Bryan-Wilson, Julia, “The Rake and the Furrow,” *Artforum*, November 2023, cover, pp. 122-127

ARTFORUM

Bryan-Wilson, Julia, “The Rake and the Furrow,” *Artforum*, November 2023, cover, pp. 122-127

THE RAKE AND THE FURROW

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON ON THE ART OF SAM GILLIAM

Bryan-Wilson, Julia, "The Rake and the Furrow," *Artforum*, November 2023, cover, pp. 122-127

SAM GILLIAM'S 1980 painting *Robbin' Peter* seethes with pigment. The colors densely clot in some areas and in others are scraped flat to reveal the weave of the raw fabric canvas. Reds and blues clump and splat and drip, interrupted by short linear marks dragged through the paint to create rhythmic grooves. The work is a puzzle-like collage of previous Gilliam paintings, which have been cut up, reassembled, and glued in patchwork-quilt fashion, and in fact it takes its name from a vernacular quilt pattern known as "Robbing Peter to Pay Paul"—conventionally, a two-color needlework with curved diamond seams and overlapping, interlocked quartered circles. The pattern is found on quilts across the United States from the nineteenth century to the present day and is sometimes called simply, as Gilliam's title acknowledges, "Robbing Peter."[1] Part of "Chasers," a series of nine-sided works that Gilliam made between circa 1980 and 1982, pursuing in the process his always restless experiments with texture, shape, and surface, the quilt painting is muscular and assertive, pressing into space with its thick, built-up impasto excrescences.

As much a tactile, embodied object to be physically apprehended as an image to be optically perceived, the piece speaks to Gilliam's interest in enfleshing abstraction, or what I'll call his incarnation of abstract motifs. As the artist stated in a 1983 interview, "One of the things I always felt about beginning to shape paintings was to make a change from the normal or expected in rectangular or square pictures. . . . It was a way of finding a look that would carry a sense of surface. One looks at painting in terms of many things including touch."[2]

Opposite page: **Sam Gilliam, *Robbin' Peter*, 1980**, acrylic on canvas, 80 × 90". From the series "Chasers," ca. 1980–82.

Below: **Sam Gilliam in his studio, Washington, DC, 1980.** Photo: Anthony Barboza/Getty Images.

Gilliam's knowing, haptic grappling with paint veers as much into Gutai mud-wrestling territory as it cites the mannered cross-hatching of Jasper Johns; however, if you believe that a major legacy can be legitimized only through comparisons to canonized men, stop reading now. Rather, Gilliam's solicitation of touch in his paintings—his enfleshment of abstraction—has political ramifications that are in dialogue with Black feminist practices and are made manifest in the way the works look as well as in how they were made. Though his radically supple unstretched paintings have been rightly at the center of much of the art-historical literature about Gilliam to date, this incarnated politics is also apparent in other aspects of his process, namely, his patchworked canvases and raked furrows.

Let me attempt to catalogue just a few of the artist's formal innovations on display in this one work: First, Gilliam breaks the traditional rectangular frame with his introduction of an irregular beveled-edge polyhedron, which necessitated the building of a complex wooden stretcher. He repeats this shape across the works in the "Chasers" series, each of which balances an element in the upper right within the rest of the composition, playing with how different two canvases can look despite an underlying similarity. Second, Gilliam pushes to an extreme what one reviewer called "self-collage," an impulse to cannibalize and reimagine older paintings, slicing them "into geometrical shapes and then incorporating them into the surfaces of other paintings."[3]

