

## ARTFORUM

### LOS ANGELES

## Sam Gilliam

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

"Starting: Works on Paper 1967–1970" was a rare chance to see sixteen of Sam Gilliam's early, never-before-exhibited works, shown alongside a typeset poem, ca. 1965. Each piece was small in size and expansive in metaphoric scale. The palette ranged from deep and muddy in the 1967 "Rock Creek" series to full-on electric in others. *Untitled*, 1968, seemed to figure an aurora borealis in an already Technicolor sky, its expansiveness belied by the modest physical dimensions of the vertical page. The overlapping splatters of blue, brown, and yellow in "Rock Creek," especially in *Untitled*, 1967, were exuberant in their own way: They preserved the force of the process of their making as an aesthetic of explosive loci of color. Seen together, the works in the series are epic.

"Rock Creek" refers to the park near Gilliam's home in Washington, DC, where he made the works *en plein air*, registering atmosphere and light. The works are also calculated responses to Color Field painting, a genre to which he made significant contributions. They were made in Gilliam's formative years, during which he started traveling more frequently to New York, where, as the press release noted, he would have been seeing work by other artists responding to Abstract Expressionism. From 1967 through 1970, Gilliam participated in multiple institutional group shows there, at the Museum of Modern Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. During the same period in New York, he had a solo exhibition at the Byron Gallery, followed by "Projects: Sam Gilliam" at MOMA in 1971.

The years of the show also bracketed Gilliam's development of two symbiotic bodies of work: the beveled-edge and drape paintings. In the latter, Gilliam reveled in the physicality of diluted acrylic paint poured onto unprimed, unstretched canvases that would later be hung as fabric garlands or curtains, contained by the architecture in imposing



Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 1970, watercolor on paper, 13¾ × 17½".

installations that defined a nearly choreographic spatial field. In a somewhat reverse sequence, for the beveled-edge paintings, Gilliam would first fold or bunch the fabric and then apply the acrylics before stretching the canvas on a beveled frame. This exhibition showcased Gilliam's experiments with comparable processes on paper, where the material still harbored traces of having been folded in origami-like bundles before being dipped into watercolor, absorbing those hues into its fibers and arresting the patterns of the creases.

Gilliam's paintings on textiles have received significantly more (and equally overdue) attention in recent years than have his works on paper. They figured prominently in his major 2018 exhibition "The Music of Color" at the Kunstmuseum Basel, and in "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963–1983," on view currently at the Broad in Los Angeles. The danger, then, is that his paintings on paper will be read as mere precedents for the larger works, especially as a third subsection of this show at David Kordansky Gallery presented pieces that suggested articulations of the drape paintings, which are remade anew for every institution. One could, rather cynically, read the show's titular *starting* as a call for these works to enter the now-burgeoning market for Gilliam's monumental pieces. But while the smaller works' calligraphic marks might abstractly delineate possible formations of the obdurately material swaths of color on canvas, they certainly ask to be read independently, as exercises in experimental uncertainty without a destination. Gilliam's poem in this show began with the line *TIME LEAVES MEMOIRS PLAYING* and ended with an evocative fantasy of irresolution: *THE YELLOW BUOYS MARK THE WAY TO THE PURPLE DREAMS.*

—Suzanne Hudson