Janet Sobel, c 1946

I PAINT WHAT I FEEL

The work of Janet Sobel by Jennifer Higgie

In the Museum of Modern Art's collection in New York is a painting titled *The Milky Way*. As much an evocation of the depths of the sea as it is the infinity of the night sky, it could also be read as an image of an atmosphere or spirit. At just over a metre long and 50 centimetres wide, it's a vivid study in pale blues, watery greens, soft pinks and ochres that evoke cobwebs and coral in equal measure; the enamel paint is applied to the canvas in drips, swooping lines and thin washes. At once abstract and figurative, gestural, and detailed, at the time it was made, it was, in its delicate way, revolutionary. It was painted in 1945 – two years before Jackson Pollock's famous drip paintings – by an untrained artist in her 50s: Janet Sobel. Her life and work are yet another example of a gifted woman being excluded from the narrow lens of the art-historical canon.

Born Jennie Olechovsky to a large Jewish family in Ekaterinoslav, Ukraine in 1893, after her father was killed in a pogrom, at the age of 14, Janet – as she re-named herself – along with her mother and sister, emigrated to New York. She had ambitions to be an actress but marriage at 17, five children and supporting her widowed mother made it impossible.

The story goes that when Sobel was in her 40s, her art-student son Sol brought home his brushes and paints. Sobel picked

1. Gallery label for Janet Sobel *Milky Way*, 1945, Museum of Modern Art New York. https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80636

them up and, without further ado, became a phenomenal artist: inventive and intense; expressive, wildly original. According to Sol, his mother *would prepare a ground, which would invariably suggest or trigger some "idea" for her, whose sudden conception was matched by an equally rapid execution. She would pour the paint, tip the canvas, and blow the wet lacquer.' Her automatic technique echoes that of the Surrealists. She described her motivation simply: 'I only paint what I feel.*[1] Her granddaughter vividly remembers seeing Sobel at work:

> *In 1942, I'm a tot sitting on the floor next to Gram. She's working on a long canvas. She poured paint on the canvas and took out a vacuum cleaner … she used the black hose to blow the paint around the canvas. No one had ever done this before. Her face is shining and her blue eyes intent. She's smiling and I remember it perfectly. I can still breathe the air coming in from the open window.*[2]

The sounds that surrounded her often dictated Sobel's images. She never painted in silence. In one interview she explained that: *I don't think that ever would I paint a picture without music to listen to. All humans must have something like that, that warms them inside.*[3] Her major work *Music* (1944) – a complex abstract work created by dripped enamel paint – was, in her words, her *impression of the music of Shostakovich, created in a world torn by war and bloodshed. Shostakovich*

2. Ashley Shapiro, email, 2021
3. Gail Levin, Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist, Woman's Art Journal, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 2005), p. 12

has captured the power of the Russian people and given them strength.[4]

Everything she made is shot through with a great tenderness towards humanity. Glimpses of faces and flowers emerge from a tangle of undergrowth rendered in marbled enamel; patterns on dresses and people evoke the Jewish folk traditions of Sobel's Ukrainian childhood and the mood and technical innovations of contemporary painters such as Chagall and Jean Dubuffet. Occasionally, in dense, elegiac works such as *The Illusion of Solidity* (c.1945) and *Hiroshima* (1948) Sobel alludes to the horrors of war, while in other paintings, exuberant layers of colour suggest the myriad promises of the New World. In *Untitled* (1944) a face – represented in thick black lines – materializes from a jumble of red, blue and yellow marks floating on a translucent blue ground: it's like a hallucination on a summer day. *In Artists at the Preview* (1943), three figures, as weighty as totems, sit in a lush red/gold environment, their eyes enlarged in order, perhaps, to see the visions they can conjure. A crimson bloom creeps over their bodies and sprouts like an organic crown from the central woman's head; it's an image that is at once, somehow, very ancient and very new.

