

DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

Sam Gilliam

Moving West Again

May 15 – July 2, 2021

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present Moving West Again, an exhibition of new paintings by Sam Gilliam in which he continues his six-decade exploration of color and materiality. Moving West Again features a group of new Beveled-edge paintings; Gilliam advances this signature typology—a forum for experimentation since its first appearance in 1967—by incorporating new materials and striking formal advances. The show opens at the gallery on May 15 and will be on view through July 2, 2021.

Sam Gilliam is one of the key figures in postwar and contemporary American art. Emerging from the Washington, D.C. scene in the mid-1960s, he has subsequently pursued a wide-ranging, pioneering course in which innovation has been the only constant. Accordingly, the paintings in Moving West Again are among the most ambitious examples of their type that he has produced to date. They find him pushing the envelope in terms of materiality and scale: among them are immersive, twenty-foot-long, mural-sized paintings, as well as pictures that feature the use of materials like aluminum granules which appear in his work for the first time.

Like the Drape paintings for which Gilliam is also well-known, the Beveled-edge works are sculptural as well as painterly propositions that engage their viewers in fully three-dimensional ways. Their characteristic stretchers give them a dynamic relationship to the wall; as a result, they seem to push forward into the spaces in which they are hung, lending them an active quality that is as psychological and emotional as it is physical. Here, he accentuates these effects further through the use of thick, rich, white impasto. As a multitude of other colors press through the fray, the artist's ability to achieve the sensation of depth through hue, in addition to texture and rhythm, comes into clear focus.

Gilliam brings the full range of his experience and knowledge to each of these singular statements, in which fields of color are combined with a variety of often surprising materials. However, Gilliam has always approached each body of work—and indeed, each work itself—as a unique and evolving set of conditions that elaborate themselves in real time, as

the paintings are made. This improvisatory ethos, which finds echoes in the urgent, elastic forms of jazz and the expansive gestural horizons of abstract expressionism, is more than an engine for making art; it is a way of seeing the world precipitated on the idea that response and participation are always possible, and often required.

In the case of the paintings in Moving West Again, this ethos is given physical expression through complex and varied surfaces built up from a surprising array of materials, many of which are remnants from other studio process and previous works. Sawdust shavings, pure pigment, flocking, perlite, discarded fabric, and cut-up artist's proofs for a print have all found their way into these compositions, in visible and less visible forms. It is also present in the endless number of ways that Gilliam applies and moves his mediums, which he flings, splatters, situates, throws, and rakes; non-traditional additives are used to transform the viscosity of the paint itself. Even the beginning stages of each painting are treated as open quantities, with some starting out unstretched and others beginning on raw, stained, or already-painted canvases.

Followers of Gilliam's work will recognize affiliations between the paintings in Moving West Again with works from several other moments in his career. These include works in the Ahab, White, and Black series from the 1970s, whose dense, kaleidoscopic planes of color share some of the volumetric and optical energy of the newest paintings. In each of these examples, the density of paint application gives the objects a paradoxical feeling of weightlessness and suspension—further testament to the depth of Gilliam's intuitive understanding of what paint can do as an abstract force in relation to both body and eye. They are also reminders that Gilliam's ongoing evolution is cyclical rather than linear, lyrical rather than literal, and always attuned to the demands and inspirations of the eternal present.

Sam Gilliam will be the subject of a major retrospective exhibition in 2022 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. In 2021, Dia Art Foundation, New York,

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and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston made the historic joint acquisition of Gilliam's significant early work, the monumental installation Double Merge (1968), which has been on long-term view since 2019 at Dia Beacon in New York. In addition to a 2005 traveling retrospective organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gilliam has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland (2018); Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (2011); J.B. Speed Memorial Museum, Louisville, Kentucky (1996); Whitney Museum of American Art, Philip Morris Branch, New York (1993); The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (1982); and Museum of Modern Art, New York (1971), among many other institutions. His work is included in over fifty permanent collections, including those of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Tate Modern, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and Art Institute of Chicago. Gilliam lives and works in Washington, D.C.

Sam Gilliam
Moving West Again
May 15 – July 2, 2021



Sam Gilliam

Sweetheart, 2021

acrylic, aluminum granules, wood,
flocking, and sawdust on canvas

96 x 96 x 3 1/2 inches

(243.8 x 243.8 x 8.9 cm)

(Inv# SG 21.027)



Sam Gilliam

Turtle, 2021

acrylic, aluminum granules, wood,
flocking, and sawdust on canvas

96 x 96 x 3 1/2 inches

(243.8 x 243.8 x 8.9 cm)

(Inv# SG 21.024)



Sam Gilliam

Into the Night, 2021

acrylic, tin shot, aluminum granules,
copper chop, wood, socks, paper,
fabric, flocking, sawdust, and wax on
canvas

96 x 240 x 4 1/2 inches

(243.8 x 609.6 x 11.4 cm)

(Inv# SG 21.023)



Sam Gilliam

River Walk, 2021

acrylic, tin shot, and wood on canvas

96 x 96 x 3 1/2 inches

(243.8 x 243.8 x 8.9 cm)

(Inv# SG 21.026)



Sam Gilliam

April 5, 2021

acrylic, aluminum shavings,
aluminum, wood, flocking, and
sawdust on canvas

96 x 240 x 4 1/2 inches
(243.8 x 609.6 x 11.4 cm)

(Inv# SG 21.022)

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SAM GILLIAM

born 1933, Tupelo, MS
lives and works in Washington, D.C.

EDUCATION

1961 MFA, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
1955 BA, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

(* indicates a publication)

- 2022 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
- 2021 *Moving West Again*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Sam Gilliam, The Ringling, Sarasota, FL
**Sam Gilliam: Color-Field Interior*, curated by Andria Hickey, Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, NY
- 2020 *Existed Existing*, Pace Gallery, New York, NY
Watercolors, Pace Gallery, Palm Beach, FL
- 2019 Dia:Beacon, Beacon, NY
Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C.
Starting: Works on Paper 1967 – 1970, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Sam Gilliam: New Works on Paper, FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY
- 2018 **The Music of Color, Sam Gilliam, 1967-1973*, co-curated by Jonathan P. Binstock and Josef Helfenstein, Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel, Switzerland
- 2017 **Sam Gilliam, 1967 – 1973*, organized by Sukanya Rajaratnam, Mnuchin Gallery, New York, NY
Spirit of Collaboration: Sam and Gilliam and Lou Stovall, Griots' Art Gallery, Center for Haitian Studies, Miami, FL
Sam Gilliam, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
- 2016 **Green April*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

