

The Menil Collection to Present *Janet Sobel: All-Over*

Houston museum devotes exhibition to the artist's abstract paintings, brought together for the first time in sixty years



HOUSTON—August 30, 2023—The Menil Collection presents *Janet Sobel: All-Over*, featuring some thirty paintings and drawings made by artist Janet Sobel (1893–1968). **On view exclusively at the Menil, February 23–August 11, 2024**, the exhibition will explore Sobel's work during her short-lived but meteoric rise to prominence as one of the first artists associated with Abstract Expressionism to pioneer a new approach to modern abstraction known as “all-over” painting.

The show will bring together significant loans from U.S. museums, private collections, and the artist's family that reveal Sobel's exceptionally inventive and influential approach to modern abstraction. Major loans from Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the San Diego Museum of Art reunite six of the artist's famous “all-over” paintings for the first time in sixty years.

Rebecca Rabinow, Director, The Menil Collection, said, “We are delighted to present the vibrant and innovative works of Janet Sobel. In late 2020, the Menil received the gift of four drawings and one

painting from the artist's grandson, Len Sobel, which became the impetus to create an exhibition dedicated to her abstract art. Over the course of our research, we became fascinated by the impact she made during her brief career, and we are glad to help her once again receive the recognition she so richly deserves.”

Sobel began to make art around 1940. She often turned to non-traditional supports, ranging from glass and tile to cardboard, envelopes, and book covers. To these, she would apply oil and enamel paints, the latter most likely harvested from her family's costume jewelry-making business, occasionally mixing them with sand. One of Sobel's most accomplished paintings, *Milky Way*, 1945, displays the range of experimental techniques that she developed in the 1940s. After dripping paint onto the canvas, she blew it with a pipette, marbled the wet colors together, and tipped the support to move the pigments across the surface. Other works in the show reveal Sobel's development of other unorthodox methods: for instance, in one painting she used a ridged tool to carve deep, lined scoops into the paint surface.

Sobel also created numerous drawings during her career. In many of these, she applied bold, bright colors in crayon, ink, and pencil, embedding faces and human figures within overgrown floral motifs and linear patterns. A selection of works on paper further expands the exhibition by

demonstrating her approach to this practice, with a series of parallel strokes that knit foreground and background together into dense, interlocking shapes.

Natalie Dupêcher, Associate Curator of Modern Art, The Menil Collection, said, “*All-Over* will be the first time many of Sobel’s paintings have been seen together since her death in 1968. We are especially pleased to reunite a group of four identically sized abstract canvases, likely executed sequentially from around 1946 to 1948, that shed light on her groundbreaking process. Through this show, we hope to open an expansive dialogue on the artist’s incredible yet under-recognized contribution to abstract painting, returning her to the center of the conversation.”



After participating in several group shows in 1943, Sobel received her first solo show in 1944 at New York’s Puma Gallery. The exhibition was widely reviewed, and her work caught the eye of Peggy Guggenheim, the prominent dealer and collector. That fall, Guggenheim called Sobel “the best woman painter by far in America.” In the summer of 1945, a famed group show titled *The Women* opened at Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery. Sobel’s work was shown alongside Louise Bourgeois and Leonora Carrington. As Sobel’s work continued to attract attention and gain momentum, Guggenheim gave Sobel her second solo show in 1946.

In 1961, American art critic Clement Greenberg described Sobel’s technique as “the first really all-over effect that I had seen.” With the term “all-over,” he invoked a style of abstraction that was newly emergent in the 1940s, in which the composition extended from corner to corner and edge to edge, with no apparent center. However, Sobel’s role in the development of mid-century abstraction was soon written out of history books. This exhibition, the first to focus on Sobel’s highly accomplished and influential abstract paintings, seeks to restore the artist to her rightful place in art history.

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.

About the Artist

Janet Sobel was born Jennie Olechovsky, in present-day Dnipro, Ukraine, in 1893. After her father was killed in one of the many pogroms, she emigrated with her mother and two siblings to the United States in 1908 and settled in New York. She began to paint around 1940, working out of her home in the Brighton Beach neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. After her breakout success in the early and mid-1940s, Sobel relocated to Plainfield, New Jersey, with her family in 1947. Although she continued making art, particularly drawings, for the next twenty years, she largely disappeared from the public eye. Sobel received two more solo exhibitions, at a local art store and gallery, in 1957 and 1962.

About the Menil Collection

Philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to cultivate greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection's main museum building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of five art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood in central Houston. The Menil remains committed to its founders' belief that art is essential to human experience and fosters direct personal encounters with works of art. The museum welcomes all visitors free of charge to its buildings and surrounding green spaces. menil.org

Funding

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Image Captions

1. Janet Sobel, *Milky Way*, 1945. Enamel on canvas, 44 7/8 x 29 7/8" (114 x 75.9 cm). The 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
2. Janet Sobel, *Untitled*, ca. 1946–48. Enamel and sand on board, 17 5/16 x 14 in. (43.9 x 35.6 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Leonard Sobel and Family. © Janet Sobel. Photo: James Craven

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