Edward M Gomez examines the life and art of

JANET SOBEL

Pioneering Abstractionist, Rediscovered Outsider

To well-informed admirers of American Abstract Expressionism, Janet Sobel (1894–1968) is a footnote – an anomalous, noteworthy footnote, to be sure – to the familiar history of painting in the era following the Second World War. To Outsider Art aficionados, Janet Sobel is still coming into focus: she is gradually finding her place in that other art history, of important achievements by innovative, self-taught artists of the 20th century.

In recent years, revisionist art historians have made a more considered, critical assessment of Sobel's main claim to fame – the fact that this shy, chubby, Jewish-immigrant housewife from Brooklyn who started making art in 1937, at the age of 43, developed a drip-painting technique years before Jackson Pollock made headlines with his dripped 'action paintings.' Also at issue: whether or not Sobel's art actually influenced 'Jack the Dripper,' as *TIME* magazine called New York Abstract Expressionism's leading figure, the booze-soaked creator of some of Modernism's most emblematic images.

What is clear is that Sobel's art has emerged as a fascinating, unexpected bridge between the art history of the self-taught and the art history of their academically trained counterparts, who have been and are more readily accepted by the mainstream art establishment.

Only recently has Sobel's work begun to resurface, and in an age of incessant art-market hype and unabashed self-promotion, her unlikely story seems like the stuff of fairy tales. Born Jennie Lechovsky in a village near Kiev, Janet emigrated to the United States in 1908 with her widowed mother (her father had been killed in a pogrom) and two brothers. Janet married Max Sobel, a Russian immigrant, when she was 16 years old. The couple settled in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, the New York borough that had

opposite page Janet Sobel, prior to 1947, photo: Ben Schnall. **Above** Untitled, c.1943, 19 x 27 inches, mixed media on paper.

attracted generations of immigrants. The Sobels had five children. Max, a goldsmith and engraver, established a company that manufactured costume jewelry. Janet, who had received little formal education but who read Russian, Yiddish and English, studied the Bible and Greek philosophy. Like her husband, she appreciated culture and encouraged her children's interest in music, art, language and ideas.

In a rare, recent interview, Sobel's surviving son Sol, who is now in his early eighties and lives with his wife near Baltimore, recalled his mother's first steps as an artist. 'I was in high school, taking art classes at the Educational Alliance in New York,' Sol Sobel explained. 'One day I came home to find that my mother had "corrected" a charcoal drawing I had made of the janitor in the apartment building where we lived. I thought she had talent, so I bought her some art supplies.' Soon, without assistance or instruction, Janet Sobel began making gouache-on-paper paintings.

Seen today, the naïf forms and spirit of those early works at first glance bring to mind Marc Chagall's lyrical, colorful evocations of old Russian-Jewish *shtetls* (villages). But Sobel's images, with their human figures, faces, trees and other forms boldly outlined in black, seem sturdier and less sentimental. Many are tender, without giving way to kitsch and, despite the economy of Sobel's line, are remarkably expressive. Visually these pictures have weight, with their brushy renderings of peasants, soldiers, flower gardens or heads popping up like jack-in-the-boxes. Often these subjects are set against watery backgrounds. The lopsided or sometimes straight-ahead gazes of Sobel's figures, who stare out through almond-shaped eyes, give these pictures their melancholic charm.

At the beginning of the 1940s, Sobel's dreamy work became more hallucinatory and technically more inventive. In an untitled, mixed-media work from around 1943 (above), a densely packed, tangled agglomeration of peasants, bearded Jews and cavorting nudes fills every inch of pictorial space and seems to push toward the edges of the paper.

Through the Glass (circa 1944) found Sobel once again experimenting with her materials. This unusual, multi-layered work features enamel paint on a sheet of glass placed in front of a canvas painted with sand-thickened oils. A nose here, a mouth there, a probing pair of eyes – faces surge forward and recede back into this surreal work's multicolored field of poured, lacy lines and energetic brushstrokes. ('I'm a surrealist. I paint what I feel within me,' Sobel once told a radio interviewer who described her as a 'short, plump, bright-eyed grandmother.')

