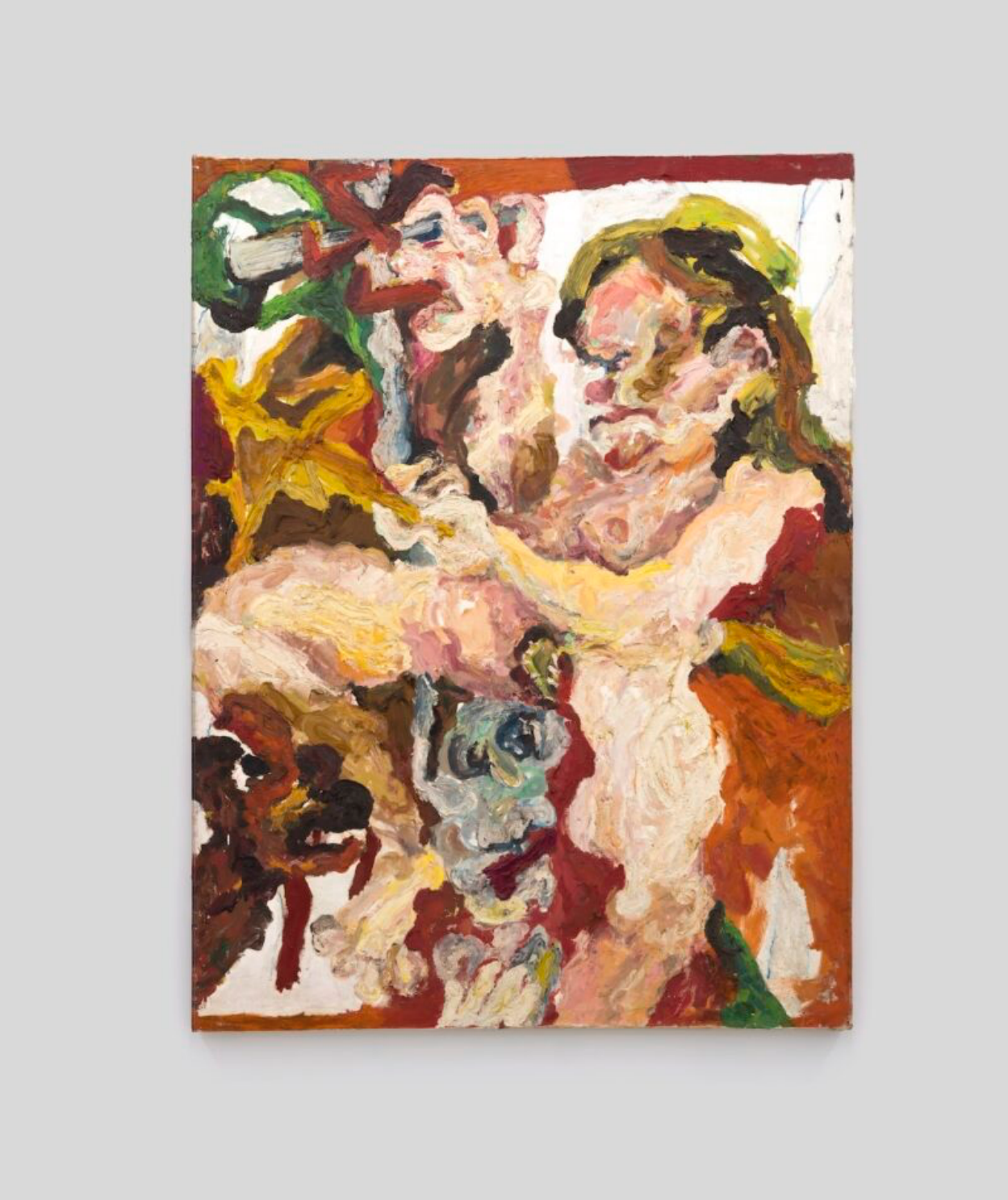
SS
I don't paint like any of these people. I paint like me. But they were really encouraging to me. James Amos Porter introduced me to fresco painting and emphasized the necessity of learning to talk about my painting, which I still have difficulty doing. The design and composition of my work was based on Lois Mailou Jones's teaching. She saw so much promise in my work and work ethic. James Lesesne Wells's teaching and tenderness influenced my use of line, especially in pen and ink renderings. David Driskell fostered me to develop my style of painting. He impressed upon me to explore abstraction and encouraged me to "expand" an area of color by adding more color. My strongest influence, though, was my parents—my mother's sense of color and design.

