

# still working

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## underknown artists of age in america

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### Sal Sirugo

Sal Sirugo lives in Manhattan and works by the window among racks of completed drawings that testify to his single-minded dedication. Some of his works are so small that they are drawn with the help of a magnifying glass mounted over his drafting table. His vision, however, is vast, meditative, and absolutely intuitive, and the abstractions especially reflect the artist's kinship with Abstract Expressionism. He works in series, heads, eyes, or landscapes, but allows the individual images to become what they demand to be—works of intense spiritual power, Arcadian dreams in velvety darks and luminous mists. Sirugo often stains his paper with tea or coffee and, working on wet paper, adds ink with an eyedropper, fine brushes, or Q-tips, directing the flow of the spreading ink. This careful listening to the medium gives the resulting ink drawings the appearance of being open to metamorphosis, as though they were part of the growth of primordial swamps or bogs out of which all of life once emerged. He has discovered that sometimes the smallest form, a dot on a blank sheet, can imply the largest expanses of the universe, and having understood this, Sirugo acts with trust, knowing that "all is accident, but in the accidental there is control."

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sal sirugo

born 1920 pozzallo, sicily  
lives and works in new york, new york

**i** HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN MY ART WORK FOR CLOSE TO FIFTY YEARS. At the age of seventeen I arrived here from Sicily. A few years later I was drafted into the U.S. Army and, while on combat duty in Germany, I was severely wounded. During a three-and-a-half-year recuperation period in army hospitals, I was encouraged to continue to paint by hospital volunteers who were themselves artists and brought me materials. A month after being discharged from the army in 1948, I enrolled under the G.I. Bill in the Art Students League's summer school in Woodstock, New York, and after that the League's school in New York City. In 1949-50 I studied at the Brooklyn Museum Art School.

The beginning of my career coincided with the Abstract Expressionist movement. My large-size work was done on canvas or Masonite, using Luminol paint, casein, and acrylics. When limited funds made me forgo the use of paint colors, I began to explore the coloristic potential of black and white. After so many years of utilizing black and white, like the ancient Chinese painters, I have no limitations in its use.

In the mid-1960s I began working on paper, combining the remarkable qualities of all types of black inks on wet surfaces. The controlled and accidental fluidity of the medium dictates the direction of the paintings. The inks form 'heads,' 'eyes,' or imaginary landscapes. When I work I forget that I am painting and become completely absorbed in the pure visual sensations caused by the shapes gradually forming on the paper or canvas. My images portray what I am. The spontaneity of the ink flows that evolve into imaginary landscapes are visual pleasures. They are delicate and poetic compositions. The differences in black inks and gray tones achieve distinct depictions of nature in its vastness and complexity.

When my working area was reduced in size by necessity, the dimensions of my paintings grew smaller, but the works retained the same sense of scale as my large paintings. There is a seventeenth-century album of Chinese paintings titled *Within Small See Large*. That is how I view my work. S.S.

Sal Sirugo makes paintings in which size is implicit. The grandeur of his vision resides in the spectator's head space. We are miniaturized by it and fitted to locales that are familiar in their absence of detail. Replete with nature's structure, knolls reflect on still estuaries, flora and ground fog fill evening silences, tempestuous skies summon Turner and Constable in formats no larger than a hand. The lack of chroma in Sirugo's places is barely realized as his tiny invocations are produced in subtle tones that evoke Arcadia.

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