After finishing high school, Sol Sobel took classes at the Art Students League, in Manhattan.

Through the Glass, c.1944, 26.5 x 29.38 inches, mixed media on cardboard.

The school was known for the many accomplished, professional artists who taught there. Around that time, the enterprising and outgoing young man began contacting art dealers and other art-world notables to get the word out about his mother's work.

In time, now-legendary figures in the art world, including the dealer Sidney Janis, the surrealists Max Ernst and André Breton, the philosopher John Dewey (author of *Art as Experience*, 1934), and the dealer and wealthy collector Peggy Guggenheim (Ernst's former wife), came to know Janet Sobel and her work. Most were dinner guests at the Sobels' home – Janet served gefilte fish, chicken soup and roast chicken – and maintained cordial communications with the artist. Sol also remembers contacting Marc Chagall, who was living in New York, and, with his parents, going to visit the world-renowned artist. 'Times were different then,' Sol Sobel said. 'Nowadays you couldn't meet such famous people as easily.'

The now-defunct Puma Gallery in Manhattan presented Janet Sobel's first-ever solo show in 1944. By that time, she had already shown her work in group exhibitions at the Arts Club of Chicago and at the Brooklyn Museum. Dewey, whom Sobel had met in Key West, Florida, three years earlier, provided a brief text for the brochure that accompanied the Puma Gallery show. Her art, Dewey's introductory message stated, 'is extraordinarily free from imitativeness and from self-consciousness and pretense.' Sobel's forms and colors, he said, appeared to 'well up' from her subconsciousness. The artist included a nude Dewey in her 1942 oil painting *Spring Festival*, which depicted a gaggle of clothed and unclothed figures lounging in a lush garden of lilacs.

Also in 1944, Janis, whose book *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century* had been published two years earlier, included Sobel's work in 'Abstract and Surrealist Art in America,' a show that he organized for the Mortimer Brandt Gallery in New York. The book that accompanied the show reproduced one of Sobel's all-over paintings whose surface was covered in thick webs of drizzled color.

The Widow, c.1942, 30 x 24 inches, oil on canvas.

Pro & Contre, c.1941, 30 x 20 inches, oil on board.

Several more public showings of Sobel's work quickly followed. By the early 1940s, her art had evolved at a brisk pace, from early folkloric representational images, to representational-abstract and then all-abstract creations like *The Attraction of Pink* (1944 – now owned by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.). In 1945, Peggy Guggenheim included Sobel in 'The Women,' a group show at her Art of This Century gallery in New York. Although the acerbic *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell dismissed the selection of works by 30 female artists with a snicker, one art magazine remarked that 'Janet Sobel is responsible for one of the most joyous chromatic expressions seen this season.'

In his introductory text in the brochure for Sobel's own solo show at Guggenheim's gallery the following year, Janis wrote: 'The psychological drive of instinctive-naïve painters almost invariably manifests itself in perfection of detail. Mrs. Sobel is an exception. More and more, her work is given over to freedom and imaginative play. Her auto-didactic techniques, in which automatism and chance effectively predominate, are improvised according to inner demands.' 'Intense hallucinatory fantasy,' reminiscent of Surrealism, and 'emotive forms which confront the observer as strange new visual experiences' were the products of Sobel's innovative working methods, Janis suggested.

This time, Jewell offered some praise. Finding 'less self-consciousness' in Sobel's abstractions than in her representational or partly representational images, the critic considered 'her fancies...rather weird,' but the overall character of her art 'pleasantly decorative.' Jewell was struck by a self-portrait that appeared in *Summer* (1941), one of Sobel's earlier canvases on view in that 1946 show. He wrote that it 'intimates that the artist is a lady of strong will and very decided views.'

The affinities to Surrealism that Jewell and other informed viewers of Sobel's work detected in her art were genuine and valid. What distinguished her art, though, from that of Breton and his followers was that Sobel was completely instinctive and uncalculating in her approach to her work.

Her art was not studiously steeped in psychology and mythology, like the early experiments of such artists as Pollock or Mark Tobey, who worked through Surrealism – assimilating its penchant for automatism – on their way to arriving at their respective mature, signature, abstract styles.

