

Janet Sobel: *The Grandmother of Drip Painting*

By John Haber in New York City

Janet Sobel would have had to wait more than fifty years for these shows. She deserves better. Her paintings make one wonder afresh at Abstract Expressionism and an almost forgotten woman's life.

Or perhaps she deserves two *concurrent* shows rather than two wonderful shows three years apart, for the two versions of her that she left behind. They sit awkwardly, like two provocative footnotes that an author cannot quite fit into the text. To his credit, a dealer and curator, Gary Snyder, gives one a chance to linger over them both—but I add a **postscript** more than a decade later for a surviving gallery, now on the Lower East Side, and for what has changed.

The thick of things

One story charts a fantastic debut and a life in the thick of things. Make that literally thick. If she needs a one-liner, she may have made the first drip painting. **Clement Greenberg** thought so, or at least he said so, and he reported the impression that her solo show made on **Jackson Pollock**. I can sure say the impression she made on me just a few years ago. At the Modern, where two of her works entered after her death in 1968, I felt that I had discovered for myself a beautiful, defining moment.

And then one hears those dismissive tales of the amateur, the folk painter. Greenberg, reports a leading biography of Pollock, found her "slightly balmy." Even to feminist art histories, she has rated at best a passing notice. One volume pretty much dismisses her as unable to break free from all the old constraints, as if that alone could exclude creativity and pleasure. A book-length reappraisal of **Lee Krasner** and other women of her time omits so much as a mention.



So who is right? One always likes to say that the truth lies somewhere in between. In fact, it cuts directly across both. And that, things turn out, leaves one with a real body of work worth knowing. It

also says quite a bit about a generation's complex pathways. It sheds light on Abstract Expressionism's complex ideas of gender and "the primitive."

Like so much of that generation, Sobel came to America from Eastern Europe, in her case Ukraine, but became very much a part of New York City. I can imagine a young **Lee Krasner** hearing much the same accent—and perhaps even talk of the **first geometric abstraction**—from her Russian parents and neighbors. She could have seen it for herself within a subway ride of Brighton Beach, a largely immigrant community in Brooklyn. As for Krasner, too, marriage deferred too many other aspirations. Krasner had a big baby to tend, her husband, and Sobel had the more traditional kind.

Even Sobel's family cannot say that she had long dreamed of the arts, and the standard account treats her initiation as a grown woman's fancy. Still, something must have run in the family. She came to count on John Dewey, the American philosopher who considered creativity and knowledge alike as part of developing experience, as a friend, and her son took up painting. Whatever the case, he served as a springboard. In 1937, at age 43 and with her kids at last on their own, she took a look at his art, and he unaccountably found her doodling with his supplies. I like to imagine an old-fashioned mother having to correct *everything* her son touched.

Thankfully, he encouraged her, and she entered some heady circles. Dewey himself had the essay for her show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century. Pollock saw her work in 1946, when he needed it most. Then, just a few years later, she may have quit—or maybe not, for precise dating grows all but impossible. In any case, her son now had enough to do between a career and children. Now, with less encouragement, the grandmother drops out of sight.

Shared journeys

But just what did she leave behind? And I do not just mean the drip, still revered today—not to mention parodied in **chocolate syrup**. In one exhibition, Snyder shows forty-one paintings from the artist's estate and half a dozen more. (He also had two others in a group show the previous summer.) All date from after she had worked for a good five years. They make any thought of a naive hobbyist untenable.

Like Pollock's, her subject veers between people and abstraction. As for him, too, the people look at once childlike and decidedly sexual. They define the space around them by their sheer presence, with little in the way of landscape to help fix one's bearings. Painting is a direct encounter with something unfamiliar but alive.

Technique and imagery contribute, and both suggest a thorough awareness of art-world currents. Sobel works mostly in oil, but she has a fondness for mixing in sand, and crucial drip paintings from 1946 use enamel. Maybe she just played in the sand, especially with her children, but **Georges Braque**, with his late still life filled with such texturing, was entering American collections. One may never know who first picked up house paint, but Pollock's most delicate studies in oil and enamel date to 1943, and **Willem de Kooning** was trying it as well. Pollock saw Sobel when the anxious artist felt himself starting over. Still, they and others were moving, independently and as a close circle, in much the same directions, directions that younger artists still **follow at their peril**.

Sobel's imagery, too, shows no lack of currency. The vogue for Jungian analysis obviously contributes to the tiny beings running about. Sometimes they line up in tiers, like a contrast between conscious and unconscious layers. Then, too, American art had seen plenty of conscious journeys



back and forth in two dimensions. Think of the *Migration Series* by Jacob Lawrence. Think of the lonesome subway platforms of American urban realism and even early Mark Rothko.

While the people have a definite appeal, most gallery-goers come for the drip paintings. Did she invent them? Better to say that they each found what they needed in Surrealism—or perhaps that it came to *them*, given its connotations of chance and receptivity. Either way, paint moves freely, one color flowing into the next. Her work really does have that all-over fabric one thinks only Pollock achieved. And yet it has an intimacy all her own.