If it wasn't for Howard University, I wouldn't still be painting. The people who taught me at Howard supported me even after I graduated. I got my first job teaching art at Delaware State College from Lois Mailou Jones, and when I had my first solo exhibition there, they came and supported it. I know this sounds a little silly, but it was almost like how you don't let go of your children.

JB
I saw that you taught quite a bit over the years; did you enjoy that experience?
SSI did. At first, I couldn't teach painting, because it took too much away from my own work to get involved with somebody else's painting—to watch them, help them, and

nurture them. Eventually, I taught introductory painting courses because I didn't have to get that involved. I preferred to teach survey courses on the history of art—I knew Western art backward and forward, from the Paleolithic era through to the twenty-first century. For a year's course, I could do that. I memorized everything I had to say, wrote out the syllabus, and I imparted information. I enjoyed that part.

Leroy Dickerson, 1981, acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite, 48 × 48 inches.



Betty, 1974, oil on canvas, 80 × 60.25 inches.

JB

The earliest work of yours that I could find images of is the Betty series. These explore the dynamic between white women and Black men, right? The white women in the paintings are cast as almost predatory figures.

Would you talk about those paintings? What was your motivation and intention with those early works?

SS
Well, I don't want to get into this racial thing. But the paintings are about how we've become products of our own propaganda. I don't know if this still goes around now, but back then there was this myth that Black men are endowed and white men are not. Supposedly, white men dislike Black men because of that myth. There's a fear of the size of the Black male penis, but also a lust for it. With white women, that was the forbidden fruit. And so Black men would have a white woman to prove that they were manly. When they did, it would make us Black women feel like, Oh goodness, not again, you know? White women became victims of that propaganda.

This particular woman, Betty, was a woman who went after Black men and exploited her white skin.

JB
These were actually inspired by a person?

SS
Oh, yeah, I knew the person. (laughter)

JB
What was the response to these paintings?

SS
Let me tell you. Sam Gilliam, the painter, was a friend. When I was in school, he came by my house—I was living with my parents in DC at the time—and he looked at my paintings. He said, "You know, you paint like Cézanne; you don't paint the penis." And I noticed that in every one of my paintings, the male was turned so you didn't see him in a frontal position. Because of that, I started painting penises and I made them large. People got upset about that. (laughter)

JB
So you were being kind of modest, and then Sam Gilliam pointed that out and it inspired you to turn things around...

SS
Yeah.

JB

Wow. They look incredible. I wonder, are those paintings still around?

SS

Some of them. They're here in my house. I have two rooms that I use as a studio. But the rest I need for storage. I'm about painting out of my space, you know? Well, but I'm here. Growing up, my son asked me if we were going to ever live in a normal house, and I said, "For us, this is normal." (laughter)

This house is paid for, so I don't have to worry about whether I'm going to sell or not sell something to pay the rent or whatever.

JB

So you're secure there. That's the ideal setup.

SS

Yeah. I can paint at any time. All I have to do is get out of my bed and go down the hall and paint. For me, it was a big advantage to be able to live and paint in the same building. I don't have to get in a car and go to another place and then come back home.

Darlene Shannon, c. 1978, acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite, 96 × 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Franklin Parrasch Gallery, and Edel Assanti, London.

Men on M Street: George Brown, 2001, mixed media on paper, 45.5 × 33.5 inches.

JB
Are you a daytime or a nighttime painter, in general?

SS
Well, I used to be a nighttime painter. That's because I had to work and take care of my children, so I was busy during the day. Now that my children are adults, I don't have to do it quite the same way. I paint during the day. Light is better; I can see.

JB
What's your routine? Do you start in the morning?

SS
I don't. I start when I feel like it. It depends on what happens during the day. I don't work on clock time—the clock doesn't have anything to do with me. I get up when I feel like it. This morning, I looked at some paintings and had to figure out exactly the marks and colors I was gonna make to complete them. I walked around and thought about that. People think that to make paintings, I'm only using emotions, that it doesn't require thinking. They don't quite understand that other cultures use what they feel and what they think together. In Western culture, because it's younger compared to the others, they have not learned to work as a whole, single entity. So at first all they did was think, and they did not believe that their feelings governed them—which is just ridiculous. That's like negating half of you. When other cultures started integrating into this particular country, these Western people noticed that they had feelings too. They haven't really gotten it all together since then—where they can actually feel and think at the same time—but they're working on it.

