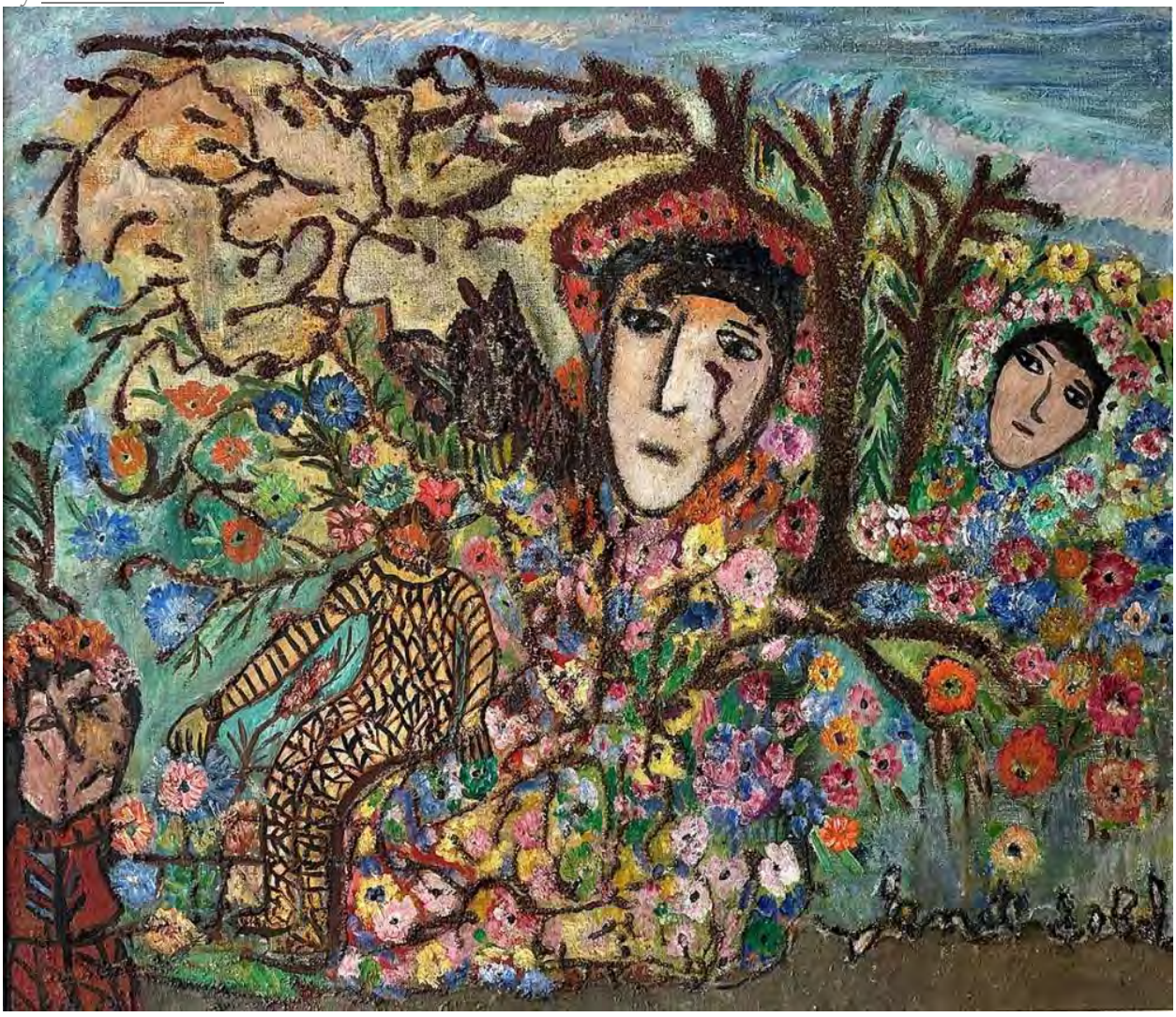
ARTFORUM

Janet Sobel

Menil Collection

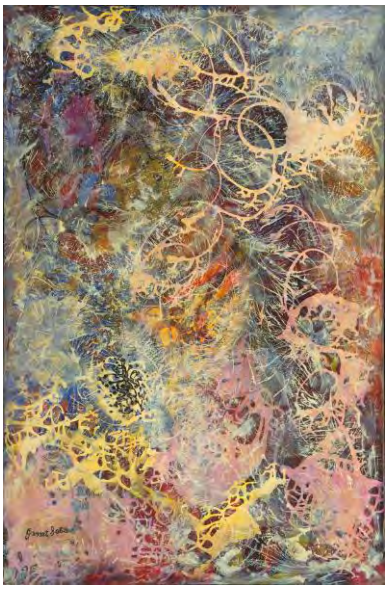
By Natilee Harren



Curated by Natalie Dupêcher

THE MOST FAMOUS drip painter you've never heard of is poised to make a comeback. "Janet Sobel: All-Over" is the first museum exhibition to highlight the abstract canvases for which Ukrainian-Jewish self-taught artist Janet Sobel won acclaim in the New York art world of the 1940s. Anchored at center by the superlative *Milky Way*, 1945—an edge-to-edge opalescent storm of plums, pinks, and creamy yellows now owned by New York's Museum of Modern Art—this tightly curated show is as bracing and brief as Sobel's dalliance with fame during her lifetime.

