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Sal Sirugo, Composition E-41,
1973. Ink on paper, 6 1/2 x 8 1/2".
Courtesy Landmark Gallery.

Black has its own spectrum: black comes in degrees of light and in shades of softness on white, off-white, and brown paper. Sharp distinctions between black and white become illusion in Sal Sirugo's work where the eye is an island and the face a landscape in the nether world between white and black. Ten years of faces and isolated eyes like suns or cells, ten years of expanding, irregular faces dissolving and coming together. Sal Sirugo's show at the Landmark Gallery consisted of 68 pieces, a selection from ten years work by a painter whose larger portraits average 18 by 20 inches and whose eye- or sun-scapes are much smaller worlds in microcosm. "Size doesn't mean anything," Sirugo explains, "because some of my paintings are so gigantic I forget the size." Indeed, Sirugo has an almost oriental spatial sense. Scale is achieved by a going-in and coming-out movement, by the growing and spreading of organic forms, and by the complexity of intimacy where everything up close grows larger. Sirugo makes us see universes in his spreading and changing inks, universes and the shifting

giant faces of our childhood when feeling was too close to the surface and everything became alternately terrifying or autobiographical because there was no inner or outer and the world was only a legend of ourselves.

The artist works across the paper, first wetting the surface and then using a brush, a stick, or an eye dropper—whatever he can lay his hands on—to achieve his effects. He uses all kinds of ink, all kinds of paper, and what happens—what Sirugo makes happen—is contingent on the wetness or dryness of the surface. "The circle," he says, "becomes an atmosphere," the face moves out to claim the edges of the paper; as the artist explains, each work is unique, a combination of accident and intention that cannot be repeated. And yet Sirugo's fiercely personal vision, what he calls "my own handwriting," links every work, joins faces and suns, manner and seeing with humor, wonder, and sadness.

Born in Sicily, Sirugo came to this country in 1937. He became interested in art during the Second World War while he was in the army. About this time, while fighting with the 14th Armored Division in Germany, he was wounded and

badly burned by an enemy shell. Sirugo had to spend the next three years in veterans' hospitals undergoing massive plastic surgery and, as a result, "I came out of the army long after everybody else was discharged." When he finally did get out in 1948, he started studying painting at the Art Students League and the Brooklyn Museum Art School. To Sirugo, at the age of 28, "it was all very much a new life." He met and got to know many of the Abstract-Expressionist painters (he was dripping paint himself before he got out of the army) and, as an artist, Sirugo feels he was born during Abstract Expressionism. What he learned from Pollock and Kline and de Kooning, he says, was a knowledge of space, of the movement of space in and out and a kind of rhythm which "I couldn't find in the old masters."

He started by making overall geometric paintings and, from there, moved to abstract paintings with a landscape quality to them. In 1953 Sirugo stopped using color. He discovered all his works had a double meaning, that an abstract painting can also be a landscape and that there is no simple demarcation between black and white.

He says now that these early black and white works seem very hard because he had not yet begun to explore the gradations between these two lunar poles. In 1966 Sirugo started on the series of self-portraits and portraits of others that comprise almost half the works included in the present exhibition.

The softness of Sirugo's portraits—large child-like faces created out of spreading lines of ink, of uneven holes for eyes, of mouth-lines like cracks in the surface of the skin, skin that is itself cratered, alive, and evolving on the surface of the paper—belongs to the tradition of *art brut*. And yet these faces have a maturity and bitter-sweetness rare in that tradition. The irregular, seeing eyes look out, move in a different way from the artist's isolated eye-scapes. But both kinds of work represent this artist's unique and sobering vision. Always, Sirugo's sense of growth, his sense of feeling, as an expanding movement incorporating yet extending beyond such variables as sadness and pain, bring us inevitably and unsentimentally face to face with ourselves. (Landmark, October 16-November 4)

Corinne Robins