

# Janet Sobel: All-Over



The path-breaking artist Janet Sobel (1893–1968) flourished in the New York art world of the 1940s. Dripping and pouring skeins of paint onto horizontally positioned boards or canvases and filling these supports from corner to corner, Sobel was an early practitioner of “all-over” painting. Beginning in the 1940s, this approach to modern abstraction was closely associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement. It involved applying nonrepresentational marks across an entire composition, lavishing as much attention on the edges as on the center. *Janet Sobel: All-Over* brings together significant artworks from museums, private collections, and the artist’s family to shed light on her exceptionally inventive and influential career.

Sobel was a luminary of abstraction in the United States, and one of its primary innovators. Acclaimed in her lifetime for her skillful use of color and densely layered compositions, she was as voracious in her choice of materials as she was experimental in her methods of application. She often combined oil paint, enamel (likely harvested from her family’s jewelry-making business), and resin; mixed in sand to produce a gritty texture; and played with light by sometimes working on panes of glass. Allowing the liquid pigment to form wide webs and pools, Sobel would then blow it with a pipette, marble wet colors together, and tip the support to manipulate the surface. Such was the level of her originality that Clement Greenberg, the famed critic of Abstract Expressionism, would later remark that Sobel’s output constituted “the first really all-over [effect] that I had ever seen.”

Sobel’s time at the center of the art world unfolded against the backdrop of World War II. An immigrant to the United States, she fled her native Ukraine amid the wave of pogroms in the early 20th century and was profoundly marked by the events of the 1940s. She evoked war and atomic disaster in many of her paintings’ titles and referenced her Jewish faith in others, imbuing these formally adventurous works with poignant personal meaning and historical context.

Short-lived but meteoric, Sobel's career began in 1943. That January marked the first public display of her artwork, in a group exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. One year later, in April 1944, her first solo show opened at Puma Gallery in Manhattan. The exhibition, which included *Disappointment*, 1943, and *The Burning Bush*, 1944 (both on view here), was reviewed in almost a dozen newspaper and magazine articles. Critics lauded the apparently overnight ascent of this new talent, praising her "all-over patterns," "commingled images," and "endless embroidery of lines."

At the time, critics were also captivated by Sobel's unusual biography. She began to make art around 1940, when she was almost fifty and without any formal training. According to contemporary accounts, Sobel's son Sol encouraged her to begin painting and presented the results to his teachers at the Art Students League of New York, where he had taken classes. From there, she connected with leading cultural figures who championed her work, including the artist Max Ernst, the collector Sidney Janis, and the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey.



Janet Sobel painting in her apartment in Brooklyn, ca. 1944.  
Courtesy of Gary Snyder Fine Art, NY

Following the show at Puma Gallery, her career took off. “Put Janet Sobel on your list,” the dealer and collector Peggy Guggenheim wrote to a fellow gallerist in the fall of 1944. “She is the best woman painter by far (in America).” Guggenheim soon became one of Sobel’s foremost supporters. In 1945, she included Sobel’s work in a group exhibition at her now-legendary gallery, Art of This Century. In 1946, she gave the artist her second solo show, presenting Sobel’s most accomplished all-over paintings, including *Music*, 1944 (right; no longer extant), and *Milky Way*, 1945, on view here. Activating a wide set of metaphors, one reviewer wrote that these abstractions “seem[ed] compounded of marble, mother-of-pearl, multi-colored spider webs, and a spatter of milk.”

In 1947, at the height of her success, Sobel left New York, seeming to disappear from the art world. She settled in Plainfield, New Jersey, where she lived until her death. Shortly after the move, she largely ceased painting, due in part to an allergy to “something in the paint she uses,” as was reported in the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Many of her crayon drawings were likely made in Plainfield. Although Sobel remained an active and exhibiting artist, she never again showed her work in New York.

Despite her singular success in the early and mid-1940s, Sobel was soon written out of accounts of the emergence of all-over painting and Abstract Expressionism. In a conspicuous example of this erasure, Jackson Pollock, a leading figure of the movement, was described in 1967 as “anticipating his own all-overness.” Sobel was omitted from the story despite the facts that the two were peers, that Pollock admired her work, and that her drip technique and all-over compositions preceded Pollock’s use of both. In recent years, a surge of new scholarship has corrected the record, bringing renewed attention to this artist’s accomplished, yet overlooked, career. Stemming from a recent gift to the Menil Collection by her family, *Janet Sobel: All-Over* is the first-ever museum exhibition devoted to her pioneering abstract practice.



Janet Sobel, *Music*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 24 × 17 ½ in. (61 × 44.4 cm). Painting now lost

*Janet Sobel: All-Over* is curated by Natalie Dupêcher, Associate Curator of Modern Art, the Menil Collection. The exhibition is organized with the support of the Sobel family.

This exhibition is generously supported by Judy and Charles Tate; Henrietta Alexander; Eddie Allen and Chinhui Juhn; Cindy and David Fitch; Frost Bank; Caroline Huber; MBJLB Trust and Jacquelyn Barish; Susan and Francois de Menil; Mark Wawro and Melanie Gray; MaryRoss Taylor; and the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### Curator Talk

#### **Natalie Dupêcher on Janet Sobel**

Sunday, April 14, 3–3:30 p.m.

Main Building

### Panel Discussion

#### **Connecting Lines: Janet Sobel and Abstract Expressionism**

Susan Davidson, Sandra Zalman, and Natalie Dupêcher

Wednesday, April 24, 6–7 p.m.

Main Building

### Podcast Interview

#### ***The Modern Art Notes Podcast***

Live recording with Tyler Green and Natalie Dupêcher

Thursday, May 23, 7–8 p.m.

Main Building

### Film Screening

#### **Framing Abstraction: Short Films by Women 1920–1970**

Friday, August 9, 8–9 p.m.

Main Building

All programs are free and open to everyone.

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## EXHIBITION DATES

February 23 – August 11, 2024