

Alive with Potent Energy: The Work of Sylvia Snowden

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*Featured image: Men on M Street –
George Brown II, 2001
acrylic on canvas
71-1/4 by 58-3/4 inches
Courtesy of the Artist and Parrasch
Heijnen, Los Angeles*

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MANY OF Sylvia Snowden's vivid canvases are so thick with impasto that they verge on being relief works. The acrylic medium retains the gestures of her fingers, the strokes of her palette knives, and the trace of her brushes. Her compositions are

made of peaks and valleys, grooves and protrusions, tracks as well as marks. They are not just a representation in signs and figures, but the thick matter of extruded thought. While the striking material fact of making paint dimensional, using it as a sculpting medium, is not the only striking feature of Snowden's canvases, it produces a visceral first impact.

The 2021 [exhibition](#) of Snowden's work at the Parrasch Heijnen Gallery in Los Angeles, which ran from November 13 to December 18, included work from six decades (the Washington, DC-based artist is approaching her 80th birthday). This sustained commitment shows in the evident maturity of the work and the

range of periods and styles with which the artist has been in dialogue. Sui generis in many ways, the corpus is still situated within the tropes of modern figurative work, color-field abstraction, and engagement with certain aspects of 20th-century art that aspired to heroic achievement — in the best sense of an ambition to struggle with the existential dimensions of aesthetic self-realization.

The work is varied, which is not surprising given its temporal range and the multiple series from which it was selected. The oldest painting in the exhibit, an untitled, modest-sized Masonite panel from 1966 created with a mix of acrylic and oil pastel, has a quietness and capacity for absorption that distinguishes it from many of the later, highly active, pieces. Moody and soft, its passages might or might not reference a head or figure, and their capacity for hovering in an ambiguous zone between representation and abstraction is part of what holds our attention. Such ambiguity carries a critical charge, challenging the viewer not only formally but socially. Snowden seems to suggest that social positions, with their specific forms of knowledge and experience, are at play in the negotiation of viewer and canvas, painter and audience, as they are in all aspects of daily life. There is no neutral spot for a cultural politics of reception to stand on.

In *Betty* (1974), figures overlap and commingle in a spatially impossible change of scale and a juxtaposition of heads, feet, genitalia, and faces. Breasts, ears, spread-apart thighs are both explicit and not, vividly present as paint strokes yet also deliriously seductive. The only work in the exhibit done exclusively in oils, the painting evokes a nostalgia for the subtle beauty of that medium. The tones of the palette are rich with ochre, carmine, burnt umber, and hints of earth greens and vivid blues associated with another era. Colors, like songs, names, and styles, carry their associations, and this canvas swarms with animate energies appropriate to the predominantly organic pigments of which it is composed. Something of the sensibility of James Ensor — dreamlike and nightmarish, ritualistic and slightly obscure — seems to push the canvas backward in time, toward precedents in Expressionistic modernism. But it has also clearly been painted by someone who has looked at Lucian Freud, Willem de Kooning, and Joan Brown. These are not references quoted or cited by Snowden in any direct sense, however, and the way she manages the figures is distinct from the methods of other painters. She situates her work in deliberate, not derivative, moves.

But the garish central woman-thing in *Betty*, with her heavy chin, brow beetled forward, hands absorbed in some object, and ghoulish head crouching below the gaping wound of her sex, raises another crucial issue. The nudes of the many modern “masters” (i.e., men) are now routinely characterized as objectification. But how are they different from this depiction of a woman *by* a woman? Who speaks, presents, writes, and offers an image to view? Who has license to objectify? If subjectivity is the place *from* which one sees and paints, then where and how is the permission for what to paint *about* granted? In the last decade in

particular, markers of identity such gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation have provided the legitimization for aesthetic depiction, the warrant for whose point of view is allowed into a conversation. Snowden's identity is an essential feature of the way her work can be read and received. The cultural politics of production also have no neutral place on which to stand.

Not only gendered but also racialized figures appear, in strong outline and silhouette, throughout Snowden's works, and the same issues of legitimization arise. The artist is a black woman, but do we need to know this fact to read her images? Should images always be situated within the identity frameworks of their authors? This is one of the unresolvable dilemmas of our time, and critical reflection on how art offers the experience of the self to the other — and captures the other's experience in an expression of alterity — is ever more urgent. If the processes of empathetic identification through which aesthetic catharsis and epiphanic revelation function are restricted along lines of identity, then where is the ground for an exchange of understanding? In one sense, these issues are irrelevant to the vibrant excitement Snowden's canvases trigger. In another, they are central to the challenges she offers.

If *Betty* feels connected to a long history of oil painting in the modern era, then the [acrylic paintings in the *Shell* series](#) (2010–'12) manage to be fully contemporary by virtue of their color, form, and treatment. They are nudes. They are bold. They are frontal and explicit, but also so thickly and richly made that they vibrate between matter and meaning, creating a force field of color as form in space. The sheer heat of the pigment would vibrate on its own, but pulled and molded into thick relief, the paint has a molten quality that refuses to conform to the decorum of mere surface. The strokes thrust into the viewer's perceptual field.

Among these full figures, their bare bodies active and alive, the nonfigurative [Green III](#) (2020) takes on more of a vitalist character than it would if surrounded by other abstractions. Described as acrylic on canvas, it seems also to contain plastic sheets contorted and twisted into the paint, and its color palette partakes of synthetic dyes and chemical compounds unheard of in an earlier era. Sheer matter, the stuff of making, the very fluid of creative energy made visible and palpable is molded into form here. The energy of the works is amazing, as if they have stopped in mid-flow or formation.

Among the vibrant canvases, one subdued work on paper from the mid-1990s — titled [Malik, Farewell III](#) — occupied its own separate wall. Set apart in this way, its symmetry and gentleness had their own very evocative effect. The image might be an icon, a bust, with its necklace of glowing stones and pleated collar. But it might also be a meditation on a moment, with the blue sky opening above a living earth, both surrounded by the darkness of a halo or aura. The subtlety and beauty

of the image makes the somber stillness and space it creates immediately elegiac. Stop here, the image seems to say, stay with me, in contemplation and company. And, indeed, it is a commemorative image of deep personal loss, very private, but eloquently, respectfully, offered for public view.

Each of these works is alive with energies, compelling active motion caught in the body of paint. Among them, *Men on M Street – George Brown II* (2001) is an image of undeniable power and struggle. The coming-apart-ness of the black figure against its orange ground — a whirlwind of motion, arms flailing, chest pitched forward — is caught in the raked strokes of the ribs, as the body becomes explosive space. Along the edges of the canvas and in its lower quadrant, a hint of rest from this dynamism appears, some passages that seem quiet by contrast, though they are activated by drips and strokes, bright areas of blue and green set off by the black and orange of the figure in motion. The energy of the Futurists, their attempts to capture the dynamism of movement, is a distant echo here, but it is the contemporary scene — the life of urban streets and sites, individuals caught in and living through the struggles of the world today — that cannot be ignored, denied, or turned away from when encountering this canvas. Heroic, again, in the best sense, the work is evidence of a commitment to the struggle to bring something into being, into form, for all the potency it embodies and gives us to witness.

Strong works, vital but poetic and subtle at the same time, Sylvia Snowden's paintings are alive with potent energy and all that it challenges us to consider.

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