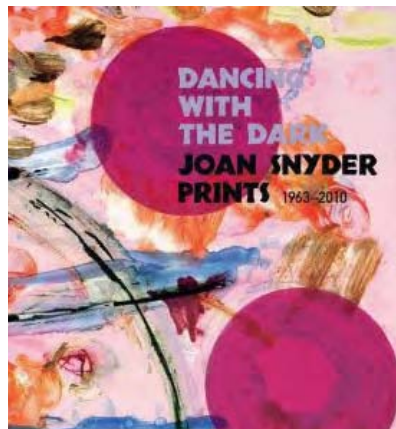


## NEW BOOKS



**Dancing With The Dark:  
Joan Snyder Prints 1963–2010**

By Marilyn Symmes, with essays by Faye Hirsch and Marilyn Symmes. 176 pp, 152 color and 14 b/w images. \$60  
New Brunswick: Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University and Munich/London/New York: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2011

**Getting Complicated:  
Joan Snyder Prints**

By Susan Tallman

**D***ancing With the Dark: Joan Snyder Prints 1963-2010* is a weighty and substantially proportioned book. Its beautifully printed cover proffers glossy letters afloat on a matte sea of raspberry orbs and translucent inks. Lovely. Which may come as a surprise to those who remember the raw frenzy of Snyder's prints of the 1980s: the howling figures of *Mommy Why?* (1983-84), the savage scratches of *Things Have Tears* and *We Know Suffering* (1983-84). How did we—or more to the point, she—get from there to here? What has become of Snyder's militant expressionism? Has she become... nice?

*Dancing With the Dark* is the hardback companion to Snyder's print retrospective at Rutgers University's Zimmerli Art Museum. With 112 prints made over the course of nearly 50 years, it charts the artist's curious trajectory through critical moments in late 20th-century art. A lengthy and insightful essay by Faye Hirsch and an 'illuminated chronology' by Marilyn Symmes follow Snyder from the woodcut portraits and landscapes that marked her first encounter with German Expressionism in 1963 (when the cutting edge art was Pop), through her etchings of the '70s, which deftly recapitulated the heavier drama of her paintings (at a time when Conceptualism was the dominant discourse), to her later woodcuts, which erupted with a fury that made German Expressionism look like Victorian watercolors, just as distanced irony became the very air we breathe. It wasn't that Snyder's timing was off—often, as with her return to woodcut in the '80s, it was right on the money—but that she was always, stubbornly, speaking a different language.

This book and exhibition are the first to survey the breadth of Snyder's printmaking, and they are critical for any understanding of who Snyder is as an artist, revealing a more complex, subtle, and layered body of work than the paintings alone suggest. Snyder rose to prominence in the 1970s with work that merged feminist outrage, formalist savvy and good old-fashioned paint-flinging expressionism. In the painting *A Letter to My Female Friends* (1972), Snyder fitted her drippy brush strokes to a staff of horizontal lines like words on a notebook page, and the epistolary conceit was reinforced with "LOVE JOAN" in the lower right. The gridded space of her 1977 etching *Red and Yellow* (Fig. 1), had affinities with both the didactic taxonomies of conceptualism and the formal rigor of artists like Brice Marden (and the invocation of primary colors echoed Barnett Newman and Jasper Johns), but Snyder packed her boxes with scribbles,

scratches and rants of near-psychotic urgency: "Dear Felicia" in the upper left, "Joan Snyder motherfucker" in the lower right. (It helps to know that Felicia was her therapist.) Despite Abstract Expressionism's reputation machismo, in Snyder's hands Expressionism and Feminism are one and the same thing: she conceives of her art as a direct response to her emotional experience, and insists that women's "experiences in, of and with the world are different than men's experiences, and their artwork springs out of this woman's place and space."

Feminism sparked a reassessment of all sorts of dominant hierarchies: is big better than small? Is the conceptual more important than the emotional? Post-Duchamp, few artists wanted to be "*bête comme un peintre*," but some began to argue that, as Pat Steir put it, "separation between thinking and emotion is a stupid person's way of defining the way things are." Steir's prints in the 70s bore a certain resemblance to Snyder's—she also made etchings that combined neat geometries with irregular, autographic elements. But Steir was cataloguing decorous style-markers to analyze how art worked; Snyder was stripping away all decorum in pursuit of raw emotional contact. Marcia Tucker compared her work to a "partially demolished building... the paradox of an intimacy aggressively exposed."

In a 1982 interview Snyder said, "What does it mean to be an Expressionist? What does it mean to be Joan Snyder? The same thing." Such pronouncements—without nuance, discussion, or hedging—make it tempting to see her work as guileless to the point of being simple, a misreading this book effectively corrects.

