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GLANKOFF

By Art Spiegelman

The old man with a cane walked slowly into the art gallery and then beamed -- there hanging on the walls were 23 of the dozens of paintings he had steadfastly refused to show publicly for 60 years. At age 87, Sam Glankoff, reclusive artist par excellence, has come in out of the cold.

He came into the Graham Gallery in the heart of New York's Madison Avenue art gallery district the other day, not knowing what to expect.

But within a minute he was bursting with a joy he shyly and characteristically tried hard to contain.

"Oh Boy, Very Nice, Beautiful, Not Bad," he said, as he saw his works displayed for the first time under bright gallery lights.

Then realizing how proud he sounded he quickly added, "I shouldn't be so extravagant. I shouldn't say such stupid things."

Mr. Glankoff saw his exhibit two weeks after the public opening, well after the critics came and left, praising him as an artist of stature.

Mr. Glankoff calls his works print-paintings -- a technique midway between printing and painting that he developed him-self in his cramped, poorly-lit one-room apartment using water-soluble inks and caseins to produce abstracts of highly charged but subtle colors on rice paper and plywood.

He signs his works with only the initials SG, he does not title them and until recently he did not catalogue them or date them or show them publicly or sell them.

It was not always that way. Some six decades ago, he did exhibit a few landscapes at the old Whitney Art Club, the forerunner of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and one of his works, which he called "Solitude" won glowing reviews.

And when he first started painting, he recalls selling three of his works. One was a portrait of a wealthy businessman who was so impressed that he paid him \$100 more than his asking price.

The businessman then produced a worn photograph of a lady friend and said, "Paint me a portrait of her, too" and Mr. Glankoff obliged even though he could barely make out her face. That was the second of his paintings that he sold. The third was a landscape but after that Mr. Glankoff became an artist only for himself.

He woked for years as a commercial artist and as a manufacturer of stuffed toys, including figures of the French children's book character, Babar the Elephant.

He avoided the organized art world, while at the same time continuing to paint furiously -- to the point where his work overflowed his apartment.

In an interview, he credited a young woman filmmaker and fashion stylist, Wendy Snyder, with convincing him to go public but only after much cajoling.

Ms. Snyder, who was introduced to Mr. Glankoff by his brother Mortimer, spent a year filming his complicated painting-print technique and slowly persuading him to allow an exhibition.

"I He worked for years as a commercial artist and as a manufacturer of stuffed tohad no intention of exhibition. I was satisfied to be in my grove, satisfied to work because as (the Argentine short story writer Jorge Luis) Borges said, "What else is there to do."

It is my peculiarity," he said, smiling and when pressed for an elaboration, he demurred, "I don't like to observe myself that closely. I don't know -- I was reluctant."

Ms. Snyder called Mr. Glankoff's feeling as "more profound than shyness" and recalled his telling her, "For a moment I embrace the world outside and then return to my solitariness."

New York's art critics were delighted that Mr. Glankoff decided to make a public debut.

Jud Tully, the critic for ART WORLD, called his work arrestingly beautiful. John Russell of the New York Times noted, "It is not every day that an artist of stature makes his debut in New York at the age of 87." He added that the color of Mr. Glankoff's work "sings quietly like a well-behaved kettle... The forms are in no hurry to define themselves...The show as a whole breathes deeply and calmly."

And like the forms of his paintings, Mr. Glankoff was in no hurry to define himself and be on public view. He refused for months to meet the gallery's owners or even to attend the opening night of his show.