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Sleeping Giants

ARTISTS ART HISTORY LEFT BEHIND

ANTIQUES MIX WITH CONTEMPORARY ART
PERSIAN GULF: THE NEXT ART CENTER?
COLLECTORS GO BACK TO SCHOOL
EAKINS' PHILADELPHIA
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Sleeping Giants

Our third installment in this series that will appear each September features a crop of innovative and accomplished artists who art history left behind.

BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ

Sam Glankoff, "Untitled," 1975, water-soluble printer's ink and casein on handmade Japanese paper.





They're innovators, their talents are indisputable and their bodies of work are rich and complex. Many—but by no means all—are also deceased, having achieved some measure of renown during their lifetimes but never the superstar status that is the unabashed goal of many art entrepreneurs today for whom “artist” is just one career choice among many, like banker, computer programmer or rock star.

Who were—and are—these inventive artists whom the market, for various, often understandable reasons may have overlooked and who still have not been awarded their fully deserved honors in the canon maintained by art historians, critics and curators? Some enjoy devoted local, regional or even international followings despite their relatively low profiles in the eyes of the art establishment's pooh-bahs. Others are palpably poised for breakthroughs. For eager art lovers and collectors alike, they are all major finds at a time when too much hype

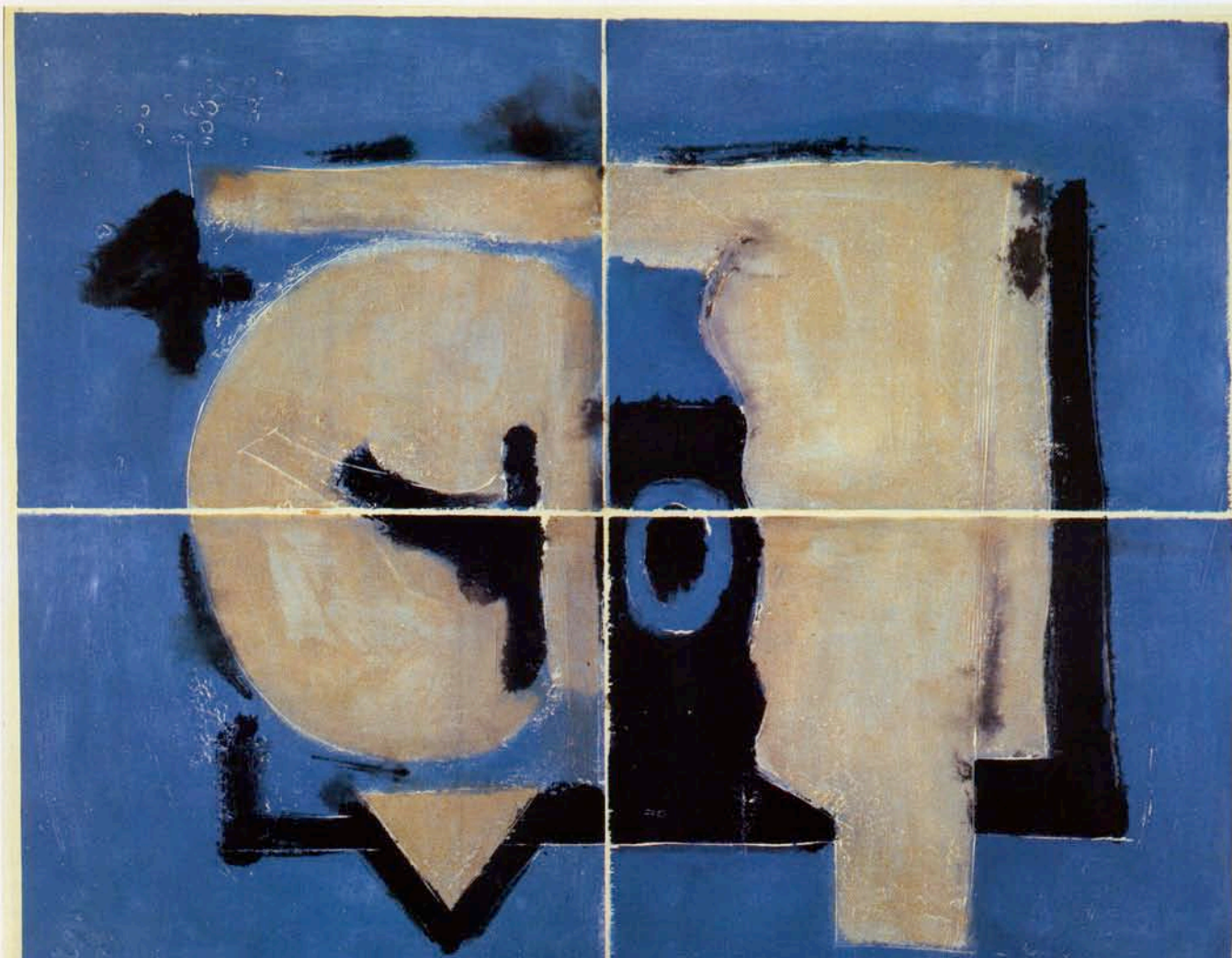
can cloud a viewer's perception of quality, good craftsmanship and value.

