

# SAM GLANKOFF

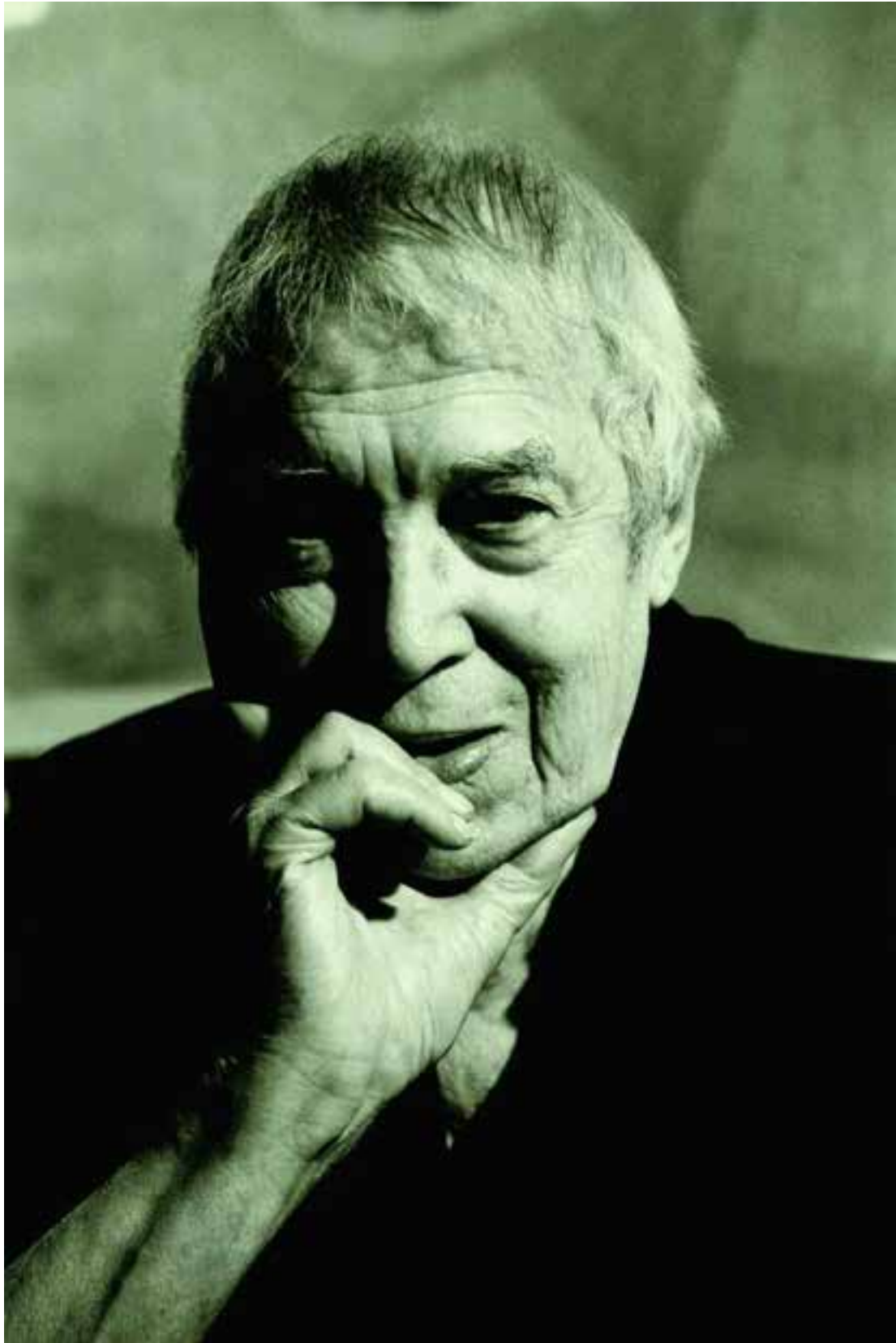
PRINT-PAINTINGS

**2 November – 29 December 2007**

Essay by Edward Madrid Gómez

VALERIE CARBERRY GALLERY

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# A LATE-BLOOMING LONER'S GROUND-BREAKING ART

**Edward Madrid Gómez**

MODERNISM LOVES ITS HEROES: IMPRESSIONISM'S academy-upsetting mavericks; Futurism and Dadaism's in-your-face taunters of the bourgeoisie; Surrealism's poetic-perverse provocateurs; and Abstract Expressionism's paint-slinging purveyors of existentialist *Sturm und Drang*. All of these art-makers occupy legendary places in the familiar history of modern art's rise to become the 20th century's dominant language in the visual arts.