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- 2013 *Hard-Edge Paintings 1963-1966*, curated by Rashid Johnson, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 2011 *Sam Gilliam: Recent Drapes*, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Close to Trees, Katzen Arts Center, American University, Washington, D.C.
Sam Gilliam: Flour Mill, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.
Sam Gilliam, New Paintings, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 2009 *Sam Gilliam: New Paintings*, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 2007 *Sam Gilliam: New Paintings and Prints*, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Sam Gilliam, Scarfone/Hartley Gallery, University of Tampa, Tampa, FL
Sam Gilliam, Imago Gallery, Desert Springs, CA
Galerie Darthea Speyer, Paris, France
**Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX
- 2006 *Sam Gilliam: Prints from the Artist's Collection*, Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville, VA; Luther W. Brady Art Gallery, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.
**Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective*, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY; Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, GA
- 2005 *Sunlight*, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
**Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Fixed between Painting & Sculpture, Angie Newman Johnson Gallery, Episcopal High School, Alexandria, VA
- 2004 *3*, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Sam Gilliam, Folded & Hinged, Louisiana Art & Science Museum, Baton Rouge, LA; Lauren Rogers Museum of Art, Laurel, MS
Sande Webster Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2002 *Slats*, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 2001 *From Shiraz*, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Imago Gallery, Palm Desert, CA
- 2000 Georgetown Gallery, Georgetown, KY

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- 1999 *Works '99*, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Sam Gilliam, Klein Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1998 *Sam Gilliam in 3-D*, Kreeger Museum, Washington, D.C.
- 1997 *Of Fireflies and Ferris Wheels: Monastery Parallel*, Kunstmuseum Kloster Unser Lieben Frauen, Magdeburg, Germany
The Three Musketeers, Baumgartner Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1996 *Construction*, J.B. Speed Memorial Museum, Louisville, KY
A Still on the Potomac, Baumgartner Galleries, Washington, D.C.
- 1994 *Sam Gilliam*, Baumgartner Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1993 *Golden Element Inside Gold*, Whitney Museum of American Art, Philip Morris, New York, NY
- 1992 USIA - Arts America, Helsinki, Finland
- 1991 American Craft Museum, New York, NY
*Walker Hill Arts Center, Seoul, Korea
Galerie Darthea Speyer, Paris, France
- 1990 **Small Drape Paintings 1970-1973*, Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1987 Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, OH
- 1986 Davis/McClain Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1985 Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York, NY
- 1984 *Recent Paintings*, Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA
- 1983 **Modern Painters at the Corcoran: Sam Gilliam*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Galerie Darthea Speyer, Paris, France
Middendorf/Lane Gallery, Washington, D.C.
McIntosh-Drysdale Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1982 **Red & Black to "D": Paintings by Sam Gilliam*, The Studio Museum in Harlem,

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New York, NY

- 1981 Hamilton Gallery, New York, NY
Nexus, Atlanta, GA
Dart Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1979 Middendorf/Lane Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Dart Gallery, Chicago, IL
Hamilton Gallery, New York, NY
- 1978 **Sam Gilliam: Indoor & Outdoor Paintings*, University Gallery, University of
Massachusetts, Amherst, MA
Galerie Darthea Speyer, Paris, France
Carl Solway Gallery, New York, NY
- 1977 Artpark, Lewiston, NY
Oliver Dowling Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
Dart Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1976 **Sam Gilliam: An Exhibition of Painting*, Rutgers University Art Gallery, New
Brunswick, NJ
**Sam Gilliam: Paintings and Works on Paper*, J.B. Speed Memorial Museum,
Louisville, KY
Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, NY
Galerie Darthea Speyer, Paris, France
- 1975 **Sam Gilliam: Paintings 1970-1975*, Fendrick Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
Linda Ferris Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 1974 Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, OH
Linda Ferris Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 1973 Galerie Darthea Speyer, Paris, France
Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis, MO
University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA
- 1972 Jefferson Place Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1971 Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

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- 1970 Galerie Darthea Speyer, Paris, France
- 1969 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1968 Jefferson Place Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Byron Gallery, New York, NY
- 1967 **Paintings by Sam Gilliam*, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

(* indicates a publication)

- 2021 *Artists and the Rothko Chapel: 50 Years of Inspiration*, Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, TX
American Painting: The Eighties Revisited, curated by Kate Bonansinga, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio
Multiples, Inc.: 1965-1992, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, NY
Under Construction: Collage from the Mint Museum, Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN; Knoxville Museum of Art, Knoxville, TN
Expanded Painting in the 1960s and 1970s, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
Promise, Witness, Remembrance, curated by Allison Glenn, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY
Collecting Black Studies: The Exhibition, Art Galleries at Black Studies, University of Texas, Austin
- 2020 **Soul of A Nation: Art in The Age of Black Power*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
**Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem*, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA; Frye Art Museum, Seattle, WA; Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City, UT
**With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972-1985*, curated by Anna Katz, CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
Presence: African American Artists from the Museum's Collection, curated by Katherine Love, The Honolulu Museum of Art, Honolulu, HI
Allied with Power: African and African Diaspora Art from the Jorge M. Pérez Collection, curated by Maria Elena Ortiz, Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL

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History Takes Place: African American Art from the Tom Burrell Collection,
curated by Horace Brockington, Borough of Manhattan Community
College, New York, NY

Shapeshifters: Transformations in Contemporary Art, Cranbrook Art
Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI

The Silence Perpetuates, Mark Borghi Fine Art, Sag Harbor, NY

Bloom of Joy, Pace Gallery, Hong Kong

Remix, Hollis Taggart, Southport, CT

*Connecting Currents: Contemporary Art at the Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston*; *Color into Light*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX

- 2019 **Soul of A Nation: Art in The Age of Black Power*, de Young museum, San
Francisco, CA
**Soul of A Nation: Art in The Age of Black Power*, curated by Mark Godfrey,
Zoe Whitley and Sarah Loyer, The Broad, Los Angeles, CA
Detroit Collects: Selections of African American Art from Private Collections,
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
Afrocosmologies: American Reflections, curated by Wm. Frank Mitchell,
produced in collaboration with The Amistad Center for Art & Culture and the
Petrucci Family Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT
New Symphony of Time, curated by Elizabeth Abston & Betsy Bradley,
Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MS
Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art, The Joyner / Giuffrida
Collection, curated by Christopher Bedford and Katy Siegel, The Baltimore
Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
Count of Three, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY
Selections from The Studio Museum in Harlem, Museum of the African
Diaspora, San Francisco
POSTWAR ABSTRACTION: Variations, Oklahoma City Museum of Art,
Oklahoma City, OK
FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY
Mapping Black Identities, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN
The Gift of Art, Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL
**With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972-1985*, curated
by Anna Katz, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
Spilling Over: Painting Color in the 1960s, organized by David Breslin and
Margaret Kross, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem, Museum
of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA; Gibbes Museum of Art,
Charleston, SC; Kalamazoo Institute of Art, Kalamazoo, MI