“When I met Sam Glankoff in the late 1970s, I knew he was the real deal,” recalls New York-based Wendy Snyder, the widow of the late artist's brother, magazine publisher Mort Glankoff. Sam Glankoff (1894–1982) was 87 years old when he had his first solo show at the Graham Gallery in New York, in 1981. A few years later, both of the Glankoff brothers were dead, and as the heir of Sam's estate, Snyder undertook to catalogue all his known works and to make his oeuvre known to museum curators, scholars and dealers. “Ultimately, it's the market that plays the biggest role in validating an artist's work,” she observes.

Valerie Carberry, who deals in the art of less-known American modernists and is assembling a selection of Glankoff's works that she will present at her Chicago gallery starting in November, agrees that recognition from critics and museums is a valuable seal of approval. “The work that heirs or administrators of an artist's body of work do

to archive it and get it ready to bring to market is vital, too,” she says. So are the efforts dealers make—at once scholarly and promotional—to advance the understanding of less-familiar artists' work. Carberry's young gallery produces handsome catalogues to accompany its shows; each is an important document in its own right.

Recognizing the art-historical value of the reclusive Glankoff's abstract paintings on paper, Snyder filmed and audiotaped the artist at work just before he died, questioning him for posterity about his past. Although he had shown with the Whitney Studio Club in the 1920s, Glankoff withdrew from the scene, working as a commercial artist and comic-strip illustrator, and living for a while in Cuba. Later, back in New York, he observed but did not actively take part in the post-World War II Abstract Expressionist explosion. He developed a woodcut-based “painting” technique by which he made one-of-a-kind painting-prints on joined-together sheets of Japanese paper. He employed bold, calligraphic lines and a strong, simple palette



in compositions that evoked a primordial sense of the psychological and the spiritual and that shared affinities with the gestural abstraction of painters like Franz Kline.

Snyder completed archiving Glankoff's work using a sophisticated software program that is used by museum registrars. Meanwhile, over the years, Glankoff's art has been shown publicly in galleries and museums. "There were problems, though," Snyder notes, "including some initial resistance to works on paper, especially pieces like these that don't fit into any conventional category." She adds: "Are they prints? Are they paintings? Nothing about Glankoff, who was an isolated eccentric, was conventional."

Undoubtedly, knowing something about the historical contexts in which less-known artists lived and evolved their ideas can enrich a viewer's appreciation of what they created. Earlier this year, San Francisco's Hackett-Freedman Gallery presented a show of paintings made by artists who lived and worked during the 1950s and '60s in New York or the San Francisco Bay Area. The compare-and-contrast show revealed both interesting similarities and differences in the ways East Coast and West Coast artists worked through post-Cubist ideas to find their own expressive voices using the language of abstraction.