Traditionally, modern art's story has been written by mainstream historians, critics, dealers and academics; separately and collectively, they have had vested interests in preserving its familiar, succession-of-styles narrative, in which experimenters and theorists, proposing new methods for making or new ways of thinking about art, reformulated what art could say and what forms it should take. Among its central principles, modernist art-making has always championed innovation and emphasized originality—the importance of creating what has never been created before.

With aesthetic concerns like these in mind, modern-art history should lionize a label-defying, innovative iconoclast like Sam Glankoff (1894-1982), the New York-born artist who single-handedly created a whole new genre of art object—a hitherto unknown form of transfer painting. Due to the unusual circumstances of his life and career, it has only been in recent years that Glankoff's remarkable achievements have begun to find the wider audience and critical attention they have richly deserved.

A life-long, unshakable loner, the soft-spoken artist certainly had his demons—not the booze that was the favorite nemesis-fuel of his Ab-Ex confrères, but rather, for starters, a debilitating shyness that prevented him from socializing or making Manhattan's art-world scene. (In fact, he decisively shunned it, and, given his very real claustrophobia, even an elevator was too big a public space to hold him.) Glankoff, who was not wealthy and always lived modestly, also felt the spirit-crushing weight of having to make a living, which he did, capably, even if the mundane necessity of it all deprived him of the precious time he coveted for making art. It was not until after the death of his life partner, Frances Kornblum, in 1970, and the sale of a small house they owned in Woodstock, New York (north of Manhattan), that Glankoff acquired something of a financial cushion. At last he was able to devote himself full-time to his art. For the next twelve years until his death, he worked intensively, producing a consistently inventive, superbly crafted oeuvre that both assimilated and advanced the abstractionist language whose development had unfolded around him during the post-World War II era in New York.

Born Samuel Glankopf, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants who were merchants, Glankoff displayed artistic talent at an early age. As a youngster, he spent hours alone drawing. He visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he examined works that attracted him, then returned home to paint their compositions and details, which he had memorized. He also played the violin and was an avid reader (his parents supplied German classics and socialist newspapers). Sam's mother encouraged his artistic interests; his father did not. Nevertheless, Glankoff once recalled, as a teenager, he took any odd job he could that would allow him to “hold a paintbrush.”

Glankoff was eighteen when he saw the “International Exhibition of Modern Art” (the famed “Armory Show”) in 1913 in New York. Offering many in the U.S. a first-ever look at the work of such European modernists as Matisse, Brancusi, Gauguin and Duchamp (whose canvas, “Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2,” caused a critical commotion), the event profoundly moved the young Glankoff. He took evening classes at New York's Art Students League (1915-1917), but as a pacifist and decidedly *not* a joiner he left the U.S. for Cuba as a conscientious objector when the U.S. entered World War I.

In Cuba, Glankoff traveled around on horseback, painting portraits and at least one mural in exchange for food. In 1918, the young artist's hiatus was abruptly interrupted when he was arrested on charges (that turned out to be false) of having taken part in the bombing of the legendary developer Henry Morrison Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway station in Miami. After several months in prison, Glankoff was released as the war came to a close. While in jail, he had met one of the German Uppmans of the London-based H. Upmann bank, which in the 1840s had established a cigar factory in Cuba. Now free, the businessman hired Glankoff to paint his portrait and that of his girlfriend; with the earnings from those commissions, the artist returned to New York.

Back in the U.S., Glankoff worked in a commercial-art studio, producing woodcut illustrations for books and magazines, and drawings for advertisements. He spent time in the artists' colonies of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Woodstock, where he made a point of not hobnobbing with other artists. In 1921, he obtained a copy of Paul Westheim's *Das Holzschnittbuch*, which had been published in Postdam that same year and publicized the German Expressionists' dramatic woodcuts, many of which had been made by carving with the wood's grain instead of against it. Glankoff quickly adopted the technique in his fine-art work, which he always viewed as strictly separate from his income-generating labor.

During the 1920s, he took part in Whitney Studio Club presentations until the group disbanded in 1928. Thereafter, he gradually withdrew from the scene, in time expanding his commercial work to include making spot illustrations for *Cue*, his younger brother Mort's arts-and-culture magazine about New York; drawing comics and creating comic-strip-style advertisements; and designing plush toys for a company Kornblum had founded. The couple spent time at its country house in Woodstock, where Glankoff worked on oil paintings he ground his own pigments and carved his own frames and refined his woodcut-making technique. He experimented with water-based paints instead of typical, oil-based printing inks, and printed on hand-made Japanese papers.