The early canvas *Disappointment*, ca. 1943, sets the terms of Sobel's provocative challenge to prevailing art-historical narratives that elevate the production of outsider artists while keeping them at arm's length from the modernist avant-garde. Pressing against the foreground is an expressive, humanoid landscape in which gnarled tree branches twist into proto-drips encrusted with sand and fields of flowers claustrophobically enrobe haunting, disembodied faces. Sobel collapses figure and ground as motifs inspired by Ukrainian folk art meet a Chagallian, faux-naïf elegance. Is it primitive or modern? How do we choose, and do we have to?



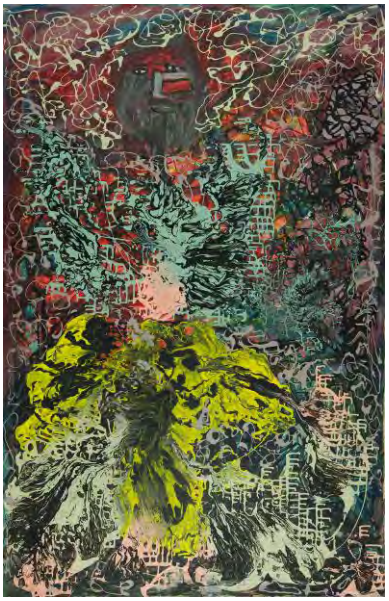
From here, the one-room exhibition proceeds clockwise from Sobel's small, densely patterned (yet still figurative) paintings on paper and board of the early '40s, through to her exuberant large-scale abstractions of 1945–48, and finally to her full return to paper with a cluster of drawings done mostly in crayon from the mid-to-late '40s in which impish, half-articulated faces peer out from wildly colored, tightly knit patterns of roving striations. A case of archival materials buttresses the visual narrative, chronicling the hedged enthusiasm with which Sobel's masterful paintings were received at the time of their making.

The story of Sobel's trajectory makes for a quirkily diagnostic tale of art-world elitism and misogyny that has been well articulated by art historians including Gail Levin and Sandra Zalman, though is worth retelling here. Born in a shtetl in eastern Ukraine, Sobel immigrated to the US as a teen in 1908 with her mother and two siblings to escape the pogroms in which her father perished. With no formal training, the artist began painting when she was almost in her fifties, now the matriarch of two generations of Americans. By 1943, she was exhibiting publicly: Her work was included that year in Sidney Janis's exhibitions "American Primitive Painting of Four Centuries" at the Arts Club of Chicago, where it was shown alongside Morris Hirshfield and Grandma Moses, and the following year in the nationally touring "Abstract and Surrealist Art in America," where her peers were Max Ernst, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko. Sobel's 1944 solo show at the New York gallery of Fernando Puma, a highly professionalized self-taught artist, was positively reviewed in nearly a dozen outlets.

"Sobel's work falls outside the chain of artistic inheritance; it is *too* original."

The combination of Sobel's magnetic art and fascinating biography was from the start a selling point for her revolving cast of champions (the dealers, curators, and scholars currently seeking to revive her renown being no exception). First among them was her son Sol, who encouraged Sobel to begin making work and then enterprisingly promoted it to major figures including Ernst, Janis, and philosopher John Dewey, whose brochure text for the Puma show praised the works' "brooding maternal wholeness." André Breton and Peggy Guggenheim soon became fans, the latter calling Sobel "the best woman painter by far (in America)" and hosting the artist's second solo show at her New York gallery Art of This Century in early 1946, a time when Sobel's paintings were going for similar prices as Pollock's.

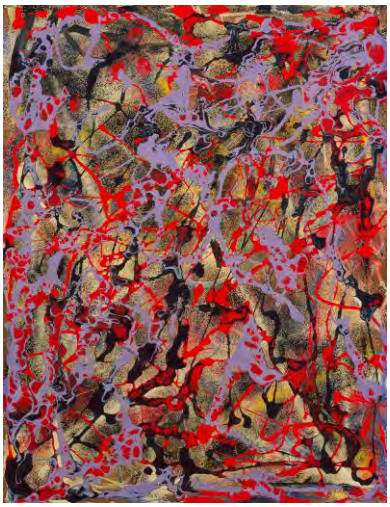
Within three years, however, Sobel's upward momentum had stalled. By 1947, Guggenheim had decamped to Venice, Janis's market fancies had turned elsewhere, and Sobel had moved from Brooklyn to Plainfield, New Jersey, where she developed a paint allergy and other health issues, likely owing to chemicals used in the family costume jewelry business (the factory location is now a Superfund site). Guggenheim brought Sobel's work with her to Venice, showing *The Frightened Bride*, 1943, in a display of her collection at the Venice Biennale's Greek pavilion in 1948. But Sobel's ghostly, lacelike canvas was hung next to Hirshfield's *Two Women in Front of a Mirror*, 1943, and thus characterized as outsider art, while on another wall in the very same exhibition Pollock made his splashy Biennale debut with a number of calligraphic abstractions including the poured painting *Eyes in the Heat*, 1946, made at least a year after Sobel had introduced her version of that innovation.



