

INTERVIEW: ASHLEY SHAPIRO

James Barron: What was your grandmother, Janet Sobel, like?

Ashley Shapiro: Gramma was a strong, grounded and capable woman. Gramma lived in the moment; her responses flowed and were natural. Her art was the same: it arose from the depth of her being — the place where her spirit and the spirit of God came together. Gramma was kind and loving, especially with little kids and animals. She had an *I can do it* attitude.

JB: Can you talk about the spiritual in her practice?

AS: She was deeply rooted in the Divine and in the manifestations of the Divine that can be witnessed, as well as the mystical and faith-based. She was a believer in angels and in a Holy Spirit that was watching out for us. Gramma brought this world view to life for me, comforting me as a child, supporting me as an adult in both difficulty and success.

You see this in her art. One of my favorite paintings shows a soul, newly freed from its body, flying in space and comforted by the Holy.

JB: How do you see your art as the continuation of the spirit of your grandmother's art?

AS: Gramma and I connected spiritually and I feel that I've carried her essence into my own life and art. She taught me a reverence for nature. She loved to be outdoors, especially near the ocean. I grew up thinking that the sand and the ocean were secret tellers and that they were mysterious beyond understanding.

Gramma loved the color blue. She talked about it like it was alive. At a certain point, I began to paint with an emphasis on blue and the way blue speaks and sings to me.

JB: What can you tell us about the faces in her art?

AS: Although Gramma left many of her siblings behind in the Ukraine, she remembered them in her art. Faces from her past — people who spoke her language — were there on canvas or paper, or envelopes or whatever surface was under her hand. The eyes and bodies spoke, and they created the familiar in a country that was never quite her own.

JB: What do you know about her life in the Ukraine, before she immigrated to the US?

AS: In 1894, my grandmother was born into a large Ukrainian family. Her mother, my Baba, was an early feminist. She was a farmer, a midwife and a respected healer who served her community and who birthed twenty-one children of her own. Baba was deeply spiritual and spoke to angels. She lived her faith, and that passion and mystic bent was translated into my grandmother as an overwhelming desire to love, to heal and to create in her amazing and prophetic art, the art that flowed from her in brave and new directions. Gramma couldn't read English. She spoke with an accent and I knew she struggled to express herself in her new language.

JB: Why did she immigrate to the US?

AS: Gramma moved to America for love. She adored my grandfather and took pleasure in serving him all their lives together. She followed him to America where they soon set up house in a large apartment on Coney Island Avenue, Brooklyn. There she raised four sons and a daughter, Lillian, my mom.

JB: You said your great-grandmother was a feminist. How so?

AS: She was a huge influence on all the women in our family. She demonstrated what a woman could do and how strong she could be in all circumstances, before it became popular.

JB: Did you spend a lot of time with your grandmother and did you see her paint?

AS: I spent much of my first six years living with my grandparents, so I was a witness to her creation of art. Gramma's studio was her living room. It was a long room with

sunlight pouring through the windows. She preferred to paint on the floor with her art materials surrounding her. Glass jars, washed clean of their former contents, were filled with brushes, knives and smooth sticks and stones that she found on the beach. Her art flowed. She didn't plan or sketch. She saw the canvas and she knew instinctively, moving paint and color, line and motion, from a place that went beyond thought.

Gramma blew on paint to move it around the canvas and let me blow, as well. She moved paint with her fingers and with her vacuum cleaner hoses. It was a while before I realized the depth of her courage. She worked without giving thought to what she *should* be doing, what someone else had done, or what others thought of her work.

JB: That must have been amazing.

AS: I'd sit beside her and play while she painted and told stories about the characters that peopled her art. She gave her assessment of different relatives and friends, both those who stayed in Kiev and those who came to America.

Gramma painted in every spare second, but especially in the morning, after Grandpa Max went to work and the kids went to school. She painted on canvas, when she had it, but also on paper, envelopes, glass, shells — whatever was available.

JB: What was Coney Island like then?

AS: Coney Island was a melting pot of immigrants. Many people spoke her native language, Ukrainian. It was busy, crowded, loud, fun, alive. It was pure connection and you didn't need to speak English to connect.

I have photos of her sculpting figures out of wet sand. She'd lie in the sand and work on the figures as though they would last forever—then stand up and forget them.