Given his solitary nature, he witnessed but did not actively take part in the post-World War II, Abstract-Expressionist explosion that erupted around him. Nevertheless, over time, his representational woodcuts evolved into monoprints whose thick, woodblock printing plates featured relief elements that produced richly textured, abstract images. Out of these experiments, the artist developed an original process for large works that were not quite conventional prints and not exactly paintings. Instead, in Glankoff's "oddball" technique, as he called it, the artist would paint with his water-based colors (ink and casein combined) over designs he had carved into or marked with enamel on plywood boards. Then he would press sheets of moistened paper on top of the boards to absorb—in reverse—his images. Each individual sheet could be subjected to as many as a dozen separate, rubbing-like impressions, for which purpose Glankoff carefully registered the physical position of his paper each time.

Because his New York studio was a very small room, Glankoff could not make big works on single, large sheets of paper. His solution was to break down his compositions into sections that could be "print-painted" on separate sheets that he would later join together to form his monumental works. The artist still used Japanese mulberry papers for these multi-panel tableaux, favoring them for their absorbent qualities. It was "my own engineering[...], finally solving this thing that I wanted to do," he said in 1981 of the working method he had invented. He added: "But it defies classification. It isn't woodblock. It isn't lithograph. It isn't intaglio. It isn't etching. It isn't anything. It is something a little strange... something that isn't easy to classify."

In the late 1970s, the reclusive Glankoff met his brother Mort's companion, Wendy Snyder, whom the younger Glankoff would later marry. It was Snyder who approached the artist. Their initial conversations in Glankoff's studio became focused discussions about his working methods, out of which a genuine friendship evolved. Snyder made audio recordings of her informal interviews with the artist, which provide valuable clues to understanding his art.

From them one learns, for instance, that Glankoff was deeply interested in ancient writing systems, like those of the Phoenicians and the Persians, and that he had closely examined traditional ink-on-paper brush paintings from East Asia, whose image-making techniques involved a fusion of writing and drawing. In his own work, Glankoff strived to develop a kind of calligraphic image-making method of his

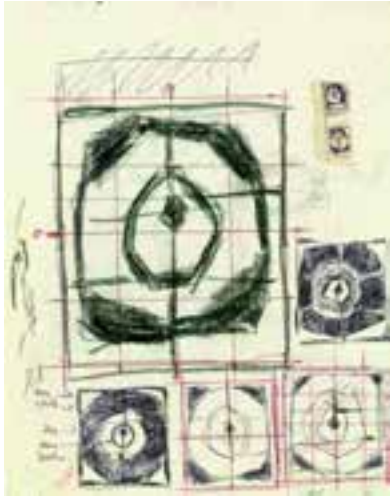
own. He told Snyder he had tried to reduce or abstract the human form and convey its essence through shapes of his own devising. Not long before he died, he recalled: "That is what I did with the human figure....I distorted it so that you could hardly trace the fact that it was originally a human." He also embraced the circle, that most basic and universal of forms, and employed it in compositions that explored its psychological, emotional or spiritual implications. "The circle...has a symbolic meaning," Glankoff observed. "It's one of the most primitive and earliest...shapes that we have, and, symbolically, it has a lot of meaning....It's like the final consummation of a thing....It gives you tranquility."

Glankoff's abstract compositions appear expertly well-ordered. At the same time, they can feel unpredictably spontaneous. This may be because, over the years, like the makers of the Japanese and Chinese ink-brush paintings that had inspired him, he had learned to skillfully control the delicate balance between the amount of watery paint he used and his paper's absorbency, which affected the character of his final images. Glankoff's preliminary, pencil-and-gouache sketches (two of which are reproduced here as plates i and ii) of his large, multi-panel compositions show that he worked out the bold forms they would contain with an exactitude that recalls the precise order in which the strokes of any Sino-Japanese character would be drawn.

