

Women and Rose in Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII*

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Flowers are endowed with rich symbolic meanings. It uses unique attributes to express people's emotions, feelings, and desires. According to Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII*, not all flowers symbolize beauty and happiness. The artist uses unique painting techniques to paint beautiful roses as bloody female organs, showing the fragility and helplessness of women. The work gives a contrasting impact of beauty and despair. Applying Greenberg's abstract expressionism theory and Erwin Panofsky's iconography theory along with research, this paper explored how Joan Snyder uses flower elements to symbolize women's vulnerability in *Symphony VII*. Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII* is constantly discussing violence against women around the world to warn and showcase the problems of women around us.

Keywords: Flower, Rose, Modern art, Abstract expressionism, Iconography



Figure 1. Joan Snyder, *Symphony VII*, 2014, oil, acrylic, paper mache, pastel, silk, berries, dried sunflowers on linen, 54 x 108.25 in.

Flowers have been endowed with rich symbolism. For example, beginning in the ancient Greek culture and continuing today, a rose represents true love, so people always send roses to show their love on Valentine's Day or weddings. Flowers always give people a beautiful symbol. While flowers, especially roses, always offer a sense of beauty for people, the rose symbolizes the fragility and pain of women in Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII* (Figure 1). Applying Greenberg's critical opinion about the style of Abstract Expressionism and Erwin

Panofsky's ideas on iconography, this essay will explore how Joan Snyder uses flower elements to symbolize women's vulnerability in *Symphony VII*.

Abstract expressionism artist Joan Snyder created *Symphony VII* in 2014. Snyder was influenced by the expressionist painter Wassily Kandinsky and incorporated feminine elements and new materials into her paintings (Meeker, 2009). For example, she uses oil, acrylic, paper mache, pastel, silk, berries, dried sunflowers on linen in *Symphony VII*. In terms of image, there are four large roses with pink, red, dark purple, and light yellow colors in *Symphony VII*. There are many white horizontal strip shapes in the middle of the screen, which seem to want to hide something. The oil paint flows naturally from the roses to the bottom of the image. There is also a rose pattern composed of several red lines in the bottom right corner of the image.

Symphony VII gives people a beautiful and fearful atmosphere as the artwork mainly discusses violence against women around the world. Joan Snyder's unique artistic spirit and materials show the fear mood of beautiful roses and colors. Joan Snyder was influenced by the theory of expressionism and she is also known as an abstract expressionist artist (Jewish Women's Archive, 2020). When Joan Snyder created her artwork, she was inspired by Greenberg's theoretical ideas. Her work pursues the spirit of art while showing her personal style. Greenberg is one of the most important critics of Abstract Expressionism. He believes that the development of modernist painting will eventually return to the purity of the medium of the work and the flatness of the two-dimensional space (Greenberg, n.d.). From Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII*, we can see that the image has small bumps because of different materials; however, the overall image has purity with the flatness of two-dimensional space. In Greenberg's "Modernist Painting", he writes that the spirit precedes the material, and the personal language and style are far superior to the material nature of the material itself (Greenberg, n.d.). Realism and naturalism cover up the medium of art and use art to cover up art. Modernism uses art to remind art. Joan Snyder not only focuses on expressionism but also pursues the expression of emotions in materials. For example, Joan Snyder boldly and straightforwardly shows the flatness of the image, and the colors in *Symphony VII* are created by pure original colors from paint boxes, made of extruded paint. Joan Snyder gave up the fidelity and correctness of the elements; she pursued the random beauty deliberately shows the loose and unfinished image for the audience. Greenberg also believes that modern art realizes the protection of the subject's identity through the autonomy of form, thus giving it a modern spirit. Joan Snyder's artwork incorporates spiritual expression. She pursues thematic storytelling, showing women's emotional characteristics and her own unique style. Snyder told that "this is a feminist piece. It fought for women's right to own property, women's inheritance rights, women's struggle against abuse" (Gail, 2007). Besides, she used flowers to show the fragility of women in *Symphony VII*.

There are many similar characteristics between flowers and women. Flowers have dual functions of narration and lyricism. Due to the natural tacit understanding of the relationship between women and flowers; therefore, Joan Snyder incorporates the meaning of woman into the elements of flowers. The image of flowers can be roughly divided into two types: self-expression and gender-based expression. Since ancient times, people have been accustomed to comparing flowers to women, similar to the way Joan Snyder does in *Symphony VII*. The rose in Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII* has a symbolic meaning as an image. Roses have always given people a beautiful impression. But in Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII*, the rose is different. It

represents fear, vulnerability, and helplessness. In *Symphony VII*, roses represent vulnerable women who are treated unfairly around the world. They are as beautiful but as fragile as flowers.

As a new type of abstract expressionism artist, Joan Snyder constantly pursues a unique visual language to discuss violence against women around the world. In the *Symphony Series*, she associates flowers with women, creating her unique visual language. Joan Snyder applies the symbolic meaning of roses to *Symphony VII*. Symbolism is mentioned in Erwin Panofsky's iconography. He explains the worldview and humanistic connotation in artworks based on iconography. Erwin Panofsky believes that iconography is a branch of art history, which is related to the theme or meaning of artworks (Willette, 2013). He also showed the idea of hidden symbolism. The theoretical connotation is a visual art technique that puts symbolic meaning into the motif form of the aesthetic object. So the aesthetic object has the dual meaning of motif form and symbolic meaning at the same time. The theoretical is the three levels of image meaning to explain the theory. From the perspective of artistic expression, the technique of concealed symbolism can make the motif form of the aesthetic object and the symbolic meaning independent of each other and not cancel each other. From the perspective of artistic acceptance, it is due to the similarity between iconographic interpretation and aesthetic experience activities. Therefore, the iconological interpretation of hidden symbols is also a special process of aesthetic experience. His tripartite method of portrait studies allows us to further analyze the meaning and the symbolism of the rose in Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII*.