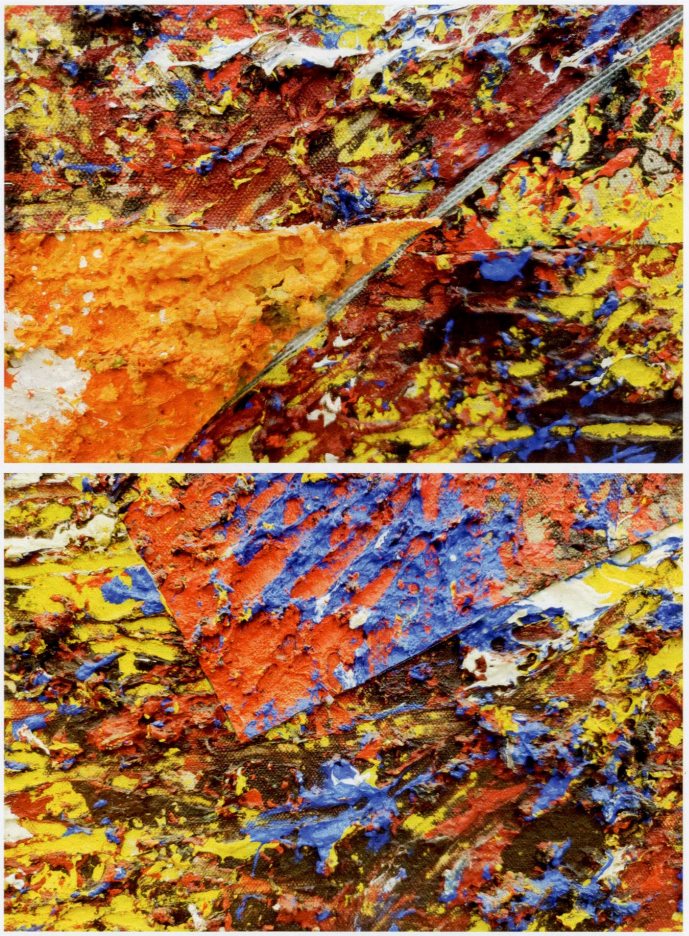
Third, his vigorous use of the rake to corral his heavily applied paint—by 1980 a long-standing practice for the artist—creates multidirectional passages of parallel marks, sometimes intersecting with the angled or gently arced shards of the cut-up patchwork pieces. As a result, the hot yellows and deep crimsons seem to bubble up from an underground source, like molten lava seeping through a crevasse. Making such large paintings was clearly a full-body enterprise, and studio pictures of Gilliam at work demonstrate his insistently immersive efforts, showing him with spattered outfits and encrusted boots, rakes (sometimes rug rakes, sometimes garden rakes) at his side. Gilliam's scored lines can appear spontaneous, like digital flutings gouged by someone's fingers, or precise, as if left behind by a mechanical harrow churning through soil.

In a 2020 essay on the artist, Fred Moten discusses how Black women's labor is a persistent current that pulses through Gilliam's oeuvre: "Black women's work resists Gilliam and resists through Gilliam, animating both his work and what his work resists. . . . The washerwomen remain in the folds as their very animation."[4] Building on Moten, I claim that so, too, does the rug rake point us to Black women's labor, in particular to the undervalued realm of housecleaning and the tending of the matted textiles that typically cover the floor. Best known for his radical gesture of draping canvases—inspired by laundered clothes hanging out to dry—in a move that liberated painting from its stiffly stretched geometries, Gilliam definitively pays homage to "women's work" in quilt-like paintings like *Robbin' Peter* with their recall of the handcrafted labors of stitching and sewing, their use of a domestic tool for the cleaning and maintenance of carpets, and their frank acknowledgment of the canvas support as another textile.

Along with participating in—and very much catalyzing—a larger modernist discourse about abstraction and the sculptural qualities of paint as a vital member of the Washington Color School, Gilliam created works that are multiply evocative of the everyday labor performed by ordinary folks, including his parents, referencing not only his father's carpentry skills (required to hammer out his unusual wooden frames) but also, as Valerie Cassel Oliver notes, "the sewing that he would see his mother engaged in."[5] Oliver also suggests possible connections between the "Chasers" paintings,

Bryan-Wilson, Julia, “The Rake and the Furrow,” *Artforum*, November 2023, cover, pp. 122-127

Gilliam’s solicitation of touch in his paintings—his enfleshment of abstraction—has political ramifications that are in dialogue with Black feminist practices.



