

Cite this article: Sandra Zalman, review of *Janet Sobel: All Over*, Menil Collection, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2024), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.19326>.

## *Janet Sobel: All Over*

Curated by: Natalie Dupêcher, Menil Collection

Exhibition Schedule: Menil Collection, Houston, February 23–August 11, 2024

Reviewed by: Sandra Zalman

*Janet Sobel: All Over* at the Menil Collection was an ambitious solo exhibition that invited viewers to engage with Sobel's multifaceted artistic output on its own terms. If exhibitiongoers have heard of Janet Sobel (1893–1968) at all, they know her as a fellow traveler of the emerging American avant-garde in the 1940s, who ultimately was excluded from the history of modernist abstraction. By bringing almost thirty of Sobel's figurative and abstract paintings and drawings together for the first time in decades, curator Natalie Dupêcher demonstrated that Sobel does not need to be understood only through this narrow lens.<sup>1</sup> In the Menil's exhibition, "all over" becomes a far more expansive term than formalist critic Clement Greenberg ever intended when he described the way works like Sobel's stretch edge to edge, disregarding the conventional limitations of illusionistic easel painting. We can begin to think about Sobel's "all over" practice in terms of her environment: she worked all over, almost compulsively transforming whatever material was around—canvas, yes, but also nontraditional surfaces like envelopes, book pages, seashells, glass, or tiles—into art. Her work is also "all over" in the sense that it reaches across time and place. Her paintings address the universal expanse of the cosmos as much as the specific historical period of World War II and her experience as a Ukrainian-Jewish immigrant to the United States.

The exhibition began with an early painting, *Disappointment* (fig. 1), in which Sobel used oil and sand to convey an alternately slick and rough network of vegetation and branches interwoven with figurative elements. The bright blotches of flowers contrast with the downcast expressions of hovering faces, the most prominent of which bears a tear-like scar. On the upper left side of the canvas, this same kind of mark is part of an intricate pattern of straight and curved lines that connect to a tree trunk form, its roots then stretching to the lower areas of the canvas and



Fig. 1. Janet Sobel, *Disappointment*, c. 1943. Oil and sand on canvas, 26 x 30 inches. Private collection. Image courtesy the Menil Collection

culminating in Sobel's looping cursive signature. Abstraction is not the goal here but emerges as a byproduct of the complicated interconnection between figure and ground, line and form. Sobel's strength is in merging these moments—another kind of all-overness.



Fig. 2. Janet Sobel, *The Burning Bush*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 30 x 22 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, American Art Acquisition Fund. © Janet Sobel. Photo: © Museum Associates/LACMA

*Disappointment* shares some folkloric elements with Marc Chagall, but just one year later, Sobel painted *Burning Bush* (fig. 2), which introduces yet another interpretation of “all over”: an interlocking white lattice of faces and foliage amid a palette of yellows, reds, and greens. The title is provocative—it refers to the bush that burned but was not consumed when God appointed Moses to lead the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt and toward the hope of freedom that Israel represented. When Sobel painted *Burning Bush*, the horrors of the Holocaust were not yet fully known, but the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943—an act of hope and resistance in the face of enslavement and extermination—was covered extensively in the local and national press and surely would have resonated with Sobel herself; she had fled anti-Semitic violence following the murder of her father in a pogrom, emigrating to the United States with her mother and siblings in 1908.

Sobel first exhibited in group shows in 1943 and 1944 thanks to the efforts of her son Sol, who was taking classes at the Art Students League in Manhattan at a time when enrollment was so low

because of the war that it threatened the school's survival. Eager critics immediately recognized Sobel's earnest explorations of pattern and color as wholly original, but they could not resist framing her practice as that of a self-taught housewife who had turned toward painting after becoming a grandmother. It was therefore extra impressive that the brochure for Sobel's first solo show, held at Fernando Puma Gallery in New York in 1944, included a text by the well-respected philosopher John Dewey, whose *Art as Experience* (1934) was much discussed in New York art circles. Dewey appreciated Sobel's “interblending” of nature and humanity in a kind of “brooding maternal wholeness,” and he spun her biography into her aesthetic strength. At the Menil, ephemera from Sobel's career was displayed across from a wall of her powerhouse paintings of 1944–48, so that viewers first encountered the works before being introduced to their reception.

None of Sobel's contemporaneous critics foregrounded the ongoing war, despite titles like *Hiroshima* that directly reference the devastation overseas. Instead, critics at the time aligned her work with the aesthetic terms of the day: Surrealism and a nascent Abstract Expressionism, often presented as separate categories, though they share an interest in psychological truth. Sobel slid between both categories, yet her lack of formal training (and the inherent sexism of the art world) meant she was always cast as an interloper, despite the support of collector Sidney Janis, artist Max Ernst, and gallerist Peggy Guggenheim, who privately declared Sobel “the best woman painter by far (in America).”<sup>2</sup>

Guggenheim gave Sobel her second solo exhibition in 1946 at the legendary gallery Art of This Century, where Sobel's tour de force *Milky Way* (fig. 3) was exhibited. The celestial painting powerfully evokes the first blush of dawn with its light blues, creams, and pinks that arc, blow, and splatter across the canvas. Here is the famous drip technique that Sobel pioneered, though with elements added at different points in her experimental process, it offers another kind of expansiveness—all over but not all at once.

