

photographed from behind, and one has the urge to peek around and glimpse his face. But the work, exhibited against the wall, has an orientation closer to that of a picture and plays on the seen and unseen, the proximate and distant, two- and three-dimensionality. With images filtered through successive layers of transparent plastic, Cheng's photographic sculptures read as neither exactly photographic nor sculptural, suggesting instead the subsumption of content *and* form within a kind of McLuhanite televisual media ecology.

The photo works serve as a prologue to the sculptures that constitute the bulk of the exhibition. In plastics—again, of several varieties—they mimic the look and feel of the era's highly designed consumer electronics, while enclosing material, and life forms, extracted from the natural world—as if in quotation. *Supply and Demand* (1972) contains two chambers encased in translucent green plexi, one a breeding ground for insects, the other a patch of Venus flytraps. A tube connects the two plexi canopies, the larger of which arches high in the back and slopes down toward the viewer, recalling a turntable dustcover. It's all set into a dark, dense plastic base from which protrude three thick green switches that look like they came from the control panel of a cartoon rocket ship.

Though we might see these electric-kinetic microcosms as successors in a legacy of mechanical sculpture, they share

neither the exuberance of the modernist "machine aesthetic" (for example, Moholy-Nagy's *Light Prop for an Electric Stage*, 1930), nor the mordancy of Jean Tinguely's *Metamechanics*. Rather, Cheng's sculptures evince a cool and ambivalent take on the consumer commodities whose forms they assume and distend. Made under his corporate pseudonym, John Doe Co., they come across almost as camp, a mannered performance of commodification and consumption in the age of polypropylene and integrated circuitry. At the same time, he says of his machines that they "model nature, its processes and effects for a future environment that may be completely made by humans."¹

But that future doesn't look so bad. The four *Erosion Machines* (1969), for example, seem to take pleasure in the malleability of nature. These plastic yellow boxes are divided vertically into two compartments, each exposed to the viewer through windows. The left contains a refrigerator-like display of handmade rocks of compacted sediment, covered in Day-Glo paint. They sit on metal racks, bathed from above in black light, while in the adjacent compartment, water continuously cycles through as a rock slowly disintegrates. Or take *Emergency Nature Supply Kit (E.N. Supply, No. 271-01)* (1971), in which a small base holds a two-inch square patch of grass, fed by a tube, while a cute little speaker, of roughly the same dimensions, issues bird sounds. The

highlight of the piece is the intricate and clever packaging and the velvet-lined, pyramidal carrying case: The fate of nature may be in doubt, but the future of the commodity form looks bright. More than ecological warning, Cheng's sculptures seem to demonstrate Fredric Jameson's claim that late capitalism marks the "moment of a radical eclipse of nature itself": the Sublime contained in Plastic.²

Joan Snyder at Parrasch Heijnen

April 30–
June 10, 2016

As the 44th presidency draws to a close, a steady trickle of retrospective articles have begun to explore Barack Obama's time in the White House, several of which refer to his administration's preferred principle of "soft power." A concept coined by the political scientist Joseph Nye, soft power advocates the use of subtle persuasion rather than strong-armed coercion—via policies, politicking, and the media—to bring other worldviews into line with one's own. Eight canvases recently on view at Parrasch Heijnen by Joan Snyder, an established New York painter and early feminist artist, deploy a similarly restrained and compelling maneuver.

Since Snyder (now in her 70s) uses a traditional

1. Cherry and Martin press release.

2. Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991. Print.

Claire
de Dobay Rifelj

medium, a bright multi-hued palette, and abundant references in her titles and materials to things coded female (the exhibition was titled *Womansong*), one could expect to encounter a room full of pictures that might traditionally have been written off as surface-level or critically undemanding. However, while Snyder's paintings do offer moments of beauty and attraction, her heavily impastoed surfaces and abstracted traces of refuse add an element of repulsion that complicates any assumptions of easy-viewing or gendered forms. In so doing, the paintings utilize a soft, insinuating power that punches subtly but firmly.

Take *Lady* (2015), for example. At a glance, the work's layered, energetic composition and colorful, confetti-like flecks of paint convey an agreeable whimsy. Upon closer examination, the pink outline of a supine woman comes to the fore; so do the heads of large dried flowers that have been smashed into splotches of oil paint, which the artist lets trickle down the canvas. At the waist of the painting's curvaceous body, strokes of minty green and vanilla mingle with black-brown, as if a fallen ice cream cone were melting into a muddy sludge across its midriff. Here, unseemly ingredients pollute both the work's initial pastoral lightness and its ghostly image of busty, idealized womanhood, so pervasive in today's advertising and Instagram culture.

Snyder likewise conjures—and then promptly

quashes—the trappings of female prettiness in *Heart of the Fugue* (2016). Heart-shaped signs are scrawled into a central, reddish-purple form that doubles as a beating heart and vagina; and across the linen support, Snyder has affixed half a dozen bundles of flower stalks, tied together with pink silk ribbons. More daubs of Technicolor paint, many in pink, provide a loose grid that structures the otherwise free-flowing and organic-looking gestures. Anything but lovely, by contrast, are the periodic smears of brown pigment, which connote abject notions of decay, dirt, and even finger-painted excrement. These passages in Snyder's work add a female-oriented twist to the exuberant, male-centered scatologies of her contemporary Paul McCarthy and, more recently, the female painter, Tala Madani.

