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## Janet Sobel's All Over, Everywhere

Natalie Dupêcher

Janet Sobel burst onto the New York art scene in 1944, at the end of an unseasonably snowy April. It was an auspicious moment for the artist. She had participated in a string of group exhibitions over the past fifteen months, many of which had traveled around the United States. Still, at the time of her New York debut, she was essentially unknown.

Sobel's 1944 solo show caused a sensation, garnering almost a dozen reviews and profiles in the New York press. Acclaimed for her skillful use of color and densely layered compositions that spilled to the edges of the support, she was an early innovator of "all-over" abstraction: a mode of nonrepresentational mark making that involved filling a support from corner to corner, agnostic to the usual hierarchies of center and periphery or of beginning, middle, and end.

"Put Janet Sobel on your list," the legendary dealer and collector Peggy Guggenheim advised a fellow gallerist several months later, in autumn 1944. "She is the best woman painter by far (in America)."<sup>1</sup> Guggenheim soon followed her own advice, including Sobel's work in a group exhibition at her gallery, Art of This Century, in the summer of 1945 and then mounting the artist's second solo show in early 1946. One year later, though, Sobel left New York for New Jersey, seeming to disappear from the art world—and art history along with it. Over the ensuing decades, as critics and art historians began to set down histories of Abstract Expressionism and the emergence of all-over painting, Sobel's name did not appear.

In recent years, a surge in revisionist art histories has brought renewed attention to Sobel's art and life. Foremost among these have been the pioneering scholarship of Gail Levin, whose 2005 article returned the artist to the conversation, and of Sandra Zalman, whose 2015 article analyzed Sobel's status as a so-called primitive painter, arguing that this association both enabled her entry into the art world and restricted her development within it.<sup>2</sup> Museums have contributed to the reappraisal of Sobel's work as her paintings have entered institutional collections at a slow but steady clip and, in the last five years, have been taken out of storage for a flurry of special exhibitions. Nonetheless, gaps remain in our understanding of this artist's production and career.

This Research Note stems from work I conducted in preparation for *Janet Sobel: All-Over*, the first museum exhibition devoted to her abstract work. As the curator of this show, which ran from February to August 2024 at the Menil Collection, I undertook archival research in the Archives of American Art in Washington, DC, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of the

Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and the Plainfield, New Jersey, Public Library. I also benefited from extensive conversations with Sobel’s grandchildren and generous access to the artist’s paintings and drawings—not only those in museums and private collections but also work still held by various branches of the family.<sup>3</sup>

Here, I present findings unearthed in the course of this work, from examining artworks in living rooms and conservation labs to leafing through newsprint and microfiche. This article proceeds in three parts, aiming to deepen and expand our understanding of Sobel’s accomplishments through three kinds of arguments—a proposition, a retracing, and a discovery. I will approach each of these in turn.

### A Proposition: From Interblending to All-Over

A remarkable feature of Sobel’s oeuvre lies in the alacrity of her stylistic evolution. Indeed, the range and velocity of these transformations pose something of a puzzle: how can we understand her move, in just three years, from paintings like *Spring Festival* (1942; fig. 1) to *Milky Way* (1945)? From a picture with more than a dozen figures clad in ornately patterned costumes and crowded into a flowering forest to a resolutely nonrepresentational canvas, which evokes the night sky through an array of painterly experiments? In the limited scholarship that exists on this artist, there has been a tendency to hold apart these modes, splitting them into two camps: the Chagallian, “naive” narrative scenes, on the one hand, and the all-over abstractions, on the other. They are presented as almost two sides of a single coin, structurally unable to meet. My proposition is that these two kinds of paintings—the two sides of the coin—are, in fact, intimately related and that, in closely examining the works that Sobel made in the first half of the 1940s, we can observe a self-directed evolution, as the artist navigated from the one stylistic camp to the other.