Sobel's meteoric rise in the art world was followed by two decades of obscurity. Janis turned his attention to other artists, and in 1947 Guggenheim returned to Europe after the war. This coincided with Sobel's own relocation to Plainfield, New Jersey, necessitated by the expansion of her family's costume jewelry business and her own increasing health concerns, which prompted her to move away from painting to work in crayon (an array of these later figurative drawings, some torn from sketchbooks, close the Menil show). Sobel's final exhibition of paintings during her lifetime was at a neighborhood art-supply store, where the accompanying brochure quoted from her old reviews in the *New York Times*, *Art Digest*, and the *New York World Telegram*.

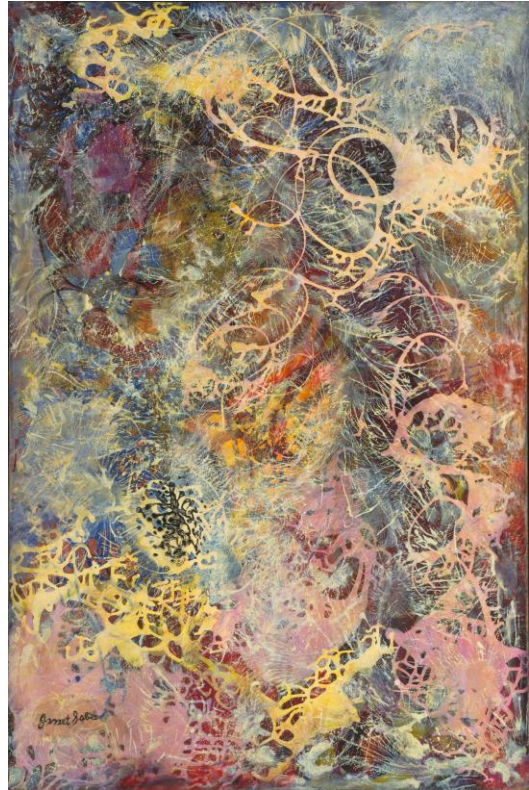


Fig. 3. Janet Sobel, *Milky Way*, 1945. Enamel on canvas, 44 7/8 x 29 7/8 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the artist's family. © Janet Sobel. Photo: © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

What the Menil exhibition succinctly demonstrates is that the same factors that once prevented Sobel from inclusion in the postwar New York School—her lack of training, her material eccentricity, her stylistic idiosyncrasies—are the very reasons her work now looks more interesting than that of some of her better-known peers. A decade ago, I analyzed how Greenberg had the power to restore Sobel to the historical record but purposely wrote her in and out of “American-Type Painting” (1961) in one brief paragraph where he credits her painting for being the first “all-over” work he had seen.<sup>3</sup> Today, the Menil exhibition asks us to look at Sobel's creative labor across mediums to reassess what we value about originality—based not on precedence or primacy but on endurance and continuity—all over again.

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## Notes

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I want to thank my colleagues Aaron Parazette and Dana Frankfort in the painting program at the University of Houston, as well as Karen Schiff, for sharing thoughts on Sobel's work.

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie Dupêcher discusses her research on Sobel for this exhibition, which was not accompanied by a printed catalogue, in the [Research Notes section](#) of this issue of *Panorama*.

<sup>2</sup> Peggy Guggenheim to David Porter, November 17, c. 1944, David Porter Papers, Archives of American Art, noted in Jasper Sharp, "Seeing the Future: The Exhibitions at Art of This Century 1942–1947," in *Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2004), 329.

<sup>3</sup> See Sandra Zalman, "Janet Sobel: Primitive Modern and the Origins of Abstract Expressionism," *Woman's Art Journal* 36 (November 2015): 20–29. Following up on Greenberg's 1961 publication, in 1966, a young William Rubin wrote to Guggenheim in Venice, attempting to locate Sobel. He eventually found her in Plainfield (not more than an hour away from midtown Manhattan) and acquired *Milky Way* (1945) for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, just before Sobel's death in November 1968. At the same time, he acquired her small abstract painting *Untitled* (c. 1946). While I have purposely avoided mentioning Jackson Pollock in the body of this review, it is worth quoting Greenberg's retrospective avowal of Pollock's drip painting, which he makes comparatively: "Moreover when, at the end of 1946, he [Pollock] began working consistently with skeins and blotches of enamel paint, the very first results he got had a boldness and breadth unparalleled by anything seen in Sobel or Tobey." Sobel's *Untitled* (on display at the Menil with three like paintings she did around the same time) shares almost identical dimensions and a very similar color palette with Pollock's *Free Form* (1946), which is considered Pollock's first drip painting. Rubin would have already been familiar with Pollock's *Free Form*, because it entered MoMA's collection in 1967 as part of the Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, which Rubin is credited with securing for the museum; it seems Rubin selected Sobel's *Untitled* precisely because it shared these similarities. Sobel's *Untitled* was shown in a *Recent Acquisitions* exhibition at MoMA in 1970, but Rubin did not officially gift it to the museum until 1987. In 1993, Sobel's *Untitled* and Pollock's *Free Form* were [displayed together](#) at MoMA for what was likely the first time.