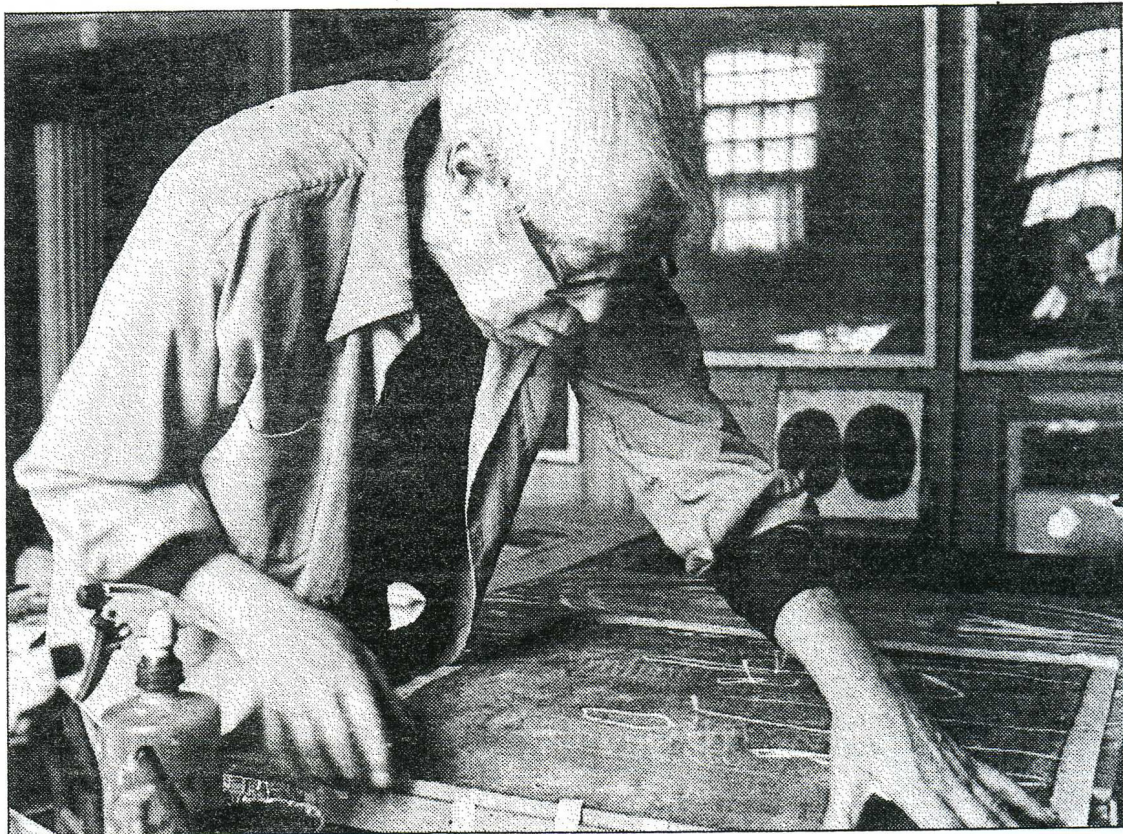


REVIEW



Courtesy of the Victoria Munroe Gallery of New York

Top, Sam Glankoff, and, his work, 'PP 1046,' printer's ink and casein on Japanese paper

A Lifetime of Painting

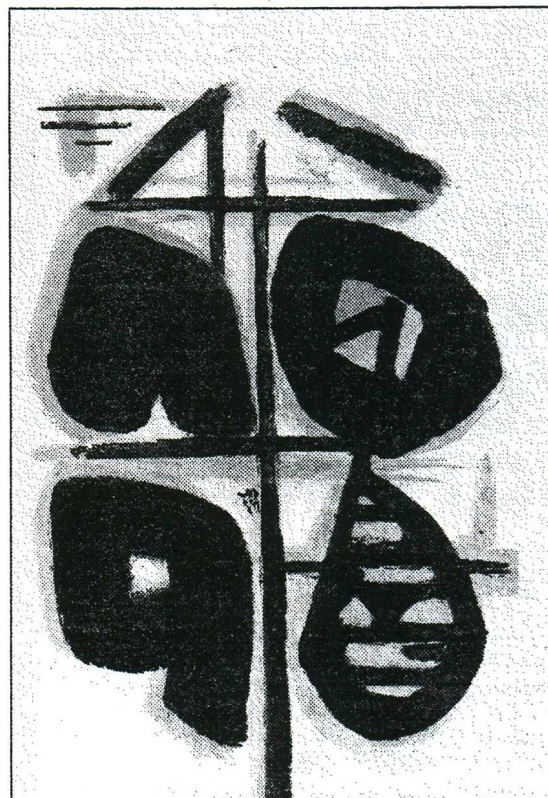
SAM GLANKOFF (1894-1982), Selected Works 1940-1982, Victoria Munroe Gallery, 130 Prince St., (212) 226-0040, Through Feb. 23.

