HYPERALLERGIC

Why Did Art History Marginalize Janet Sobel?

A new show at the Menil Collection in Houston raises important questions about the ways that we remember and historicize artists.

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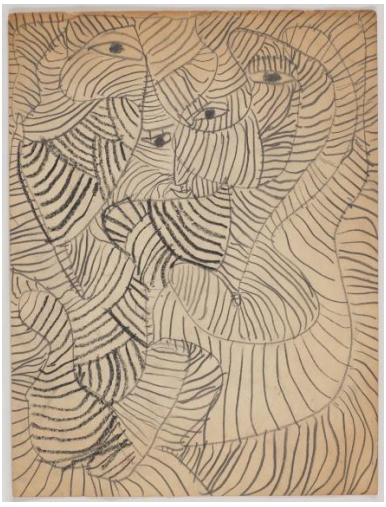
HOUSTON — In the fall of 1944, the gallerist and collector Peggy Guggenheim was confident that she'd found the next big thing. "Put Janet Sobel on your list," she once wrote to a fellow gallerist. "She is the best woman painter by far (in America)." A year later, Guggenheim included Sobel's work in a group show at her renowned New York gallery Art of This Century, which then hosted the artist's solo show the following year. Covered in vibrant, dripping colors and web-like layers of texture, Sobel's groundbreaking paintings attracted the attention of New York's key critics and artists; in fact, Jackson Pollock created his now-iconic all-over drip paintings sometime after seeing Sobel's work. But in 1947, at the height of her fame, Sobel left New York and its art scene. Soon after, American art history largely left her behind, too.

Janet Sobel: All-Over at the Menil Collection is a timely, captivating glimpse into this formative but nearly-forgotten figure through 30 of her paintings and drawings. Curated by Natalie Dupêcher and on view through August 11, the exhibition not only presents visitors with the rare opportunity to experience Sobel's unique work, which broke the mold of mid-century American avant-garde art, but it also raises important questions about the ways that we remember and historicize artists who have long been pushed to the margins.

Born in 1893 in present-day Ukraine, Sobel moved to Brooklyn with her family in 1908. She married shortly after and had five children, and then began painting in 1937 without any formal training. Throughout her career, Sobel and her work were constantly labeled and forced into categories, perhaps because her identity as a Jewish woman immigrant, grandmother, and homemaker was so atypical amid the macho jockeying of the burgeoning New York art scene. If she could be named, she could be contained.

Early on, the labels that stuck most forcefully to Sobel and her work were "naive" and "primitive." In a compelling 2015 article, the art historian Sandra Zalman explained how, despite Sobel's meteoric rise in New York, these terms confined her to "a circumscribed space where she was at once in dialogue with the avant-garde but could not become part of it." Embedded within the "primitive" designation is a sense of xenophobia, condescension, and judgment; Sobel could more comfortably serve as Pollock's muse if her work was untrained and somehow rudimentary and involuntary.



Critics lobbed these terms at Sobel with the assumption that she was completely unacquainted with a larger art world, but a pen and ink drawing in *All-Over* made on the copyright page of a Salvador Dalí catalog shows her to be familiar with this artist. In a 1946 *WCBS* radio interview, she was identified as a Surrealist. Her familiarity with the movement was personal: Her son Sol was enrolled at the Art Students League of New York and had the connections to introduce his mother to Surrealists Max Ernst and André Breton, who joined Sobel for dinners at her home. However, the label shifted again in 1961, when a short mention of Sobel in an essay by critic and writer Clement Greenberg named her — albeit with a plainly degrading tone — as a precursor of Abstract Expressionism.

The Menil's exhibition aims for more nuance. Its inclusion of work from throughout Sobel's career highlights her complex and continuous use of the figure, as well as her inventive materials and technique. Oil paints, enamels from her family's jewelry business, crayon, ink, and even sand cover her surfaces, which she would tilt, splatter, and blow on to achieve specific effects. In addition to canvases, boards, and paper, the artist also worked on book covers, cloth, seashells, ceramic tiles, and the back of receipts. "She was just so creative and voracious with her choice of art materials and equally adventurous in her methods of paint application," Dupêcher told *Hyperallergic* in an interview.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Sobel's abstraction is its tie to real-world events. Paintings with titles like "Hiroshima," "Nagasaki," and "Hitler's Hell" reveal her anxiety during a conflict that likely resonated with her own past escaping the pogroms of early-20th-century Eastern Europe. The horrors of World War II appear to coincide with a kind of deterioration of the figure in her work; swirling abstraction and visual turmoil take on a larger presence as the years pass. Perhaps this was Sobel's response to the chaos of a darkening world. After she moved to New Jersey in 1947, she continued to make and exhibit art on a smaller scale. Art was her ultimate refuge, regardless of the labels assigned to her or who knew her name.

Hyperallergic, May 6, 2024, review of *Janet Sobel: All-Over,* link