

# The New York Times

## *Art in Review*

### **Janet Sobel**

Gary Snyder Fine Art

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Jackson Pollock may have broken the ice, in Willem de Kooning's well-known phrase, but Janet Sobel definitely helped crack it. Using her son's art materials, this Ukraine-born Brighton Beach mother of five took up painting in 1937 at the age of 43. Within a few years, she was making small abstractions covered with paint dripped in continuous, looping lines.

Because of an allergy to paint, Sobel worked in crayon and pencil after 1948, and at her death in 1968 she was little more than a rumor, the woman who had dripped paint before Pollock. She had resurfaced in an article on Pollock by William S. Rubin that appeared in *Artforum* in 1967; the Museum of Modern Art acquired a painting just after she died, and occasionally exhibited it next to its Pollocks.

Sobel's first 15 minutes occurred in the mid-1940's, when she was embraced by the art world as a kind of Surrealist savant. Her work was included in a group show at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, *Art of This Century*, in 1944, where it was seen and admired by both Pollock and Clement Greenberg, who later cited it as the first instance of "all-over" painting he had seen. Sidney Janis wrote the catalog preface for her solo show at Guggenheim's gallery in 1946, noting her "self-invented method for applying paint."

The Snyder Gallery's 41-work exhibition — the first since 1946 — reveals a complex mix of innate Outsider, folk and Surrealist instincts. Sobel's first efforts show a flair for a primitivist figuration that recall early Chagall and presage early Dubuffet and for profuse floral patterns reminiscent of Ukrainian peasant art.

But equally innate was a need to exploit materials of all kinds (including sand). Ditto all-over patterns and surfaces, which might entail repeating faces, herringbone marks, splattered watercolor or zigzagging pencil lines. If her drips weren't vivid enough, she didn't mind outlining them in ink, and helping to invent Abstract Expressionism did not end her imagistic work. Her main goal was visual intensity, which she achieved with impressive regularity.

Starting out in the vicinity of Kandinsky and Klee and ending nose to nose with Pollock, Sobel's work is further proof of modernism's impure, nonlinear paths. It is great that her short strange career is visible again. May it remain so.

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