The next critical moment in Sobel's reception came in 1961, when Clement Greenberg's canon-defining "'American-Type' Painting," originally published in the *Partisan Review* in 1955, appeared in his essay collection *Art and Culture*. Greenberg had made slight tweaks, namely adding mention of Sobel as the inspiration for Pollock's allover technique and offering furtive admiration for the "strangely pleasing" "primitive" pictures of this "housewife living in Brooklyn." In a mere four sentences, Greenberg wrote Sobel in and out of art history, acknowledging and then immediately disavowing her impact on this catalytic moment of modern painting. Greenberg's bounded appraisal facilitated MoMA's purchase of *Milky Way* in

1968, though sadly Sobel never learned of this acquisition; she passed away within days of Sol's office having received but not registered the contents of the announcement letter. In his reply to the museum, Sol offered this paraphrase of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844): "It is requisite for the ideal artist . . . to keep faith in himself . . . and be his own sole disciple. . . . the reward for all high performance must be sought for within itself, or sought for in vain." At this point, Sobel's most recent exhibition had been at her local art supply shop.

At the Menil, *Milky Way* and four small untitled paintings dated circa 1946–48 are the only fully abstract works on view. More paradigmatic of Sobel's high point are the large, minutely detailed *Hiroshima*, ca. 1948; *Heavenly Sympathy*, ca. 1947; and *The Burning Bush*, 1944, which employ a staggering array of distinct techniques and yet never turn away from the figure. Their infinitely complex interlayering of painterly filigree with encoded figures demands that Sobel be relieved of her burdensome role as handmaiden to Pollock. Made at a time when her techniques in wet media achieved their height of sophistication, *Hiroshima* offers a taxonomy of painterly marks and modes of application. The far background of the canvas is structured by an open weave of one-inch bands; thin washes frame the edges; skeins of dripped paint form decorative loops; deliquescent wet-on-wet passages merge but do not fully blend distinct colors and evidence Sobel's bodily manipulation of the entire canvas plane. Together, these various applications congeal into the outline of an ominous mushroom-cloud-shaped angel of death. *Heavenly Sympathy* offers a complementary balm; in it, a thin tracery of interconnected beings float upward toward a cosmic, vorticular sun.



The archival materials on view draw attention to the diverging rhetorics of "freedom"—to use a term often deployed to describe Sobel's practice—that structured the reception of Sobel's visionary art versus Pollock's Abstract Expressionism. In Pollock's case, a heroic notion of freedom imagines Pollock the bohemian freeing himself from strictures of polite society and artistic convention. Because she was pegged as a "primitive" artist, Sobel's "freedom" is free-floating; nothing is being rejected, there is no ground of aesthetic conflict, and so she is not the conscious agent of her own aesthetic liberation. The result is that her work falls outside the chain of artistic inheritance; it is *too* original.

The takeaways here may be more anthropological or sociological than art-historical. The exhibition's brochure copy perhaps overhypes Sobel as a "luminary of abstraction," but history is not just a game of firsts. Ongoing participation in art's social world is required for integration into its lasting narratives. Innovation must be coupled with endurance, and anyway feminist scholars have already made the case against expanding art history's blueprint without completely renovating the foundation. I for one am less bothered that Sobel's contributions to drip painting have been suppressed; more tragic for her legacy was the combination of fickle patronage and disability. It could be more productive and radical to resituate Sobel in more sympathetic contexts. Her directional drips in *Hiroshima* and preoccupation with the international repercussions of World War II (other works in her oeuvre include the undated paintings *Nagasaki*, *Hitler's Hell*, and *Prelude to Peace*) resonate with the atomic abstractions of Informel artists Jean Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier, and Wols, including Dubuffet's play with *art brut*. Or, if one takes seriously the mystical allusions in her titles and pictures, Sobel finds fellowship with spiritualist artists such as Hilma af Klint, Ithell Colquhoun, and Agatha Wojciechowsky. Thankfully, as this exhibition reminds us, the work of writing art history is never all over.

"Janet Sobel: All-Over" is on view through August 11.

Natilee Harren is an art historian, critic, and author of Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and The Eternal Network. *She is co-author of The* Scores Project*, a major digital publication launching in 2025.*

Artforum, June 1, 2024, review of *Janet Sobel: All-Over,* link