I hope fifty years from now, they won't have to say that they only either think or feel. Thinking and feeling will come together and operate in the same sense at the same time. If you look at Black people, Black kids, and younger people dancing, they use a lot of mental and emotional knowledge simultaneously. When they dance, they think about the steps and feel the music—they go together to become one statement.

JB
Exactly. There's no reason to compartmentalize those entities. What do you think are the consequences of not thinking and feeling together?

SS
The split personalities, you know? They seem to be more destructive. There's no real understanding of themselves nor of other people as people.

JB

Were you always aware of this dichotomy between thinking and feeling? Or did you come to a realization at some point?

SS

I figured this out through knowing myself and other people. Seeing how they work. I was around a lot of Black and white people while I was growing up, but it was usually separate. I had to learn that there's a difference in the cultures. You're taught that white people think there is only one way of looking at things, at life, and it's their way. Well, that's simply not true. There are many ways of looking at life, many experiences. I had already learned the white way, and I realized it's not fitting for me, the whole world doesn't think like this. The whole world doesn't have these experiences. I became very much interested in learning exactly what I am about as a Black person.

I had to question what white people, this dominant society, was saying about us as Black people. I had to look inside and see what is true, not what they're saying. See, they say such negative things about Black people. We're not those negative things. We're not.

JB

Does this describe your approach to painting? Would you say you marry thought and feeling?

SS

Yes. I have been trying to combine the two. To create your signature as an artist, you have to make use of your intellectual self and your emotional self in a practice that you develop over time. Now, as far as paint is concerned, my style and signature stay famously the same with my use of impasto paint and brush work, but it's also exercising that process of thinking and feeling.

JB

Is there anything you do to get yourself into the proper state of mind to be creative?

SS

No, not really. I think about painting all the time. I paint every day. I understand what my focus is, make sure I have the materials here, and I work. I enjoy it immensely. I made up my mind a long time ago about what I can do. I can only do two things at a time that command an emotional response, and that's caring for my children and painting. I realized that I could not work forty hours a week. That was just impossible for me. I was very, very fortunate that many of the jobs I had were teaching at universities and colleges where a full-time workload was twelve hours. That allowed me to raise my kids and paint.

JB

I can sympathize—childrearing and painting are both complicated and multilayered pursuits. That's enough to keep yourself busy right there. Even one would be enough. I'm curious, do you ever make drawings independent of the paintings?

SS

Sometimes I do. I make what I will call studies. Particularly and only when I do figures. I draw the position of the figures, and sometimes I draw on a separate paper.

JB

Like a preparatory sketch, a note to yourself.

SS

Right. I do that so that I know where the head goes, how the arms stand, where things touch, the perimeters, that sort of thing. That way I don't paint the very same figure all the time.

Shell, Glimpses 112, 2003, acrylic on paper, 38.5 × 28 inches.

JB
So you don't work with any drawing material on the actual painting?

SS
I don't know whether you'd call oil pastel a drawing material.

JB
I think I would consider it to be.

SS
Well, I don't use it as drawing, at least to me. It's just incorporated in the painting itself. I don't mean that I mix oil pastel with paint. I put oil pastel on top of the paint and sometimes I paint over it.

JB
I see. You would have to put oil on top because the bottom of the painting is acrylic, right?

SS
Right. I first paint the surface with acrylic paint, and I'll see where I can stretch that material more. And then I introduce oil pastel. I'm originally an oil painter, and oil painting and acrylic are just two different things. My kids could not stand the odor of turpentine, and when I was an artist-in-residence at the University of Sydney in Australia, the program could not import enough oil paints for me to use, so I had to teach myself how to use acrylics, which I've been using since then. Using acrylic is like painting with plastic, and oil paint is like painting with nature. As acrylic dries, it dies, has no more life to it. I can't blend much with acrylic. That was a hard thing for me to understand. You can't and don't work within the paint; you work on top of it. I didn't use oil pastels with oil paint because there wasn't a need, but I use oil pastel with acrylics.