Sobel was tireless in her exploration of materials. As well as using enamel – which lends the surface of her works the soft sheen of a stained-glass window – she became adept in crayons and pencils and in some instances incorporated

4. Gail Levin, Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist, Woman's Art Journal, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 2005), p. 8

organic elements such as sand to lend texture to her surfaces; she also used glass pipettes from her husband's business to distribute paint. Again and again, she drew faces like masks – floating, disjointed, rhythmic. In *Untitled* (c.1942) four characters, their features simplified and bold, glow like moons in a verdant undergrowth of deep orange and blue leaves that seem to bend and quiver as if in a high wind. Often, the rich variety of materials evokes the worn, lovely patina of old walls, flaking in the sun. For example, in two untitled mixed-media-on-cardboard works from 1948 and 1946/48 blunt herringbone lines define androgynous, slightly smiling figures as dark as spiders' legs against a background of swirling red and pinks. The direction of the paint makes clear that it was applied from different directions: dripped from above and pushed about with a brush. Photographs of Sobel show her working, like Pollock, on the floor.

Sol was his mother's great champion, writing to people he felt could help her – from Marc Chagall, with whom she could converse in Russian, to the surrealists André Breton and Max Ernst, the Jungian psychologist John Dewey and the gallerist Sidney Janis. It paid off. Sidney Janis included a painting by Sobel in his show of American Primitive paintings at the Arts Club of Chicago in 1943 and wrote in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* that: *Janet Sobel will probably eventually be known as one of the important surrealist artists in this country.*[5] In the same year, she had a solo show with the artist and dealer Fernando Puma. Word got about. In 1944, Peggy Guggenheim

5. Maya Blackstone, *Overlooked No More: Janet Sobel, Whose Art Influenced Jackson Pollock*, *The New York Times*, 30 July 2021

called Sobel *the best woman painter by far in America*[6]; in 1945 her work was included in the legendary exhibition of 33 female artists, *The Women* at Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in New York, alongside that of Louise Bourgeois, Lee Krasner, Kay Sage and others. A solo show followed at the same gallery in 1946. A decade or so later, Sobel was the only woman out of 30 or so artists mentioned by Clement Greenberg in his seminal 1955 essay, *American-Type Painting*:

> *Back in 1944, however, he [Jackson Pollock] had noticed one or two curious paintings shown at Peggy Guggenheim's by a primitive painter Janet Sobel (who was, and still is, a housewife living in Brooklyn). Pollock (and I myself) admired these pictures rather furtively: they showed schematic little drawings of faces almost lost in a dense tracery of thin black lines lying over and under a mottled field of predominantly warm and translucent color. The effect-and it was the first really all-over one that I had ever seen [...] Later Pollock admitted that these pictures had made an impression on him.*

The praise, here, is begrudging: Greenberg's description of Sobel as a *primitive* and *a housewife*, and the fact that he and Pollock had to be *furtive* in their admiration of her, is patronising. Sobel was a working-class, untrained female artist in her 50s. Everything was stacked against her.

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6. Eleanor Nairne, *Janet Sobel, Women in Abstraction*, Centre Pompidou, 2021, p. 154

Her family's relocation to New Jersey in 1946 and Peggy Guggenheim's concurrent move to Venice was disastrous for Sobel: she disappeared from the art world. After the death of her husband, she ran the family's costume jewellery business. Her granddaughter is blunt about the hurdles placed in her way, declaring that:

> *My grandmother [...] had to create art – until she was squashed by the way men thought about women and the way she thought of her duties as a woman. [...] People thought she had allergies to paint. [...] She had allergies to suburbia.*[7]

Despite the far-sighted MoMA curator William Rubin's belief in the artist – he bought two paintings from her in 1968 – it would be half a century before her ground-breaking originality was fully recognised. In a 2012 talk given at the San Diego Museum of Art, the educator Brian Patterson described Sobel's untitled painting from 1946 – which at first glance looks like an early Pollock – as 'perhaps the most important in the collection' because it challenges the biases of the white, male art-historical canon. Since then, Sobel's work has been rightfully included in numerous landmark exhibitions, most recently *Women in Abstraction* at the Pompidou in Paris. (It's travelling to the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao.) When Sobel died in 1968, she left behind around 1,000 pictures. As she told *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1946: *It is not easy to paint. It is very strenuous. But it's something you've got to do if you*

7. Ashley Shapiro, email, 2021
8. Ashley Shapiro, email, 2021

have the urge. Her granddaughter, who describes Sobel as *a magical human being with an immense spiritual dimension*[8] remembered her as *bursting with a flow of creativity that couldn't be stopped*.[9] Our world is all the richer for it.

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9. Quoted by Maya Blackstone, *Overlooked No More: Janet Sobel, Whose Art Influenced Jackson Pollock*, *The New York Times*, 30 July 2021