Resurrection, 1977, (Detail of Second Panel)

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency.
The theme of rape or violence against women is not an uncommon one in the history of art. The Rape of Europa, the Rape of Proserpine, the Rape of the Sabine Women, that of Helen, of Hippodamia, Lucretia, the daughters of Leucippus, are familiar subjects that have served repeatedly as pretexts for the pictorial juxtaposition of heroic male might and yielding female flesh in erotic fantasies of dramatic confrontation. What is uncommon, and what marks Joan Snyder's Resurrection of 1977 as a turning point in western painting, is to see the violence of rape in all of its traumatic brutality and ugliness from the point of view of the victim. Resurrection testifies to the terrorizing climate of precaution and fear that prevails in a culture which sensationalizes and condones sexual assault. But at the same time it speaks of transcendence, of a visionary strength that comes from a collective consciousness and refuses to remain the victim.

Resurrection stands as the monumental culmination to a series of paintings Snyder executed in the period 1974-77 which embody explicit feminist imagery. Since taking up painting in 1962, while a sociology major at Douglass College, Snyder had consistently worked from her own personal experience, creating canvasses that Hayden Herrera has characterized as "diaries of emotion" and exploring specifically "female" means of expression. A pioneer in the women artist's movement (she initiated the very important program of women's exhibitions at the Douglass College library in 1971 and was early involved in consciousness-raising among women artists) Snyder was one of the first to expound the concept of a "female sensibility" different from the dominant "male sensibility" of the art world, and directly related to the differences in women's and men's life experiences. In her own work this sensibility began to show itself in fleshy pink coloration, layered paint textures, "membrane" overlays, vaginal and heart-shaped forms, and vulnerable --often pierced and mutilated--surfaces whose physicality she identified with the flesh of her body. With the painting Small Symphony for Women in 1974 these formal metaphors merged with a more political subject matter: "that painting was the beginning of a lot of my more conscious efforts toward talking about women, women's place in the world, women's pain and strength."

In Resurrection pain and strength are the two major themes, the first invoking enraged response and the second resounding in a visionary landscape of historical and cosmic dimension. Intended as a memorial to specific murder victims, the painting is also a monument to the spirit of woman which has persisted as a humanizing force in the face of overwhelming violence.

Originally Snyder planned to concentrate on the subject of rape. For two years she had been collecting articles about violence against women which she found with alarming frequency in the newspapers she read in her travels around the country. In August 1976 she said in an interview, "They like to burn women, for some reason; they like to rape them, pour gasoline over them. For a year now I have been trying to figure out how to integrate all that into the painting." By October she had begun the painting and was having trouble: "I had trouble with the panel about violence. It came out to be such an ugly painting that it is disturbing to me (not that I wanted it to be a beautiful painting), but it is so torn, so brutal and so ugly that it almost doesn't work as a painting." Her temptation was to abandon the work altogether.

In 1977 Snyder was haunted by the sense of a ghostly presence
at the farm which she owned in Martins Creek, Pennsylvania, and she became obsessed with the idea that a woman had been raped and murdered on the property sometime in the past. To lay this ghost to rest, she resumed work on the "rape" painting, expanding it to embrace this woman so long forgotten: "Someone needed to be buried," she said shortly after the swift completion of the work. "The painting became the story of one woman and many women's lives. It was about rape and murder and rage. It was also about the rich life history of a woman aside from the fact that she was violated. Finally I made a painting about someone else's experience. It was a great release to me."

The "story" of the painting unfolds in a narrative sequence over 8 panels of varying width, though one tends first to confront the dramatic formal contrast between left and right before being drawn to details of content. Yet form and content are inseparable in the passage from turgid, dark, compressed space to open sunlit expansiveness; from hot, biting colors to the calming pastel blues and greens; from jagged, tearing lines to smooth curving arcs; from explosive violence to healing peace.