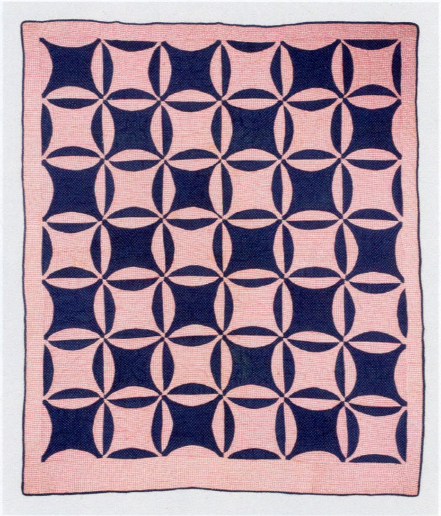
with their nods to traditional quilt patterns (in addition to “Robbing Peter to Pay Paul,” patterns alluded to in “Chasers” include “Flying Geese”) and to lore about the Underground Railroad “quilt code” that might have helped enslaved people navigate their way north to freedom. For Gilliam, materials matter. He proposes an intimate reciprocity between textile and paint.

Though the title *Robbin’ Peter* refers to a symmetrical and regularized fabric pattern, the actual design of Gilliam’s work is closer to the zigzag improvisations of the crazy quilt, which follow no preordained arrangement but rather are more fluid compositions in which each scrap responds to the others in a spontaneous and nimble process of addition. Typically constructed out of leftover remnants and castoffs, the crazy quilt offers a model for how the task of making something out of nothing can fuel the imagination. In her text “Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand,” bell hooks writes about the crazy quilt as a fundamental keeper of memory within African American cultural practices, its cloth strips holding traces of bodies as an archive of “history as life lived.”[6] Such quilts are much more than necessities for staying warm—they are beautiful, aesthetically rich objects born of Black women’s love and care. Though the crazy quilt was a popular genre across the US, hooks speculates that “it is possible that black slave women were among the first, if not the first group of females, to make crazy quilts, and that it later became a fad for privileged white women.”[7] In Gilliam’s updating of this tradition, the crazy quilt as an underlying structure has been seized upon as a resource while its soft, pliant fabrics have been translated into pigment.

Gilliam’s insistence on textured materiality in such works was emphasized in contemporary reviews. “This was a way in which the sense of the image began to melt into a feel for material,” wrote one critic.[8] Yet when Gilliam’s quilt-like “Chasers” series debuted, the works were met with mixed responses. One critic raved, “No earlier Color Painter ever managed to come up with surfaces so sculptural or with layered colors so constantly surprising.”[9] Others were less generous. A reviewer assaying Gilliam’s 1983 show at Washington, DC’s Corcoran Gallery of Art, for instance, commented that the works were too somber, verging on angsty: “Solid, handsome, workman-like . . . they just do not give as much pleasure as the more recent lighthearted canvases.”[10] That reviewer, Eleanor Green, pointed directly to the vexed status of Gilliam’s Blackness within the predominantly white art world. At the end of her review, she wrote that “it seemed ungracious . . . for both the Corcoran catalogue and early reviews to dwell on the implications of Gilliam’s black skin as if he were a Moby Dick of a different color.”[11] The double bind Green both calls out and participates in is glaring: When the artist’s Blackness is discussed, it is viewed as “ungracious.” But in her objection to such racialization, the author reproduces a violent exoticizing when, in her metaphor, Gilliam becomes an elusive, hunted whale.

As a corrective to accounts that confine Gilliam to this or that movement or a proscriptive set of identifications, it is vital to place him within all the many contexts in which his work resides, including multiple strands of modernism that encompass the flourishing of Black feminist forms.[12] It’s worth noting that 1980, the year of *Robbin’ Peter*, was also the year Faith Ringgold made her first story quilt, *Echoes of Harlem*, alongside her mother, Harlem fashion designer and tailor Willi Posey, who taught Ringgold how to sew. This mother-daughter collaboration, with its emphasis on Black faces with small smiles (shown in profile and head-on, as if to echo the disciplining mug shot while resisting its dehumanizing force), set the stage for Ringgold’s later narrative quilts that centered Black girls. By partaking in the procedures of piecework, Gilliam’s work is as much in dialogue with Ringgold’s figurative scenes as it is with the color fields of Kenneth Noland and Alma Thomas.