Along with such familiar names as Willem de Kooning and Richard Diebenkorn, the show called attention to such obscure but powerful abstractionists as Clay Spohn, Ernest Briggs and Frank Lobdell. Spohn and Lobdell's loopy, mysterious compositions, with their foggy or serpentine forms, and Briggs' vibrant patchworks of thick, overlapping oil-paint strokes are every bit as remarkable as the more familiar works of their era—de Kooning's or Jackson Pollock's, for example—but these artists occupy smaller places in the art-historical canon.

Greater recognition "sometimes has to do with having someone behind you—a certain dealer, critic, collector or curator—who has the interest and imagination to help promote your work," notes Pavel Zoubok, the founder of the New York gallery that bears his name. "Luck and timing are important, but they're totally unpredictable." Zoubok, who specializes in collage and assemblage art forms, has had considerable experience

bringing forward bodies of work by artists he describes as "undervalued." Among them: Philadelphia-born Salvatore Meo (1914–2004), who made assemblages of wood scraps and found objects and regularly showed his work in Italy; another is the collagist Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt.

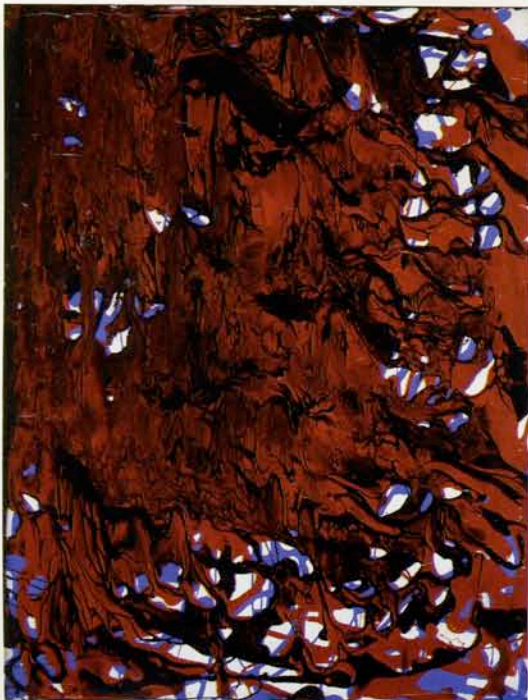
A young Robert Rauschenberg saw Meo's work in Rome in 1953 around the time he was developing his own mixed-media "combines." Decades later, Meo's work would find affinities with the ethereal creations of Italy's Arte Povera artists, which were often made with natural materials. Today, Meo's oeuvre is ripe for rediscovery. "Sometimes the critical and market attention come later," Zoubok says.

Lanigan-Schmidt, who lives in New York, creates mixed-media works with unconventional materials like metallic foil and plastic bubble wrap. His collages are luxurious, seductive and fun—characteristics that have never sat well with "serious" modernism's less-is-more aesthetic but have inspired a more recent generation of artists to whom recycling found materials comes naturally. Dan Cameron, a curator associated with the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, has noted that Lanigan-Schmidt regards what he does as the "spiritual vocation" of someone who creates "beautiful things by hand."

Similarly, New York-based Stephanie Brody-Lederman is a painter and maker of one-of-a-kind, mixed-media books. Her work has always been deeply personal, poetic and unafraid to evoke a wide range of emotions. Those same qualities may have prevented art-establishment taste-makers who mistake bombast for gravitas or pigeon-hole everything in familiar-label categories from appreciating the nuanced voice and impressionistic aura that are the essence of Brody-Lederman's art.

"I feel uncomfortable doing the self-promotion many artists do," she admits. "Maybe I'm wrong, but it has given me a much freer mind when I make art." Recently, Brody-Lederman has been spending time in Paris, a city made for *flâneurs*, or observant stroller-meanderers, a club of which the artist is an avid member. Her subjects, inspired by her urban wanderings, include, she says, "joy, romance, sensuality, wonder" and the spirit of "quirky, personal interactions" that catch her eye. She captures them in images whose patches of hot or cold color, simple elements like trees, birds, lanterns or curlicues, and ambiguous word





Janet Sobel: "Untitled" (far left), c. 1946, oil on canvas; "Untitled" (detail), c. 1945, mixed media on board.

fragments encourage viewers to fill in the blanks of their potential meanings.

