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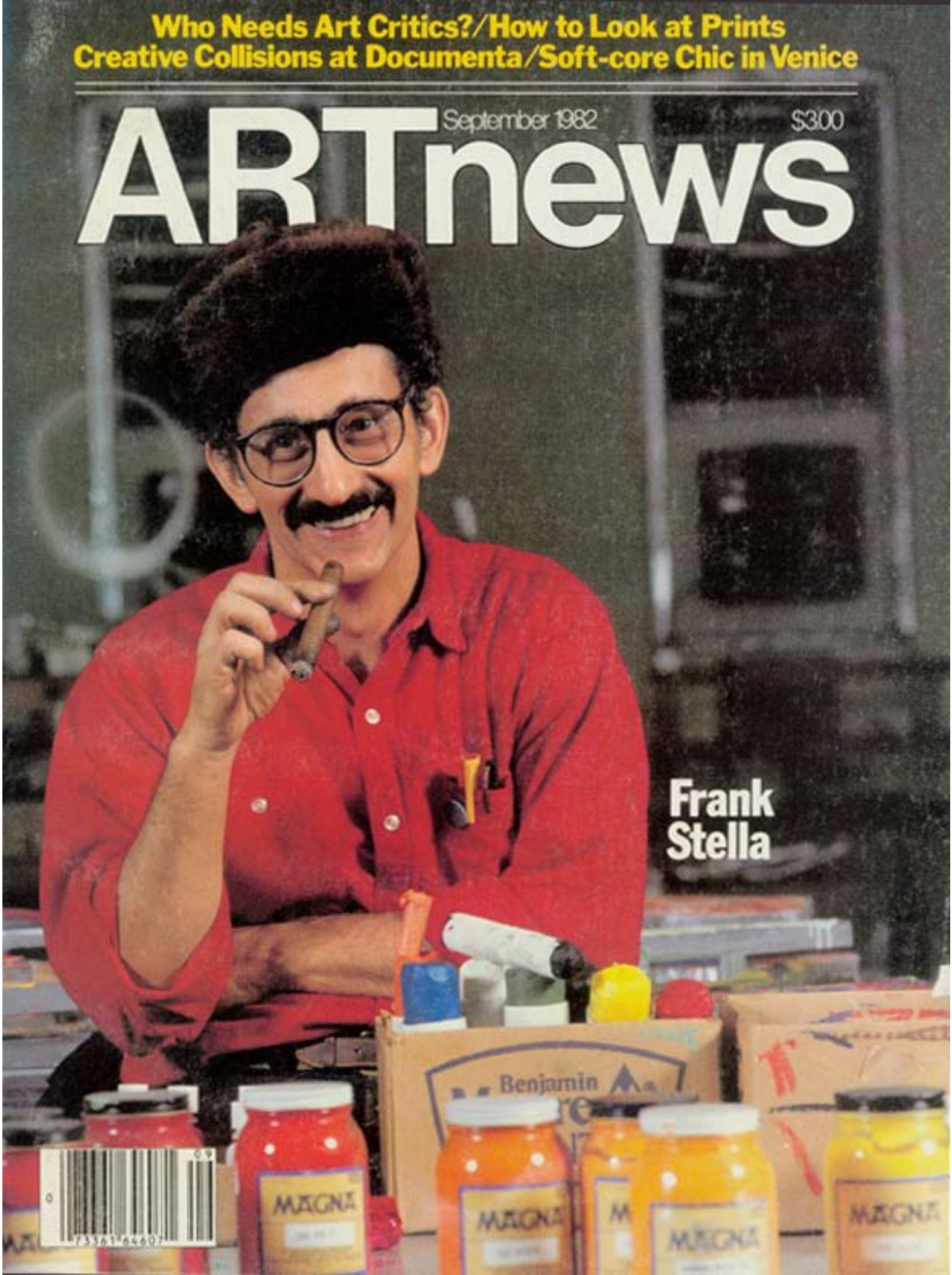

Sam Glankoff: 'Maybe I'm Not Bad'

For most of his life, the painter stood squarely in his own way. His first one-man show, at age 87, represented a victory over fear as well as age

by

JUDITH GOLDMAN

EVEN IN THE ART WORLD, WHERE the unexpected regularly occurs, an octogenarian's first one-man show constitutes an event, particularly when the artist is not a former president or prime minister. Such an event took place last fall, when Sam Glankoff exhibited print-paintings at New York's Graham Gallery. The opening was a festive production. Three hundred friends crowded into the usually staid gallery and gave the place a celebratory air. Everyone was there—everyone except the artist.

"I felt funny," Glankoff said, "about the whole idea of going public." Then 87 years old, Glankoff was apprehensive, embarrassed by the exposure. He had last shown work in the 1920s, when a painting aptly titled *Solitude* was included in a group exhibition at the Whitney Studio Club. Success had not eluded him; Glankoff had not spent 60 years looking for a gallery, languishing as an undiscovered talent. Opportunities had come his way. A newspaper critic reviewing the Whitney Studio show had singled out his painting and described it as "spellbinding." He had briefly studied at the Art Students League, attended life classes in Greenwich Village and lived where artists live: on 14th Street, in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Woodstock, New York. During the 1930s he could have joined a WPA program but chose not to. Glankoff's story is familiar: He spent his life wanting to paint.