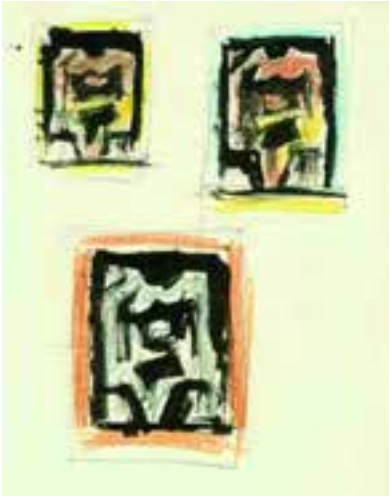
Accident played a large part in the working methods and final, image-making results of many abstract artists; Glankoff also welcomed the unpredictable effects his transfer-painting method yielded, especially the ways in which his color-receiving sheets absorbed his paint. ("I'm hoping for accidents to happen," he once remarked.) In the East, even the most masterful calligrapher-painters of the past had appreciated the "accidental" energies that had become visible in their work in a slightly extended brushstroke here, or in a blotch of absorbed pigment there. In Japan, such gestures came to be regarded as the Zen impulse made tangible. This Eastern art and the sensibility it reflected influenced Pollock and other gestural abstractionists and Glankoff, too.

Like the abstract painters who mined humanity's primordial, psychic depths in the surrealism-influenced period just before American Abstract Expressionism's full-blown explosion in the 1940s, Glankoff dug deep in his effort to understand and to use art to represent what was most enduring and ineffable about the human spirit. In contrast to the humble circumstances in which he had long worked and the frugality with which he had proudly led his life, Glankoff's abstract works, like some of the most emblematic creations of the Ab-Ex age Mark Rothko's floating blocks of radiant hues, Barnett Newman's spare stripes, Clyfford Still's towering color flames dared to reach for soul-stirring, thematic heights. Similarly, Glankoff's art transformed one man's personal anxiety and yearning into soulful objects of beauty and transcendent allure.

Remarkably, albeit reluctantly, it was not until 1981 that Glankoff presented his first-ever solo exhibition, at the Graham Gallery in New York. True to form, he did not attend the opening of his own show, although he did visit the gallery toward the end of its run. Half a year later, he died.



i. *Untitled (C II)*, ink, pen and charcoal, c. 1970s, 11" x 8 1/2"



ii. *Untitled (Fil 59)*, ink, pen, and crayon, c. 1970s, 11" x 8 1/2"

In the 1980s, as Glankoff's ground-breaking "print-paintings" began to emerge, the art market did not know exactly how to classify them. However, a retrospective exhibition of his art in 1984 at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Museum at Rutgers University, in New Jersey, helped position his multifaceted oeuvre historically. Since that time, two other trends have brought well-deserved attention to Glankoff's work. One has been a burgeoning interest in modern and contemporary works on paper. Another trend, inspired by postmodernist critical thinking, has been a wave of revisionist, art-history research in which certain scholars have been revisiting modern art's familiar canon. In doing so, they have made room for important, early-modernist pioneers and Abstract-Expressionist innovators whose accomplishments had been previously overlooked.

Against this backdrop, in recent years Glankoff's art has been coming into sharper focus, too. (Ironically, in this resolutely reserved artist's case, it was his own, self-imposed isolation that probably cost him critical recognition during his lifetime, although *New York Times* critic John Russell did note admiringly of his 1981 Graham Gallery presentation: "It is not everyday that an artist of stature makes his debut in New York at the age of 87." "The color sings," he wrote in his review.) Glankoff told Snyder several months before that show: "In order to feel the life around you, you have to get away from it for a while....you have to be alone. It also means that you feel moments of deprivation, of aloneness....and I think that's all to the good. If you're so constantly busy,...without ever being deprived of the thing, you can't develop to your full potential. You have to have moments of wanting, [of] expectation, of even suffering in order to appreciate the good." For Glankoff, that "thing" of which he had felt deeply deprived

during the long years when he could not give it his full attention was the pleasure ("the good") of his beloved art-making itself. His maturing as a stylist and technician came in the extraordinarily productive period at the end of his life.

Simply put, Glankoff never sought fame or fortune. By the end of his life, though, he found himself living in a hype-fueled, celebrity-obsessed culture that often paid more attention to what was said about certain works of art than it did to what those art forms may have been trying to convey themselves. Thus, Glankoff's biggest triumph may have been that he managed to create such an original, resonant body of work of exceptional quality despite not because of that same, noisy culture (much of which he rejected) that had come to shape the world around him. Of all of the aspects of the life of this most self-effacing, even secretive art-maker, this may well have been his most heroic achievement.

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Critic and author Edward Madrid Gómez has written for the *New York Times*, *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *Art + Auction*, *Art & Antiques*, *Raw Vision*, the *Japan Times*, *Reforma* and other publications in the U.S., Europe, Mexico and Japan. He has written or contributed to monographs on the work of Adolf Wölfli, Roberto Cortázar, Yoko Ono and other artists.