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Solidary and Solitary: The Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida Collection, curated by Christopher Bedford and Katy Siegel, presented by The Helis Foundation, Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL

**The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection*, Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO

PROSPECT 2019, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego, CA

In The Absence of Light: Gesture, Humor and Resistance in The Black Aesthetic, Selections from the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection, organized by Theaster Gates in collaboration with Beth Rudin DeWoody and Laura Dvorkin from the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection and EXPO CHICAGO, Rebuild Foundation/Stony Island Arts Bank, Chicago, IL

- 2018 *The Fabricators*, Akron Art Museum, Akron, OH
- Pattern, Decoration and Crime*, curated by Lionel Bovier, Franck Gautherot, and Seungduk Kim in collaboration with Le Consortium, Dijon, France, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (MAMCO), Geneva, Switzerland
- Second Look, Twice: Selections from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation*, curated by Emily Kuhlmann, Soleil Summer, and Essence Harden, Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA
- American Abstract*, Charles Riva Collection, Brussels, Belgium
- One Shot: featuring works by Color Field artists*, UTA Artist Space, Beverly Hills, CA
- PUBLIC ARTWORKS OF ROCKNE KREBS AND SAM GILLIAM, BUILT AND UNBUILT*, in partnership with Day Eight, The Washington Studio School, Washington, D.C.
- Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA
- Summer 2018*, Mnuchin Gallery, New York, NY
- Collecting Contemporaries: Recent Acquisitions From The Koch And Wolf Collections*, Newfields, Indianapolis, IN
- Expanding Narratives: The Figure and the Ground*, Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- Remember to React: 60 Years of Collecting*, NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, Fort Lauderdale, FL
- Abstraction, Color, and Politics in the Early 1970s*, curated by Christina Olsen, University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI
- Painting: Now and Forever, Part III*, Matthew Marks, New York, NY
- Indulge*, curated by John Wolf, ArtMovement LA, Los Angeles, CA
- Inherent Structure*, curated by Michael Goodson, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH

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Hopes Springing High: Gifts of African American Art, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA
Problem Solving: Highlights from the Experimental Printmaking Institute, curated by Galina Olmsted, Special Collections and Museums at the University of Delaware, Mechanical Hall Gallery, Newark, DE
The Conscientious Objector, curated by Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey and Lauren Mackler, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, The Schindler House, West Hollywood, CA
Solidary and Solitary: The Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida Collection, curated by Christopher Bedford and Katy Siegel, presented by The Helis Foundation, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC; Snite Museum of Art at Notre Dame University, Notre Dame, IN
Sam Gilliam in Dialogue: Race + Representation, curated by Horace Ballard, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA
Sam Gilliam in Dialogue: Form, curated by Horace Ballard, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA
Sam Gilliam in Dialogue: Topographies of Color, curated by Horace Ballard, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA
Experiments in Form: Sam Gilliam, Alan Shields, Frank Stella, organized by Janet Dees, Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL
Washington Color School: 50 Years Later, Bethesda Fine Art, Bethesda, MD
The New Art: A Milestone Collection Fifty Years Later, curated by Roja Najafi, Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Oklahoma City, OK
**Soul of A Nation: Art in The Age of Black Power*, curated by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, Lauren Haynes and Ashley James, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY
Reclamation! Pan-African Works from the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection, Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA
Artworks by African Americans from the Collection, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

2017 *57th Venice Biennale, *VIVA ARTE VIVA*, curated by Christine Macel, Venice, Italy
BIG, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, WI
Apparitions, curated by Elise Wiarda, Joan Hisaoka Healing Arts Gallery, Smith Center for Healing and The Arts, Washington, D.C.
Picturing Mississippi, Picturing Mississippi, 1817-2017: Land of Plenty, Pain, and Promise, curated by Jochen Wierich, Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MS

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Disorderly Conduct: American Painting and Sculpture, 1960 - 1990, organized by Marshall N. Price, Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, NC
Start at Home: Art from the Frank W. Hale, Jr. Black Cultural Center Collection, various venues, Columbus, OH
**Impulse!*, curated by Wedel Art, PACE Gallery, London, England
Dimensions of Black, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in collaboration with the San Diego African American Museum of Fine Art, Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, University of California, Davis, CA
Art of Rebellion: Black Art of the Civil Rights Movement, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
Simple Passion, Complex Vision: The Darryl Atwell Collection, Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture, Charlotte, NC
Color People, curated by Rashid Johnson, Rental Gallery, East Hampton, NY
The Evolution of Mark-Making, Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville, Jacksonville, FL
Solidary and Solitary: The Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida Collection, curated by Christopher Bedford and Katy Siegel, presented by The Helis Foundation, Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, LA
**Soul of a Nation: Art in The Age of Black Power*, curated by Mark Godfrey, Zoe Whitley, Tate Modern, London, England
Please fasten your seat belt as we are experiencing some turbulence, Leo Xu Projects, Shanghai, China
Approaching Abstraction: African American Art from the Permanent Collection, La Salle University Art Museum, Philadelphia, PA
Investigating Identity: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Art, Maier Museum of Art, Randolph College, Lynchburg, Virginia
Revelations: Masterworks by African American Artists, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX
Colour Is, Waggington Custot, London, England
Approaching American Abstraction: The Fisher Collection, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA

2016 *Under Construction: Collage from the Mint Museum*, Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC
December 1, 2018 – August 18, 2019
Circa 1970, organized by Lauren Haynes, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
AfroFantastic: Black Imagination and Agency in the American Experience,

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Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Rollins College, Winter Park, FL
Dimensions of Black: A Collaboration with the San Diego African American Museum of Fine Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego, CA
Visual Art and the American Experience, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C.
Passages in Modern Art: 1946 - 1996, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX
Complex Uncertainties: Artists in Postwar America, Jepson Center, Telfair Museums, Savannah, GA
Three American Painters: David Diao, Sam Gilliam, Sal Sirugo, organized by Betty Jarvis and Donna Gustafson, Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ
Big & Bold: Selections from the Collection, Columbia Museum of Art, SC
Approaching American Abstraction: The Fisher Collection, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
**Modern Heroics: 75 Years of African-American Expressionism*, Newark Museum, Newark, NJ
Close Readings: American Abstract Art from the Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN
Landmark: A Decade of Collection at the Jepson Center, Savannah, Georgia
A Celebration of the Speed Collection, Louisville, KY
**Not New Now*, Marrakech Biennale 6, curated by Reem Fadda, Marrakech, Morocco
African American Art Since 1950: Perspectives from the David C. Driskill Center, curated by Dr. Robert E. Steele and Dorit Aaron, Susquehanna Art Museum, Harrisburg, PA