Fig. 1. Janet Sobel, *Spring Festival*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 46 x 48 in. Collection of the Spieler family

Sobel first exhibited *Spring Festival* (see fig. 1) in her solo show at Puma Gallery, where it was among the earliest works on view. In it, ecstatically colored bodies, blooms, and trees fill the canvas in a visually flattened field. Look closely: the compositional elements are carefully fitted together, almost slotted into place like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The display also included *Three Vases* and *Artists at the Preview*, both undated but likely completed around 1943. In these paintings, Sobel simplified her composition—each features only three figures—but she rendered the eponymous “artists” and “vases” in an overgrown crimson scumble, describing them with the same looped, curlicue strokes as other elements of the composition. Figure and ground remain cleanly separate in both, but the particularities of Sobel’s brushstrokes mean that the bodies are not merely *in* an environment but constructed *from* that environment, too.

The show at Puma Gallery also included at least three paintings from 1944. Given that the exhibition opened in late April, Sobel would have had to complete these in the narrow slip of four months prior to its unveiling. Let us consider two of them: *The Frightened Bride* (fig. 2) and *The Burning Bush* (fig. 3). In these, we can see the artist intensifying her engagement with certain stylistic devices present in *Spring Festival* (the superabundance of figures, the lack of pictorial depth) and *The Three Vases* (the uniformity of brushstrokes, the hints at interblending figure and ground), pursuing them to what may seem, in retrospect, like something approaching a logical conclusion.



Fig. 2. Janet Sobel, *The Frightened Bride*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 40 x 51 in. Courtesy of The Museum of Everything, London

In *The Frightened Bride* (see fig. 2), Sobel leveled out her color palette, bathing the entire scene in a unified yellow glow, interspersed with incidents of green and lilac. She achieved this effect with near-uniform flicks of paint that cover the entire canvas like a grassy meadow, save for the faces that occasionally emerge from the dense overgrowth. The relationship to works like *Artists at the Preview* and *Three Vases* is evident, as is Sobel’s departure from them. Already in those works, she had painted foreground and background with remarkably similar strokes, so that the entire canvas crawled with tiny, curved shapes. In *The Frightened Bride*, she deepened that association between object and environment, flattening space into an all-consuming field.

In *The Burning Bush* (see fig. 3), meanwhile, an all-over, pattern-like scrawl of black and white loops covers a wash of autumnal yellow, red, and forest-green hues. As in *The Frightened Bride*, faces emerge in *The Burning Bush*, but these, too, have been constructed from the same gestures that comprise the background, as though Sobel merely picked out and clarified the human visages already latent in the scene. Nestled into curlicues of paint, they occasionally flicker out of view, seeming to merge with the wider field. The pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, an early champion of the artist, may well have had such works in mind when he wrote, in the brochure that accompanied her first solo show, "The quality I myself seem to feel most vividly is that of the interblending of the abundant life of vegetation with the sparser life of human beings."<sup>4</sup>

In 1946, Sobel's second solo show opened at Guggenheim's gallery, Art of This Century. In addition to some works previously shown at Puma—including *Spring Festival*, *The Frightened Bride*, and *The Burning Bush*—it included ten of Sobel's most recent canvases, completed in 1945, all abstract. One critic lauded the lack of "self-consciousness in the abstract work of 1945,"<sup>5</sup> while another noted, "It is the pure fantasies such as the all-over patterns that resemble curiously veined, colored marbles that make most impression."<sup>6</sup>

Only two of the 1945 paintings exhibited at Art of This Century are known today: *Milky Way* and *The Attraction of Pink* (fig. 4). Both evince an extraordinary continuation of the progression evidenced in Sobel's move from work like *Spring Festival* to *The Burning Bush*. With that shift, she had already left behind her heavily populated scenes, which were sophisticated in their pictorial construction and the locked-together elements of the composition but were still peopled narratives. In works like *The Burning Bush* and *The Frightened Bride*, Sobel painted all-encompassing tangles of vegetal overgrowth, knitting together fore- and background through finely articulated paint strokes and controlled drips, with which she also created faces and figural traces.