All quotes from Sam Glankoff from interviews conducted by Wendy Snyder in 1980-1981; transcripts courtesy of the Glankoff Collection, LLC, New York.



- I. *Untitled (PP 1021)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1971  
33" x 22 5/8"



2. *Untitled (PP 2019)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, c. 1972  
41 1/4" x 26 3/8"



3. *Untitled (PP 1023)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1971  
29 1/2" x 17 1/2"





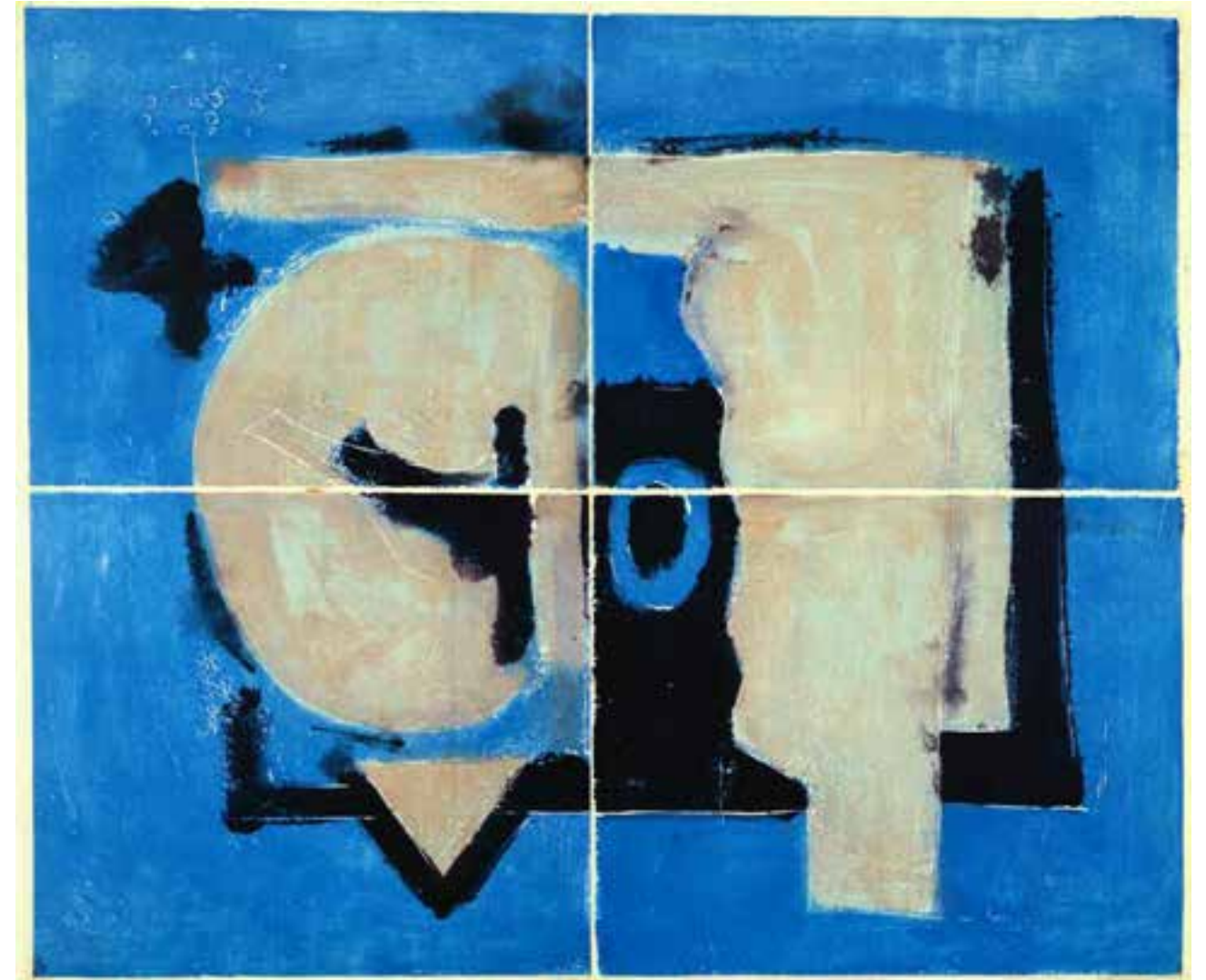
4. *Untitled (PP 2006)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1972  
40 1/2" x 25 3/16"



