

Freudenheim, Tom L., "A Master of Color Too Long in the Shadows," *Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2006

WALL STREET JOURNAL

A Master of Color Too Long in the Shadows

By TOM L. FREUDENHEIM

A high-risk museum venture: a retrospective exhibition of a living artist. Too selective, and the artist is only partially seen. Too inclusive, and one may think the artist might have been better served by no exhibition at all. Those apprehensions are quickly put to rest in the Corcoran's impressive array of Sam Gilliam's paintings.

Born in Tupelo, Miss., in 1933, Mr. Gilliam landed in Washington in 1962, after earning a graduate fine-arts degree from the University of Louisville. That made for a late arrival at the doorstep of the so-called Washington Color School (Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland are among its most prominent names). This was still the small-town national capital, with fewer museums than today's Washington and a close-knit community of artists, many of them clustered around the Corcoran School of Art and heavily influenced by the accomplished painters and teachers Tom Downing and Gene Davis. It's more a comment on the fast-moving world of art fashion than a reflection of quality that some of these names resonate from an irrelevant past.



Corcoran Gallery of Art

Among Sam Gilliam's best-known works are his 'draped' paintings, such as 1969's 'Light Depth,' in which painted and unstretched canvas cascades in space—suspended by wires or tossed over wood supports.

Nowhere is this more evident than in "Leah's Renoir" (1979) -- oddly named, since the layers of almost shimmering paint are more suggestive of Monet's large water-lily paintings.

Mr. Gilliam is an exuberant colorist whose almost batik-like, thinly paint-stained canvases evolved into works with drips and splashes of paint sometimes so heavily layered that they suggest relief sculptures. The exhibition is a reminder of both his power as a painter and of the Corcoran's breathtakingly capacious galleries -- among this country's most beautiful. Some of the larger works bring back the nostalgia of discovering large Abstract Expressionist paintings: We wish that we might simply dive into the walls, but those walls just happen to be

Freudenheim, Tom L., "A Master of Color Too Long in the Shadows," *Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2006

As strongly as anyone since de Kooning, Mr. Gilliam is a painter of passages -- lyrical melanges of splashes and streaks that often emerge from the rich strata of paint and challenge one another: Think of the Molto Allegro (last movement) of Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony, where the themes emerge, playing against and finally with each other. I found this musical quality one of the consistent strains in this Gilliam exhibition, giving me a new perspective on his best-known works: the "draped" paintings of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which painted and unstretched canvas cascades in space -- suspended by wires or nonchalantly tossed over crude wood supports.

"Relative" (1969) -- huge rose and green stretches of canvas, knotted at the top for wall hanging, and suggesting the gore of bloody bandages -- still looks daring. These are so obviously a painter's heroic gestures that they don't lend themselves to other interpretations. However, when the canvases find their way onto stretchers with beveled edges, the illusion created by the folds of canvas and paint conjures up the classic dilemma of abstract painting: the tension between imagined image and simply lush paint.

Throughout his career, Mr. Gilliam has investigated how colors interact, in the tradition of Hans Hofmann, to whom he often seems to be paying homage. There is a consistency in the dynamic movement within the canvas as Mr. Gilliam layers, sometimes even slathers, his paints -- one of the most compelling ways in which the artist moves from his early stained, almost dappled, canvases to a palette that is at once far richer and also more subtle.

The irregularly shaped canvases of the 1980s lack discipline, as the artist appears to grope with the challenge of finding a format for his colors. Yet we never doubt Mr. Gilliam's power as a painter, and even in these works, for example "The St. of Moritz" (1984), and in others that show a relationship to Frank Stella's relief painting/constructions of the 1980s, Mr. Gilliam maintains control in handling a myriad of moments -- painterly passages that are endlessly rich and often mesmerizing.

A recent sculpture, "A and the Kitty" (1998), is needlessly complex; yet we recognize it as another version of a painting. "30,000 Knots (2005)," a commemorative return to the earlier draped paintings, hangs in the Corcoran's beautiful rotunda as a signature piece in which theatrics overpower Mr. Gilliam's truly impressive skills as a master of colors.

It's a bit disconcerting to realize that this is the artist's first full retrospective ever, and that Jonathan P. Binstock's excellent catalog is the first monograph.

Freudenheim, Tom L., "A Master of Color Too Long in the Shadows," *Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2006

The Sam Gilliam exhibition shows a painter secure in his work and thus unafraid to suggest echoes of earlier modernist painters and contemporaneous artists. "Composed" (formerly "Dark as I Am," 1968-74) hints at Robert Rauschenberg's Combine paintings, and yet it is more hauntingly personal. The most recent works, uncharacteristically monochromatic, with overtones of 1920s deStijl abstraction and highly polished acrylic surfaces, suggest a local boy's homage to the highly regarded Washington artist (and diarist) Anne Truitt (1921-2004); yet they have little in common with Ms. Truitt's mysteriously intense colors and the simple rectangular forms of both her paintings and sculptures. In contrast, Mr. Gilliam characteristically reveals the support mechanisms of his paintings -- here, birch plywood that remains visible at the edges -- again reaffirming the notion that, whatever the substratum of support, color is what matters most for him.

This overdue retrospective serves the artist well. Moreover, a visitor gets to share in the excitement of Mr. Gilliam's highly personal vision and his commitment to the apparently endless possibilities of paint and color.