Ohio-based La Wilson is an 83-year-old maker of mysterious box-assemblage works who, like Brody-Lederman, has followed her own path, shunned the spotlight and still built up a following of devoted admirers. "I'm happiest when I'm in the studio, experimenting and seeing where it will go," Wilson says of her creative process. Long interested in Buddhist philosophy, she calls attention to the humble but distinctive characteristics of the everyday objects that are her raw material. In her art, many are given a mischievous twist. Evoking the air of surrealist whimsy and provocation of nearly a century ago, Wilson can transform clothespins or drain plugs into exotic jewels, or typewriter parts into otherworldly artifacts.

Like Glankoff and Lanigan-Schmidt, the Ukrainian-Jewish self-taught painter Janet Sobel (1894–1968) devised original art-making techniques. A homemaker in Brooklyn whose husband manufactured costume jewelry, Sobel did not start drawing and painting until she was in her 40s. As her work evolved, folk-flavored scenes of old *shtetl* life gave way to dynamic abstractions and psychedelic-looking compositions marked by bold colors and line drawings of androgynous faces. In the 1940s, Sobel's creations caught the attention of painter Max Ernst, dealer Peggy Guggenheim and the philosopher John Dewey. Jackson Pollock saw her abstractions at Guggenheim's New

York gallery in 1943; by that time, Sobel had developed her own paint-dripping process and, technically, was "dripping" well before Pollock started doing the same to make his now-legendary abstract canvases.

Sobel later fell back into obscurity after she and her husband moved from Brooklyn to New Jersey. "Unlike many other artists, her works on paper are as important to her overall body of work as her paintings on canvas or board," observes New York dealer Gary Snyder, a specialist in bringing forward the art of relatively unknown 20th-century American modernists. One of Snyder's recent rediscoveries: the geometric abstractions of Thomas Downing (1928–1985), an artist who was associated with Kenneth Noland (of concentric-circle paintings fame) in the Washington, D.C., area. Downing's grids of big, colored dots presaged those of Damien Hirst by a quarter-century.

Sobel called herself a surrealist. Colin Garland, an Australian-born painter who spent most of his life in Jamaica, where he died this year, eschewed labels, but his richly rendered dreamscapes recall the fantasy-illusionism of the Mexican surrealists of the 1940s and the "magic realism" of modern Latin-American fiction. Garland's is another complex body of work that deserves broader attention—and which, in time, will probably receive it in a market that is always hungry for "material of high quality," as dealers like to say.

As Wendy Snyder knows from experience, the

process by which such a place is carved out for an artist who is not already well-positioned in the establishment's canon can be uncertain. Once, for example, a well-known American art historian asked her, "What's a lovely girl like you wasting your time for?" Surprised but undaunted, Snyder persevered. Other, younger, critics and researchers who did not feel threatened by new findings that could expand our understanding of the history of an "old" subject—modern art—did embrace Glankoff. Meanwhile, once-strict borders between art genres began to dissolve. Today, Snyder points out, "Works on paper are hot." Prices for Glankoff's smaller pieces are in the low thousands, while larger works sell for \$30,000 to \$50,000 and up. "There are two temperaments in collecting," she notes. "Either you make choices based on presumed investment value or you come from passion. I've always been on the side of passion."

In the same way, Brody-Lederman, speaking perhaps unwittingly for all of the artists considered here, notes that she has always had "an enormous amount of faith that the kind of people I respect will recognize my work—and they have, and that's enough for me.

"Everything else," she appreciatively adds, "is gravy." ☒

New York correspondent and art critic Edward M. Gomez has written about less-known American modernists and follows intellectual-property issues linked to artists' estates.