

INTHESTUDIO

# ALL THAT

After decades of working under the radar, **SAM GILLIAM** is back in the spotlight, as curators and collectors clamor for his sculpted canvases

BY CHARMINE PICARD

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTINE LARSEN



"IN THE EARLY 1960s, Washington, D.C., was filled with protests, filled with agitators and people trying to change the conversation to accommodate people of color, and Sam, by not necessarily invoking the black body in his work, is essentially producing a protest work," says Rashid Johnson, who curated a 2013 exhibition of Sam Gilliam's early hard-edge paintings at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. "It speaks to the complexity of the black experience and his ability to be incredibly cognizant of what is happening around him while staying true to his concerns as an artist."

By emphasizing the idea that art need only reflect upon itself, Gilliam has stayed true to his formalist origins, producing experimental work over the past 50 years that resists easy categorization, work that can be positioned somewhere between painting, sculpture, and installation.

"Art is art," he tells me on a recent visit to his studio in the mainly residential Petworth neighborhood of Washington. The former drive-through gas station was converted by the artist in 2010 into a state-of-the-art work space with skylights, a gallery, ample storage, and a wood shop. The airy studio shows Gilliam's recent compositions to advantage; they include suspended sculptural paintings, multilayered acrylic wall pieces, and tables stacked with vibrant watercolors. While many successful artists would be satisfied to rest on their laurels (or just to rest), at 82 years of age, Gilliam arrives at the studio each day eager to work. And work he must: Demand for his pieces has been on the rise in recent years as curators and collectors rediscover the artist, who by his own account spent several decades wandering in the wilderness as he privately battled bouts of depression.

Over the past two years Gilliam's works have been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and by the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, along with private collectors in the United States and abroad. This past January, Gilliam was also a recipient of the

FREDRIK NILEN AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

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The artist in his Washington, D.C., studio. Opposite: *Swing Sketch*, 1968, an acrylic on canvas with leather cord, was among the works presented by David Kordansky at Frieze Masters in London this past October. There, prices for Gilliam's draped canvases ranged from \$225,000 to \$500,000.





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*Light Depth*, 1969, in synthetic polymer paint on canvas, was among the artist's first large drape works to be exhibited. It was featured that year in a group show curated by Walter Hopps at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

U.S. Department of State Medal of Arts for his contributions to the Art in Embassies program and fostering international exchange.

When we met in early September, the artist, who has been represented by Kordansky since 2013, was preparing for a solo show in the gallery's booth at Frieze Masters in London and an exhibition in Kordansky's Los Angeles space this spring.

Soft-spoken, with an easy laugh, Gilliam is best known for his large-scale, color-stained drape paintings, first exhibited in a 1969 group show, featuring three young artists, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. It was curated by his friend and mentor Walter Hopps. In these revolutionary works, Gilliam eliminated the stretcher bars from the canvas and suspended massive, billowing swathes of color—supported by hooks or ropes—from walls and ceilings, and later from ladders and over sawhorses. The artist eschewed the idea of the two-dimensional picture plane, pushing abstract painting into the viewer's physical space.

When asked if there is drama inherent in his oeuvre, Gilliam responds, "Yes, it's all theater or performance."

Tall and trim with elegant and expressive hands, he shows me a recent series of works done in saturated ink pigments on rice paper. The vividly hued works are arranged in layers on two long tables. Gilliam folds and manipulates the paper while the paint is wet, allowing colors to bleed into one another.

"When they're unfolded there are pieces of geometry in them, which is part of the aesthetic," explains Stephen Frietch, who has assisted the artist for the past 35 years and has witnessed the evolution of his practice. "In a sense it is a mini version of how the early drapes were made, except they

were made on canvas and painted on the floor."

As a young boy in Tupelo, Mississippi, Gilliam liked to draw, particularly sketches of horses, which were the main source of transportation for tradesmen passing through town; he also drew cartoons modeled after comic strips like *Dick Tracy* and *Tarzan*. The seventh of eight children born to Sam and Estery Gilliam, the artist nostalgically recounts his early life in Elvis Presley's hometown, describing a childhood filled with creativity and bouts of mischief. "My mother grew up on a farm outside of Tupelo and her father was a minister, and that's where we'd go during the summers. There were chickens, a small grocery store, a cotton field, long tree-lined country roads; there was a pond across the highway which was forbidden territory, but that was the first place you went."

When Gilliam was eight years old, his family moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where he eventually pursued a bachelor's degree, and then a master's, in fine arts at the University of Louisville. There he became a studio assistant to painter and calligrapher Ulfert Wilke, developing under his tutelage an interest in German woodcut prints, African sculpture, and the art of Paul Klee. In graduate school he studied under German painter and stained glass artist Charles Crodel, who offered Gilliam a scholarship to study at the Bavarian State Academy of Fine Arts in postwar Munich, which he declined in favor of remaining at the University of Louisville.

Following graduation, Gilliam served two years in the army in Yokohama, Japan, in the late 1950s. In 1962 he moved to Washington, D.C., where he married Dorothy Butler, a reporter for the *Washington Post*. The couple had three daughters, and to make ends meet Gilliam took

MARK GALEZIAN AND CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C.

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a job teaching art at McKinley High School.

In Washington, Gilliam's work quickly transitioned from expressive canvases inspired by Bay Area figurative artists like Richard Diebenkorn, David Park, and Nathan Oliveira to hard-edge geometric abstraction. Under the sway of second-generation Washington Color School painters like Gene Davis, Tom Downing, Howard Mehring, and Paul Reed, Gilliam began producing abstract canvases with diagonal stripes and large, flat fields of acrylic-based pigment. (By that time, movement leaders Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland were no longer in the city; Louis had died, and Noland had moved to New York, where Gilliam visited him in 1966.)