Moving further still in *Milky Way* and *The Attraction of Pink*, Sobel dove headlong into pure abstraction. In *The Attraction of Pink* (see fig. 4), a dense tracery of black paint crawls over the surface. Atop it, Sobel applied scrawls of pink, periwinkle, and aqua, dripping the viscous liquid, then tipping and blowing it into a webby arrangement. The aptly named, celestial *Milky Way* presents a complex overlay of enamel paints: delicately feathered sprays; swooping loops like ovoid ring stains; runny pools punctuated with open, honeycomb gaps; and limpid, nearly-translucent washes of opaline blue and pink. No figural traces appear in these compositions, and the titles do not point to or suggest any narrative context.

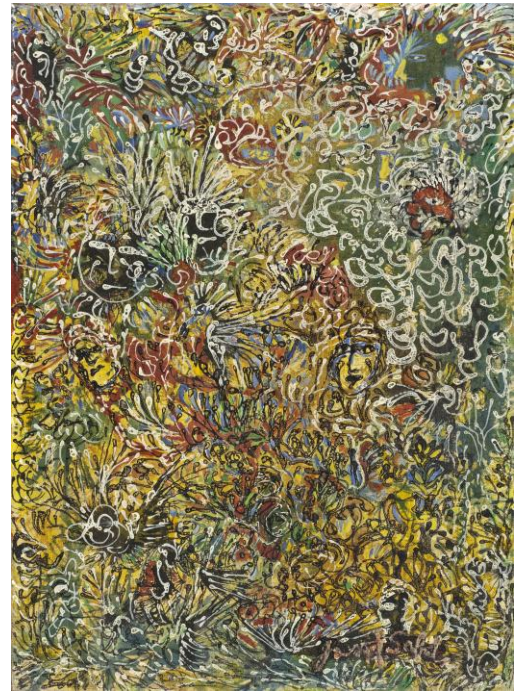


Fig. 3. Janet Sobel, *The Burning Bush*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 30 x 22 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, American Art Acquisition Fund; digital image © 2024 Museum Associates / LACMA; licensed by Art Resource, NY



Fig. 4. Janet Sobel, *The Attraction of Pink*, 1945. Oil, enamel, and lacquer on canvas, 70 x 32 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund and Gift of Sol and Leah Sobel, 1999

Reviews of Sobel’s 1946 exhibition cast the relationship between the new paintings and her earlier work as one of radical change—a sudden reversal or about-face, occasionally worthy of skepticism. As the critic for the *New York Times* wrote: “Janet Sobel, at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century, began as a ‘primitive’ and is now an abstractionist. Whether her primitivism was ever genuinely such or from the start sophisticatedly ‘pseudo,’ may be debated.”<sup>7</sup> The *New Yorker* agreed with that estimation, though without the derisive inflection, dubbing the artist “a primitive gone modern.”<sup>8</sup>

The much-discussed change received its most extensive treatment by collector and dealer Sidney Janis, who had followed Sobel’s career for four years and wrote the introduction to the exhibition brochure for Art of This Century. Sobel’s work was “no longer primitive,” he noted, but unlike many “self-taught or instinctive-naïve painters,” she had not begun introducing “knowing touches and short cuts” to it. Rather, her paintings today were “filled with unconscious surrealist phantasy.”<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, here and elsewhere, Surrealism became the ready-made explanation for Sobel’s turn to abstraction. The possibility of the artist pursuing and expanding on the logic of her own invention—from *Spring Festival* to *The Burning Bush* to *Milky Way*—was not considered. Instead, the evolution was outsourced to an established art movement. Surrealism may have seemed, to Janis, a sufficiently self-evident explanation: by the mid-1940s, many exiled European Surrealists had established themselves in New York, indelibly reshaping the city’s creative landscape and influencing younger creatives.

