

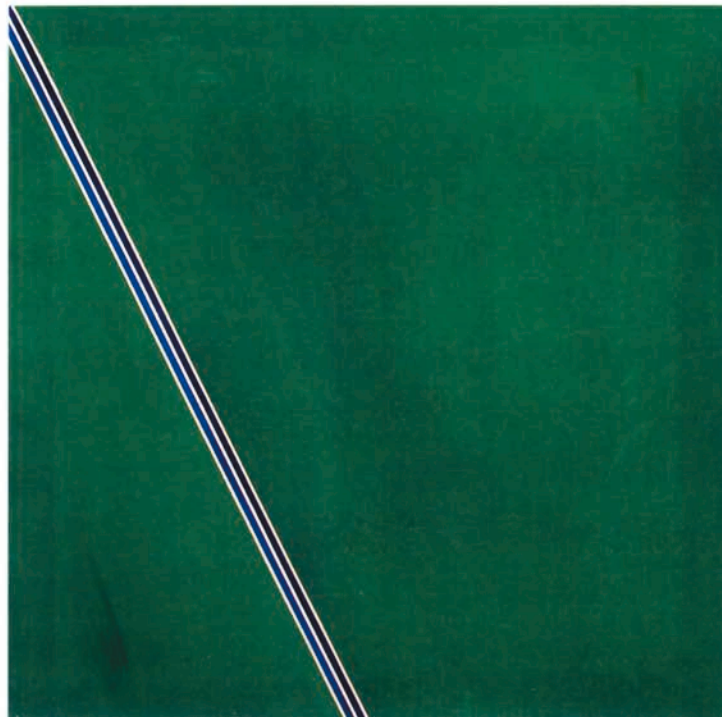


A pioneer of colour field painting speaks about being curated by Rashid Johnson

By Mark Rappolt

So, here's a thing. There's a painter who during the mid-1960s starts doing radical things with his materials and medium. Having created a series of works that explore abstraction and hard-edged geometry, he pushes his experiments to a new level. He begins treating the canvas as a flexible rather than fixed surface for painting on. He's one of the first artists to introduce the idea of paint spreading beyond the canvas and, starting in 1968, of canvases working independently of the stretcher - hung from a variety of other supports and interacting with the architecture of the exhibition space. He's creating art that pushes formal ideas of restructuring and re-forming. And ultimately he's pushing painting into realms that touch on what others might call sculpture and more contemporary folks installation art. In short, he's an artist ahead of his time. So much so that during the early 1980s, one of his draped canvases, commissioned for a state office building in Atlanta, was nearly thrown out

Sam Gilliam



this page, from top:
Hellas, 1965, acrylic on canvas,
183 x 184 cm, photo: Stephen
Frietch; *65*, 1965, acrylic on
canvas, 141 x 142 cm, photo:
Stephen Frietch

facing page:
Blue Let, 1965, acrylic on canvas,
181 x 119 cm, photo: Brandon
Webster

Rappolt, Mark, "Sam Gilliam," *ArtReview*, Issue 67, April 2013, pp. 76-79



this page, from left:
Ode, 1966, acrylic on canvas,
226 x 213 cm, photo: Stephen
Frietch; *Black Break*, 1966,
acrylic on canvas, 229 x 144 cm,
photo: Stephen Frietch

all images:
Courtesy David Kordansky
Gallery, Los Angeles



delivery of content (whether it's the inclusion of those carefully selected books in a sculpture, or a work such as *I Talk White*, 2003, a photograph of the title written out in white moisturising lotion). "We're both on the same page," says Gilliam, "but we develop work in different directions – we're from different generations. How he stands in his generation and his approaches are different from mine."

"There are black artists who tend to work with the message involved," he continues, discussing artists of a later generation. "They are able to do something I was not – to keep the political in the front. I may have made a big mistake by not looking closer earlier – they're in the news and you want to know what they're doing." But there's no doubt that Gilliam's efforts to expand the scope and range of both his medium – letting the formal aspects of work that is both apparently and essentially

abstract be shaped by external elements – and the environment in which it is viewed opened up a territory that artists such as Johnson could explore.

"I followed in Sam's footsteps when I had a show in Magdeburg, Germany [*Sharpening My Oyster Knife*, Kunstmuseum Magdeburg, 2008]," Johnson explains. "Sam had been there earlier [*Of Fireflies and Ferris Wheels*, 1997] and I dug into the catalogue – the destruction and removal of the stretcher was a really important evolution. A lot of artists' work owes him a great debt."

On the one hand there is clearly a sense that Johnson is conscious of what he calls "the level of access for black artists" half a century ago and wanting to address this imbalance; and Gilliam's strength of purpose and optimism about the outcome of his works is clearly something he admires. On the other hand he describes a far more selfish motivation for getting involved: "I'm

interested in seeing how people respond to the things I like," he says.

While Gilliam concedes that "there's a lot that's not been said about the times we've been through" (not just for artists of colour, he points out, but for women artists, too), he's more phlegmatic about the past: "When you choose a career in art or the life of an artist," he points out, "you put yourself in a position where there's a likelihood of not much success." And what does he hope people take away from the show? "To see the work and see the context, to look at it as painting and approach the painting as something that at the time was very far out. That's what it takes to follow your own desires or thinking and be optimistic."•

Sam Gilliam: *Hard-Edge Paintings 1963–66*, curated by Rashid Johnson, is on show at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 28 March – 11 May