By Alastair Gordon

HE WORKED IN self-imposed obscurity and shunned the spotlight of the art world. Born in New York City in 1894 to immigrant parents, Sam Glankoff never had any formal artistic training. His first one-man show didn't come until he was 87 years old, only a few months before he died in 1982, and he didn't even attend the opening. Like the artist who made them, the works on view at the Victoria Munroe Gallery in Soho through Feb. 23, have a removed and tranquil air about them.

Despite its expressionist origins, there is nothing rushed about Glankoff's work; it seems more as if it emerged gradually over the years with a sense of duration and quiet resolution. There are echoes here of primitive art, abstract expressionism, early cubism, and the sacred imagery of Tantric art. The detached sense of spiritual space recalls something of Rothko and Gottlieb. Speaking in 1980, Glankoff said of his work, "What I'm concerned about is something we project beyond figures. As humanity. Essence."

But for a man with such a gentle artistic vision,



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Sam Glankoff's Lifetime of Painting

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Glankoff had his fair share of adventure. As a conscientious objector during World War I, he went to Cuba and lived as an itinerant painter riding around the countryside on horseback. This was the only time in his life he actively tried to sell his paintings — he had to, to survive.

Near the end of the war he was falsely accused of sabotage and spent time as a prisoner in the dungeon of a 16th-Century fortress on the Isle of Pines. This experience is said to have had a profound effect on his outlook toward life and art. He paid for his passage back to New York at the end of the war by painting the portrait of a German cigar magnate, and after his return he made his living as a commercial artist.

Encouraged by his friends, Glankoff submitted some of his work for a group exhibition of the Whitney Studio Club in 1922. The show included William Glackens, Rockwell Kent and Joan Sloan, and a landscape painting by Glankoff, appropriately called "Solitude," was singled out for praise by the New York critics. After that, however, there was a 60-year dry spell when he neither exhibited nor sold any of his paintings. He continued to work in secret in his spare time.

He always kept his private art work separate from his commercial work: woodcut illustrations for the *New Yorker*, Scribner's and other magazines in the '20s and '30s. In the 1940s he became head artist for True comics and did advertising illustrations for various companies.

His artwork might well have remained in obscurity if it hadn't been for the efforts of Wendy Snyder, Glankoff's sister-in-law, who has committed herself to bringing this man's lifelong work out of the shadows. She photographed, cataloged and promoted his work and arranged for his first one-man show, in 1981.

Some of the works in the current show have vaguely human imagery. "Print Painting Number 4195" (1980) has a splayed-out stick figure in blue. His head is a crescent with points and it appears as if he has fallen. Some prints, "Print Painting Number 4045" (1971) and "Print Painting Number 4003 (1972), appear to be struggling with a different kind of abstract imagery, a looser application of color and calligraphic scrawling.

All the images in the exhibition seem purposefully indirect. His painting-/printing transfer technique allowed Glankoff to generate vaguely recognizable elements of landscapes, human figures, anthropomorphic forms that sort of slip away into a peripheral twilight if you look at them too directly.

As a result of his unique process, he combined the distance that comes with the printmaking process with the more emotional involvement of direct painting. The process served as a veil that concealed both the hand of the artist and, it would seem, his personality. "The process he used," said Snyder, "is a reflection of his life and his inner world."

In the transfer process that Glankoff developed and called "print painting," he would cut directly into plywood blocks, apply areas of water-soluble ink and casein onto the wood. He then made several different

impressions onto handmade Japanese paper allowing the colors to seep into the thin fibrous paper. Subtle layers of color were allowed to build up with a translucent resonance that is unique to casein. He wet the paper first and then blotted it. At least six different layers of color were applied to the paper and this meticulous process of layering would give his paintings a resonance and a slightly ethereal quality, almost like subtle emanations of collected light.

Because he had so little work space in his apartment, he would print on four separate sheets of paper, each measuring about 24 inches by 19 inches. The colors and shapes would have to be carefully matched throughout the process and then when the four sheets of paper were pasted together, one completed image would emerge. He never painted directly onto paper.

Some of the most focused images in the show are from the late '70s and early '80s. With ovals, circles, or incomplete circles, these suggest an inner tranquility. Some have a floating, ephemeral quality — slightly fuzzy and soft around the edges — a little like the glowing afterimages you see when your eyes are closed. In "Print Painting Number 4180," for instance, a vertical black stroke hovers at the center of the picture where four sheets of the handmade paper meet. A bright red, oval ring (it might be a halo or the retina of an eye) surrounds the black stroke and appears to emanate a soft yellowish glow. At the bottom is a band of color that completes the scene — some sort of reference to a horizon, without which the oval shape above it would deflate and sink from sight.

In another gallery there is a series of smaller prints dating from an earlier period in Glankoff's career (some are from the 1940s). These prints are busier and more gestural. Here you get a much stronger sense of the artist cutting into the wood in the spirit of German expressionist block printing. Two of the original blocks have been hung alongside the prints for comparison. / ■■

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