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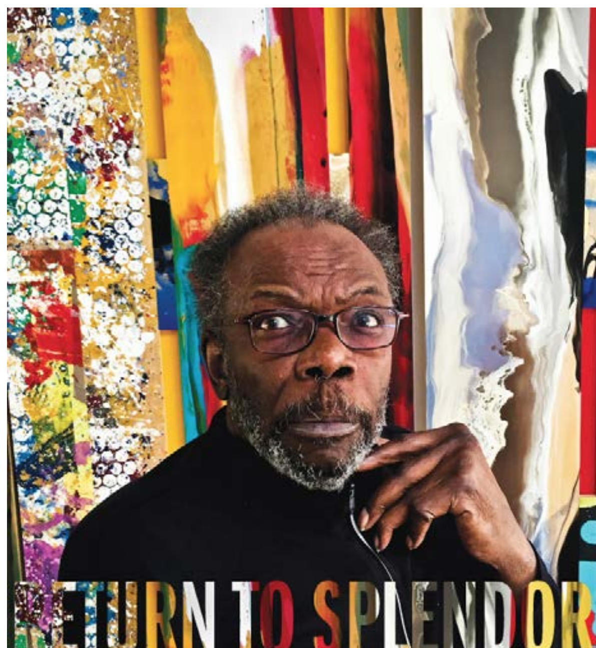
Sam Gilliam’s art is more relevant than ever, but don’t call it a comeback.

By Kriston Capps • Photographs by Darrow Montgomery • March 27, 2015



Maybe you’ve heard of Sam Gilliam. Maybe you’ve seen his work, but it’s been a while. Right now, the art world is rediscovering the painter for the first or second or maybe third time.

Once again, the moment is just right. It’s been 10 years since his major retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Twenty years since he showed at a project space run by the Whitney Museum of American Art, a museum he once boycotted.

Thirty years since his first solo shows at the Corcoran and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Forty years since he made the cover of *Art in America*.

Fifty years since his first show at the Phillips Collection.

But it’s been just two years since Rashid Johnson, the post-black conceptualist photographer and rising New York art star, curated an exhibit of Gilliam’s early work at a prominent Los Angeles space, David Kordansky Gallery. The show drew admiring writeups in *W*, *Vogue*, and the *Wall Street Journal.* Then, last year, Kordansky devoted the gallery’s entire booth at the Frieze New York art fair to showing Gilliam’s work. Over this short span, a hot second in Gilliam’s career, the price of his paintings has doubled.

This is to say nothing of the National Medal of Arts he received in January. Secretary of State John Kerry presided over the ceremony, which also honored Maya Lin, Kehinde Wiley, and other titans of culture. Gilliam received a Lifetime Achievement Award, the first ever bestowed by the program, for showing his work in embassies and diplomatic outposts in more than 20 countries.

No, Robert Colescott was not the first black artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. That was Sam Gilliam.

An outpouring of love from New York, Los Angeles, and the State Department has revived Gilliam’s career, but also some of the misconceptions that have trailed it. A recent profile in the *New York Times’ T Magazine* showers Kordansky with praise, yet sums up Gilliam as a painter who never earned the recognition of his peers “in part because the art establishment didn’t know what to make of a black artist who refused to make work about race.”

No, Sam Gilliam was never so broke that he had to trade paintings for laundry detergent. Things never got that bad in D.C. (*T Magazine* ran with this colorful detail but retracted it.)

Maybe Gilliam did shed some tears, as *T* relates, when an ambitious young curator and an ascendent young photographer (Kordansky and Johnson) showed up at his studio, promising the one thing that has always eluded him. No, not success—the man’s got seven honorary doctorates—but context.

Through his new Los Angeles show, Gilliam has landed paintings in the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Rose Art Museum, among other collections, both institutional and private. Most of those museums already owned his work. But now, these museums and more are rushing to put it out on display. His paintings are now some of the most pressing artworks of the moment.

“It seems like an especially important moment to bring Sam back,” says Kurt Mueller, director at David Kordansky Gallery. “Because there’s so many young painters doing what’s called—my favorite term for is it

zombie formalism—where they’re reconsidering painting as an object, or painting as a process, or painting as an installation. This is something that Sam was the leading edge of back in the ‘60s and early ‘70s.”