Recent exhibitions had displayed the movement’s stylistic diversity, including, notably, the traveling show *Abstract and Surrealist Art in the United States* in 1944, curated by Janis himself. In this period, then, Surrealism was understood as a flexible category, equally amenable to experiments in abstraction and figuration.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in his catalogue essay, Janis aligned Sobel’s deployment of “unconscious surrealist phantasy” with the movement’s major figures, namely Max Ernst and André Masson. “More and more her work is given over to freedom and imaginative play. Her auto-didactic techniques in which *automatism* and *chance* effectively predominate, are improvised according to inner demands,” he wrote. Once set down, however, “*a posteriori* images suggest themselves to her, . . . the intense hallucinatory phantasy that often intuitively parallels in concept and spirit the work of leaders of surrealism such as Ernst and Masson.”<sup>11</sup> Here, Janis may have had in mind work like Ernst’s *Marlene* (1940–41), which had recently been exhibited in New York. In creating these monotype decalcomania paintings, Ernst covered his canvases with paint and briefly applied a flat sheet (often made of glass or paper) against the still-wet pigments. This combination of pressure and

suction produced mottled, coral-like surface effects. Taking his cue from these suggestive, automatically generated passages, Ernst would then add finely wrought narrative elements. Plainly, Janis saw Sobel's combination of abstraction and what he called "a *posteriori* images" as a continuation of this technique.

The alignment with Ernst and Masson was intended as an elevation, turning Sobel into an implicit peer of well-established male artists. It is worth noting, too, that the artist participated in this framing, once telling an interviewer: "I'm a Surrealist. . . . I paint what I feel within me."<sup>12</sup> (Her language here further reveals how broadly flexible Surrealism, as a movement and category of art making, had become by the mid-1940s in the United States.) In retrospect, though, Janis's framing was not only antiquating, fixing Sobel in the older world of the European Surrealists, but also diminishing, denying the force of her own self-directed creative invention. Like all artists, she may well have drawn inspiration from the art of others. But what was lost in her critics' and champions' swift enlistment of Surrealism as her abstractions' *raison d'être* was the possibility of a more radically self-directed evolution. A close examination of Sobel's paintings from around 1942 to 1945 reveals how they may be read in formal sequence, traveling from what Dewey described as an "abundant interblending" to what critics, already in 1944, dubbed "all-over."<sup>13</sup>

### A Retracing: Moving Pictures

For years, to the extent she has been acknowledged at all, Sobel has been consistently identified with the New York art world. There is ample reason for this association: she lived and worked in Brooklyn during her years of greatest renown, and her two landmark solo shows opened in Manhattan art galleries. This association is nonetheless incomplete. It has tended to falsely circumscribe our understanding of her influence, creating the impression that, while Sobel may have made a splash among a certain coterie of New York collectors and galleries, her accomplishment was nevertheless specific to this local environment. In retracing the various tours of group shows in which Sobel participated, I have found that her art actually traveled widely.

In 1944, Sobel exhibited in the show *Abstract and Surrealist Art in the United States*, curated by Janis, which traveled extensively. After opening at the Cincinnati Art Museum, it continued to the Denver Art Museum, the Seattle Art Museum, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and the Portland Art Museum in Oregon, before ending at the San Francisco Museum of Art in September.<sup>14</sup> Later that fall, portions of the show, including the Sobel painting, were reunited at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery in New York. Sobel showed *Devotion of the Spirits* (1943) for part of the circuit, until it was damaged in transit from Denver to Seattle and, according to correspondence between the museums, "pronounced a complete loss."<sup>15</sup> A new abstraction, *Music* (1944), took its place.

The year 1945 saw two exhibitions devoted to the work of women artists, both of which included Sobel. Organized by Washington, DC-based gallerist David Porter, *The Women: An Exhibition of Paintings by Contemporary American Women* began its run in March 1945 at the Alumnae Hall Gallery of Western College in Oxford, Ohio.<sup>16</sup> All the works were for sale, but Sobel's *Chronicle of Our Elders* (c. 1944) was the most expensive by an order of magnitude: at \$1,500, it was priced three times higher than the second-most costly work of \$500.<sup>17</sup> The exhibition traveled to Mary Baldwin College, Virginia; David Porter