Another instructive comparator is Howardena Pindell, with her abstract “cut and sewn” paintings that refer obliquely to West African textiles, particularly garments from Nigeria and Ghanaian kente cloth. Created between 1977 and 1981, the works also incorporate punched-out circular paper chads, detritus from her office job at New York’s Museum of Modern Art.[13] Like Gilliam, Pindell experimented with enfleshed, bodily abstraction, painstakingly accreting bits of matter on her surfaces to create canvases that

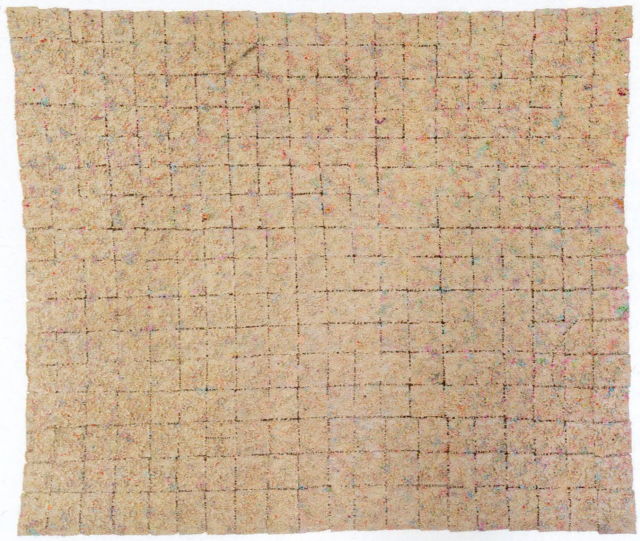


Opposite page: **Sam Gilliam, *Robbin' Peter* (details), 1980**, acrylic on canvas, 80 × 90". From the series "Chasers," ca. 1980–82.

Left: **Sam Gilliam, *Purpled*, 1980**, acrylic on canvas, 80 × 90 × 4¾". From the series "Chasers," ca. 1980–82.

Above: **"Robbing Peter to Pay Paul" quilt, ca. 1850.**

Below: **Howardena Pindell, *Untitled #24*, 1978–79**, acrylic, paper, powder, sequins, and glitter on sewn canvas, 86½ × 103".



are topographically contoured, inviting a method of seeing as a proxy for touching and, as such, resisting the vaunted flatness of Clement Greenberg's limited framework for high-modernist painting. (Greenberg never wrote a word on Pindell or, for that matter, on any Black woman artist. [14])

"What is it about Southerners, Black Southerners, particularly, and abstraction?" asks artist and educator Daonne Huff. She plumbs the deep and abiding interest in abstraction by Black artists who hail from the American South, a group that includes the Tupelo, Mississippi–born Gilliam, contending that "Southern Black Abstraction derives from an adaptation for survival."[15] Huff continues, "In abstraction, we could carry messages that those who didn't have the key wouldn't be able to decipher. In the same ways that Negro spirituals offered comfort and navigational routes to the North and safe houses." For Huff, abstraction acts as a highly developed language in which to speak what has been criminalized as unspeakable. Moten's essay on Gilliam's "whorl-making" (his poetic complement to "world-making") connects abstraction by Black artists to the abstractions of racialized capitalism—a monetary exchange system rooted in and dependent on the slave trade and on the flesh of Black bodies converted into units for sale.

In some of his last paintings, from ca. 2020–22, the politics of Gilliam's incarnating process again comes to the fore. Many of these works are named after Black cultural icons (e.g., *Nikki Giovanni*; *Black Mozart/ ORNETTE*; and *Heroines, Beyoncé, Serena, and Althea*, all 2020). Mostly

Left: **Sam Gilliam, *Foggy* (detail), 2021,** acrylic, aluminum granules, copper chop, sawdust, flocking, encaustic, and paper collage on canvas, 96 × 96 × 4".

