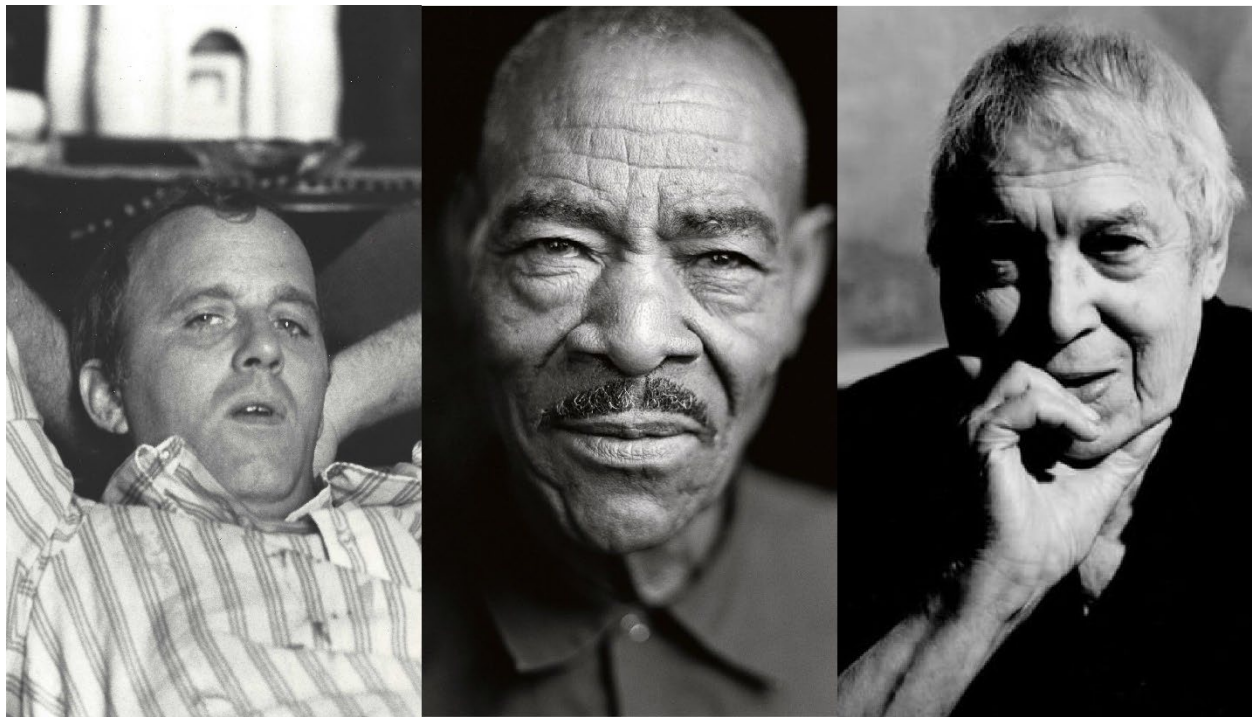


# JOHNSON LOWE GALLERY



## *Sleeping Giants*

Herbert Crecy, Thornton Dial, Sam Glankoff

May 18 – July 1, 2023

## PRESS RELEASE

Johnson Lowe is proud to present *Sleeping Giants*, the second exhibition in its inaugural year. *Sleeping Giants* apposes the work of three artists - Herbert Crecy, Thornton Dial, and Sam Glankoff - whose unique contributions to the canon of art history were largely overlooked for the majority of their careers. Despite their undeniable talent and significant innovations, their work was largely relegated to the periphery of modern and contemporary art.

*Sleeping Giants* showcases paintings and assemblages, along with selections of works on paper as guideposts for their artistic outputs. The exhibition is accompanied by *Sleeping Giants: Rediscovering and Reclaiming the History of Overlooked Modern Masters*, an essay by award-winning journalist, art critic, and curator, Edward M. Gómez.

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Thornton Dial, *The History of the Dials*, 1996  
Glass, mirror, splash zone compound, wood, and mixed media  
on panel  
60 x 48 x 5 in

With *Sleeping Giants*, Johnson Lowe Gallery pays homage to the inventiveness and originality of three artists who, to varying degrees, found themselves working on the margins of modern art's mainstream currents, even as, in their own ways, they may now be seen — and acknowledged — for having contributed substantively to the language and expressive power of the art of their time.

Glankoff, Dial, and Creecy produced large, diverse bodies of work whose many innovations and hallmarks are still coming to light. Now, as *Sleeping Giants* richly demonstrates, as the achievements of such artists are being rediscovered and examined, the retelling — and reimagining — of modern art's story of creative rebellion and invention are becoming all the more compelling thanks to the resonance of their enduring legacies."