The development of Sobel's art was not prompted by – nor did it reflect – overt intellectual or critical-aesthetic concerns. Working at home, without direct influences from other artists, she did not make art to accommodate or as an exercise in any particular theory. This intellectual and aesthetic separation from her mainstream, academically trained, critically received peers, her origins as a self-taught amateur, and her socio-cultural isolation – this was one Jewish grandma who did not frequent smoky Manhattan bars – defined and determined Sobel's outsider status and experience.

Untitled, c.1946, 26 x 22 inches, mixed media.

Untitled, c.1946–48, 16 x 12 inches, mixed media.

Untitled, c.1946, 18 x 14.5 inches, oil & enamel.

And then there's the Pollock connection or, more precisely, the evidence in both artists' work of a similar drip-painting technique. Who was the first to paint by dripping, and who may have influenced whom? Does such cause-and-effect, art-historical evidence even exist?

What is known is that Sobel made use of glass pipettes borrowed from her husband's costume jewelry business to drip and blow paint. In 1943, Pollock showed some of his partly drip-painted works at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, but Sobel's surviving family members emphasize that, in her isolation from the art world, it is unlikely that she would have seen them. It is clear, however, from the writings of the influential American critic Clement Greenberg, who championed Pollock's art, that the well-known painter saw Sobel's work in both her 1944 Mortimer Brandt Gallery and her 1946 Art of This Century solo shows.

'Pollock (and I myself) admired these pictures rather furtively...,' Greenberg later wrote in his essay 'American-Type Painting' (1955, revised 1958; published in *Art and Culture*, 1961). 'The effect – and it was the first really "all-over" one that I had seen, since Tobey's show came months later – was strangely pleasing. Later on, Pollock admitted that these pictures had made an impression on him.' Greenberg's wording does not explicitly indicate that Pollock was influenced by what he saw in Sobel's work. Nevertheless, Sobel's all-over drip paintings, like her red, green and black untitled work of 1946 and *Milky Way* (1945 – now owned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York), are emblematic works that are as compelling as any of the now-iconic canvases of the New York Abstract Expressionist school. (The Museum of Modern Art, now under reconstruction, used to hang a Sobel drip painting near a monumental Pollock.)

By 1946 Sobel had developed an allergy to the paints she had been using, so she switched to crayons. Many of her subsequent works combined different media, techniques and styles, including, for example, drip painting and line drawing with crayons. Boldly outlined heads and faces pop out of Sobel's later luminous, fractured-rainbow compositions, whose moods ranged from trippy-cheerful to brooding and mysterious. An irrepressible sense of spontaneity surges through them, though; sometimes she outlined big splotches of color in her pictures or created strong rhythms and visual textures by creating patchworks of repeating, curved lines.

After Max and Janet Sobel left Brooklyn and moved to Plainfield, New Jersey, to the west of New York City, in 1947, her tenuous connections to the New York art world dissolved. At the time of her death, she left behind a body of work that was mostly unknown. In 1967, William Rubin, the former director of the Museum of Modern Art's painting and sculpture department, acknowledged Sobel's importance in developing drip-painted abstraction. Years later, a 1989 exhibition at Rutgers University, in New Jersey, focused on lesser-known, small-scale Abstract Expressionist works and again called attention to Sobel's achievements.

Sobel's re-emergence in the Outsider Art camp today acknowledges the peculiar position she occupied vis-à-vis the mainstream during her art-making life. It also reflects the fact that Sobel's varied oeuvre, which includes folkloric scenes, floral-patterned psychedelia, mixed-media experiments and all-over dripped abstraction, is impossible to pin down under one convenient, conventional label.

Many questions remain about Sobel and her art (including, for example, the questions Outsider Art enthusiasts may raise about her later pictures' stylistic affinities to so-called psychotic art, although her family members insist she was never mentally ill). Still, there is little doubt that Sobel, whose studio was the family living room and whose painting uniform consisted of a skirt and an army field jacket, was serious about her art-making. She considered herself an artist and was glad to have been recognized as one. 'It is not easy to paint,' she once told a newspaper reporter. 'It is very strenuous. But it is something you've got to do if you have the urge.'

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