

SAL SIRUGO

Sal Sirugo's sensitive assured touch permeates his ink paintings of the past two years. The selected *Eye* and *Head* works at the Landmark Gallery indicate Sirugo's heightened preoccupation with the human head, a subject he has explored since 1966. Never using a model, the artist's fluid ink process dictates the painting structure. "I call them heads, not portraits," and he jokingly adds, "I try to figure out who they are after the fact." Imaginary or real, the artist gets inside each head as he feels and portrays the pain, the ecstasy, the superficiality, the frivolity, or the alienation of his subject. All frontal and staring (although sometimes cavities miss eyes), some mask-like and animal-like, literary allusions to T. S. Eliot, John Steinbeck, and Jean Paul Sartre can be made. But it is the deep-felt understanding of pain and isolation—Sirugo was severely disfigured during the Second World War—that arms this artist with special sensibility. One is reminded of Käthe Kollwitz and Edvard Munch whose screams are much louder, but not much grander.

Learning the techniques and philosophies of the Abstract Expressionists at The Club and on Tenth Street, the large black and white landscape abstractions of the '50s and the '60s appear tight and controlled in comparison to the loose control of the recent small ink *Eyes* and *Heads*. These new works relate closer to German Expressionism and Kokoschka than to New York Abstract Expressionism of the late '40s and early '50s. (It should be kept in mind that Sirugo studied at the Art Students League and at the Brooklyn Museum under the G. I. Bill in the late '40s, but that most of his education was "on the street.") "Turner was a master," Sirugo says. "I wish the Turner Retrospective [at MOMA, 1966] had been held sooner. When I saw his work—his limitless space and misty light—it overwhelmed me. I could have learned everything I needed to know about Abstract Expressionism from Turner."

Working wet on wet, sponging water across a tea-stained surface (the tea creates a warm-tone paper), drawing with an eye dropper or a stick combining Tusche and Sumi

inks, blotting excess pools, exquisite lines and patterns begin to break up the surface. On this level and this level only, "the image becomes an excuse for spatial organization of value and line." Few paintings need be destroyed despite the seemingly experimental technique. Knowing exactly what to do at each point of the drying process and keeping the humidity in his studio constant, Sirugo

Sal Sirugo. Composition H-104. 1978. Ink and acrylic on paper. 22 x 17". Courtesy Landmark Gallery.

The current paintings—ranging from 1 by 1 inch to approximately 20 by 16 inches—appear larger than many of the earlier 5-by-6-foot paintings. Sirugo's postcard-size works especially point out that scale can be more important than size; he worked "small" out of necessity, long before it became a vogue in the '70s. (In this Landmark exhibit, however, the average size work is 18 by 14 inches which the artist

there are fewer multiple images and more decisive lines. The "calligraphic doodling" (Natalie Edgar's apt term) continues. The image remains intuitive, childlike, and distorted. Fragments of painted hair appear as miniature landscapes; variegated patterns are reminiscent of rock, perhaps remembered from his childhood stone-carving experiences in his native Sicily.

Friends, strangers, or self-



works five or six simultaneously with complete command of his medium.

The artist worked through his geometrics of the late '40s and through his frottage and palette knife patterns of the '50s and early '60s. He has arrived at a simpler free-flowing (still black and white) statement with "opened up" space.

considers very large.) "I've had to set limits for myself," the artist admits. "I have limited working space and funds, but within the bounds I've set, I find endless possibilities."

Since his last solo show of *Eyes* and *Heads* in 1976, Sirugo's forms have become clearer and less ambiguous;

portraits? Whoever they may be, they bear a striking resemblance to everyone we know. Beautiful people and not-so-beautiful people stare at the viewer. Sirugo has created a strange world of quiet screams with a controlled air of spontaneity and immediacy. (Landmark, November 25-December 14)

Joellen Bard