Gilliam's hard-edge paintings laid the foundation for his process-oriented abstractions of the late 1960s and '70s. In 1967 he began staining and splattering his canvases with poured acrylics and then folding, rubbing, and crumpling them. "I left the works overnight to dry with a space heater, and when I returned the next day I'd find this beautiful, undulating object," he recalls. His early brushless paintings incorporated the element of chance as the colors were left to bleed. Later he would place the canvas on a beveled stretcher with chamfered edges, facing either forward or backward, projecting the work into the viewer's space and exaggerating the painting's distinct plane from the wall. At this time Gilliam also began experimenting with the scale of his pieces, with some paintings measuring more than 30 feet in length.

According to Kordansky, who has bonded with the artist over their shared love of jazz, "Gilliam parted ways from the D.C. school and really started to experiment with the

construction of how a picture is made, and this is very much steeped in the tradition of jazz. He was listening to John Coltrane, Miles Davis, McCoy Tyner, and Rahsaan Roland Kirk, and these musicians were experimenting outside the parameters of the traditional jazz standard. It was a music that was predicated upon improvisation. He wanted to create a similar kind of ambience through this kind of improvisation with the canvas."

"As opposed to buying 100 yards of canvas in 25-foot rolls and cutting them up and putting them on stretchers, I just painted them," Gilliam says of the works presented in that 1969 Corcoran show, in which his works were suspended from the atrium's 40-foot-high ceiling, their luminous cascades filling the Beaux Arts interior with sensual folds of light and color. Included in the display were four rhythmic and dynamic drapes measuring 10 by 75 feet, and *Baroque Cascade*, a monumental sculptural painting 150 feet in length.

This groundbreaking exhibition cemented his reputa-

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Clockwise from top: *Fan Craze*, 1973, an acrylic on canvas on offer from David Kordansky at Frieze in October; a work in progress in Gilliam's studio; and the artist with a recent series of works on paper.



tion, and requests for shows came flooding in. Between 1969 and 1974 alone, Gilliam participated in exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Museum of Modern Art, and the American Pavilion at the 1972 Venice Biennale. Gilliam also earned several fellowships, including a Guggenheim, which enabled him to travel throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. During the 1970s and early '80s he averaged four group or solo shows per year at major venues, with curators such as Hopps, Kynaston McShine, A. James Speyer, and Martin Friedman championing his work. Speyer convinced his sister Darthea Speyer to represent Gilliam in her Paris gallery, where he showed work until 2009, when the gallery shut its doors.

TOP: FREDRIK NILSEN AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY



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Clockwise from left: *Untitled*, 1969, sold at auction for an artist record \$197,000 this past April at Swann Auction Galleries in New York. Gilliam's *10/27/69*, 1969, was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 2014, the same year the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased *Whirlirama*, 1970.

Gilliam's early success coincided with the rise of the Black Power movement, which drew attention to representations of black cultural identity. According to Washington-based art collector and longtime friend Peggy Cooper Cafritz, "In the 1960s and '70s, Sam was well known as an artist who was doing incredible abstract work. In the professional African-American artist community there was some backlash, and there were some who thought that every artist who could get seen had an obligation to paint about black life, black deprivation, and black oppression."

Responding to his critics at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 symposium "The Black Artist in America," Gilliam clarified his position. "What we should be talking about is the quality of aesthetic experiences available to persons within the black community and raising the level of this quality. But let's not forget about what has gone before; let's not forget about black history. In fact let's emphasize this more," he said. "It's erroneous to presuppose that a person who doesn't follow a certain philosophy all the way doesn't care about his race or his kids. We're all badgered by these things." While some disagreed with his stance, Gilliam's dedication to formalist experimentation was an affirmation of his right to choose his own path.



From hard-edge to drape paintings, and from collaged canvases to works on metal, wood, and paper, Gilliam continues to explore the idea of process. When asked if he can push painting to further extremes, he responds, "It's called reinvention. You can paint, but it doesn't mean that you're limited to making Bierstadt landscapes."

In the studio he is working on his "Slatt" series, created with layers of acrylic pigment poured onto thin panels of birch plywood. The

pieces are composed of intersecting geometric shapes that are assembled into a rectangular whole, and are painted with as many as 12 layers of pigment. Produced on tables but meant to be installed on the wall, they were inspired by the flat-paneled Constructivist furniture of Dutch designer Gerrit Rietveld. "With these Slatt paintings, Sam's work seems to have come full circle," says Frietch, referring to the hard-edge paintings Gilliam created when he first arrived in Washington.

"Sam is a fantastic American artist whose recognition has been long overdue," says Nigel Freeman, director of African-American fine art at Swann Auction Galleries in New York. Gilliam's artist record at auction was set at the house this past April when his *Untitled*, 1969, sold for \$197,000, three times its \$60,000 high estimate and more than double his previous record of \$72,000, achieved by *Butterfly, feeling*, 1972, which also sold at Swann, in February 2013. While such prices may not seem lofty for an artist of Gilliam's caliber, Freeman is quick to point out that these sales were of relatively small stretched canvases. "We have not seen a monumental drape work come on the block in five years," he says. "When they do, they are sure to shatter the price of any previous work at auction." 田

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SWANN AUCTION GALLERIES; MAX FRIETCH AND THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK; MAX FRIETCH AND THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.