- 2015 *Black: Color, Material, Concept*, organized by Lauren Haynes, Studio Museum Harlem, New York, NY
On Paper: Howard Hodgkin, Sam Gilliam, Gene Davis, Sheila Rotner, Andrea Way, Athena Tacha, Agnes Denes, Kathleen Kucka, Marcha Mateyka Gallery
Surface Matters, curated by Jen Mergel, Edward H. Linde Gallery, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
Art in the Making: A New Adaptation, Luther W. Brady Art Gallery, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C.
You Have to See This: Abstract Art from the Permanent Collection, Palmer Museum of Art, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
New Visions: Contemporary Masterworks From The Bank of America Collection, Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC
Surface Tension, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY
Affecting Presence and the Pursuit of Delicious Experiences, organized by Paul R.

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- Davis, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX
Great Impressions IV: An Exhibition of Contemporary Prints, Dean Jensen Gallery, Milwaukee, WI
Represent: 200 Years of African American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
**Pretty Raw: After and Around Helen Frankenthaler*, curated by Katy Siegel, The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
New Acquisitions, The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
**Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, organized by the Brooklyn Museum, Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX
**Make it New: Abstract Painting from the National Gallery of Art, 1950-1975*, organized by the National Gallery of Art, The Clark Institute, Williamstown, MA
African American Art Since 1950: Perspectives from the David C. Driskell Center, Figue Art Museum, Davenport, IA; Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland FL
- 2014 *Sense of Place II: Selections from the Permanent Collection*, Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, LA
Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
**Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY; Hood Museum, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH
**African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era, and Beyond*, curated by Virginia Mecklenburg, Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY
African American Art Since 1950: Perspectives from the David C. Driskell Center, The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts, Charlotte, NC
- 2013 **African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era, and Beyond*, curated by Virginia Mecklenburg, Muscarelle Museum of Art, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA; Mennello Museum of American Art, Orlando, FL; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA; Albuquerque Museum of Art, Albuquerque, NM
Black in the Abstract, Part 1: Epistrophy, curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX
Assembly Required: Selections from the Permanent Collection, curated by Naima J. Keith, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
The Force of Color, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, WI
African American Art Since 1950: Perspectives from the David C. Driskell Center, Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati, OH
- 2012 **African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era, and Beyond*, curated by Virginia Mecklenburg, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
African American Art Since 1950: Perspectives from the David C. Driskell Center,

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- The David C. Driskell Center, University of Maryland, MD
**A Bigger Splash: Painting after Performance*, Tate Modern, London, England
Drip, Drape, Draft, curated by Rashid Johnson, South London Gallery, London, England
The Spirit Level, curated by Ugo Rondinone, Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY
The Constant Artist, Katzen Arts Center, American University, Washington, D.C.
- 2011 *Washington Color and Light*, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
The 100th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art: The Vision Endures, Maier Museum of Art, Lynchburg, VA
- 2010 *Colorscape: Abstract Painting, 1960-1979*, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA
- 2008 *Three American Masters: Gene Davis, Sam Gilliam, Nathan Oliveira*, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 2007 *5 X 5: Five Artists choose Five Artists to Watch*, Ann Loeb Bronfman Gallery, Washington District of Columbia Jewish Community Center, Washington, D.C.
- 2006 *Generations*, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA
**Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction, 1964-1980*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, Harlem, NY
- 2005 **The Shape of Color*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada
Resurfaced, Boston University Art Gallery, Boston, MA
The Chemistry of Color: African American Artists in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA
- 2003 *Abstract Notions: Selections for the Permanent Collection*, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA
- 1997 **Seeing Jazz*, Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service
After the Fall: Aspects of Abstract Painting since 1970, Newhouse Center of Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, NY
- 1995 *44th Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Richard Artschwager, Sam Gilliam, Jim Hyde, Baumgartner Gallery, Washington, D.C.

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- 1991 *Abstraction: The 90's*, Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York, NY
- 1989 *The Blues Aesthetic*, Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.
*Duke University Museum of Art, Durham, NC
California Afro-American Museum, Los Angeles, CA
- 1987 **Contemporary Visual Expressions*, The Anacostia Museum, Washington, D.C.
- 1986 **Abstraction/Abstraction*, Carnegie-Mellon University Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
- 1982 **American Abstraction Now*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Virginia
Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, VA
**Painterly Abstraction*", Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Fort Wayne, IN
- 1981 *Installations: Stephen Antonakos, Sam Gilliam, Rockne Krebs*, Middendorf/Lane
Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1980 *Alternatives by Black Artists*, Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, DC
- 1979 *Art of the Eighties*, The Grey Gallery, New York University, New York, NY
- 1978 *American Artists' Work in Private French Collections*, Museum Modern Art, Lyon,
France
- 1977 *Le Peinture et le Tissu*, Museum of Modern Art, Lyon, France
12th International Biennial of Graphic Art, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia
- 1976 **Handmade Paper*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
**Festival Internationale de la Peinture*, Cagnes-sur-Mer, France
**30 Years of American Printmaking*, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY
72nd American Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- 1975 *34th Biennial of Contemporary American Painting*, Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Washington, DC
- 1974 *Cut, Bend, Spindle, Fold*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Expo '74, Spokane, WA
- 1972 **Gilliam/Edwards/Williams: Extensions*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art,
Hartford, CT
**Works for Spaces: Antonakos, Bladen, Gilliam, Irwin and Rockburn*, San Francisco

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- Museum of Art, San Francisco, CA
*36th Venice Biennale, American Pavilion, Venice, Italy
- 1971 **The De Luxe Show*, De Luxe Theater, Menil Foundation,
Houston, TX
Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC
Works for New Spaces, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
Kid Stuff, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
*2nd Indian Triennale, American Exhibition, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, India
- 1970 **Two Generations of Color Painting*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of
Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA
**Dimensions of Art*, La Jolla Museum of Art, La Jolla, CA
Work on Paper, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
**Washington: Twenty Years*, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
69th American Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- 1969 *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting*, Whitney
Museum of American Art, New York, NY
X to the Fourth Power, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
Gilliam, Krebs, McGowin, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
**Other Ideas*, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, MI
**The Washington Painters*, Ringling Museum, Sarasota, FL
- 1968 *Tribute to Martin Luther King*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Inaugural Show, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
- 1966 **The Negro in American Art*, UCLA Art Galleries, University of California, Los
Angeles, Los Angeles, CA
Artists in Washington, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Washington, D.C.
**Ten Negro Artists from the U.S.*, First World Festival of Negro Arts,
Dakar, Senegal
- 1964 *Nine Contemporary Painters, USA*, Pan American Union, Washington, D.C.

GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 2019 Artist honoree, Dia:Beacon Gala, Beacon, NY
Artist honoree, BOMB Magazine's 38th Anniversary Gala & Art Auction, New York,
NY

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- 2018 Archives of American Art Medal, New York, NY
- 2015 U.S. State Department Medal of Arts
- 2007 Mississippi Governor's Award for Excellence in the Visual Arts
- 1997 Honorary Doctor of Arts & Letters, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI
- 1993 Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts, Corcoran Gallery and School of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1992 Honorary Doctor of Arts & Letters, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
- 1990 Honorary Doctor of Arts & Letters, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL
- 1989 Individual Artist Grant, National Endowment for the Arts
- 1987 Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts, Atlanta College of Art, Atlanta, Georgia
- 1986 Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts, Memphis College of Art, Memphis, TN
- 1980 Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
- 1973-1975 Workshop Activities Grant, National Endowment for the Arts
- 1971 Solomon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship
- 1969 Norman W. Harris Prize, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- 1967 Individual Artist Grant, National Endowment for the Arts

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- 1999 **Works '99*, Washington, D.C.: Marsha Mateyka Gallery, 1999
- 1997 *Gellner, Uwe Jens, *Sam Gilliam: Of Fireflies and Ferris Wheels; Monastery Parallel*, Magdeburg: Kunstmuseum Kloster Unser Lieben Frauen, 1997
- 1996 **African-American Art: 20th Century Masterworks*, New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 1996
- 1991 "Solids and Veils," *Art Journal*, 1991, pp. 10-11
- 1987 **The Afro-American Artist in the Age of Cultural Pluralism*, Montclair: Montclair Art Museum, 1987
- 1986 **"About Abstraction," *Abstraction Abstraction*, edited by Elaine A. King, Pittsburg: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1986
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- 1983 **Through Their Eyes: The Art of Lou and Di Stovall*, Washington, D.C.: Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, 1983
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By RANDY KENNEDY

In 1988, the Dia Art Foundation hosted one of the most momentous readings in postwar art history — the reclusive poet James Schuyler appeared before an audience for the first time in memory, occasioning a line down Mercer Street to the foundation's SoHo headquarters. One particularly lovely turn in Schuyler's poem "Empathy and New Year" elicited a hum of admiration from the crowd: "Not knowing a name for something proves nothing."

The sentiment could have been written as a maxim for Dia itself. What was this unusual, diffused, at times unstable art organization, exactly, and did it matter if no name quite suited?

Founded in Manhattan in 1974 by the art dealer Heiner Friedrich, his wife, Philippa de Menil, an heir to the Schlumberger oil-field company, and the art historian Helen Winkler, it has never operated like a museum by any conventional measure. It didn't have a central location to display its collection for nearly three decades, until opening Dia Beacon in a vast former box factory along the Hudson in 2003. Before Beacon and since, around the American West, Europe, Long Island, New England and Manhattan, it has maintained numerous discrete sites, several of which came and went along with the foundation's changeable fortunes and leadership.

At various times, it held stakes in a hilltop castle, an extinct volcanic crater, a defunct Army base and a Sufi mosque — unorthodox homes, to say the least, for a core of work from the 1960s and 1970s that was rooted in Minimalism and Conceptualism but branched off in curious ways that had little to do with either.

Now, after decades of unrealized plans to find or build a new home in Manhattan, the foundation has opened a central hub on West 22nd Street in Chelsea that knits three of its existing industrial buildings into one of the largest single spaces Dia has ever had in the city.

The rough-hewn galleries — to be used for long-term exhibitions, often of commissioned work by younger artists — represent a homecoming, in a sense, for a place the foundation never really left. But its now-you-see-it-now-you-don't existence over so many years blurred awareness, by even informed art lovers, that Dia consists of substantially more than a popular blue-chip collection in the Hudson Valley.

"We'd lost an audience, lost relevance, lost a connection to the city by not being open in New York for so long and just having Beacon," said Jessica Morgan, who took over as director six years ago and quickly scrapped a \$50 million plan to build a new multistory home in Chelsea, one of several architectural visions that pushed the foundation's fund-raising ability past its limits.

Beyond money, the project ran counter to Dia's very temperament. It has never built from scratch. It has instead supported immense land art pieces conceived beyond the bounds of the built world. And in cities it has always recycled existing buildings, melding their industrial contours with work created in just such spaces, by artists like Donald Judd, Walter de Maria and Richard Serra.

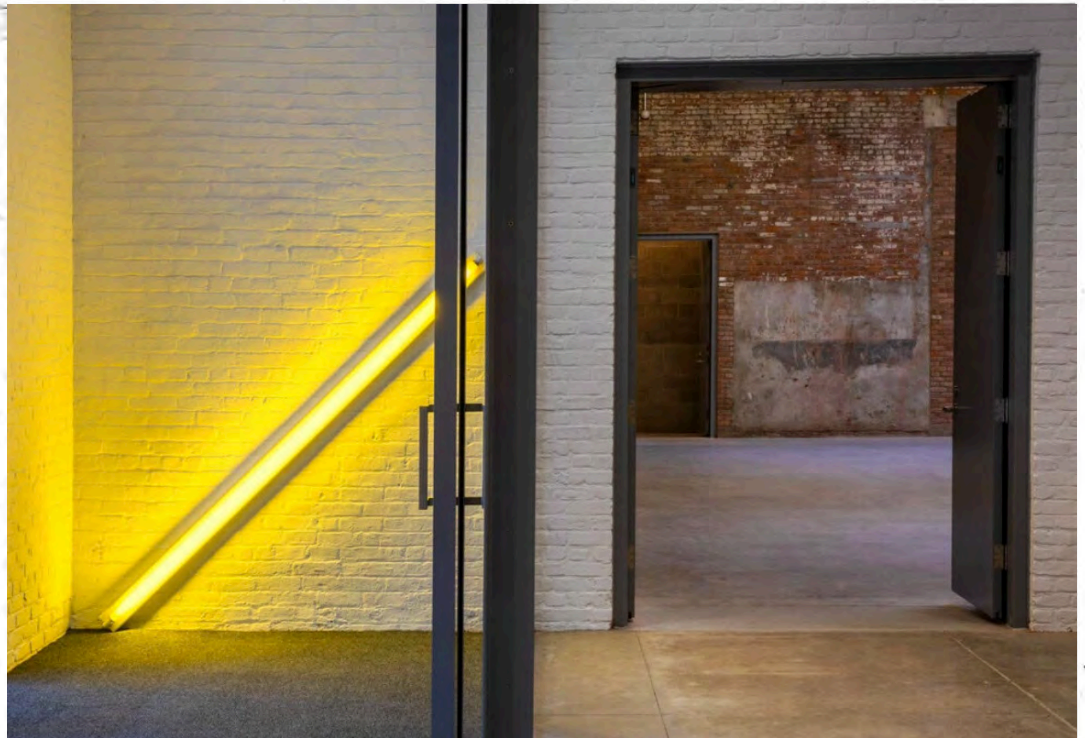
The foundation used those buildings to provide work, by museum standards, with untold space and viewing durations that were unusually long or even permanent. Friedrich, who cast himself and Dia's founders as modern Mediceis, likened this philosophy to the almost spiritual certitude that Giotto's frescoes will always be there in Padua when you step into the Scrovegni Chapel.