Themes such as landscape, the body, music, the brushstroke, and the grid have been recurring concerns within Snyder's work since her career first took off in the late 1960s. Living in New York, fresh from a master's program at Rutgers University, her work received early recognition: solo exhibitions in New York and San Francisco in 1971; a major article in *Artforum* that same year by curator Marcia Tucker; and inclusion in two of the Whitney Museum's then-annual exhibitions.¹ In this early period she was deep into her “stroke paintings,” canvases that examine and catalog a range of expansive brushstrokes and brusque dabs

of paint. One example, *Spring* (1971), is installed at the entrance to Snyder's recent exhibition, where it offers not only a chronological counterpoint to the more recent canvases, but also evidence of her long-standing treatment of paint at once as a material, a language, and a skin of its own. The positioning of historical and contemporary works together is especially well-suited to Snyder's cyclical return to particular motifs and pictorial strategies.

Between these temporal poles of early and late career, the artist has followed a mantra of “more, not less”—a conscious departure from the 1960s dicta of late-modernist criticism and Minimalism alike? Rejecting flatness and opticality on the one hand, and the concept of a self-contained, depersonalized object on the other, Snyder instead infused her abstract paintings with collaged materials, bodily traces, and narrative suggestion, just as the feminist art movement was beginning to gain steam.

Unlike many of her feminist peers, including Judy Chicago, Faith Ringgold, and Martha Rosler, Snyder did not delve into alternative media such as performance, installation, or video. Rather, she stood steadfastly by painting, working to dislodge its largely masculine associations with authorial gesture and power. At different points in each subsequent decade, Snyder's canvases have veered towards an overabundant accretion of material and text that

1. Tucker, Marcia. “The Anatomy of a Stroke: Recent Paintings by Joan Snyder.” *Artforum*. May 1971: 42-45. Print.

2. Snyder first articulated this phrase in a manifesto penned in the mid-1970s; see Joan Snyder, response to “What is feminist art,” ca. 1976-77, Woman's Building records, 1970-1992, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

***Performing the Grid* at Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design**

**January 23–
May 15, 2016**

These briefs are installed in a single room in the gallery along with the noisiest of her works, *Molly Barnes* (1969). Barnes seems to have neglected to turn off her electric razor following a kerfuffle in which she spilled her pills and powder. The vibrating razor rests on a delicately soiled pink bath mat, its insistent buzzing audible to the viewer throughout the show.

After *California Lives* was poorly received upon its debut in New York, Antin doubled down on her methods but altered her subjects, creating *Portraits of Eight New York Women* (1970), each inspired by a prominent female member of New York's avant-garde community. Reflecting the often performative lives of these women, the arrangements become more dramatic in this body of work. There is the show-stopping *Carolee Schneemann* (1970): a dramatic sweep of red velvet is personified and preening in front of a mirror, yet is still grounded by the earthy jar of honey at its feet. The work is haunting and elegant. Meanwhile, a more playful *Yvonne Rainer* (1970) balances a heaping basket of flowers atop her Exercycle, her sweatshirt lingering on the edge of the seat. And what exactly does *Hannah Weiner* (1970) plan to do with that hammer? The tool rests threateningly amongst an otherwise saccharine picnic arrangement complete with gingham-clad, heart-shaped chairs.

Here too, the issues of subjectivity and identity bubble up to the surface.

One work, the portrait of *Rochelle Owens* (1970) was deemed inaccurate by its subject; in its place, a wall label reads “Rochelle Owens Removed/ Piece Did Not Live up to Subject” According to the text accompanying the exhibition, only one woman wanted her portrait after the show. But, after a year “she called to say the piece was making her nervous and her therapist suggested that she give it back.”

These are portraits that both celebrate and scrutinize their subjects. Antin does good work digging into the complexity of people's (and particularly women's) identities and relaying those specific details with simple goods considerately placed. The sculptures resonate by capturing the imperfections and nuances that people project into the world, encompassing style, poise, and presence, yet also a darker internal turmoil that many of us contain under the surface. Her portraits celebrate and expose the complexities of each of our inner lives, while also unmasking a dependence on capitalist structures to express the self. These objects become stand-ins for the body, infused with the energy of life, and the pathos of mortality.

The grid occupies a seemingly contradictory place in our culture, representing both dystopian rigidity and utopian perfectibility. Take for instance, the architecture of prisons v. that of modernist utopian art movements. As organic bodies, we are caught between the two: simultaneously defined and corralled by the dystopian, and striving toward and illuminated by the utopian. The recent exhibition *Performing the Grid* at Otis College of Art and Design's Ben Maltz Gallery, brought this tension to a sustained vibration, bringing the eccentricities of the body into relief. Here, bodies perform the grid, but also confront, are dwarfed by, give rise to, and abide within grids both monolithic and evanescent.

One of the pleasures of the show was its inter-generational roster, as well as the range of media within which the artistic investigations took place. Dance and performance were well represented (on video) with iconic works like Bruce Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967); *Dance*, Lucinda Childs collaboration

Molly Larkey