

ART IN REVIEW

By Roberta Smith

The New York Times
Friday, February 15, 2002

Jackson Pollock may have broken the ice, in Willem de Kooning's well known phrase, but Janet Sobel definitely helped crack it. Using her son's art materials, this Ukraine-born Brighton Beach mother of five took up painting in 1937 at the age of 43. Within a few years, she was making small abstractions covered with paint dripped in continuous, looping lines.

Because of an allergy to paint, Sobel worked in crayon and pencil after 1948, and at her death in 1968 she was little more than a rumor, the woman who had dripped paint before Pollock. She had resurfaced in an article on Pollock by William S. Rubin that appeared in *Artforum* in 1967; the Museum of Modern Art acquired a painting just after she died, and occasionally exhibited it next to its Pollocks.

Sobel's first 15 minutes occurred in the mid-1940's, when she was embraced by the art world as a kind of Surrealist savant. Her work was included in a group show at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, *Art of This Century*, in 1944, where it was seen and admired by both Pollock and Clement Greenburg, who later cited it as the first instance of "all-over" painting he had seen. Sidney Janis wrote the catalog preface for her solo show at Guggenheim's gallery in 1946, noting her "self-invented method for applying paint."

The Snyder Gallery's 41-work exhibition - the first since 1946 - reveals a complex mix of innate Outsider, folk and Surrealist instincts. Sobel's first efforts show a flair for a primitivist figuration that recall early Chagall and presage early Dubuffet and for profuse floral patterns reminiscent of Ukrainian peasant art.

But equally innate was a need to exploit materials of all kinds (including sand). Ditto all-over patterns and surfaces, which might entail repeating faces, herringbone marks, splattered watercolor or zigzagging pencil lines. If her drips weren't vivid enough, she didn't mind outlining them in ink, and helping to invent Abstract Expressionism did not end her imagistic work. Her main goal was visual intensity, which she achieved with impressive regularity.

Starting out in the vicinity of Kandinsky and Klee and ending nose to nose with Pollock, Sobel's work is further proof of modernism's impure, nonlinear paths. It is great that her short strange career is visible again. May it remain so.

ART GUIDE

By Roberta Smith

The New York Times

Friday, February 22, 2002

Janet Sobel, a Ukraine-born Brighton Beach mother of five, took up painting in 1937 at the age of 43 and within a few years was making dripped-paint abstractions. Shown in New York City in 1944, they were seen and admired by Jackson Pollock, as well as by Clement Greenberg. And the rest is history, a history whose true messiness continues to unfold. This exhibition, the third show and first survey of Sobel's work, contributes to that unfolding. It reveals an innately talented artist – part folk artist, part Outsider, part natural-born Surrealist – who began in the vicinity of Klee and Kandinsky and ended up nose to nose with Pollock, laying the foundations of the New York School.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

The New Yorker
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Janet Sobel

For years, a drip painting by Sobel (1894-1968) hung kitty-corner from Jackson Pollock's "Autumn Rhythm" at MOMA; but how many people, outside a small circle of experts, knew that a Jewish grandmother from Brooklyn may have inspired Pollock's famous technique? This egregiously overdue survey (her last exhibition was in 1946) offers a glimpse of various Sobel styles, ranging from trippy Chagallist watercolors to the meandering tracteries of her brief abstract phase. The later works, with their fractured, leering rainbows, are so persuasively hallucinatory that one begins to wonder whether Sobel was, along with everything else, a pharmacological pioneer. Through March 9. (Snyder, 601 W.29th St. 871-1077.)

JANET SOBEL

By Alexi Worth

Artforum International

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Janet Sobel probably never read Clement Greenberg's glancing tribute to her in his revised 1955 essay " 'American-Type' Painting," but the passage has become an obligatory pit stop in discussions of her puzzling, newly resuscitated career. Back in 1944 at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery, Greenberg recalls, "Pollock (and I myself) admired [Sobel's] pictures rather furtively.... The effect, and it was the first really 'all-over' one that I had ever seen....was strangely pleasing." You'd think the implication that Sobel had some role in Pollock's development would have guaranteed her a steady measure of attention. Instead, the hedged tone (and perhaps also the description of Sobel as a "housewife living in Brooklyn") may have had the opposite effect. Sobel didn't show again during her lifetime. A few scholars have written about her pioneering drip abstractions (beginning with William Rubin in these pages in 1967), and a few canvases have appeared in revisionist surveys, but this was the first exhibition devoted to Sobel since her second show at Art of This Century fifty-six years ago.

Sobel's long eclipse, like her brief fame, was partly a matter of circumstance. Born in the Ukraine, she moved to the United States as a teenage, married, had five kids, and in 1937, already in her forties, impulsively took up painting. As her style grew increasingly nonobjective, Sobel earned a bemused local notoriety: CRITICS ACCLAIM BORO GRANDMOTHER AS TOP FLIGHT SURREALIST PAINTER read one Brooklyn headline in 1945. Clippings show a small, genial, heavysset woman, the archetypal nana: When Max Ernst and Andre Breton showed up at her house in Brighton Beach, you don't need to be told that she served them gefilte fish and chicken soup.

Soon after her second solo show, illness and allergies forced Sobel to give up oil paints – and the drip-based style that had intrigued Pollock. She continued to make images until her death in 1968, apparently without any effort to exhibit them. The result is a curious legacy: a vast hoard of pictures, mostly undated, with little information on their author's subjects or motives.

Understandably, the gallery has chosen to focus on the period from 1941 to 1948, bracketing Sobel's foray into pure abstraction. The sequence opens with enigmatic watercolors of wartime subjects, then follows Sobel's move toward ever more hallucinogenic patterning. The later pictures show fractured rainbows interspersed with swollen smiling faces. The impression is of a dramatic, coherent trajectory: from representational angst to dissolution and finally goofy, prismatic calm.