If paint, in the hands of her peers, itself stands for a person, she is not looking for an idol or a challenge. She finds friends—or a chance to pose for admiration herself. Even the figures from the unconscious come bearing flowers and flirtatious smiles.

Charm school

By the same token, anyone expecting a grand breakthrough is in for a disappointment. Sobel moves freely between abstraction and figures, with a chronology that one may never know for sure—sometimes in the same patch of paint. In their Pollock biography, Steven Naifah and Gregory White Smith describe Sobel as on "a career path much like Jackson's, although considerably shorter." I might call it less a direct path than a continuing, often hesitant experiment, doubling back when one least expects it. Abstract Expressionism may have taken much the same path as well. Think of de Kooning's women.

Sobel's confusing evolution in subject matter makes it hard to ascertain when she stops. So does her technique. Drawing and drips overlap, seemingly growing out of flowers in gouache as well. Sometimes they actually set outlines for one another.

She never gives up on the good old-fashioned easel picture, where for others an abandonment of the easel painting came to stand for a new approach to space. She is still representing the world to the eye as much as experiencing it with her whole weight. The weave of her abstraction, at its freest and most dense, feels patterned. The outlined people, a bit like cartoons, have the charm of folk art as

much as the terror of the unconscious—or of modern life. If feminism, postmodern cynicism, and Greenberg's high Modernism can agree on anything, self-assertion demands more than charm.

I want to end the story here. I have no desire to turn Sobel into the overlooked feminine counterpart to Pollock. Krasner does that well enough already. Pollock himself does it even better. Yet I cannot avoid one more twist in Abstract Expressionism's wonderfully uneven story. In fact, Sobel's career fully reflects the hesitant, human course of a critical art movement. It also helps reveal some of that movement's prejudices.

Start with scale and patterning. Is Sobel really alone? Pollock works magic on a small scale with *Sounds in the Grass* and in his sketches. He brings the viewer right up to the space between paint, whatever the size. Conversely, Sobel's concerns anticipate the feminist rediscovery of decorative arts. Once, after all, a woman artist might have *had to stick to flowers*. For her, they represent memories of a lost homeland and a rebirth, at times lying on an apparent grave.

Or consider figuration and abstraction. Again, Sobel has company. For Pollock or, more notoriously, de Kooning, figures kept emerging right to the end, and with **Philip Guston** they eventually took over for good. Krasner knits them into friezes, and **Barnett Newman** wants his *Man the Sublime Hero*. Conversely, Sobel anticipates a feminist demand for woman as self-representation, rather than as object of lusts and fears.

A layer above the old

One has trouble fitting it all into a tidy narrative—the underrated woman artist, a painter celebrated equally by an American pragmatist like John Dewey and a Kantian like Greenberg, and a paradigm of **outsider art** to boot. If that still has you puzzled, despite my eloquence thus far, you can then ask why much of the work also recalls one very unfeminine, unhip, and not at all abstract insider, **Jean Dubuffet**.

The paradox alone would make more attention to Sobel worthwhile, and I happen to hate Dubuffet. Turn the clock forward three years then, for a moment, to encounter her again, this time in midtown. Shamefully, the **expanded Museum of Modern Art** seems to have lost room to display her, as part of an apparent **new memory hole**. Yet in a gallery a few blocks away in 2005, her weave of paint again sticks determinedly to the surface, combining delicacy and density. D. C. Moore does exhibit one abstract painting, and for once one can truly imagine Pollock's breakthrough in the hands of another sensibility rather than of a copycat. Perhaps the show's greatest interest, however, lies in how easily Sobel moves on to the next painting, with hardly a change in technique.

Sobel tends to flatten people and the landscape that they occupy into a succession of vertical strata. Sometimes these correspond actual physical layers or by memory, as in an apparent burial scene that turns grieving into a confrontation of the visible and the symbolic. Besides contributing the Jungian flavor of the times, it also allows her to shift between **memories of Eastern Europe**, a little like those that haunted **Arshile Gorky**, and the comedy of Brooklyn's neighborhoods and beaches. However, she also layers paint upon paint, usually that close weave of bright color on more monochromatic scenes and more thickly outlined subjects. She experiments with different media and supports to help distinguish those two layers, in some cases with paint on glass.

Sobel's weave suggests an interest in the decorative arts, as if she could physically costume her characters. Perhaps the physicist who applied **fractal analysis to Pollock** could explain it. Its tightness suggests a slightly daft woman who could not let go, and today one associates **outsider art** with both craft traditions and obsessive drawing, as well as her concentration on people and expressionless faces. However, it also may hold a clue to her abstractions—and to why she did not simply evolve linearly from painting people to abstract art. One could argue that the top layer simply takes on a life of its own, regardless of what happens below.