Above: **Sam Gilliam, *For John Lewis*, 2020,** acrylic on canvas, 72 × 96 × 3¾".

Opposite page: **Sam Gilliam, *Foggy*, 2021,** acrylic, aluminum granules, copper chop, sawdust, flocking, encaustic, and paper collage on canvas, 96 × 96 × 4".

rectangular in format, some nonetheless travesty the purity of the picture plane by incorporating folds, wrinkles, creases, and crumples into their surfaces. Gilliam's late canvases have moments that rise and swell, buckling in places to create canyons and ridges. In some areas, the works literally gleam: He introduced tiny metal flecks—aluminum granules—and copper filaments alongside flocking and pale silicone beads to further encrust the surfaces with glittering texture.

The metaphors that come to my mind when I'm in front of these paintings are partly geologic (strata, sedimentation, igneous rock formations) and partly culinary—I think of baked confections, of frosting and sprinkles, of licking and tasting. The dreamy whitish-bluish *Foggy*, from 2021, has a gouge near its center, and underneath the edge of this slit lies a purple world of mystery. The late paintings are also stubbornly corporeal, recalling coagulating blood, keloid scar tissue, fibrous fasciae, a fissured cuticle, cracked heels, scabs that itch to be flaked off with a fingernail. The thingness of this matter in the end refuses to be depicted as only image and insists on its thingness; Gilliam's abstractions insist on the obduracy of matter. The example set by Gilliam's determination to remain dimensional is evident in Theaster Gates's 2022 exhibition "Young Lords and Their Traces" at New York's New Museum; one of Gilliam's used work boots, coated with residual paint, was placed inside a vitrine as a reverential sculptural object.[16]

And then there is the rake, the tool Gilliam used so often. In *For John Lewis*, 2020, Gilliam creates a dark night sky speckled with universal emanations. At the far reaches of the upper right corner are several deliberate crosshatched scrapes, like lines of ruled paper etched into the paint. The gesture of raking returns me to the idea of Gilliam's works as suggestive of both textile labors (when performed with the rug rake) and as redolent of tilled landscapes (when performed with the leaf rake). Scholar Sylvia Wynter writes about how enslaved people forced to work plantations in the Caribbean were granted a small plot of land on which to cultivate food for their own nourishment and describes how the plot thus became the crux of Black culture and survival. Wynter argues that "this folk culture became a source of cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system."[17] As a space for growing vegetables as well as a gathering place out of earshot of the plantation managers, the plot serves a major role in Black perseverance and rebellion.

What is more, the plot becomes for Wynter the fulcrum of a larger framework for theorizing marginalized Black knowledge production; this includes practices like storytelling and quilt-making. The plot, from which the vegetable is pulled with rich dirt still clinging to its roots, dysregulates the monoculture of the plantation crop (sugar, tobacco, cotton) and becomes a space inside that monoculture for dreaming. The plot is also an arena within which to sustain diasporic histories (the seeds for some of the staples grown in these gardens came from Africa) and nurture the possibilities of liberation. Gilliam's boots were not some theatrical prop—they were worn quite matter-of-factly because they provided protection from the genuine muck and mess of this way of painting. The roughness of his facture could be considered an analogue for the manual labor that goes into painting as well as into traditionally far less exalted forms of work. If Gilliam's canvases, with their surface tillage, function like plots, then his rake becomes a vital implement in the cultivation of new narratives about modernism. □

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON'S MOST RECENT BOOK, *LOUISE NEVELSON'S SCULPTURE: DRAG, COLOR, JOIN, FACE*, WAS PUBLISHED IN JUNE BY YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

For notes see page 196.

Bryan-Wilson, Julia, “The Rake and the Furrow,” *Artforum*, November 2023, cover, pp. 122-127