

Since the mid-1960s Sam Gilliam has effected one of the most powerful deconstructions of colour field art. Soon after moving to Washington, DC, where he encountered the work of the Washington Colour Painters Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Thomas Downing and Howard Mehring, among others, Gilliam began his enduring investigation of colour. His work quickly evolved and, by the late 1960s, he expanded upon pouring, staining and soaking techniques to include scrubbing, rubbing and mopping paint onto canvases that he would subsequently roll, fold and crumple. The painting became a thing rather than a surface, which the artist manipulated.

By fundamentally questioning the techniques of paint application, Gilliam also came to investigate the framing properties of the artwork. He dispensed with the stretcher and the received notion of the painting as rectangular and began to drape or suspend his canvases, allowing them to occupy space. Viewers were required to walk around and under his work in order to explore properties of colour, light, depth, volume and form.

Cloud Kilimanjaro is indicative of Gilliam's subverting of the parameters of modern painting. Affixed directly to the wall with a single nail, the canvas hangs limp, cascading downward like a deflated memory of prior authority. By giving the work an evocative title, Gilliam rhymes the shape of his canvas with the African mountain. Such descriptive reference infects a strictly formalist reading of the work with landscape connotations. Such willingness to embrace a range of possibility indicates Gilliam's quest to explore his own intellectual, cultural and aesthetic interests, rather than conform to strictures of a single direction. Gilliam's work skirts the periphery of the colour field movement, critiquing it from within in order to heighten awareness of its parameters and ultimate limitations. By simultaneously embracing yet contesting the grandeur of colour field art, Gilliam charts new territory, which he continues to explore today, unfurling a discourse in painting that shuttles between two and three dimensions.

DAVID MOOS

SAM GILLIAM

American, born 1933

Cloud Kilimanjaro, 1970

Acrylic on canvas
165.1 x 165.1 x 40.6 cm
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, gift of Dorothy Butler
Gilliam in memory of her parents, Adele Conklin
Butler and Jessie Norment Butler
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Moos, David, "Sam Gilliam," *The Shape of Color*, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2005, pp. 78-79