At 81, Gilliam may finally be shedding the Washington Color School label that has followed his work for most of his life. As much as he admires those Color School luminaries—most of whom are no longer living—their works and their goals never fully encapsulated his own. It was always possible to see the ways his work broke protocol. Now the world is looking.

While his paintings are finding new purchase in New York, Los Angeles, and beyond, Gilliam still credits Washington, D.C., for everything he’s accomplished.

“It was very ambitious,” Gilliam says, remembering the art scene he discovered in the District in 1962. “Things that could keep you up all night long.”

No, despite what you may have heard, Sam Gilliam is not a Washington Color School painter.

Gilliam came to the District by way of Louisville, Ky., where he spent his childhood and earned his education. He studied fine art at the University of Louisville, where he learned to paint in a figurative manner associated with the Bay Area movement. That’s also where he took classes with Johnny Unitas, the legendary Baltimore Colts quarterback, he says, beaming. Gilliam coached basketball while he taught sixth grade for a year in Louisville, and he’s a big fan of D.C. hoops, especially at the high-school level. He greatly admires Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (despite the fact that his Milwaukee Bucks swept the Washington Bullets in the 1971 NBA Finals).

In 1956, Gilliam served a two-year peacetime deployment for the U.S. Army in Japan, where he earned a badge as a sharpshooter. When I ask him about his time there, the first thing he mentions is seeing a project

by the artist Franz Kline in Tokyo. “Japan was very stimulating,” Gilliam says. “Meeting Japanese artists, young artists, who were following the Abstract Expressionist movement. When I went back to Louisville, I wasn’t ready for a small town.”

He wasn’t necessarily ready for a career as an artist, either. He got his master’s degree in painting from the University of Louisville in 1961. The following year, he married Dorothy Butler, a city desk reporter for the *Washington Post* (the first black woman to work as a reporter there), and moved to the District. “I had come to the point that I wasn’t going to paint,” he says about his uncertain early years. “I didn’t think that painting led to anything.”

Upon arriving in D.C., he applied to teach at Howard University, where faculty, including David Driskell, Lois Mailou Jones, and James Porter, were building a hell of an art department in the early 1960s. Howard didn’t take Gilliam on, though. This makes sense, stylistically speaking, according to Jonathan Binstock. In his 2005 monograph on Sam Gilliam, Binstock speculates that the sullen Bay Area–style paintings that Gilliam was making back then didn’t mix with the highly animated black figurative work at Howard. Gilliam’s relationship with black art (or lack thereof) would be a theme underscored by critics throughout his career. (Binstock, who curated Gilliam’s career retrospective while he was with the Corcoran in 2005, is now the director of the University of Rochester Memorial Art Gallery.)

“I would’ve chosen New York,” Gilliam says. He got a job teaching at McKinley High School instead. It didn’t much matter, or so it seemed: New York and D.C. were emerging as “simultaneous cities” back then, as he puts it. He maintained strong relationships with the artists he had met in Harlem when he visited Butler while she was studying journalism at Columbia University; his work appeared in the inaugural show at Harlem’s Studio Museum in 1968. But Gilliam put roots down in D.C. He quickly came to know the growing group of artists working under the Washington Color School banner. These artists were his teammates.

“Tom Downing. Howard Mehring. I knew Gene Davis. I wasn’t a friend of his. Gene was rather elite,” Gilliam says. “There were a lot of artists. Washington became a camping ground for everyone that came from college that didn’t want to live in New York.”

In D.C., two figures emerged as special influences early in Gilliam’s career. One was Downing, the painter who made dots a thing. Downing had never earned the favor of the powerful art critic Clement Greenberg, who had named Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland the deans of the Washington Color School. Crucially, Downing was never dogmatic about Greenberg’s precepts for how Color School art should work, neither in his own practice nor as a mentor to Gilliam. (Even in the 1960s, New York was telling D.C. how to act.)

“That became my ambition,” Gilliam says. “Just to be a Washington artist.”

The other coach in Gilliam’s corner was Walter Hopps, a mercurial curator who left an outsized footprint in the District. “No single individual contributed more to Washington’s art scene from 1966 to 1972—and to Gilliam’s professional development during that period—than Walter Hopps,” Binstock’s monograph reads.

