

A New Exhibition From Collector Komal Shah Gives Female Artists the Attention They Deserve

“Making Their Mark,” on view in New York City, features nearly 100 works by more than 80 women from across all disciplines

By Stephanie Sporn

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During the 1940s and '50s, influential critic Clement Greenberg helped catapult Jackson Pollock to art-world stardom with reverential reviews of the abstract expressionist's innovative, action-based paintings. It wasn't until 1961 that Greenberg revised his seminal 1955 essay “‘American-Type’ Painting,” to mention that in 1944, he and Pollock had, in fact, visited a gallery where they “admired” the “first really ‘all-over’” artworks they had seen, by self-taught Ukrainian-American artist Janet Sobel. “Pollock admitted that these pictures had made an impression on him,” wrote Greenberg. Yet, in the same breath that the critic acknowledged Sobel's “strangely pleasing pictures,” he spited her as a “primitive” painter, just “a housewife living in Brooklyn.”

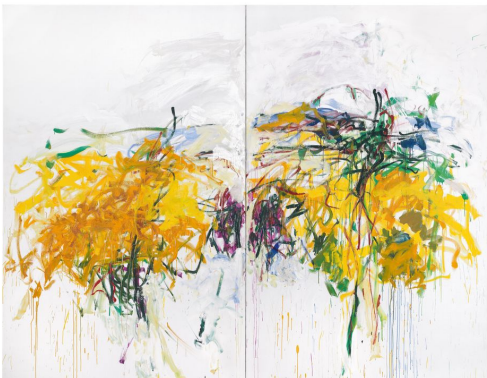
Sobel's drip paintings, some of which are now included in MoMA's permanent collection, are widely known to have predated Pollock's—though like many women's, her story has been left out of most history books. Now, a psychedelic painting by Sobel, circa 1946, which bears an uncanny resemblance to Pollock's iconic canvases, greets visitors at “Making Their Mark,” a new exhibition featuring nearly 100 works by more than 80 artists from the jaw-dropping collection of tech executives and entrepreneurs Komal Shah and her husband, Gaurav Garg. The all-female show, which opened in November at Dia Chelsea's former New York City gallery space, brilliantly reflects the California-based couple's efforts to, as Shah puts it, “level the playing field in a world which has long been dominated by men.” Shah found a curator in her friend Cecilia Alemani, the Donald R. Mullen Jr. director and chief curator of High Line Art; as artistic director for the 2022 Venice Biennale, Alemani conceived an exhibition largely around avant-garde female artists.

Although a recent influx of texts and exhibitions have helped revive the stories of overlooked female artists, Shah and Alemani warn that such promotion must be more than a trend. “Centuries of distinction cannot be wiped away in a few years,” Shah says. In October, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., relaunched after a two-year, \$70 million renovation, and the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum disclosed more about its ambitious plans—though it is still a decade away from welcoming visitors. “If the needle moves in every museum from the 12 percent of work by women to 51 percent, then we won't even need a museum dedicated to women. So until we go from 12 to 51, I'm going to have to keep working.”

For nearly a decade, Shah and Garg's home has been a destination where artists, educators, and institutional leaders from around the globe can convene. The couple has lent works to countless museum shows, and published their first book, *Making Their Mark: Art by Women in the Shah Garg Collection* (edited by art historians Mark Godfrey and Katy Siegel), last May. Far from a mere vanity project, the tome is chock-full of scholarly writing on both established and undersung female artists, many of whom penned their own essays. Once the book was in motion, the next question Shah asked herself: “How will we make this collection accessible?”

“There's nothing better than just seeing creativity without any boundaries. It is supremely uplifting.” —Komal Shah

And thus “Making Their Mark”—the exhibition—was born. Staged across two floors (the first focusing on abstraction, the second introducing figuration), the show contextualizes cutting-edge talents across genres with titans who have continued to pave the way for other artists, even posthumously. For example, just a week after the exhibition opened, the late Joan Mitchell (who died in 1992, and is one of only a handful of women whose works sell for eight-digit prices) broke her auction record with a painting that sold at Christie's for nearly \$30 million.



Joan Mitchell, *Untitled*, 1992, oil on canvas
BRIAN BUCKLEY/ © ESTATE OF JOAN MITCHELL