She may seem less progressive still in the later show than with Snyder in 2002, but also more explicable. A larger room concentrates on the span of a year or two, when she is experimenting with layered surfaces and figurative themes. A smaller room then jumps ahead three years in her short career, including the abstraction.

If her best work exists alongside some surprisingly conservative, sometimes clumsy art, it can enrich one's perspective on the mainstream figures in the development of **American Modernism** as well. The vision back then of the primitive, not to mention Sobel's friendship with Dewey and her learning from her son's work, should add insight in another way, too: it can start a more intelligent debate about **outsider art** now.

The primitive and the quaint

One assumes that an untutored artist must naturally paint like this rather than, say, like Pollock with finger paint. One assumes that one can *have* an artist untutored by images everywhere, while in fact the new style derives in part from admiration for the outline style of pop-culture sources. Critics have come down hard on notions of the primitive that made Africa fodder for past generations. No doubt those notions truly did amount in retrospect to a kind of cultural imperialism and to a naturalism meant to replace the older "givens" of art as a window on visible nature. The rediscovery of Henry Darger and others has encouraged a new fashion but also, I fear, a similar illusion—one that takes for granted the compulsive detail and emotional detachment characteristic of certain developmental disorders. What does it say that mental illness may have become the new primitivism?

As a reasonably sane New York woman, no wonder Sobel comes off on the wrong side of "the primitive." Europe had **discovered other cultures** through **its empires**, and now collectors brought America a new fascination with **African art**. Suddenly the primitive took on so many meanings all at once. It stood for a universal, formal impulse that a new art was about to unleash. It promised a fresh, sympathetic understanding of the outsider, in nations or in culture. It meant the raw power of unconscious desire or the Other, the subject, who might just happen to be female.

The painters of their time took in all of this. It allows a whole new *alignment* of ideas. It gives them that uncanny ability to become at once defiantly abstract and so very human. It helps explain how a single movement has struck different people as formalism or action painting, the pure representation of space or an artist's self-representation.

At the same time, primitive meant just primitive, in the sense of backward or trivial. And sure enough, Sobel asks for it. She mimes exotic figures with oversized, totemic heads. Yet they caricature people basically going about their business—and enjoying it to boot. In that male,

confrontational world, she begs for condescension. One can never forget that somehow she gave up painting and moved to New Jersey, and one may never know how to judge that decision in a male world.

In her own way, she discovered, as Newman once wrote, "The Sublime Is Now." Only for her it keeps the specificity and even quaintness of any past year's *now*. No wonder the work sometimes has the scale of a footnote. No wonder, too, it comes with the wonder of a personal discovery. Ironically, Newman wrote that the year Sobel may have retired from painting. I am glad to have her back.

A postscript: before the drip

Long before outsider art became trendy, Janet Sobel entered the collection of the Museum of Modern Art—but not as an outsider.

Times have changed. **MoMA's 2019 expansion** celebrates women artists, but not yet Sobel. (It will rotate works from its collection in and out of display every few months.) To see her work, one must turn to galleries that champion outsider art, like Andrew Edlin, where she appears along with Pearl Blauvelt, a contemporary with her own touch of folk art in the Hudson Valley. It shows Sobel as the self-taught artist and mother of five who had taken up painting in her forties, after her son. It shows her, too, in her fifties, from around 1943 to 1946, only then on the verge of abstraction.

Critics have compared her to **Marc Chagall** and **Jean Dubuffet**. She traffics in memories of **family and community**, from her birthplace in Ukraine to Brooklyn's Brighton Beach—much as Chagall in Paris remembers Jewish Belarus. She works in thick outlines of gouache on paper and in thick bursts of white and oil colors, not unlike Dubuffet's *art brut*. Still, Sobel stays closer to home and further from childhood. Flattened figures appear together, sharing even their isolation, feet on the ground rather than above the rooftops. Flowers on what might be a burial site are the closest she comes to religion or ritual.

Drips enter only at the show's end, almost as an afterthought—and no wonder, for now **outsider art is in**. They fill the bottom of a small work like outgrowths of the flowers, as if she could hold in neither the vegetation nor paint nor her feelings a moment longer. Unlike at MoMA, they never take over entirely, although they have a fluid quality all their own. The older oils feel more joyful and the gouache darker and more painful by comparison.

That still leaves the very idea of outside and inside in question, as I found in the rest of this review and my first encounter with a fair of **outsider art**. Rather than trying to find my way again, let me leave you with that.

*Janet Sobel's selections ran at **Gary Snyder Fine Arts** through March 9, 2002. Snyder also helped guide the show of her work at **D. C. Moore** through October 8, 2005. Work from the early to mid-1940s returns at **Andrew Edlin** through February 22, 2020. I am indebted to Elinor Sobel Spieler, Sobel's granddaughter, and to Rebecca Shapiro, her great-granddaughter, for telling me more about her. A related review considers **Janet Sobel as outsider**.*