Hopps dragged Gilliam to California, his former home, where Gilliam drove Hopps all around the state. The curator brought him along for studio visits with legends in the making like Sam Francis and Robert Irwin, introduced him to the Watts Writers Workshop in South Central Los Angeles, and toured with him the major printing studios in the Bay Area. “Walter didn’t really like Washington or the Washington Color School,” Gilliam says. Hopps championed Gilliam everywhere he went.

“Of all the artists working at the time, it was Sam Gilliam who earned [Hopps’] greatest respect and admiration,” Binstock says. “Sam was a way forward in Walter’s mind. He represented another phase in the conversation on Modernist art.”
In 1972, Hopps added Gilliam to a roster of heavyweight artists that included Richard Estes and Diane Arbus to represent the U.S. in the Venice Biennale. That same year, Hopps was fired from the Corcoran, officially

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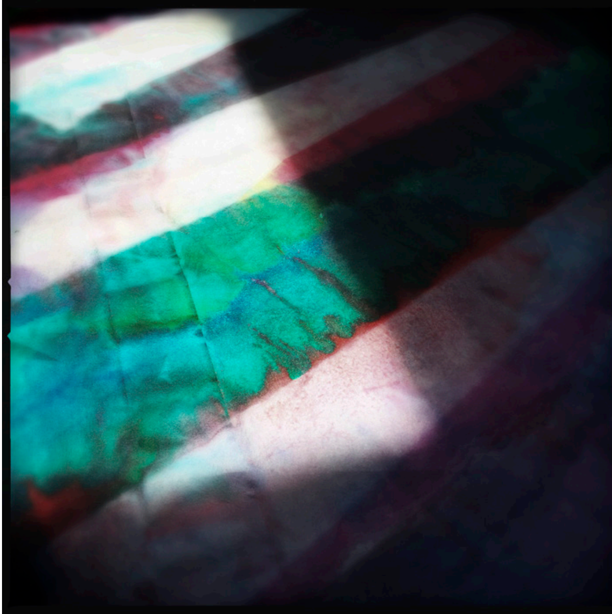

for the unexplained absences that dogged his workdays (the same reason he’d been drummed out of the Pasadena Art Museum). According to Gilliam, the truth is that Hopps refused an order from a board member to fire a curator who didn’t wear a bra. (Even in the 1970s, Corcoran trustees didn’t know how to behave.)

But before Hopps left, he helped usher Gilliam into the hall of fame. In September 1969, Hopps mounted a three-artist show at the Corcoran (with Rockne Krebs and Ed McGowin). In that exhibition, Gilliam debuted his “drapes,” in which the artist suspended painted, unstretched canvas without any wooden support. The show included 10 of these slobberknockers, among them “Baroque Cascade,” a painting spanning 150 feet.

The drapes were a mondo breakthrough. While Gilliam wasn’t the only artist exploring this mode (which Binstock refers to as “softness”), he nevertheless rocketed ahead of the rest with the dramatic drapes he produced in the 1960s and 1970s. This was Gilliam’s fast break.

“I stayed up all night,” Gilliam says. “Those were amazing days.”

Yet for decades to follow, it seemed that somehow, despite the height of his accomplishment and all the praise he garnered for the originality of his work, Gilliam found himself alone. The art world had moved somewhere else, leaving him behind.

Three years ago, Gilliam moved into his current studio, a converted warehouse (and former gas station) in 16th Street Heights where he works most days. For many years prior, he worked out of a second-floor space in a building he owned at 14th and U streets NW (the same one now occupied by the GoodWood furniture store). He held out on the U Street studio for as long as he could, says Annie Gawlak, Gilliam’s partner of the last 30 years and the proprietor of D.C.’s G Fine Art gallery.

But with property taxes and rents rising along the 14th and U street corridors, Gilliam sold the building in 2010. According to tax records, the building sold for $3.85 million: an awful lot of detergent. “He bought that building in the early 1970s for $60,000 and three paintings,” Gawlak says.

Gilliam might have retired as a lion in winter when he sold his former studio building in 2010. He has three daughters by his first wife, but they’d long since graduated college (he now has three grandchildren). He and Gawlak had moved from Mount Pleasant to Crestwood in 1996. (“Annie said she was going to leave me if she couldn’t get a place with trees,” he says.) His health had begun to decline: Gilliam suffers from chronic kidney disease, which he is currently managing with a strict hydration and dietary regime.