Gallery, Washington, DC; and the San Francisco Museum of Art, though Sobel's painting was removed from the California presentation in January 1946 for what the museum called "an eastern showing" (namely, the artist's second solo show).<sup>18</sup> The second such exhibition was Guggenheim's *The Women*. On view at her New York art gallery in June and July 1945, the exhibition received national attention, with Sobel singled out in several reviews.<sup>19</sup>

It was a banner year for the artist, with an escalating number of group exhibitions that swung her paintings around the United States. That year, in addition to *The Women*, Porter mounted an exhibition of abstract art that bore the numinous title *A Painting Prophecy, 1950*.<sup>20</sup> Sobel showed *Milky Way*, at Guggenheim's suggestion.<sup>21</sup> After opening in Washington, DC, the show traveled to the George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum in Springfield, Massachusetts, the City Art Museum in Saint Louis, and the San Francisco Museum of Art, circulating around the West Coast before finally closing at Illinois State University in Normal in February 1946.<sup>22</sup>

Also in 1945, Sobel joined the *140th Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture* at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The institution immediately acquired her picture *Invasion Day* (1944) for its permanent collection. After the show closed in Philadelphia, *Invasion Day* embarked on a national tour, traveling to the Reading Public Museum and Art Gallery in Pennsylvania; to Saginaw, Michigan, under the auspices of the Junior league; and to the Butler Art Institute in Youngstown, Ohio.<sup>23</sup> (Plans for display at the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Minnesota State Fair were cancelled, cutting the tour short.) Finally, *The Burning Bush* traveled to Lincoln, for inclusion in the Nebraska Art Association's *55th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art*.<sup>24</sup>

Guggenheim continued to play a key connective role. In May 1946, she wrote to Sobel that "the State University of Iowa" [sic] was mounting "a large summer show" and that they "would like to include *Music*." Guggenheim had already returned to Sobel the paintings from her solo show and thus requested that the artist bring this one back to Art of This Century before May 20.<sup>25</sup> One month later, *Music* was on display at the University of Iowa as part of its newly launched annual exhibition of contemporary art.<sup>26</sup>

In 1947, Guggenheim closed her gallery and relocated to Venice, Italy. Even from this geographic remove, she continued to advocate for those artists whose careers she had championed in New York, including Sobel. In 1948, when she presented her collection at the Venice Biennale, Guggenheim included *The Frightened Bride* in the display.<sup>27</sup> As the first postwar Venice Biennale, the 1948 edition played an outsize role in the dissemination of modern and contemporary art in Europe. Guggenheim's collection presentation proved pivotal, marking Jackson Pollock's European debut and, in the words of one scholar, "the first sighting outside the United States for a new generation of American artists, including William Baziotes, Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still, who would dominate the art scene through the 1950s."<sup>28</sup> Guggenheim subsequently donated *The Frightened Bride* to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta as part of her efforts to seed interest in modern art around the United States.<sup>29</sup>

All told, group shows were the motor that propelled Sobel's art around the United States, and even Europe, granting her a broader audience of artists and nonartists alike. The point here is not so much that her art was unique in its wide circulation. Indeed, many artists' work moved in similar circuits: Pollock's *Guardians of the Secret* (1943) toured the country

with Sobel's *Devotion of the Spirits* and *Music* as part of *Abstract and Surrealist Art*; so too did Rothko's *Omen of the Eagle* (1942) and William Baziot's *Opposing Mirrors* (1943). All of these paintings were among a cohort of very recently completed works sent on national tours. But this aspect of Sobel's career—its dynamism, the extent of its reach, and the velocity of its ignition outside of New York—has yet to be fully appreciated.