5. *Untitled (PP 2088)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1972  
40 3/4" x 29"



6. *Untitled (PP 4014)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1972  
38 3/4" x 47"





7. *Untitled (PP 2014)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1971  
40" x 24 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub>"



8. *Untitled (PP 4038)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1973  
38 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 48 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

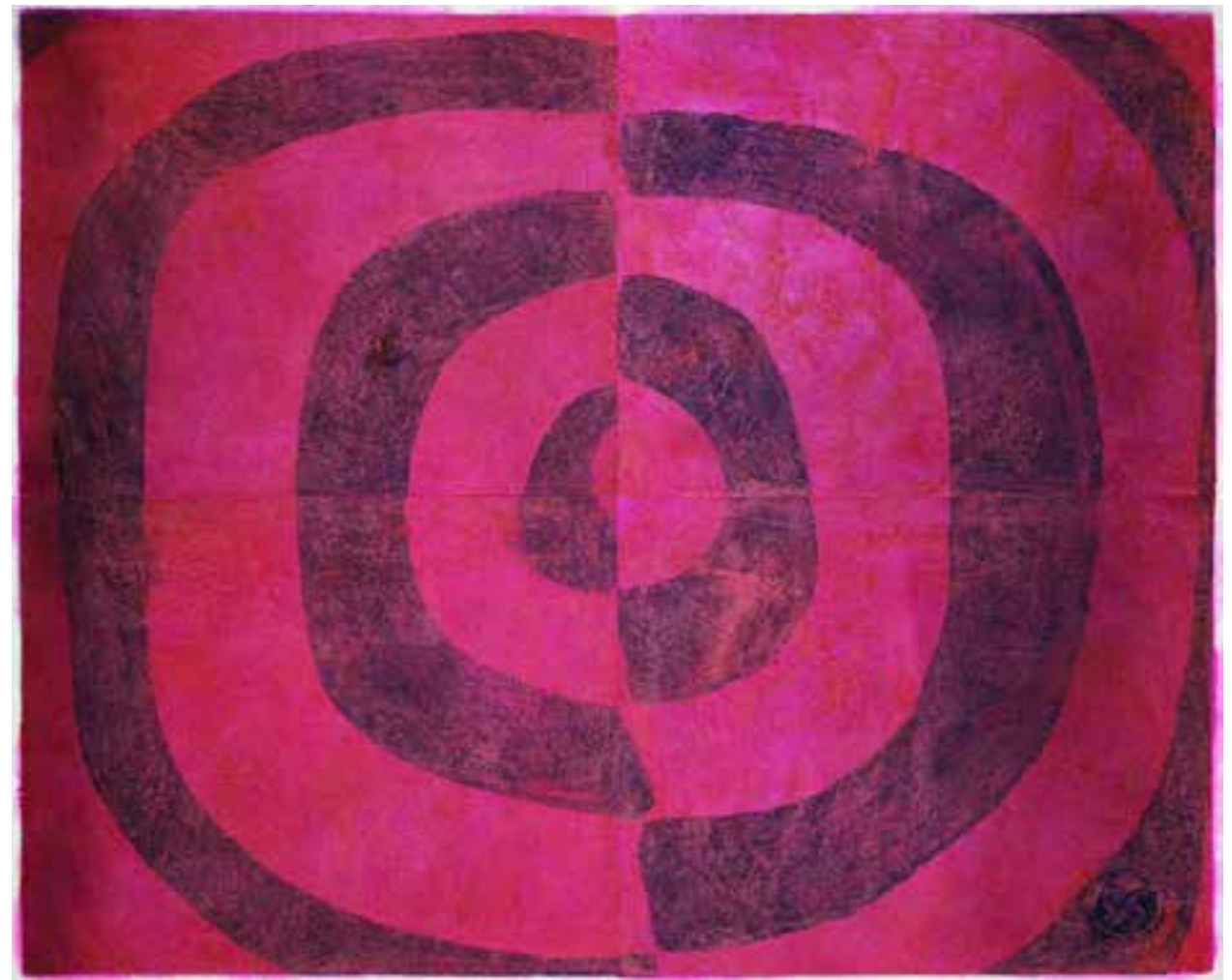




9. *Untitled (PP 4131)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1977  
38 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 48 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"



10. *Untitled (PP 4163)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1978  
38 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 48 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"



11. *Untitled (PP 2083)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, c.1972  
28 3/4" x 40 7/8"



12. *Untitled (PP 4200)*  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1981  
49" x 39"





EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

1.