And he’d worked through hard times. Binstock tells a story in his monograph about how Gilliam once worked for six months in 1967 on little more than the promise of a check from an artist-in-residence program Hopps had arranged for him. Gilliam tells me that, for all the gains that black artists were making, even the best of

them—Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden—rarely ever saw more than one of their paintings hanging in a museum.

When I ask Gilliam if it was hard making work as a black man, he fixes me with a look like I’m simple. “Yeah,” he says, with the same quiet kindness with which he says everything. He has almost never addressed race as an artist: His paintings are concerned strictly with the formal qualities of painting. This is not to say he is apolitical: Gilliam and other artists pulled out of a 1971 show at the Whitney, “Contemporary Black Artists in America,” because the museum had not consulted with any black artists. And he was fully invested in debates about the direction of museums in D.C.

Above all, abstraction (and D.C.) had begun to fade from view when Gilliam was making his greatest strides.

“He took the hardest road. Choosing to be an artist, period, is a tough one. It’s a risky venture. Most will go unnoticed and unappreciated. How many people deserve the attention?” Binstock says. “Given when he was working, it had nothing to do with him. It was hard for Lynda Benglis. It was hard for Eva Hesse. It was hard for Richard Tuttle. It was hard for all these artists.”

Binstock adds, “I think it was especially hard for Sam. African Americans, especially in the early 60s, just had fewer opportunities. There were greater obstacles in their path when it came to achieving success, recognition, building a career as an artist. It’s just a fact of American history.”

By 2010, Gilliam’s paintings were in the collections of any museum you cared to name, but his gallery appearances had dwindled to small shows at the Marsha Mateyka Gallery in Dupont Circle—a fine gallery, but a long way from the blue-chip art world. His longtime Paris dealer, Darthea Speyer, shuttered her gallery in 2009; she died from complications of Alzheimer’s disease last year. Most of the artists of the Washington Color School to which Gilliam’s name was inextricably linked had died.

“My life was as abundant as I could have made it,” Gilliam says. He forged on. “I’m just starting.”

He commissioned a design firm (Wnuk Spurlock Architecture) to convert the warehouse into an open, airy, 6,000-square-foot studio with high ceilings, storage space, and a wood shop. He hired four assistants. He continued to paint, making series after series, just as he had on U Street, just as he had under Walter Hopps, just as he had beside Tom Downing.

“I used to paint by myself. I spent long hours doing it. I had lots of energy,” Gilliam says. Now? “I don’t have to teach and then paint. I don’t have to worry that much about paying bills. Now it seems a lot more fun.”

Most all of Gilliam’s ideas are represented in the 16th Street Heights studio in one form or another. It may be the largest repository of contemporary art in D.C. outside the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Kordansky and Johnson met with Gilliam at his studio in 2012.

“They were really blown away by everything they saw,” says Mueller. (Kordansky, who is traveling for personal reasons, could not be reached.) “Sam is a very protean artist. He’s amazing in that regard, his desire and ability to keep inventing new formal languages and approaches.”

Johnson curated a show of Gilliam’s first D.C. paintings, hard-edged abstractions painted between 1963 and 1966, works too early even for Binstock’s career retrospective. Mueller says that starting from the bottom is a deliberate strategy that Kordansky is taking to show artists of an older generation. The gallery is retelling Gilliam’s story from the hard start. “There’s 40-plus years of work. We’re only a couple of years in,” Mueller says. “We have quite some ground to cover. We want to take our time to do it thoughtfully and carefully.” Gilliam’s next show with Kordansky, scheduled for next year, will focus on his bevel-edged, or “slice,” paint-

ings of the 1960s. The show will grace the gallery’s new 20,000-square-foot space near Hollywood, a sizable expansion that Gilliam’s strong sales helped to build. It’s notable that these sales are all coming from his early works—not the drape paintings that curators and historians know from the pinnacle of his career. (The gallery did sell one of Gilliam’s drapes to MoMA.)

“Viewers either know Sam’s work and are very excited to see it again, or they don’t know it all, and are just blown away,” Mueller says. “This was what [Gilliam] had been waiting for, for someone to come back and recognize what he had done and what he was doing.”

