

How Ideas in Art Appear ... and Spread

Pablo Picasso supposedly declared, "Good artists copy, great artists steal." But who would have thought Jackson Pollock, that super-macho, testosterone-drenched inventor of drip painting, might have stolen the idea — and from a woman, Janet Sobel, some of whose work is the focus of an enlightening show at James Barron Art in Kent, CT.

Sobel, Ukraine-born and mother of five, began making art with a son's school art supplies in 1937, when she was 43. In the next few years, she moved from primitivism to surrealism and, finally, abstract expressionism. Her subjects never varied — the folk and Jewish traditions of her native country, similar to those of her friend Marc Chagall, but without his lightness and delicate line.

Sobel lived in the Jewish neighborhood of Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, close to the city by train. She met other artists and critics, who thought her a surrealist savant. Peggy Guggenheim included her in a 1944 group show, *Art of This Century*, where her work — now including the novelty of paint dripped in continuous loops — was seen by Pollock and the influential critic Clement Greenberg, who named her technique "all-over" painting. Two



Untitled, Janet Sobel, gouache on paper

years later, in his catalogue preface to the only solo show Sobel received during her lifetime, again at Peggy Guggenheim's, Sidney Janis recognized her "self-invented method for applying paint." She died in 1968.

At Barron Art, the work comes from 1941 through 1948, when Sobel had given up paint because of an allergy, turning instead to crayon,

ink, pen, even sand. But her obsession with Ukrainian Jewish traditions remained: flowers, headscarves, shawls, wreaths on the heads of unmarried girls, and always eyes floating in the picture plane. Sobel was a dramatic colorist, an intense artist unable to leave any part of a picture untouched. The finest picture in the show, "Disappointment," with its

subject of youthful marriage emphasized by Sobel's recurring herringbone marks, is a composite of her memories of a happy life in Ukraine before the diaspora of the Jews tore her world apart.

Sobel was not a great artist, perhaps, but she was more than a footnote in the development of modernism. She will soon be the subject of shows in Europe and in the United States, nods to new thinking about the rise of abstraction. Barron's exhibition gives us work from Sobel's formative years and reminds us of the mysterious ways of talent and the creative impulse. It is a delight.

Janet Sobel: Revisiting the Drip, continues at James Barron Art through June 19. The gallery, located at 4 Fulling Lane in Kent, CT, is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.