### A Discovery: Work after New York

In early 1947, Sobel moved to New Jersey, living briefly in Scotch Plains before settling into a large house in Plainfield with her family.<sup>30</sup> The move coincided with the zenith of her success; it also came at a time when New York was crystallizing its status as the postwar capital of the Euro-American avant-garde art world. Most accounts of Sobel's life in New Jersey have cast it in terms of total isolation and abstention from art—almost as a self-imposed exile. "Whether Sobel agreed with the move to New Jersey or not," Levin writes, "she was separated from almost everything and everyone that had previously served to support her art making."<sup>31</sup>

There is historical basis for this supposition: in November 1946, the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported that "painting is extremely arduous for Janet Sobel. She is allergic to something in the paint she uses, but has not yet been able to find out what it is that bothers her." And yet, the potentially devastating implications of this allergy were almost immediately contradicted by the report of an undeterred artist. "It's a serious drawback," the article continued, "particularly because she cannot leave paint alone, even when she tries."<sup>32</sup> Readers are informed of the allergy, in other words, only to be immediately told that, nonetheless, Sobel "cannot leave paint alone."

Given her allergy, it has been long assumed that Sobel stopped making and exhibiting art once she moved to New Jersey, with the exception of what has long been called her third lifetime solo show, at Swain's Art Store, in 1962. Let us address the second claim first. Sobel remained an active and exhibiting artist, circulating in the admittedly much smaller pool of Plainfield, New Jersey, and its environs. She participated in group exhibitions in 1948, 1959, and 1960.<sup>33</sup> She staged a display of her own work in her home in 1952, in conjunction with an aid drive for the Women's Division for the State of Israel Bonds.<sup>34</sup> Most significant, Sobel had another, earlier solo show at Swain's Art Store—bringing her lifetime total to four. Held in March 1957, it occasioned a lengthy review in the *Plainfield Courier-News*. In addition to older works, like *Spring Festival* and *Chronicle of Our Elders*, some paintings were shown for the first time, including the major work *Hiroshima* (c. 1948), which the *Plainfield Courier-News* described as "done either completely or largely without brush stroke."<sup>35</sup> As is typical, Sobel did not inscribe a date on *Hiroshima*, but its inclusion in the show raises anew the question of whether Sobel continued to paint in New Jersey. A new discovery reveals that she did.

This revelation is based on one work's verso. The Sobel painting in the Menil Collection, an untitled abstraction historically dated to around 1946–48, bears a label on the back from Swain's Art Store, indicating that the support, a tempered piece of composition board, was purchased there. On it, Sobel dripped an array of colorful enamels, from periwinkle blue and yellow-streaked aquatic green to black and garnet red (fig. 5). She thickened some of the streams with sand, grains that glimmer faintly in the light. Blues and blacks



occasionally marble together, but the colors generally remain separate, even as the drips themselves tangle, overlap, and interleave. It is a quintessential all-over abstraction, with paint spilling from edge to edge. And, as the verso label tells us, the work was definitively created in Plainfield.



Fig. 5. Janet Sobel, *Untitled*, c. 1946–48. Enamel and sand on board, 17 5/16 x 14 in. The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Leonard Sobel and family; photograph by James Craven

The revelation that Sobel continued to experiment in all-over abstraction in New Jersey runs contrary to what has been argued previously—namely, that the relocation coincided with her virtual abandonment of painting, if not art making altogether. Equally fascinating is the fact that this painting belongs to a group. Sobel executed a total of four untitled all-over drip paintings at this exact size, all of which have been historically dated between roughly 1946 and 1948. Siblings to the Menil picture, they are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, in Bentonville, Arkansas; and the San Diego Museum of Art. Closely connected not only by size and technique but also by media and color palette, the four paintings appear to have been executed sequentially, or perhaps even concurrently. Might they all be Plainfield works? More research is necessary to investigate the question, but already the Menil picture has expanded our understanding of the artist’s New Jersey chapter.