But the chronology is for the most part provisional, and many questions remain. Sobel's ardent and uncannily timely experimentation (she used sand and enamel as well as oils and adapted glass pipettes from her husband's costume-jewelry business for dripping and blowing paint) is hard to imagine without some kind of corroborating factor. It is

possible that she had seen Pollock's own experimental partial-drip paintings, shown at Guggenheim's gallery in 1943 -in which case Pollock's "furtive" admiration would have been ironic, an appreciation of his own influence. (Sobel's family, however, insists that her contacts with the art world were minimal, that we should take at her word her claim to be entirely self-invented.)

The trickier question is the intrinsic merit of the works themselves, which varies wildly even within individual pictures. Often folk-art mannerisms butt up against passages of idiosyncratic fierceness. Faces, comic but stiffly marionettish, are a constant liability. But the turn toward abstraction clearly energized Sobel. A few transitional images – especially a vertiginous painting of heaped figures rising into a frothy sky – seem radically unsettled, freakish and powerful. The pure abstractions vary too, from handsome but bland tracteries to viscous clotted tangles that eerily anticipate you-know-who. Is it possible to appreciate Sobel in her own right, entirely apart from Pollock? Not yet, and certainly not until we get a better sense of their (mutual) indebtedness. But at the least, Sobel's work offers a reminder that something very much like Pollock's recklessness could well up out of a far less melodramatic biography.

WAITING LIST FOR SOBEL DRIP PICTURES

By Raj S. Rangarajan

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NEW YORK- Switching careers at age 43 is perhaps not unusual these days. But Janet Sobel (1894-1968) did so back in 1937, when she went from being a homemaker with six children to being an artist. She began by painting figurative images and after six years, moved into crowded compositions. Well into her later years, after she was a grandmother, the artist continued to develop her skills, producing surrealist and abstract works.

Sobel took to painting after her son, Sol, a teenage student of art at the Educational Alliance, New York, reportedly decided to give his mother a gift of paintbrushes and other materials. Sol did so to prevent his mother from painting over his school assigned drawings.

Several of Sobel's creations, including her figurative surreal forms, were displayed in Gary Snyder Fine art's exhibition in Manhattan's Chelsea earlier this year, from January 25- March 9, as "*Selected Works of the Artists Estate.*" Amazingly this was her first New York solo exhibition since the artist's one-woman show at collector Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery in 1946.

Prices in the show ranged from \$2/6,000 for her works on paper and from \$10/30,000 for her paintings, including drip paintings and Marc Chagall-like earlier works, the largest of which measure about 44-by-30 inches. More than 30 of the approximately 40 works on offer sold, said gallery owner Gary Snyder, with considerable interest evidenced by museums and private clients, particularly in her drip paintings. Near the end of March, the San Diego Museum of Art purchased the work featured on the cover of the show's invitation. Since the show there is a waiting list for the artist's drip paintings. Interestingly, her works have never come up at auction.

In the 1940's Sobel's work had a commendable following by art lovers, critic and collector Sidney Janis, and surrealists Max Ernst and Andre Breton. Her "spontaneous style of decorative, scenic representations and radical technique of dripping paint in abstract frames" were original them and greatly appreciated, noted philosopher and educator John Dewey, whom Sobel met in Key West, Florida, in 1941. Dewey spoke highly of Sobel's "youthful spontaneity" and "brooding maternal wholeness" in her approach to creativity.

The Milky Way, completed in 1945, was an enamel-on-canvas painting that now hangs at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Other works by Sobel can be seen at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

Sobel has exhibited at the Arts Club of Chicago and Brooklyn Museum; she had her first one-woman show at the Puma Gallery, New York, in 1944. Also in '44, Janis showed Sobel's works at Mortimer Brandt Gallery, New York, in an exhibition titled "Abstract and Surrealist Art in America." As late as 1989, Sobel was included as part of "Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions," an exhibition organized by the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at New Jersey's Rutgers University.

JANET SOBEL

By Melissa Gronlund

ARTnews

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This retrospective provided a comprehensive look at the accomplished career of Janet Sobel, often described merely as a forerunner to Jackson Pollock. Before being called into the pantheon of Abstract Expressionism, however, Sobel was a Jewish émigré who came to New York from the Ukraine in 1908. Untrained in art, she began drawing when she was in her 40's, depicting folk-art subjects (bright flowers, allegorized stages of life, and scenes of the Ukraine). As in Chagall's early works, Sobel's do not convey the illusion of depth: lades and skies are stacked one atop the other, and faces often hide in flower petals or in decorative scribbles.

At times Sobel used the lack of perspective to symbolic effect: the drawing *Widow* (ca. 1942) shows a woman standing on a lush garden pathway. From close up, her late husband's face, in black and white with bared teeth, appears in the fields as a haunting memento mori.

The Surrealists were attracted to Sobel, viewing her as an innately talented naivist. She exhibited at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in 1946 and was soon serving gefilte fish in Brighton Beach to Max Ernst and Andre Breton. Then she was largely forgotten, until William Rubin rediscovered her in 1967 and dubbed her a precursor to Abstract Expressionism.

This overdue retrospective (her last show was in 1946) not only illuminated Sobel's striking early pieces, but also helped trace the progression of her work from representational folk art to her "allover" drip paintings that were extolled by Clement Greenberg.

For Sobel, there was never a "break" with representation; her abstracted swirls are in the same family as her earlier floral patterns and the hidden, scribbled faces. Far from being an intellectual revolt against representation, abstraction offered Sobel a way to free the imagination.