

About New York

An Artist's Late Emergence Into Life's Sunlight

By ANNA QUINDLEN

The studio in the building on Lexington Avenue is spare, white, with an enormous artist's table in the middle of one room. The drawers of the table are filled with artworks, and the top is covered with them, in neat piles; in the bedroom there are more, and in the closet. A very large one is tacked up with pushpins in the hall; a small one is on the wall in the dining nook. The place is a little stuffy.

If spirits exist, than Sam Glankoff's is here. All his things are at the ready for him to produce another one of his abstract works, his odd combinations of painting and printing. His special table has paper next to it, and paints. Only the artist is missing. Somehow this seems right for, in some ways, Sam Glankoff was missing from the world for a good long time.

It also seems sad, for he had come to it new in the last year, because of his brother, Mort, and the young woman they both cared for, a film maker and fashion stylist named Wendy Snyder.

This is their story, and the story of how, after 60 years of stacking his work against walls and in closets and avoiding crowds, 87-year-old Sam Glankoff allowed it to be exhibited. Just last year, when he went so far as to pay \$1.63 for a bunch of asparagus, Sam said, "This is all Wendy's fault," and that is what Mort thinks, too, that Wendy changed Sam's life. "With apologies to Kafka, Wendy converted a cockroach into a man," says Mort.

The story begins with Sam, living for 50 years in a one-room apartment on East 33d Street, a commercial artist and a manufacturer of stuffed animals. For the last decade Sam had been working feverishly each morn-

ing, turning out one painting, going on to the next. He had exhibited his landscapes at the Whitney Art Club in 1922, and he did not much care to show his work again. It seemed somehow beside the point.

He lived on the small amount of money he realized every month from investments. He went out to buy vegetables, or stop at the Chinese laundry, but in general he had very little to do with people and spent much of his time reading Sartre and Kierkegaard. Some people said he was intensely shy, and others that he was simply an amalgam of arrogance and insecurity, at ease only in his own company and with his work. He could not bear crowds.

Sam and Mort, an urbane, sociable man who founded Cue Magazine, had a sibling rivalry that could light a match. For many years they were estranged, but in recent times they had managed to achieve an uneasy peace. "He was older than me, quite an intellectual, sardonic but a brilliant mind," says Mort now. "I could take about an hour and a half of him at a time."

Mort had a friend named Wendy Snyder, a woman of 29 with Botticellian curls who moved in with 82-year-old Mort several years ago. A year after they began seeing one an-

other, Wendy went with Mort to Sam's apartment and was flabbergasted by what she saw: hundreds of paintings in bright colors and abstract design.

Mort had brought people to see Sam's work before, but Sam had always ignored questions about exhibitions, saying he had not yet reached his plateau, and he did the same with Wendy. He thought her pushy. He complained about the light, and she suggested he wash the windows. That was the essential difference in their characters.

Therewith began the struggle, and the friendship. Wendy went to galleries without Sam's knowledge, long cardboard tubes under her arm; she began arranging for a documentary film. She made Sam sign and date all of his work.

Wendy found the apartment in the building where she and Mort lived, and the gallery where Sam's work would be shown. He would not attend the opening. But he went with her to view it alone, and his reaction is part of the unfinished documentary. The camera follows Sam as he walks past the paintings. He is cackling, giggling, laughing like a child. "Oh boy," he says, delighted. "Oh, God, this looks

very good." Then, suddenly aware of the scrutiny, he adds, "I shouldn't say such stupid things."

But the giggles bubble up again. "I'll be damned!" he says, "I didn't realize that blue here was handled with such abundance." It was the first time he had seen his work properly hung, framed, lit. "God, I'm not so bad."

In fact the critics said that he was very good indeed. John Russell, art critic of The New York Times, wrote, "It is not every day that an artist of stature makes his debut in New York at the age of 87."

Soon after the show, Sam moved into the new studio, where he could do larger print-paintings with no space constraints. He had come to love and rely upon Wendy.

His new studio was several floors below his brother's apartment and was full of life's work. Mort's walls are covered with the work, too — the newer pieces and some old portraits of Mort himself and their father, a milliner. "His whole concept changed in the last six months of his life," said Mort. "He realized what he had been missing. He realized what life could be like."

One morning in April, at 6:30, Sam called upstairs and said he was not feeling well. Mort and Wendy went down; Sam shook his head twice, and then died in her arms. It had been six months since the gallery opening. All Sam's things remain in the apartment; those who want to buy his work see it there. Wendy is trying to raise financing for the film, and wants to organize a retrospective. "He wouldn't have approved of either," she said, standing in the studio, turning over the sheets of rice paper.