Sobel’s art challenges existing narratives around midcentury modernism and the formation of Abstract Expressionism, and there is much that remains to be learned. This Research Note has sought to advance a trio of new findings. I have proposed new ways of understanding Sobel’s rapid creative evolution, from a style identified as “primitive” in the early 1940s to all-over abstraction by mid-decade. I argue that this evolution was radically self-directed, less a matter of her being influenced by other (well-known, male, European) artists than a question of Sobel engaging ever more deeply with the flat and dense

patterning of her early pictures, chasing these stylistic tropes into the nonrepresentational all-over. In retracing into her paintings’ exhibition histories, I have sought to elucidate how widely Sobel’s art traveled during her lifetime, far beyond the confines of the New York art world to which she has been historically tied. Sobel’s “all-over” was everywhere—and ongoing. As I discovered through my research, Sobel continued to paint after her relocation to Plainfield in 1947. At least one all-over abstraction may be conclusively placed here, with numerous other likely candidates. Information about additional exhibitions in New Jersey, including a second solo show held there in 1957, suggests that she continued to work in oil and enamel paints, despite her long-standing allergy to the material (and contrary to the existing literature on the topic). “Put Janet Sobel on your list,” Guggenheim recommended in 1944. Eighty years later, it is past time we listened.

*Natalie Dupêcher is associate curator of modern art at the Menil Collection.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peggy Guggenheim to David Porter, November 17, 1944, Edwin David Porter papers, 1929–69, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter “Edwin David Porter papers”).

<sup>2</sup> See Gail Levin, “Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist,” *Women’s Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 2005), 8–14; and Sandra Zalman, “Janet Sobel: Primitive Modern and the Origins of Abstract Expressionism,” *Women’s Art Journal* 36, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2015), 20–29. A [review of my exhibition by Zalman](#) is also featured in this issue of *Panorama*.

<sup>3</sup> I extend sincere thanks to Gary Snyder, as well as Leonard Sobel, Philip Sobel, Jeff Spieler, and their respective families, for so generously sharing their time and knowledge with me.

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey, in *Janet Sobel* (New York: Puma Gallery, 1944), back cover. For more on Dewey’s interest in the artist and how this may have connected with his broader philosophical and aesthetic project, see Anna Godfrey, “Janet Sobel and Abstract Expressionism: Reconsidering Marginality” (PhD diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Edward Alden Jewell, “New Year Melange,” *New York Times*, January 6, 1946.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Breuning, “Janet Sobel Gains,” *Art Digest* 20, no. 8 (January 15, 1946), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Jewell, “New Year Melange.”

<sup>8</sup> “Goings on about Town,” *New Yorker*, January 12, 1946, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Sidney Janis, “Janet Sobel,” in *Paintings by Janet Sobel* (New York: Art of This Century, 1946), back cover.

<sup>10</sup> See also Zalman, “Janet Sobel,” 23.

<sup>11</sup> Janis, “Janet Sobel,” back cover.

<sup>12</sup> Janet Sobel, interview by Bill Leonard, WCBS (December 16, 1946), reprinted in *Janet Sobel: 20th Century Woman* (London: Gallery of Everything, 2021), 25.

<sup>13</sup> See, by way of example, H. D., “One by One,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1944.

<sup>14</sup> For more information, including the planned dates (which were adjusted throughout), see *Abstract and Surrealist Art in the United States* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1944), 7. Although not originally included in the circuit, the Portland Art Museum was added following the success of the show in Cincinnati. See “Abstract and Surrealist Art in the United States—Correspondence,” 9/6/1944–9/24/1944, Exhibition Records, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Archives.