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REFERENCES:  
Gomez, Edward. "Sleeping Giants" *Art & Antiques*,  
September 2007, illus. p. 74.
7.

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Gomez, Edward. "Sleeping Giants" *Art & Antiques*  
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28 3/4" x 40 7/8"
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Untitled (PP 4200)  
water soluble printing ink and casein, 1981  
49" x 39"

ALL WORKS FROM THE GLANKOFF COLLECTION, LLC

CHRONOLOGY

- 1894

Born in New York City. As a child, Glankoff taught himself to paint by copying miniature paintings he had seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- 1913

Attended the 1913 Armory Show, the first international exhibition of modern art in America.
- 1915-17

Enrolled in Edward Dufner's night classes at Art Students League.
- 1917-20

As a conscientious objector of WWI, left for Cuba, where he was falsely accused of espionage, imprisoned, and then released in 1919.
- 1920

Returned to New York.
- 1920s

Worked for Rosenberg Art Service Studio, and other art service studios, where he did woodcut illustrations and pen and ink advertisements.
- 1921

Received a copy of *Das Holzschnittbuch*, the first book to publish German Expressionist woodcuts. After seeing these images, Glankoff began carving woodcuts with the grain in the German Expressionist style.
- 1922-28

At the invitation of Juliana Force, exhibited paintings and woodcuts in the annual group shows of the Whitney Studio Club at the Anderson Galleries, for which Glankoff (Glanckopf) received critical acclaim from *The New York Times*.
- 1926

Began living with Frances Kornblum, his partner for forty years. Glankoff and Kornblum spent the majority of their time in Woodstock in a large one-room stone house, where the attic served as Glankoff's studio.
- 1930s

Unwilling to have his work judged by others, Glankoff refused to join the WPA. Did illustrations for *St. Nicholas*, *Scribners*, *The New Yorker* and *Family Circle Magazine*. Created paintings in oil as well as woodcuts. Despite the fact that Glankoff was prolific both in his personal and professional work throughout this decade into the 1940s, few paintings from this period remain.
- 1935

Returned to New York City taking an apartment on East 33rd Street; commuted to Woodstock.
- 1942-46

Worked as head artist for True Comics.
- 1940-50s

During this time Glankoff became more interested in using water-based inks for printing instead of oil-based. His wood cuts became less figurative and more abstract, a shift conveyed in small abstract collage monotypes and small casein paintings on paper. Symbolism and primitive ideas began to surface in his work.
- 1955

Began designing toys full time for Kornblum's toy import business *Impulse Items*. Over the course of fifteen years, Glankoff designed and fabricated over 200 new toy ideas. Glankoff produced the first *Babar the Elephant* stuffed toys and created the prototype of Dr. Seuss' *Cat in the Hat*.
- 1970

With Kornblum's death, Glankoff walked away from their shared venture in the toy business, selling the Woodstock house and using the proceeds to work full-time on his art. During this time, Glankoff began to further develop his innovative paint-print-transfer technique, a method that he invented which combined painting, printing and woodcut to make multi-panel large-scale works.
- 1974

Introduced by his brother to Elke Solomon and Berte Walker, curators at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Out of this meeting, the term *print-painting*, one that would be applied to his works of this period, emerged. Although offered an exhibition, Glankoff declined, saying he was not yet ready.
- 1980

Glankoff signs and dates his previously unsigned body of work. Agrees to be filmed for a documentary on his art-making process and life, entitled, *Re-Arranging Short Dreams*, the title taken from a collection of his writings.
- 1981

One-person show, Graham Gallery, New York City. Included in Brooklyn Museum's 22nd Annual Works on Paper exhibition.
- 1982

Died in New York.
- 1984

*Sam Glankoff Retrospective Exhibition*, Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Museum, Rutgers University, New Jersey.
- 1984

*Sam Glankoff: Woodcuts, 1925-1960s*, Associated American Artists Gallery, New York.