JB
It's tough, right? But I think you've managed to exploit the qualities that acrylic paint does have and really make it work. One thing that doesn't necessarily come through in photographs or reproductions of your work is the physicality of the paintings. The surfaces are intense. They're sculptural, three-dimensional. There's a real build-up of paint.

SS
I love impasto. I love to mix paint. It gets thicker. I like the feel of paint and the feel of putting paint on the canvas. The moment it goes on the canvas excites me.

JB

You can definitely see that in the work. Do you ever throw a painting out? Do you ever find that you reach an impasse with a painting, and you can't salvage it?

SS

No. When I paint, I get involved with the paint itself. The paint and the painting ... I am in it. I just put it aside and the answer will come in time. It looks different when you're not so close to it. You can see more flaws. A painting is like a puzzle in a way. It might not be there at the moment, but the answer to the puzzle will come in time. Thankfully, I don't ever get to the point where I feel a painting is hopeless. I know that whatever's there, I can use as underpaint.

JB

I know exactly what you mean. I sometimes find that I need to almost lose contact with the painting to be able to continue to work on it. When you're too embroiled in the process, you can't really see it. If you put it away for a few weeks and then haul it out again, you can see real possibility in it.

This is a question that I always find irritating, but I'm going to ask it anyway. (laughter) How do you know when a painting is finished?

SS

When I see that the painting is a complete statement and there's nothing else I can do to it—when I realize that I have finished a statement, that the sentence is over with. When you've exposed the area to too much paint and color, you're getting to the point where you're overworking it.

JB

Right. You get the feeling that you've said what you need to say, and you can move on. Is that intuitive for you?

SS

It's not just intuitive. It's mental, too. When we talk and make sentences and paragraphs, that's a structure, an intellectual effort to communicate with an emotion. They combine. The design of a painting is the same—it's mental, intellectual. When I actually apply the paint, it comes from my head through my heart, out through my arm to my hands and the brush. That's the way it travels.

JB

Since the '70s, most of your paintings focus on a single figure. Why is that?

SS

I am a figure painter. I like people—being around people. I know more about people and myself than I do anything else. I'm just trying to understand the way they think. Therefore, I paint them.

My work is structural abstract expressionism. It's not action painting or symbolic painting. It's based on the structure of a human, but the figure isn't necessarily the subject matter. The figures become paint.

JB

The figures appear to be tortured. They are contorted and compressed in a rather claustrophobic space. It feels to me like the figure is sort of pressing up against the edge of the painting. Is that something important to you?

SS

I guess so because I do it over and over again. (laughter) My figures do extend themselves to the perimeters of the canvas or paper—they're coming out to meet you, to greet you. The point is, they're pushing out of those parameters. But they're not tortured. They look just the way human beings look to me. I'm trying to get into the whole guts of a person; I paint the person without the packaging.

Steve Carter, 1982, acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite, 61.5 × 49.5 inches.

Clarice Little, 1985, acrylic on paper, 30 × 22 inches.

JB

I was looking at some pictures from the early ’80s and the titles referenced specific names: Steve Carter (1982), Leroy Dickerson (1981), Clarice Little (1985). Are these people from your life?

SS

They were my neighbors—people who lived on this one block on M Street in DC. When I came back from Australia, I was separated from my husband. My kids were staying at my parents’ house and I realized I had to get a place for us to live. We went around everywhere trying to find a house that I could afford and that would also be large enough to house a studio. I knew that my jobs were far and few between, so I had to make sure that we were not going to be homeless. Eventually I found a house in Shaw that did not need a lot of fixing up.

All the houses on this block are very, very large houses that were built for wealthy white people. And of course, when white people left for the suburbs, they held onto the houses and rented the rooms to poor Black people. At the time I moved in, this area was called the ghetto. Now the neighborhood is all white, and they look at me and say, “What are you doing here?” Only three, four houses on this side of the street are owned by Black people, even though there must be eighty-four addresses on this block.