"I was a painter. I was always a painter. I felt that was my life's work. No matter where it was, in the circus, in a cement factory—I felt, if I had a brush in my hands, I was doing what I was put here to do," Glankoff told an interviewer last year. Except he did not do it. For over 70 years, one thing or another got in his way. He had to make a living. As a young man, he worked as a commercial artist, drew book illustrations and cartoons. Later he designed toys, then became trapped by a business he did not like. At the age of 70, he was still working, managing Impulse Items, the toy company he and his wife owned, which produced a line of sophisticated bean bags and stuffed animals: frogs, sheep, Babar elephants and Dr. Seuss' Cat in a Hat. But it was more than business that kept him from painting; it was what Glankoff called his "peculiarities."

Glankoff, who died last May, had a soft

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The late Sam Glankoff at work in his studio.

voice, infectious grin and affable manner. Although he appeared genial, even outgoing, he was a secretive man, had few friends and was pinioned by fears. He dreaded heights, crowds and all forms of regimentation. He suffered so severely from acrophobia that he could not ride elevators; his aversion to enclosed spaces kept him off subways and, despite his passion for painting, from visiting art galleries. Largely self-taught, his knowledge about art came from books.

Most of his life, Glankoff stood squarely in his own way. He did not join the WPA because "I knew I had to submit work and that it had to be accepted by a group of people." As much as he desired to paint, he could not give himself the chance. "You don't," he said, "make money doing the things you want in life. I've tried to separate the two directions." Separating work and art, Glankoff focused on making a living, and whenever he could he stole time to paint. In many ways, his life was a desperate choice, but what distinguished it from other desperate lives was that eventually, though it was late in the game, at the age of 75 he began to paint full time.

He spent his last decade doing what he was put here to do. It had always been clear he was meant to be an artist. Growing up on Grand Street on the Lower East Side and in the Bronx, he had spent his childhood in his room drawing. During World War I, when he left the country (the first and only time) for Cuba, he supported himself as an itinerant painter. In Cuba, Glankoff allowed himself adventures. Traveling on horseback, he painted portraits and murals and was jailed on suspicion of being a spy. On his return to New York, the adventurous spirit was still operating. It was in those years that he showed paintings, attended figure classes and decided the woodcut was his medium.

Glankoff said he was drawn to woodcut because he liked the idea that he could do everything himself, that it didn't involve other people. But woodcut is no more a do-it-yourself medium than painting. Perhaps it was the aggression of cutting and gouging, or the woodcut's capacity to depict angst—or the fact that space is not required for making woodcuts. Glankoff worked in the cramped floor-through apartment where he lived for 50 years. Whatever the reason, he made the woodcut his medium.

In early prints, created intermittently in the '20s and '30s, the figure dominates. These are forceful and earnest, if not particularly remarkable, images; there is little that distinguishes them from other socially relevant prints of the period. As the figure receded and the work became more abstract, it grew more adventuresome. In the '60s, Glankoff stopped using traditional oil-based inks, replacing them with water-soluble caseins, and evolved a technique somewhere between painting and printmaking—a technique he perfected in the 1970s.

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Sam Glankoff, untitled four-panel print-painting, 1979, printer's ink and casein on rice paper, 48¼ by 38⅞ inches.

When Glankoff's wife died in 1970, he was 75 years old and still in the toy business. In short order, he liquidated Impulse Items and rearranged his apartment, clearing a small area for studio space. For the next 12 years, he rose at eight every morning, worked until one in the afternoon, and began all over again the next day.

The results, which were on view at the Graham Gallery, are not quite paintings, not quite prints and not quite monotypes. Large images are made from four, six and eight pieces of Japan paper; archetypal circles move out of densely colored fields. The color is thick, mat, layered like lacquer, created by the constant reprinting of each section. The results owe something to William Baziotes and to Adolph Gottlieb, but the color's easy serenity is straight Glankoff. The effect is innocent, exuberant and celebratory. In the end, Glankoff did have something to celebrate—he had won his battle with himself.

The show received good reviews and not just because Glankoff had survived eight decades. His age seemed incidental to the positive reactions. His avoidance of "proven formulas" revealed "a free spirit and an open mind," wrote Deborah C. Phillips in *ARTnews*. "The color sings, but quietly, like a well-behaved kettle. The show breathes deeply, calmly, and the individual images are harmonious without being insipid," wrote John Russell in *The New York Times*. After Glankoff read the *Times* review, he was still self-deprecating but pleased and flattered: "Maybe," he said, "I'm not bad." And when he finally saw his pictures at Graham, on the day they were taken down, he looked embarrassed and wistful but he couldn't hide the satisfaction. "I wish," he said, "I'd started all this when I was 70." ■