

SAL SIRUGO

1920 - 2013

ABOUT

Sal Sirugo (1920-2013) was one of the last living direct links to the Abstract Expressionist era and actively pursued his painting career since the 1940s. Always productive at a very high level of artistic creativity, he showed his work during the early years of Abstract Expressionism alongside many of the noteworthy artists of the day. Admired by his fellow artists, he was known as a “painter’s painter,” an honorific which, while quite complimentary, does not necessarily translate into general critical or public acclaim. Currently, Sirugo’s impressive work remains one of the under-appreciated oeuvres of Abstract Expressionism.

“Field painting” was considered one of Abstract Expressionism’s most important achievements. Traditional painting depended on basic principles of composition -- the placement of objects (or in an abstract sense, shapes, lines, and colors) to create a pleasing, balanced arrangement. Field painting virtually dispensed with composition; a field painting’s imagery is distributed relatively evenly with few if any specific points of more concentrated visual incident. In essence, the image is visually homogenous. Pollock did this through networks of lines; Rothko did this with hazy rectangles of color (“color field” paintings). Obviously, there cannot be many variations on this theme, and its few major practitioners are venerated as paragons of innovation and radical progress in painting.

In the late 1940s, Sal Sirugo developed a personal variation on field painting. It differs from much field painting in its relatively thickly painted surfaces, but it is insistently, almost metaphysically, without emphasis or focus despite its complexity of markings and the frequently visible impasto. Somehow, substance is manipulated to suggest the insubstantial. Sirugo’s fields are neither blank surfaces nor clean-cut accumulations; visual incidents remain one with the overall material matrix, which lends each work a sense of wholeness and even a meditative, mysterious quality. Mysterious, too, is that Sirugo’s early creation of an individual style of field painting has still not been generally recognized.

Perhaps Sirugo’s lack of historical and critical acknowledgment is due to certain other characteristics of his working methods, the very ones which give his work its special appeal, yet paradoxically are not appreciated by many of the writers and historians who defined Abstract Expressionism. For example, Sirugo saw no reason to restrict his vision or imagination, and throughout his career he simultaneously produced art within four basic categories of imagery: Abstractions, Landscapes, imaginative faces he designates as “Heads,” and striking variations on roughly circular themes that he designates as “Eyes.” Sirugo’s refusal to maintain the purity of totally non-objective art and rejection of the unchanging “signature style” also agitated against critical acceptance of his oeuvre as a whole within the reductive stylistic history of Abstract Expressionism.

However, the most likely factor is the usual size of Sirugo’s work. Although he made large paintings in the 1940s and 1950s, the typical dimensions of his paintings are remarkably modest. Most are less than twenty inches on a side; many are less than ten inches on a side, and some are no more than an inch and a half in either dimension. It is astonishing that no matter the size, the artist inserted all his technical inventiveness and a practiced, personal touch into each piece. The expressive latitude of the work is vast. The Eyes and certain Landscapes offer mystical qualities within their swirling mists of washed ink; a rigorous yet delicate formal objectivity is found in many abstractions; and a full gamut of emotions emerge from the Heads, from the ominous and frightening to the frankly humorous.

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Connecting all the work is the artist's remarkable diversity and experimentalism of technique. To some extent, Sirugo's art is an unending exploration of the visual potential of various materials and methods. He has painted on all sorts of surfaces, from canvas to writing paper to vellum, and he has applied his pigments with everything that comes to hand (including his fingers and hands), such as sponges, toweling, scrapers, and eyedroppers. The mediums are equally as diverse. Besides various inks and commercially available paints, works may evidence marks from wax crayons, carbon paper, and even colors derived from tea and coffee.

The artist's experimentalism sometimes appears to be a process impelled by innocence – the simple pleasure of trying out a material or technique to see what happens – but it is a knowing, controlled innocence, parallel to that of, say, William Blake. In his *Auguries of Innocence*, Blake wrote of the rapturous ability “...To see a World in a Grain of Sand.... Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand...” The art of Sal Sirugo exemplifies this poetic notion. His condensed fields and images, always a blend of spontaneity and craftsmanship, are compact universes of stunning complexity. By means of his art, one realizes that an infinity of emotion and visual incident can be concentrated within the most intimate proportions.

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