First, in terms of the primary subject matter, *Symphony VII* is a sharp horizontal composition. The colorful image with four flowers lines up in a row, occupying half of the image. The oil paint flows naturally from the flowers to the bottom. There are also white horizontal stripes and red and green organic shapes with red organic lines on the bottom side.

Second, in terms of the conventional subject matter, the dark purple flowers in *Symphony VII* are the same as Snyder's *Winter Rose* (Figure 2). Therefore, the four flowers in *Symphony VII* are roses. The painted succulent roses serve as a rich metaphoric matrix of images, and they are all made of paper pulp and acrylic model paste. The strength of the material and the rich color promote the mention of sadness and anger (Brock, 2015). At the bottom of the image, Snyder placed dried flowers and plant stems covered with honey-colored resin. The silk in the bottom right is a floating ghost of a rose. It's the elegant rose and its contrast with the vibrant rose on the top side.

Third, in terms of intrinsic meaning, *Symphony VII* refers to the burial of the dead, sadness, and memories, and is a place to contrast the world of life and death (Kreimer, 2015). Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII* has a heavy texture, and strong colors, all of which are condensed into inner self-expression. She paints roses as female reproductive organs, and the oil paint dripping from the roses represents the female blood during menstruation. She powerfully explores violence against women around the world, representing the paint dripping from the rose as the blood, tears, and sweat of women. For Snyder, women are fragile and helpless, so she uses the fragility of the rose to represent the fragility of their lives among violence. For Joan Snyder, painting is like a scrapbook, diary, and garden diary, digging for roses and going deeper into the roses (Smith, 2015). All materials create an exaggerated posture, at the same time giving the audience a sense of feminine fragility and helplessness.

There are many depictions of "reproductive flower" images in female artworks. Most works using this theme use metaphor. Since O'Keeffe, the metaphorical relationship between flowers and women,

especially the female body, has been clearly and directly revealed. O'Keeffe's work inspires many female painters, such as Joan Snyder. However, each artist has their own unique creative method and artistic visual language. Both Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII* and Georgia O'Keeffe's *Abstract White Rose* (Figure 3) use the rose element. But Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII* is different from Georgia O'Keeffe's *Abstract White Rose* as it makes audiences feel darkness and fear. The same floral element adopts different creative methods to produce different atmospheric paintings. For example, *Abstract White Rose* inevitably produces sexual associations in visual effects. There are no details and shadows in *Abstract White Rose*, but the audience can feel that the flowers are still alive. O'Keeffe's flowers often emphasize a certain form and tone. The image gives a feeling of quiet, tranquility, and innocence. However, Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII* shows the story of the burial of the dead, sadness, and memory. In terms of materials, Joan Snyder also receives Greenberg's Abstract Expressionism, so the painting techniques and materials cause the image to be horrible and beautiful. The natural flow of paint makes the rose like the blood left by the female sexual organs, and the brush strokes make the audience feel desperate. Joan Snyder cleverly shows the dark side of the flower symbol, not beautiful and harmonious, but painful and sad. The rose is compared to the female genitalia to express the fragility of women.

Flowers are given a rich symbolic meaning. According to Joan Snyder's *Symphony VII*, not all flowers symbolize beauty. Applying Greenberg's critical opinion about the style of Abstract Expressionism and Erwin's Panofsky's ideas on iconography, this essay will explore how Joan Snyder uses flower elements to symbolize women's vulnerability in *Symphony VII*. Joan Snyder was inspired by Greenberg's abstract expressionism theory and found the connotative symbolic content of iconography represented by flowers. She did not create the fidelity and correctness of the elements. Joan Snyder pursued the random beauty deliberately shows the flatness, loose, and unfinished image for the audience. According to Erwin Panofsky's idea of hidden symbolism, a visual art technique puts symbolic meaning into the motif form of the aesthetic object. Therefore, Joan Snyder painted roses as female reproductive organs, and the oil paint dripping from the roses represents the female blood during menstruation to powerfully explore violence against women around the world. Women's issues also occupy an important position in contemporary art trends. All of the artwork created by Joan Snyder expresses life, marriage, and everything that happened around her. Therefore, she uses the rose to symbolize the fragility and pain of women in *Symphony VII*. It can bring the audience into a private world of women and help them to understand women's lives and status together. She focused on internal resources and faced women's social problems and self-exploration. She also chose media from nature, life, mankind, and survival to find a way to create discourse aimed at women from materials (Meeker, 2009). For Snyder, women are fragile and helpless, so she uses the fragility of the rose to represent the fragility of their lives among violence. Her artwork is constantly evolving and changing, discussing violence against women around the world to warn and showcase the problems of women around us.



Figure 2. Joan Snyder, *Winter Rose*, 2013, oil, acrylic, paper mache, pastel, glitter on linen, 64 x 30 in.



Figure 3. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Abstraction White Rose*, 1927, oil on canvas, 36 x 30 in.

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