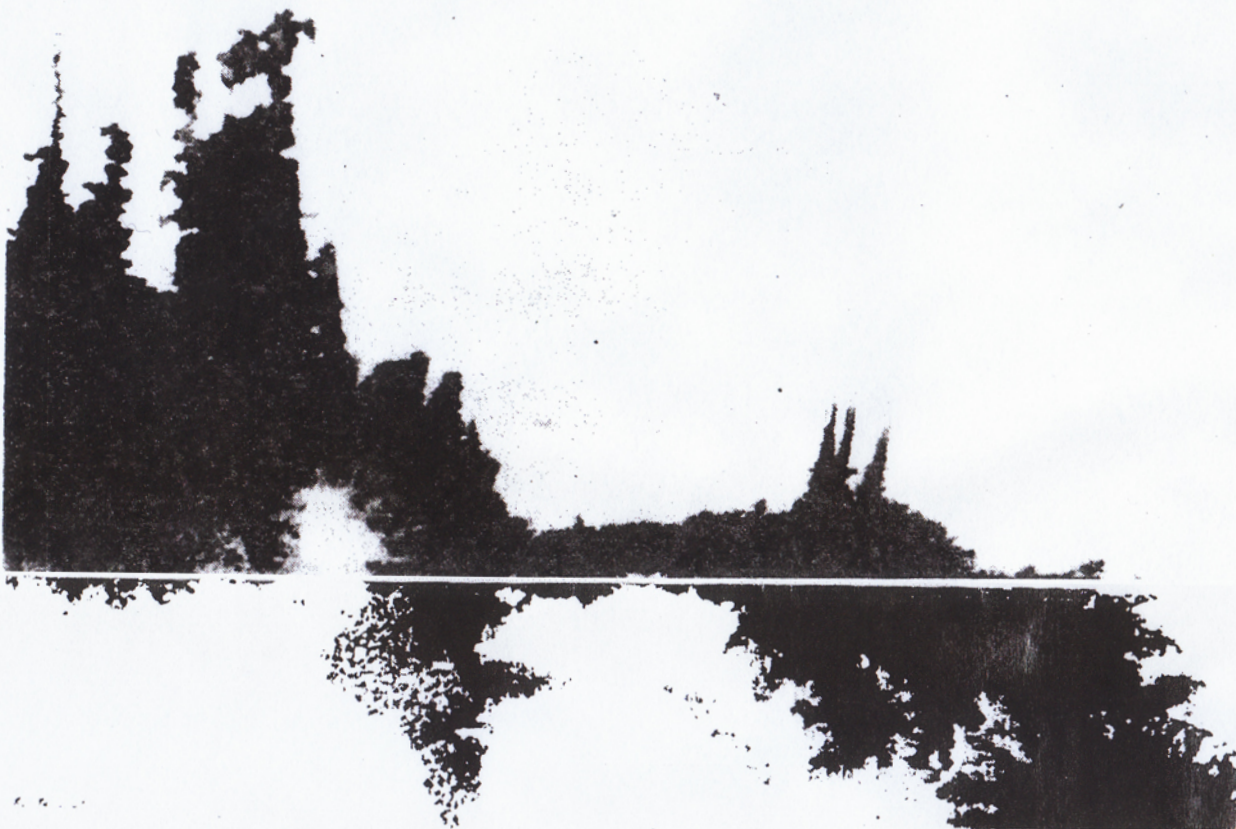


Sirugo's miniature sublime



"Comp. M-17," ink and acrylic on paper, 5 1/4" x 6 1/2". 1979.

Sal Sirugo is a mystic of visual experiences, and he creates new ones from memory refracting in imagination. He is an artist of darkly immanent mysteries, and Albert Pinkham Ryder is his spiritual compeer.

A 30 year retrospective of Woodstocker Sirugo's landscape paintings is at Landmark Gallery in New York City. They are essentially abstractions, but each suggests some bit of earth. Many draw on his mental inventory of Catskill scenery from 33 years of seasonal residence in Woodstock. He calls them landscapes, but they derive so strongly from imagination they could be called mind-scapes.

The artist was born in Pozzallo, Sicily in 1920 and came to the U.S. in 1937. He was wounded during World War II; someone he met in a hospital steered him to Byrdcliffe where he committed himself to art in 1948.