— Edward M. Gómez

"Thanks to new ways of thinking about art history, especially due to the influence of postmodernist critical ideas, the overlooked or little-known legacies of some of modern art's most remarkable sleeping giants have been rediscovered in recent decades being appreciated anew. Now honored — and aroused — these artists' creative spirits and the ideas that inspired them gave rise to distinctive bodies of work for which a new generation of art historians, curators, critics, and collectors have been making room in modern art's familiar canon and in the broader story of its long, multifaceted evolution.



Sam Glankoff, *Untitled*, 1975  
Water soluble printing ink and casein on Japanese paper  
38.125 x 48.125 in



Herbert Creecy, *Untitled (Violet)*, 1977  
Mixed media on canvas  
72 x 84 in

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### EXHIBITION ESSAY

*Sleeping Giants: Rediscovering and Reclaiming the History of Overlooked Modern Masters*, by Edward M. Gómez

Thanks to new ways of thinking about art history, especially due to the influence of postmodernist critical ideas, in recent decades, the overlooked or little-known legacies of some of modern art's most remarkable sleeping giants have been rediscovered and are being appreciated anew. Now honored — and aroused — these artists' creative spirits and the ideas that inspired them gave rise to distinctive bodies of work for which a new generation of art historians, curators, critics, and collectors have been making room in modern art's familiar canon and in the broader story of its long, multifaceted evolution.

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**Sam Glankoff** (b.1894 - d.1982) was born in and spent most of his life in New York. As a youngster, Sam, who played the violin and was deeply interested in art, often visited museums. At the age of 20, he began taking evening classes at the Arts Students League in Manhattan. However, in 1917, as the United States prepared to enter World War I, the young artist, who was a conscientious objector, departed for Cuba, where he spent the remaining period of the conflict.

Back in New York in the early 1920s, Glankoff worked as a commercial artist, creating illustrations, including woodcuts, for books and magazines, and in the 1940s, he became the head artist for a comic-book company. Alongside his commercial assignments, Glankoff developed his own art, including woodcuts inspired by German Expressionism.

Glankoff's fellow artists introduced him to the Whitney Studio Club (the forerunner of the Whitney Museum of American Art), with whose members he exhibited his work from 1922 through 1928, the year in which the group disbanded. Decades later, Glankoff developed his own approach to making abstract works with water-soluble inks on handmade Japanese paper; his compositions were derived from his earlier woodcuts. In later years, at his companion Frances Kornblum's request, he designed and fabricated prototypes for her toy company, but it was not until after her death in 1970 that Glankoff was able to devote himself completely to the development of his own art.

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He pioneered a new method of image-making combining aspects of print-making with those of painting; now recognized as his signature contribution to the technical innovations of modern art, the genre Glankoff invented became known as “print-painting.” No other modern artist worked in a similar way, printing images on individual sheets of Japanese-made paper and combining them to create multi-panel, large-format compositions. Glankoff’s method allowed him to make art on a grand scale even though he worked in a tiny apartment.

Glankoff was interested in history, philosophy, and Greek-Armenian mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff’s teachings. Suggesting affinities with prehistoric pictographs, the artist’s spare motifs are actually extreme abstractions of such subjects as the human figure.

See, for example, the male and female sculptural forms in the one-panel “Untitled,” 1971, with its blue, black, and white palette, or the long, red stretching arms set against a light-purple background in “Untitled,” circa 1975, a four-panel piece; like other works in the exhibition, these images call attention to the gusto and sensitivity with which Glankoff explored color’s expressive power. In his most minimalist compositions, single, luminous circles, those enduring symbols of both the fullness of the universe and of nothing — the void — hover over energized fields of radiant color.

Glankoff was a lifelong loner who shunned the art world. However, in 1981, at the age of 87 and shortly before his death, he presented a first-ever solo exhibition of his print-paintings at New York’s Graham Gallery (which he saw only on its last day.) As his profile has risen, Glankoff’s works have been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, and by other notable public and private collections.

**Thornton Dial, Sr.** (1928-2016) was born and grew up in a family of poor sharecroppers in in west-central Alabama, near the border with Mississippi. Dial, whose ancestors included enslaved Africans who had been forced to labor on Southern plantations, experienced firsthand his native region’s institutionalized racism. A master welder who produced Pullman railway carriages at a factory in Bessemer, Alabama, Dial employed paint, wire, metal and fabric scraps, and a host of other materials in innovative works of art that bear witness to some of the 20th century’s most convulsive periods. Among them: the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the Vietnam War, the 2001 terrorist attacks on American soil, and the United States’ war of aggression against Iraq.