Over the last several years, the founda-

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, APRIL 25, 2021

Art

Dia 2.0: Facing the Future



STEPHEN FLAVIN/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK, ELIZABETH FELICELLA

tion and Morgan have been quietly at work less on construction — the Chelsea site, even with a sleek new bookstore, is notable mostly for a studied inconspicuousness — than on figuring out how to re-engineer Dia's tightly bounded ethos to keep it vital in an art world now moving steadily beyond the mostly white, mostly male, sometimes swaggering heart of its founding collection.

In only the last two years, it added the first works by African-American artists — the conceptualist Charles Gaines and the painter Sam Gilliam — to its permanent holdings, with plans for major presences by the painter Jack Whitten, the sculptor Melvin Edwards and the sculptor and performance artist Senga Nengudi over the next three years. The Detroit techno producer Carl Craig's hit sound-and-light installation "Party/After-Party" was the most visible example of the change afoot when Dia Beacon reopened from lockdown last summer. Since 2015, the foundation has also added work by 13 women, so that of 57



SAM GILLIAM AND DIA ART FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK, BILL JACOBSON



FAIRWEATHER & FAIRWEATHER LTD./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK, DAN WALWORTH

artists in the collection, 19 are now women. (The first substantial body of work by a woman, the painter Agnes Martin, didn't enter the collection until 2002.)

"There was a barometer at Dia of what I call muscularity," said Dorothea Rockburne, whose mathematical, sometimes ephemeral work was acquired in 2018 and

given spacious, overdue galleries at Beacon among peers like John Chamberlain and Robert Ryman.

"That barometer sucked, to be blunt, and the situation is only very grudgingly changing," said Rockburne, 88, who added: "Heiner Friedrich had a great eye. Sexist, but a great eye."

Friedrich, in a recent interview at one of the foundation's many scattered sites, the Dan Flavin Art Institute in Bridgehampton, N.Y., said that the art world in which his sensibility was formed was overwhelmingly male and that he was generally pleased to see the canon he helped establish being widened. But he said he continued to believe that "artworks speak for themselves" and that additions to complement and extend Dia's history should not be chosen based primarily on whether work was made "by a woman or a man, or someone of black color, red color, green color."

Friedrich, 83, who has not been directly involved with the foundation since a coup over faltering finances in 1985, added that he applauded Morgan's decision to concentrate on art and artists over building. But he said he felt that the foundation, to remain fully true to itself, still needed to establish permanent Manhattan sites for displays of iconic works from the collection, like Andy Warhol's "Shadows" series, on view in Beacon; the German painter Blinky Palermo's grand syncopated painting suite "To the People of New York City"; and "Dream House," the immersive sound and light environment by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela.

"Worldwide, everything is changing exhibits," he said. "Changing events. Changing everything. What is completely misunderstood is that certain works of art must have lasting presence. If you see them over time, they change your presence."

Such a commitment to single bodies of art by a relatively small group of artists is not only financially arduous in New York but also swims against the contemporary tide, as museums work to keep their collections in evermore dynamic rotation and tell multiple, overlapping stories of art's history.

"Even decades ago, it didn't quite compute," said Donna De Salvo, a veteran curator who worked for Dia in the tumultuous 1980s and returned in 2019. "Part of my job back then was to try to find places to show parts of the collection we couldn't show. I'd ask museum directors for a minimum six-month commitment. They'd say: 'Wow. What a great idea! But who has enough real estate to give one artist that much time?'"

A Chelsea site is notable mostly for a studied inconspicuousness.

Gilliam, 87, who had early success but whose work, like that of many Black artists of his day, was substantially overlooked for decades, said being given a signature presence at Beacon was akin to seeing work over time in his studio, "which is like your instrument and where there's no place you're happier being, if you're a real artist."

"I saw a lot of my paintings for a long time because no one wanted them," Gilliam said. "The day I walked into Dia and saw the rooms where the work of mine was going to be was one of the best days of my life. It's that kind of place, where you feel like you're part of a continuity."

Lucy Raven, a multimedia artist, has been at work for the last three years with Dia curators to inaugurate the Chelsea space with two new works, a kinetic light sculpture and a film about the destructive transformation of rocks into concrete, a kind of inverse land-art piece.

"Having moved here from Arizona, Dia was striking for me because it was in the city but on the other hand it was supporting all this monumental artwork out West," Raven, 44, said. "At the time I got to know it, it seemed like a kind of archival situation, not a place that was in the cards for a younger artist like me to be part of. But then you could see that was changing."

She added, "It certainly hasn't been lost on me that I've been working with a team almost entirely of women there now."

Dia's curators have been working for years on the knotty calculus of determining which artists and works, like Raven's, make sense in the foundation's highly particular biome. Much of their time, Morgan said, has been directed toward "thinking about who was not in the collection and why and let's move beyond the same tired history that we hear over and over again because we all know that there are different stories to tell."

Artists and ideas on the horizon, possible but not yet set in stone, Morgan said, tend to lie further afield than Dia has ranged in the past: a project with the Indian artist Sheela Gowda, 64, in Bangalore; others with the Mexican writer and activist Valeria Luiselli, 37, and the Colombian artist Delcy Morelos, 53, whose practice in ceramic and clay speaks partly to her country's history of violence; and a permanent land-art site in Puerto Rico.