Sirugo is a miniaturist. These works vary from one to ten inches on a side, and the reproductions here are shown here. He paints while most people sleep, sometimes through the night; and this contributes to the dream-like air of his art. He works on paper or cardboard, arranging for half-random effects and developing them toward suggestive images. The earliest works are impressions rubbed from irregularly folded carbon paper and worked up with pencil. Some papers are stained with tea for warm uneven tones. Painting is with brush in a great diversity of black inks and paints, occasionally heightened with white or aluminum. Pigment bleeds variously as it

touches the moistened paper, and a broad range of effects is obtained. Crystalline and fungal forms, tongues of flame, waves and aureoles, lines as from repeated foldings, etc., live in restful, harmonious rhythmic structures and patterns.

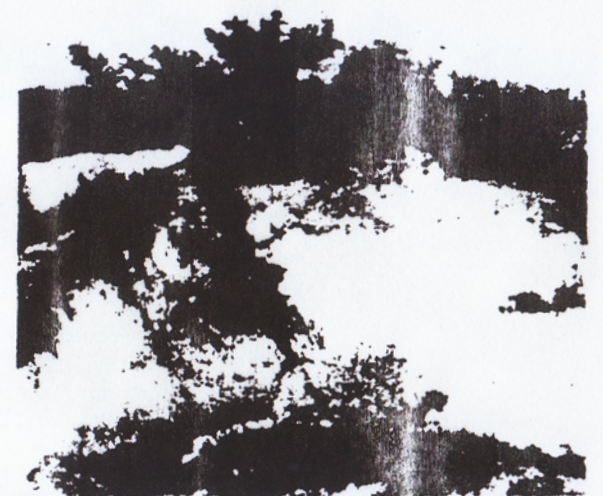
As do Chinese ink painters, Sirugo finds all colors in black. Some of his blacks are very black, but whites are never insistent. He is a poet of chiaroscuro, working in darkneses, sometimes irradiated. These paintings are like Rorschach blots, seducing and bemusing us into association. Our imagination moves in them fantasizing. Forest fires on distant ridges; earth viewed from space; storms on the sun; close-by pools with reeds or rocks; steeples of saplings in snow (these look startlingly etched); choppy waves or foam-lines on the beach; micrographs of rust entering metal; mountain profiles, some with auras; castle, draw-bridge and rider are a few associations. Everywhere there is a poetic suggestiveness reminding us of places and things. But beyond that, the images suggest classes and ideas of things, acting thus as symbol or synecdoche.

Sirugo began his art when Abstract Expressionism was especially active in New York and Woodstock, and his work shares some of its definitive characteristics. His touch is various, personal, distinctive, also expressive and Expressionistic. While his imagery is based on abstraction from observation, his paintings can be satisfying experiences as non-objective and self-referent art. He works in uncentralized patterns, and his works suggest extensions beyond the edges of the supports, as with many other field painters.

Sirugo's work is original, and has no important antecedents. A few modernists work occasionally in miniature; Ernst and Bissier are well-known. Perhaps the most interesting contemporary with whom to compare Sirugo is Henri Michaux as their oeuvres share important characteristics and have major differences. Michaux works in fields or seas of black ink brush-strokes like elongated commas or polliwogs on white sheets in small sizes and up. His paintings relate to psychedelic drug states, are self-consciously art and display-minded and not suggestive of other things. Sirugo's works are tiny, intimate, warm and catalyze the imagination with imagery from human experience.

These paintings appeal especially to people with extensive experience of art. The first works sold were to famous painters, and among collections which contain his work are those of collectors, corporations, critics and dealers known for taste. Sirugo has the kind of "underground" esteem among cognoscenti which usually precedes considerable publicity. A museum retrospective is called for.

Landmark suggested its large gallery for this exhibition, but the artist requested the small "Drawing Room" instead. The larger show would have functioned as a general retrospective, but the intimate nature of this work makes it more effective in a small room. The size of the large gallery would have required over 200 paintings, and the expense of



"Comp. M-36," ink and acrylic on paper, 2 1/4" x 2 1/2". 1975.

so much framing was also considered. Landmark Gallery is owned by five artists, and specializes in mature artists with little public exposure; its exhibitions are consistently among the most interesting in Soho. These works are well-hung, in groups to minimize that "more-of-the-same" look which can diminish the viewer's appetite for many works of similar size and appearance in one space.

The paintings have series names and numbers for identification only. "Composition M-40" is the fortieth work suggesting mountainous images. Others are designated K (for Kaaterskill) and R (for Rubbing.) The pictures are floated on pale earth-color grounds within thick white or egg-shell mats in brushed gold anodized metal section frames.

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Tram Combs