There were a lot of people here in this neighborhood I would say hello to—you know, as neighbors do—but there was a difference in our backgrounds, so we did not socialize. I wasn’t interested in what they were interested in, and they weren’t interested in me. But if it weren’t for all the Black men on M Street, or the men who came to this area to socialize, my kids and I couldn’t have made it in this house. I learned who knew about electricity, coal, the roof, or whatever, and they would come in and help. And all they wanted was a bottle of wine. These men could do all these things, but because they were not formally educated, their employment was scarce. And so they socialized outside. At any rate, I got to know the names of people this way and watched them from afar. When I made figure paintings, I would name them after a particular person as a means of identification of a work—not as a portrait.

When trucks used to come by and get my paintings out front, people knew what they were coming for, and they would all come out and see their names marked on the back of the painting. They’d say, “Oh, there I am! There’s Catherine!” There was just so much pride that someone took an interest in them to paint them. Not that they necessarily knew what the painting was, or even whether it was facing up or down. But that pride they had made me feel good. For most of us, we don’t ever get recognized for anything.

One of the fortunate aspects of my life was that I was raised in an upper middle-class environment, but moving to this neighborhood made me privy to two extreme ways of living which enriched my understanding of people. I paint the humanness of us all.

JB
That's fantastic that you made them feel proud and recognized. I was just in DC a few weeks ago. Does the city have a happening, vibrant community of artists?

SS
No, none whatsoever. There were a lot of galleries forty years ago, but now most of them are closed. I mean, there are none! Back then, everybody who wanted to open up a gallery and had a large house like mine would open a gallery in their own house. It got to the point where anybody who could spell the word art felt that they could be a gallery owner. Still, it was quite a nice little art hub. Everybody knew each other and knew who was going to have a show. We would all go on a Friday or a Saturday to support that artist, see who was there, and say hi.

Now, why they got closed? I don't know. The artists left. Galleries left. You can speculate on a lot of things, but there was a saying that you have to go to New York in order to show in DC galleries. You have to go prove yourself in New York—

JB
—to get attention in your own hometown.

SS
Exactly. The galleries here also didn't have any contact outside of, Oh, Art in America is gonna be here next week. It was all so inward.

JB
Right. And you need a certain critical mass to make things work. You need to have a group of interesting artists in a supportive gallery scene, and if there's not enough of that it just dies on the plan, I suppose.
Do you nonetheless see yourself as being in dialogue with contemporaries or do you think of your work more in relation to artists from the twentieth century and from the past?

SS
My work doesn't have anything to do with what's going on now. I've worked in the style that fits my personality—that is my personality—and that is expressionism. Now, if I were born today and painted ten or fifteen years from now, would I be expressionist or not? I don't know. When I was learning to paint, abstract expressionism was at its peak.

JB
Right. So that was in the air. What was it about expressionism that drew you to it?

SS
I find that my truth is more thorough through what I feel than just through what I think. What you think is often funneled through a lot of different things; what you feel is purer. You can operate on both, but I lead with my feelings more so than what I think about something. Expressionism places an emphasis on an emotional reaction to the subject matter, and that's what geared me to it. I just want to know what my truth is, and I paint that. But it's not just my truth—if it was just mine, then I wouldn't be able to communicate with people. And people do communicate with my work.

JB
What's next? Would you like to talk about your upcoming show?

SS
I'm currently working on a new series called the G series. It's named for my father—whose name was George—out of respect and love, but what I paint doesn't have anything to do with him. The emphasis in this series is on large sweeps of paint, and the paintings are nonfigurative. I work in series in the same way you might write a paragraph in a story or a chapter in a book.