Gilliam’s rediscovery has allowed for his work to be seen in a brand new light. At the Rose Art Museum, a wide-ranging show called “Pretty Raw: After and Around Helen Frankenthaler” matches Gilliam up with Lynda Benglis, an artist who explored “softness” by pouring latex paint in puddles. (For her part, Frankenthaler devised the canvas-staining technique adopted by the Washington Color School.) “Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties” at the Brooklyn Museum in 2014 included Gilliam, a painter who defied pretty much everyone’s expectations of a black artist by devoting his career to formalist experimentation.

Then there are the art fairs and their booths upon booths of zombie formalism. Walter Robinson, an art critic, coined the term: “‘Formalism’ because this art involves a straightforward, reductive, essentialist method of making a painting…. ‘Zombie’ because it brings back to life the discarded aesthetics of Clement Greenberg.” The ideas that gave rise to Gilliam’s work in the 1960s are back in fashion. Artists everywhere are discovering his discoveries.

“Sam’s been misperceived as a Washington Color School painter for a very long time. He certainly comes out of that tradition. He was certainly inspired by that tradition,” Binstock says. “But he introduced aesthetics, ways of making, that were completely anathema to Color School art. Sam’s painting was theatrical, architectural. It had nothing to do with drilling down deeper into a singular notion of what painting could be.”

“In Frieze New York, people would walk by the booth and say, who’s the artist?” Mueller says. “They would assume in that question that they were made in the last year or two years. These were made over 40 years ago. You could just see their jaws drop.”

Gilliam was ahead of his time. “So much so,” writes critic Mark Rappolt, “that during the early 1980s, one of his draped canvases, commissioned for a state office building in Atlanta, was nearly thrown out by workers before it was installed—they had thought it was merely a drop cloth left behind by decorators.”

The National Gallery of Art is yet another museum that has recently scooped up paintings by Gilliam.

In February, the National Gallery took custody of more than 17,000 objects from the collection of the Corcoran following the decision by the Corcoran board of trustees to dissolve the museum and Corcoran College of Art + Design.

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“The Corcoran was on its last legs in the 1960s. It had some great years, but it could never sustain itself,” Gilliam says. “I’ve been a big supporter of the Corcoran. I sort of built it.”

Last month, the National Gallery brought 6,000-plus artworks from the Corcoran into its own collection. What it does not take will be distributed among Washington-area museums—and possibly beyond.

“The NGA collections are highly selective and not subject to deaccession,” writes Harry Cooper, curator and head of department of modern art for the National Gallery, in an email. “As a result, in many cases we only have one or two works by a given artist. But many artists deserve a broader representation which reflects their changing careers. Such is the case with Sam Gilliam.”

Among the accessions announced by the National Gallery are a handful of works by Gilliam, including three paintings: “Shoot Six,” “Certain,” and “Scrub.” One of these, “Shoot Six,” is a hard-edged painting much like the series shown by Johnson in Los Angeles.

That adds to the Gilliam painting the National Gallery already owns (a 1969 drape painting called “Relative”), plus another four promised to the museum by Dorothy Butler Gilliam, according to Cooper. He says that he is still reviewing the remaining works from the Corcoran collection, including “Light Depth,” a standout drape painting.

All in all, the National Gallery now owns four paintings and 14 works on paper by Gilliam, and it stands to gain others. It should consider putting these and more on view (and not merely in the planned Corcoran Legacy Gallery). The museum has a poor record of showing work by people of color. It has organized just one exhibit by a living African-American artist in its nearly 75-year history (Kerry James Marshall’s excelsior D.C. solo debut in 2013). Right now, the market interest in Gilliam’s work is strong, whereas the research—Binstock’s excellent monograph notwithstanding—is still incomplete.

“There is growing interest in African-American artists who came up in the 1960s and 1970s and remained true to abstraction despite pressures to embrace subject matter driven by politics or identity,” Cooper writes. “Gilliam is among the best of these.”

Foremost in Gilliam’s mind, he says, is the dearth of the kinds of alternative institutions in D.C. that “made art part of the street” back in his heyday (which might be coming up again). “Something has to happen to revive this place,” he says.

Gilliam helped to form both the Washington Project for the Arts and DC Arts Center—both of which are doing well today. Those places were instrumental to the way he found success as a painter again and again.

“I couldn’t have done it any other way unless I’d been here,” Gilliam says. “Washington was a place you became known.”