In the 1980s, William S. Arnett (1939-2020), the founder of the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation, began exploring the South’s indigenous art forms. His discoveries, including Dial’s work, profoundly influenced his understanding of art’s expressive power. They convinced him that conventional narratives of 20th-century art’s evolution needed to be torn up and rewritten to recognize the contributions of hitherto unknown creators like Dial, whose tradition-busting drawings, mixed-media paintings, and assemblage sculptures took on such big subjects as war, death, bigotry, and history itself.



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In *Sleeping Giants*, Dial's fluid, energetic line and finely tuned sense of color stand out in such mixed-media drawings on paper as *The Ticking of the Heart*, 1998; *Flowers of the Trees*, 1999; and *Teaching the Daughter*, 2008. A tiger, an animal that turns up in many Dial works and functions partly as a symbol of the hope of African Americans for equality, appears in several drawings, while a mixed-media-on-panel painting, *The History of the Dials*, 1996, featuring an image made up of just a few bold, calligraphic strokes and serves as a kind of generations-spanning, composite portrait may be regarded conceptually as one of the artist's rare self-portraits.

Arnett recognized that Dial's work, like that of many of the other self-taught artists of the American South he discovered and promoted (including, among others, Lonnie Holley, Ronald Lockett, and Bessie Harvey) was rooted in the Southern, African-American tradition of decorative yard art made from found and repurposed materials. Its antecedents included centuries-old African modes of crafting objects capable of communicating powerful spiritual and aesthetic messages.

Marked by its creator's deft handling of his often unusual materials and a deeply humanistic vision of the world, Dial's art has traveled far — all the way from the most hardscrabble outposts of the American South to the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and other important museums across the U.S.

**Herbert Creecy** (1939-2003) was closely associated with Atlanta and is regarded by those who are familiar with the trajectory of his career as one of the most notable — and prolific — modern artists ever to have emerged in the American South. Broader recognition did not come his way, however, perhaps because he never left his native region. Still, such under-the-radar status was a price Creecy was willing to pay for the unbridled freedom he enjoyed in creating his art in the place he loved.

Creecy was born in Virginia and grew up in Atlanta; he attended the University of Alabama, where, after taking commercial-art classes, he transferred to the Atlanta School of Art, from which he graduated in 1964. Later, a French-government study grant allowed him to train at Atelier 17, the legendary workshop of the British painter-printmaker Stanley William Hayter (1901-1988).

In the early 1970s, Creecy moved to the small town of Barnesville, south of Atlanta, where he set up a home and studio in a former cotton mill. He was known for taking a long time to develop a single work, repeatedly painting over finished compositions and even cutting up completed canvases, only to use their fragments as collage elements in all-new productions. (Late in their respective careers, such well-known modern painters as Lee Krasner and Jean Dubuffet employed a similar technique.)

Creecy was an indefatigable experimenter. He was inspired by Jackson Pollock's gestural drip-painting technique and Abstract Expressionism's no-limits impulse but he also made use of collage, scraped and scratched his paintings' surfaces, and used squeegees to blend colors and yield unusual textures. Various combinations of these art-making methods can be seen in *Sleeping Giants* in such works as "Untitled," 1993, with its explosion of cloud-like forms surrounding a central, vaguely bird-like shape, and "Untitled," 1997, with its cascade of black-and-white elements set against a richly textured background of pale pinks, blues, and greens (a palette that feels as surprisingly harmonious as it does audacious). Creecy packed his rhythmic abstractions — like Glankoff and Dial, he liked to work large — with thickets of organic shapes; passages of luminous, transparent color; and freely expanding, voluminous forms. Creecy sometimes used an air brush to apply wet paint to his surfaces.

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In the 1970s, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York acquired one of the artist's canvases, and for a while, he was represented by that city's O.K. Harris Gallery. Today, Creecy's ferocious creativity and dedication to his native region, which nourished and nurtured his outlook, may be seen as some of the definitive characteristics of his art.

**Edward M. Gómez** is an art critic, art historian, and curator who has written for the *New York Times*, *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *Art & Antiques*, *Metropolis*, *Art + Auction*, and many other publications in the U.S. and overseas. A former senior editor of *Raw Vision*, the London-based magazine focusing on outsider art, he is the founder and editor in chief of *brutjournal*, a magazine examining *art brut*, outsider art, and a wide range of experimental art forms. The author or co-author of numerous exhibition catalogs, in 2017, in collaboration with the cinematographer Chris Shields, Gómez produced the film *Valton Tyler: Flesh Is Fiction* (Ballena Studio).

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