Following a war memorial-like listing of over 100 names of specific victims and their fates (Alice Osborne 79 bludgeoned to death; Eloisa Ogundo 15 mos. beaten to death by uncle) are three collage panels of newspaper articles describing rape and violence of the most lurid sort, the first two over-painted in a tight, grid-like manner, the third with lines that burst open. In all three the slashing lines are built up from the surface like scar tissue. Close reading implies damage of a more abstract sort (e.g., the quote from a Kyoto college professor: "If you consider company work as a meal, men employees are the main dishes and women employees are the desserts. If a company has to slash the cost of food, the first thing it has to cut is dessert"). Wrenching letters to Dear Abby are laced with items of humorous revenge ("The females of some species of polar bears weigh twice as much as the males and often eat up their own mates!") The fifth panel of the painting seems to depict an act of bloody violence of the sort contained in the collaged clippings, with spattered and stained gauze and flailing brushwork pulling away from battered floral patterns. From this repellent episode there emerges in panel 6, the gold-winged angel of resurrection, rising from a vaginal/labial wound image to a cluster of light-hearted plastic grapes and clothed in a heart-shaped garment of small overlapping fabric swatches—the sort a woman might save to make a crazy quilt some day. This image serves as a transition to an oversized seventh panel where the dead, bow-faced "ghost" woman (the quilter?) generates a peace-filled landscape of moonlit mountains, rainbows, home, old flowered wallpaper, a cow, things growing, patterns (Simplicity?) for children's clothes. Sewing as healing, a deep enduring strength, all warmed by a blazing childhood sun: a regenerative woman's place where rape is unimaginable. Of the last panel Snyder has said: "it is full of sweet pastel colors and collaged with net veils taken from ladies' hats... It is heavenly old age."

One is reminded of a passage in Adrienne Rich's poem "Phantasia for Elvira Shatalev." "When you have buried us/told your story/ours does not end/we stream into the unfinished/the unbegun/the possible."

Joan Snyder was born in Highland Park, N.J. in 1940. She lives in New York City and is represented by the Hamilton Gallery.

Judith C. Rohrer
Guest Curator
Manchester Center, VT
Works in MATRIX:
Resurrection, 1977, Mixed media on canvas & wood in eight panels, 6 1/2' x 26'. Lent by Sidney Singer, Jr., NYC.

Study for Resurrection, 1978, Etching, 28 1/2'' x 31 1/2''. Lent by the Artist.

Resurrection, 1978, Etching, 29'' x 41''. Lent by the Artist.

The Cow, 1978, Etching, 20'' x 26''. Lent by the Artist.

Selected group exhibitions:
Detroit Institute of Art 12 Statements: Beyond the Sixties '72; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC Annual '72; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia Grids '72; New York Cultural Center, NYC Women Choose Women '73; Whitney Museum American Drawings, 1963 - 1973 '73; Philadelphia Civic Center Women's Work '74; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston Joan Snyder/Pat Steir '74; Corcoran Gallery, Washington DC 34th Biennial of Contemporary American Painting '75; Brooklyn Museum Contemporary Women: Consciousness and Content '77; The New Museum, NYC The 1970s: New American Painting (travelling exhibition); Louis Abrons Art for Living Center, Henry Street Settlement, NYC Exchanges I '79; Museum of Modern Art, NYC New Works on Paper I '81; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC Biennial '81.

Selected one-woman exhibitions:
Paley and Lowe Gallery, NYC '70, '71, '73; Michael Walls Gallery, NYC '71; Carl Solway Gallery, NYC '76; Mabel Douglass Library, Douglass College, New Brunswick, NJ '76; Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, OR '76; LA Institute for Contemporary Art '76; Neuberger Museum, Purchase, NY '76; Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art, NYC '78, '79; San Francisco Art Institute, '79 (also travelled to Grand Rapids Art Museum, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, the Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond).

Selected Bibliography about Snyder:

Herrera, Hayden. Joan Snyder: Seven Years of Work, Neuberger Museum (Purchase, NY) '78.
Walls, Michael. Joan Snyder, San Francisco Art Institute (San Francisco) '79.

© Copyright Wadsworth Atheneum 1981.