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- <sup>15</sup> Richard E. Fuller to Grace L. McCann Morley, May 17, 1944, "Abstract and Surrealist Art in the United States—Correspondence," 9/6/1944–9/24/1944, Exhibition Records, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Archives.
- <sup>16</sup> See exhibition brochure in the Edwin David Porter papers.
- <sup>17</sup> See the price list sent from David Porter Gallery to Western College in Ohio, in "The Women," 1/2/1946–2/11/1946, Exhibition Records, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Archives.
- <sup>18</sup> "The Women," undated description of the exhibition, in "The Women," 1/2/1946–2/11/1946, Exhibition Records, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Archives.
- <sup>19</sup> See Edward Alden Jewell, "Chiefly Modern in Idiom: 'The Women,' Again," *New York Times*, June 17, 1945; Carlyle Burrows, "Art of the Week," *New York Herald Tribune*, June 17, 1945 (which praised Sobel's "handling of paint with superior subtlety and poetic understanding"); and Ben Wolf, "Bless Them," *Art Digest*, July 1, 1945 (which, outrageous title notwithstanding, wrote that Sobel was "responsible for one of the most joyous chromatic expressions seen this season").
- <sup>20</sup> For more on this exhibition, see Melvin P. Lader, "David Porter's 'Personal Statement: A Painting Prophecy, 1950,'" *Archives of American Art Journal* 28, no. 1 (1988), 17–25.
- <sup>21</sup> Per Sobel, "I brought her [Peggy Guggenheim] several paintings and she chose one called 'Milky Way' which she will forward." Janet Sobel to David Porter, December 10, 1944, Edwin David Porter papers. For more on Guggenheim's involvement with this exhibition, see Lader, "David Porter's 'Personal Statement,'" esp. 22.
- <sup>22</sup> See Lader, "David Porter's 'Personal Statement,'" 23. See also the correspondence in the Edwin David Porter papers.
- <sup>23</sup> Letter from the American Federation of the Arts, which organized the tour, to Joseph T. Fraser Jr., Secretary of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, December 19, 1945, archives of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia.
- <sup>24</sup> The show was on view at the Nebraska Art Association from March 4 to April 1, 1945.
- <sup>25</sup> Peggy Guggenheim to Janet Sobel, May 9, 1946, Museum Collection Files, Janet Sobel, *Milky Way*, Department of Painting & Sculpture, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- <sup>26</sup> The *Second Summer Exhibition of Contemporary Art* was on view at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City, from June 16 to July 31, 1946.
- <sup>27</sup> See the checklist in *La collezione Peggy Guggenheim* (Venice: Istituto Tipografico Editoriale, 1948). See also the installation photo in Gražina Subelytė, "1948: Peggy Guggenheim's Biennale," in *Peggy Guggenheim: The Last Dogaressa*, ed. Karole P. B. Vail (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2019), 108.
- <sup>28</sup> Subelytė, "1948," 106.
- <sup>29</sup> See Subelytė, "1948," 109n29. The High Museum later deaccessioned the work and sold it at auction in 2014.
- <sup>30</sup> I am grateful to Jeff Spieler for providing me with the information about Scotch Plains.
- <sup>31</sup> Levin, "Janet Sobel," 13. See also Jennifer Higgin, *The Other Side: A Journey into Women, Art and the Spiritual World* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2023), who writes, "Her family's relocation to New Jersey in 1946 and Peggy Guggenheim's concurrent move to Venice was disastrous for Sobel: in a heartbeat, she disappeared from the art world" (159).
- <sup>32</sup> "Critics Acclaim Boro Grandmother as Top Flight Surrealist Painter," *Brooklyn Eagle*, November 10, 1946.
- <sup>33</sup> These include the Plainsfield Art Association's *Fifth Annual Exhibition* in April 1949 (see Ruth Butler, "Many Attend Art Exhibit," *Plainfield Courier-News*, April 7, 1948); the *Mid-Summer Exhibition* at Swain's Art Store from June to August, 1959 (see "Area Artists' Showing Set," *Plainfield Courier-News*, June 26, 1959; and "Art Exhibition Underway; 15 Artists Participating," *Plainfield Courier-News*, July 10, 1959); and the Spring Art Festival at the Jewish Community Center in March 1960 (see "Center Group Will Sponsor Art

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Exhibit," *Plainfield Courier-News*, March 24, 1960; and William McFadden, "28 Artists Exhibit at JCC Festival," *Plainfield Courier-News*, March 19, 1960).

<sup>34</sup> See "Art Exhibit to Aid Drive," *Plainfield Courier-News*, November 13, 1952; and "Women Spur Bond Effort," *Plainfield Courier-News*, November 21, 1952.

<sup>35</sup> Joan Sherako, "Plainfield Artist Exhibits 'Challenging' Paintings," *Plainfield Courier-News*, March 13, 1957.