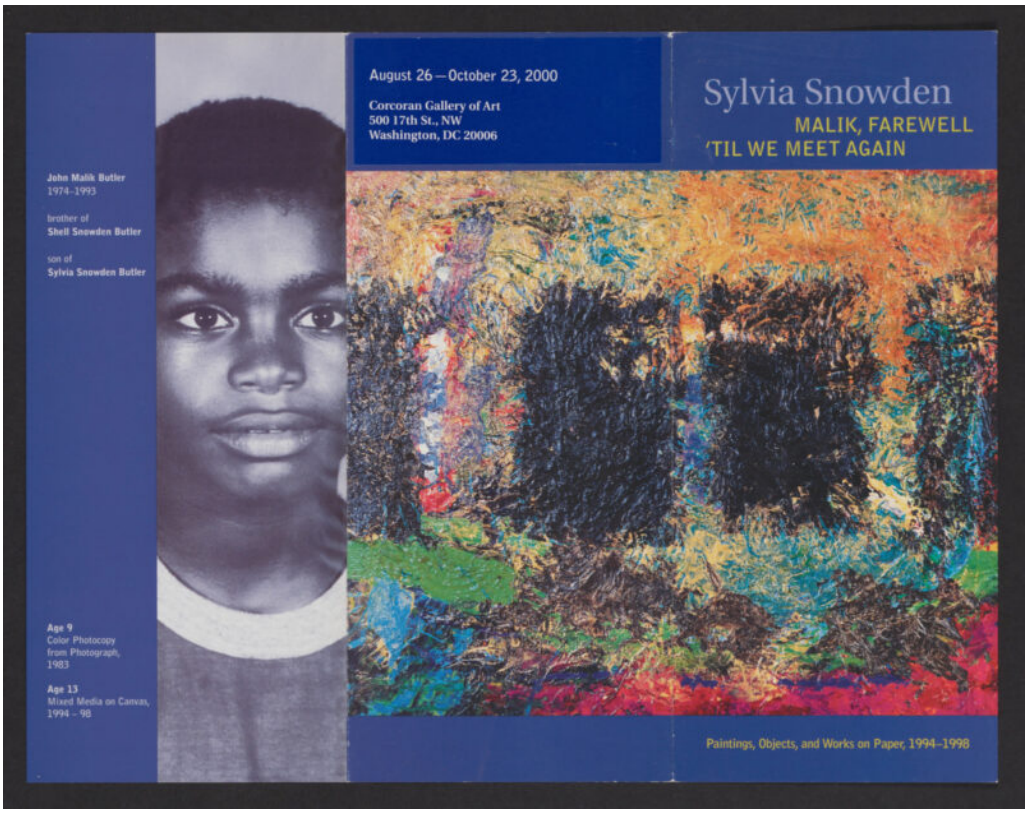
For the show, all the paintings are about my daughter, Shell. I have two children—had two children. My son was killed, shot to death.

JB
My god, I am so sorry.

SS
You know, you just don't get over the loss of a child. You never get over it. I don't like to dwell on it, but I did a huge show dedicated to his life.

JB
That's beautiful. They were paintings of your son?

SS
Not of him. The exhibition had large and small abstract paintings and some sculptures. Next to each large painting, I had black-and-white photographs of him, enlarged and printed to represent a particular age. I also had three-dimensional forms—like his shoes, catcher's mitt, all sorts of things that I still had—that I painted on to make sculptures. I traced his life from the beginning—with his crib—all the way up through when he was found on the ground with gunshots in his head. I was trying to place emphasis on how precious a life was; how an American child has gone through these phases of life with his football gear, hockey sticks, and all of that.



Exhibition brochure for *Malik, Farewell 'til We Meet Again*, 2000.

Installation view of *Malik, Farewell 'til We Meet Again*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 2000. Courtesy of the Sylvia Snowden papers, 1962–2017, from the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

JB
What a beautiful tribute. I have four children of my own and I simply can't imagine what that pain must be like. I'm really sorry to hear that your family went through that.

SS
You have four!

JB
Yeah, I've got my hands full. (laughter) And a real range, too. My oldest is eighteen and my youngest is three. So yes, I have many balls in the air at the moment.

SS
Exactly. (laughter) Well, when you have kids, what you do for one you got to do for the other. When my son died, I gave him a great big show, and with my daughter, I thought, Oh, I can't have her feel left out! So I did a lot of paintings of her. I showed five of them at the Rubell Museum, and Franklin Parrasch Gallery is going to show some more in the fall. The show is called Shell, Glimpses, and I paint her in different situations. It's all figures. I wanted to make sure she understood that I love her just like I love my son.

JB
I look forward to seeing the show. Will you come to New York to celebrate the exhibition?

SS
Let me ask you something—if I go up to New York for the opening, would you meet me and take me to some galleries?

JB
Absolutely. I would be delighted.

Joe Bradley is an American artist whose expansive visual practice encompasses painting as well as sculpture and drawing. Over the past twenty years, Bradley has created a distinctive body of work that has ranged from modular, minimalist-style paintings and sculptures; to rough-hewn, heavily-worked surfaces featuring pictographic and abstract elements; to recent refined and layered compositions. Bradley was born in Kittery, Maine, and received his BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1999. He presently lives and works in New York.