EXHIBITION HISTORY

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Solo Exhibitions

**2007** Sam Glankoff: *Print-Paintings*, Valerie Carberry Gallery, Chicago, IL  
**2004-05** *American Modernist: Sam Glankoff (1894-1982)*, David Sutherland Inc., Los Angeles, CA  
**1994** *The Sam Glankoff Exhibition*, The Rosenblum Museum, Sydney, Australia.  
**1991** *Sam Glankoff (1894-1982): An Overview 1940-1982, Watercolors, Woodcuts and "Print-Paintings,"* Victoria Munroe Gallery, New York, NY  
**1989** *Sam Glankoff (1894-1982): Print-Paintings*, Tilden-Foley Gallery, New Orleans, LA  
**1987** *Sam Glankoff: Print-Paintings*, Roger Ramsay Gallery, Chicago, IL  
**1984** *Sam Glankoff: Woodcuts and Monoprints, 1925-1965*, Associated American Artists, New York, NY  
*Sam Glankoff (1894-1982): A Retrospective Exhibition*, Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Museum, Rutgers-New Brunswick, NJ  
**1982** *Sam Glankoff*, The Harkness House Gallery, New York, NY  
**1981** *Sam Glankoff: Print-Paintings*, The Graham Gallery, New York, NY

Selected Group Exhibitions

**2007** *Drawings II*, Valerie Carberry Gallery, Chicago, IL  
**2005** *A Distinct Impression: The American Artist and the Monotype*, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA  
**2001-04** *The Stamp of Impulse, Abstract Expressionist Prints*, Worcester Museum of Art, MA (Exhibition later traveled to The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH; Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, TX; Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Evanston, IL, and The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY)  
**1997** *Against the Grain, Works of Art from the 1960s and 1970s*, Snyder Fine Art, New York, NY  
**1995** *New Art, Artists, Estates*, Snyder Fine Art, New York, NY  
*Enigmas and Abstractions: Prints and Drawings from the Permanent Collection*, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI  
**1993** *Abstractions*, Elizabeth Moore Gallery, New York, NY  
**1992** *Color Block Prints of the 20th Century*, Associated American Artists, New York, NY  
*Annual Collector's Exhibition*, Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas  
*Woodcuts from the Collection*, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA

**1991** *Modern American Prints*, Associated American Artists, New York, NY  
**1990** *Selected Works on Paper*, Victoria Munroe Gallery, New York, NY  
**1988** *The Jewish Museum Collects: A Five Year Review*, New York, NY  
**1987** *Image to Abstraction - The Fifties*, Luise Ross Gallery, New York, NY  
**1986** *American Master Prints*, Associated American Artists, New York, NY  
*The Discerning Eye*, Associated American Artists, New York, NY  
*America Between the Wars-Urban and Rural Views*, Smith Anderson Gallery, Palo Alto, CA  
*Masters of Science Fiction Art*, Olympia & York Gallery, New York, NY  
*American Prints 1880 -1950*, Pace Master Editions, New York, NY  
**1985** *Group Show*, Princeton Fine Art Gallery, Princeton, NJ  
*Prints From Blocks 1900 - 1985*, Associated American Artists, New York, NY  
*Back Streets/Back Yards*, Associated American Artists, New York, NY  
*Collector's Choice Gallery 19*, Marion Koogler McNae Art Institute, San Antonio, TX  
**1984** *Fifty Years of Fine Prints*, Associated American Artists, New York, NY  
**1983** *Collector's Choice Gallery 17*, Marion Koogler McNae Art Institute, San Antonio, TX  
**1982** *Annual Art on Paper Exhibition*, Weatherspoon Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC  
*Woman Subject and Object*, Vanderwoude-Tannanbaum Gallery, New York, NY  
*22nd National Print Exhibition*, The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY  
**1981** *Twentieth Century American Prints and Drawings - A Selection from the Permanent Collection*, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI  
**1922-28** *Whitney Studio Club Exhibitions*, New York, NY

The Detroit Institute of Arts  
The Fogg Art Museum  
Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Museum  
The Jewish Museum  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
New York University  
The Skirball Cultural Center  
Smith College Museum  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum  
Wesleyan University – Davison Art Center  
The Worcester Museum

# VALERIE CARBERRY GALLERY

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This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition

*Sam Glankoff: Print-Paintings*, Valerie Carberry Gallery,

November 2 – December 29, 2007.

Special thanks to Wendy Snyder, Edward Madrid Gómez, Morgan McDonald, and Susan Beagley.

ISBN: 978-0-9777686-7-7

DESIGN AND TYPOGRAPHY: the JNL Graphic Design, Chicago, IL

PRINTING: Original Smith Printing, Bloomington, IL

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS:

Plate 5: Glen Castellano, Plate 10: Ken Cohen, Frontispiece: Winnie Denker,

Plates I & 7: Ali Elai, Camerarts, Plates i & ii: Danny Hong,

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