Hirsch's essay begins with the 1997 etching *My Work...* (Fig. 2), in which a blood-red heart-vulva-butterfly-molar shape is set against a field of words running backwards and forwards ('drips', 'moons', 'rust', 'blossoms'...), with a statement scratched across

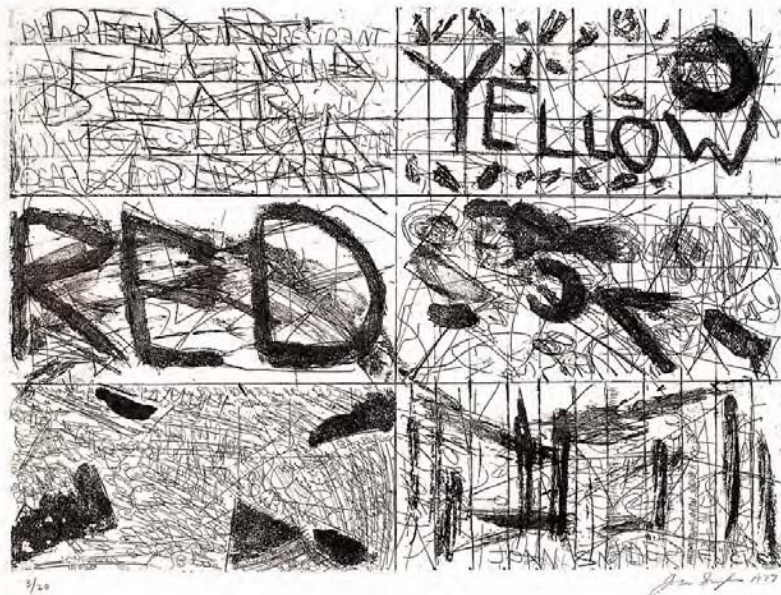


Fig. 1. Joan Snyder, *Red and Yellow* (1977), etching, 39.7 x 54.9 cm (image).

the bottom—"my work has been absolutely faithful to me"—that lands with a declarative thump. But the sheer variety of marks (muscular gouges, hairline scratches, dusty sprinkles, woodcut, etching, image, word) evokes indecision and opportunity. This sense is literally multiplied on the two-page spread devoted to the proof states of the print: one looks like a strawberry twirling in a crimson mist; in another the words are highlighted in confetti colors; in another they are tagged with black if by an angry censor with a can of Rustoleum. The monogamous exclusivity of "my work has been absolutely faithful to me" opens up into something more like "it's complicated."

Snyder has complained, "I don't usually get praised for writing on work like, say, Twombly or Schnabel or Rauschenberg. I get nailed, usually be being called a 'feminist' who 'wears her heart on her sleeve.'" Like many painter-printmakers, she is drawn to written language: sometimes her own, sometimes borrowed from Thoreau, or Millay, or Virgil. As Hirsch observes,

Snyder uses text differently than the male artists she cites: her words, "so closely linked to feminine subjects and subjectivity, have a kind of rawness that mask their formal strategies." For Twombly words were a deflection, a gesture from the artist's hand plotting a circuitous route to his heart. Snyder says: "I never write on a print or painting unless there is an urgency," she says.

But urgency plays out in funny ways in the prints. Prints, of course, are never as direct, and rarely as spontaneous, as paintings. They are, for want of a better term, strategic. Images have to be broken down by color, by line type, by positive or negative process; and out of the chaos of techniques and templates, order has to be reasserted and a coherent image re-produced. Snyder has worked with many talented printers—Andrew Mockler, Maurice Sanchez, Jennifer Melby—the kind of people who are adept at strategizing on behalf of the artist. But she has also pulled her own prints on her own press, which she kept in her studio in the 80s

and 90s, proof of her interest and her immersion.

Snyder recognized early on that prints were a chance to riff on a theme. Take, for example, the etchings she made after her 1977 painting *Resurrection*. The painting is a 26-foot long, multi-panel indictment of violence against women. It begins (reading left to right) with a handwritten list of names and a collage of newspaper stories about rapes and murders, then moves through passages of angry paint to resolve, in its final panels, into bright clouds and a shining sun. The etching reproduces the structure of the painting but as a small event on a large page, an armature for blocks of color and clusters of strokes, a launching pad for addenda. Here again the book's generous reproduction of variant proofs is illuminating: revealing a body of work, from painting to print, that is more mediated than it seems at first glance, less a political trope about violence than a psychotherapeutic narrative about the artist's emotional response to accounts of violence.

"Printmaking," Snyder says, "is magical, though a lot of work... You don't know what you're going to get." The more comfortable Snyder has become with printmaking, the more she has cultivated layering, derivative alterations and unpredictability. By the turn of the millennium she was deploying woodcut, etching,



Fig. 2. Joan Snyder, *My Work...* (1997), etching and woodcut, 40 x 50.1 cm (image).



Fig. 3. Joan Snyder, *Madrigal X* (2001), lithograph, monotype and woodcut, 85.1 x 90.1 cm.

lithograph and various monotype techniques in increasingly virtuosic, complex and nuanced constructions. The line between printing, painting and installation work has become increasingly blurred, as elements on one mode frequently appear in the other.

The shockingly lovely cover image is a detail of *Madrigal X* (Fig. 3), a work built from woodcut, lithography and monotype. It is one in a series of 33 prints, in each of which ten colored disks orbit a large circular field, braced or disrupted by horizontal slashes, and sprinkled with thumbprints and floral splashes. They are engaging and ambiguous, an invitation to interpretation. Over the last two decades, as Snyder has aged, and faced the losses that age brings, her work has become increasingly elegiac. This is not to say she is less angry—one body

of work cites Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Dirge Without Music" which begins "I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground."

Symmes and Hirsch emphasize the degree to which Snyder's art is rooted in biography, in emotional responses to the events of her life. So it is interesting to note that the *Madrigals* were made in Brooklyn in the weeks following September 11, 2001. The prints don't seem to channel rage or grieving or fear. Instead, they evoke, as she wrote about a related series, "a way of bringing order to my world... in times of great disorder." It's not necessarily "nice," but it is a very printerly view of things.