Morgan said her greatest hope for reopening in Chelsea was that it would make its strongest statement by declining to make an architectural statement.

"This is the road we chose — not to spend tons of money on something but to prioritize giving money to artists and to an endowment so that we can continue to do what we do best," she said. Especially now, as institutions around the world reel from the pandemic's financial blow, cutting programs and staff, she said she believed Dia's instinct to remain low to the ground was prescient. And lucky.

"Money has often gone to the wrong place, I think, vanity projects for one person or another," she said. "I don't know any artists who are really into those kinds of spaces. Do you?"



LUCY RAVEN AND DIA ART FOUNDATION, BEJ JACOBSON

Dafoe, Taylor, "Two Major Museums More Than 1,600 Miles Apart Have Jointly Acquired a Sprawling Sam Gilliam Installation," *Artnet.com*, March 15, 2021

artnet[®]

Two Major Museums More Than 1,600 Miles Apart Have Jointly Acquired a Sprawling Sam Gilliam Installation

The Dia Art Foundation and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, will split the costs of upkeep and share the work for five-year periods.

Taylor Dafoe | March 15, 2021



Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968). Installation view, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York, 2019. © Sam Gilliam/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy of Dia Art Foundation.

There is no joy in possession without sharing, Erasmus once said—and it's a lesson museums are learning.

The Dia Art Foundation and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, have jointly acquired an early landmark work by Sam Gilliam, which the two institutions will share moving forward. The institutions have split the purchase price evenly.

The price for the artwork was not disclosed, though the *Financial Times* reported that "market experts estimate a seven-figure sum."

Dafoe, Taylor, "Two Major Museums More Than 1,600 Miles Apart Have Jointly Acquired a Sprawling Sam Gilliam Installation," *Artnet.com*, March 15, 2021



Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968). Installation view, Dia: Beacon, Beacon, New York, 2019. © Sam Gilliam/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy of Dia Art Foundation.

Gilliam's work, a gallery-spanning installation of hanging canvases titled—appropriately, in this case—*Double Merge* (1968) has been on view at Dia's Beacon museum since 2019 through a loan from the artist's studio.

It is expected to move to Houston in 2022, and will change places roughly every five years after that. Per the terms of the agreement, the institution holding the piece at any given time will be responsible for insuring it; they also have control of how and when it's exhibited.

"We have these works in order to show them to a general public, so therefore reaching more of a public in different parts of the country is surely only a good thing," says Jessica Morgan, Dia's director.

This agreement came together quickly and was "miraculously straightforward," she says: it was simply a matter of reaching out to the Museum of Fine Arts and proposing the idea.

Though the Houston institution has two other works by Gilliam in its collection, museum director Gary Tinterow says *Double Merge* is in a "league of its own, on a par with Monet's *Nymphéas* at the Orange-rie in Paris."

Considering the simplicity of the deal, why don't more museums partner for joint acquisitions, especially in an era of depressed budgets?

"It baffles me," Tinterow says. "I have always approached my job as a curator as a mandate to make the best possible displays for my audience. Ownership of the particular pieces is almost irrelevant."

"I do believe that this is the future for acquisitions," Morgan says.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Closure of New York's Metro Pictures gallery a blow to the art world

Gallery's end exposes art market vulnerability; Banksy sells hospital picture for the NHS; Art Dubai fair moves with the times; museums share cost of art; Sprüth Magers represents Nancy Holt

By Melanie Gerlis | March 10, 2021



'Double Merge' by Sam Gilliam (1968) © Dia:Beacon/Sam Gilliam/ARS

Covid-19 has accelerated shared acquisitions of art between museums, says Jessica Morgan, director of the Dia Art Foundation. She has joined forces with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) to buy an early work by the American artist Sam Gilliam, namely his "Double Merge" (1968), a large installation of draped stained canvases. The institutions split the cost of the acquisition, though are not saying what this is. Market experts estimate a seven-figure sum.

Since 2019 the work has been on loan from the artist's studio to Dia: Beacon, the expansive upstate New York site. The plan is for "Double Merge" to travel to the Houston museum in 2022, swapping between the two institutions approximately every five years. The MFAH's team was immediately behind the idea, Morgan says, adding that in general "Covid-19 has brought some urgency and clarity to such conversations." Gary Tinterow, director of MFAH, says while the museum already has pieces by Gilliam, they have nothing as "spectacular and monumental". He and Morgan both emphasise that by sharing in works, they avoid keeping them in storage. "Multiple owners reduce the time that art is invisible to the public," Tinterow says. Plus, Morgan notes, "Market prices have gone up so much, it can be otherwise impossible to buy."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Thursday, August 20, 2020 | A13

ARTS IN REVIEW



Sam Gilliam's 'Double Merge' (1968), left, and 'Spread' (1973), below

Now at Dia Beacon, "Spread"—the first, smaller work on display (though still nearly six feet tall by 10 feet wide)—is a master-class in the art of the in-between. Abstract forms appear and reappear out of the folding of the canvas. Lines of white add structure, bringing the design to the surface, while symmetries of yellow and red created out of the folds hint at illusion and depth. Mr. Gilliam has long understood how his process of folding and unfurling creates a Rorschach test of abstract forms. Framing these dynamics, the canvas's thick bevelled stretcher bars push the painting to the edge of sculpture while echoing the smoothed-out facets of its jewel-like composition.

After this taut introduction, "Double Merge" appears all the more free-flowing. A combination of two huge works from

1968, both titled "Carousel II," "Double Merge" is a new site-specific installation created by the artist of these two canvases, 66 and 71 feet wide, suspended from the ceiling and tacked to the wall.

Mr. Gilliam has attributed his suspensions or "drapes" to the vision of wash drying on the line. Flags, bunting, carousel rides, and the big top all come to mind. The two parts of "Double Merge" interact like a ballet pas de deux dancing off the wall. Despite their casual, even provisional appearance, the works are architectural studies in curves, masses and forces in space, coming within inches of the ground. Mr. Gilliam has described his affinity for banners arcing in the paintings of Albrecht Dürer. As he bundles and pins his canvases into catenary curves, "Double Merge" turns this appeal on its head. Painting itself becomes the banner.

Here the draping folds play off the folding that went into painting these compositions. In certain passages, Mr. Gilliam can overwork his studio sorcery. Elsewhere, his absorbing designs come together in celestial revelation. It's as though the serendipity of soaking and folding can reveal heavenly clouds or the gas storms of Jupiter.

Daydream beside "Double Merge" and see for yourself. Once again, the work is ready to sway and inspire wonder as we come upon it. Like clothes on a line, these once-wet canvases hang loose in the light of a new day.

Mr. Panero is the executive editor of the *New Criterion*.

ART REVIEW

Flowing Color, Billowing Canvas

Sam Gilliam's innovative, loosely draped work is a light and luminous addition to Dia Beacon

By JAMES PANERO

Beacon, N.Y.

IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY to see the light at Dia Beacon. This 240,000-square-foot cathedral of Minimalism, Conceptualism and related art movements of the 1960s and '70s has next to no artificial lighting, which can make it hard to come to grips with the works on display. Instead the sprawling museum in a repurposed Nabisco box-printing plant relies on factory windows and 34,000 square feet of skylights for illumination. So the mood of the museum, a little over an hour's car or train ride up the Hudson River from New York City, is muted and indirect. The seasons, the weather, and the time of day all color and shade what you see and feel.

And about that feeling: puzzling, contemplative, perhaps at times reverential, but, until recently, not necessarily uplifting. Minimalist art, of rusted metal and broken glass, can be menacing. Conceptual art, of dry ideas and arid humor, can be deadening. The heady art of the 1960s and '70s takes itself seriously—perhaps too seriously. All that weight is meant to be profound.

Which is why Sam Gilliam's



light and luminous addition to this display is so welcome. A colorful, spirit-filled installation of two of his sculptural canvas works—the draping, loose "Double Merge" (1968) and the tightly fitted "Spread" (1973)—arrived here last fall on long-term loan. With the museum newly reopened by appointment, finally this assembly returns to view.

Taken together, these works feel like the baldachin and tabernacle in the heart of the gothic gloom.

Although Mr. Gilliam appeared in the American Pavilion of the 1972 Venice Biennale—the first Black American to receive the honor—the 86-year-old artist has been of ten considered peripheral to the movements of the 1960s and '70s. Now he is right where he should be, in dialogue with his contemporaries and front and center in his own time and place.

A Washington-based artist born in Tupelo, Miss., Mr. Gilliam has a way of absorbing diverse influ-

ences and folding them into his own innovative work. Abstract Expressionism, Japanese tie-dyeing, Titian-esque color, and his own history as the son of a seamstress all spread and merge in a deeply felt sense for paint's interaction with a canvas's warp and weft.

In the 1960s, Mr. Gilliam followed other artists of the so-called Washington Color School, such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, who had been inspired by Helen Frankenthaler to develop new approaches to abstraction. They experimented with new materials and techniques by staining unprimed canvas, unstretched and on the floor, with poured acrylic paints. Mr. Gilliam began adding aluminum powders, fluorescent paints, and resisting agents to his expanding palette. He also tucked and folded his wet canvases on the floor to create patterns in his free-flowing compositions.

He then went a step further. Working with ever-lengthening rolls of canvas, Mr. Gilliam developed new ways of presenting his widening work: hanging from the ceiling, nailed to the wall, draped over sawhorses, or tacked onto his own bevelled stretchers—pushing the boundaries of painting and sculpture.

Tarmy, James, "An Artist Born in 1933 Finds His Hottest Market in 2020," *Bloomberg.com*, February 6, 2020

Bloomberg

An Artist Born in 1933 Finds His Hottest Market in 2020

Sam Gilliam, who is 87, is on a market streak. A show at the Hirshhorn, planned for 2022, is likely to draw even more investor attention.

By James Tarmy | February 6, 2020



Sam Gilliam, *Light Depth*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy Corcoran Gallery of Art. Gift from the Trustees of the Corcoran Gallery of Art (Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund), 2018

In the spring of 2022, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., will hold a retrospective of the abstract artist Sam Gilliam, his first major U.S. show in more than 15 years. Gilliam is best known for his brightly colored, unstretched canvases that hang from walls and ceilings—part paintings, part sculpture.

The Hirshhorn show, though, will include the many styles of Gilliam's six-decade career. "It sets his work in context," says Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu. "I think now that we understand Sam Gilliam's practice a bit better, we can see that he was so much a part of the Washington Color School, but his work has evolved and gone in different directions. This [show] will be a reappraisal."

The announcement comes at a time when Gilliam's international profile has skyrocketed. In June the Kunstmuseum in Basel, Switzerland, held a massive show of his most famous work, paintings he made from 1967 to 1973 by pouring paint on loose canvases and then either leaving them unstretched or putting them on stretchers, which created a tie-dye effect.

Tarmy, James, “An Artist Born in 1933 Finds His Hottest Market in 2020,” *Bloomberg.com*, February 6, 2020



An untitled work by Gilliam, on view during the 2018 iteration of Art Basel in Switzerland. Photographer: SEBASTIEN BOZON/AFP

That show was followed last summer by a much smaller presentation of work from the same period at Dia:Beacon. And in July, the mega-gallery Pace announced that it would share representation of Gilliam with David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, which has represented the artist since 2012.

“There’s no question that the Kunstmuseum Basel show was incredibly eye-opening,” says Kordansky. “It was timed in concert with the opening of Art Basel in Switzerland, so you had every major curator, collector, and foundation seeing Sam’s work, some of whom were discovering it for the first time.”

Meanwhile, Gilliam’s market is on a similar tear. In 2018, *Lady Day II*, a 1971 work, set an auction record when it sold for \$2.2 million at Christie’s New York. Six of his top 10 sales at auction occurred in 2019; 19 of his top 20 public sales took place in 2017 or later, according to data from Artnet. It’s hard to overstate, in other words, how recent, and how stratospheric, Gilliam’s rise has been.

“In our Frieze Masters booth of Gilliam’s work in 2015, the most expensive painting was \$400,000,” says Kordansky. “It didn’t sell.” Four years later that same work—a 1970 drape painting called *Rite*—did find a buyer, but for a very different price: \$1.4 million.

A similar work, *Street*, in roughly the same dimensions as *Rite* and made in the same year, was acquired by SFMoMA for just under \$2 million, Kordansky says. “It’s hanging at the museum right now.”

For all that, Gilliam’s market still has a ways to go before he catches up with his peers, no matter which you compare him to. Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, and Kenneth Noland, for example, have auctions records of \$5.7 million, \$3 million, and \$3.5 million, respectively.

Tarmy, James, "An Artist Born in 1933 Finds His Hottest Market in 2020," *Bloomberg.com*, February 6, 2020



Gilliam in his paint-splattered studio, Washington D.C., 1980. Photographer: Anthony Barboza/Archive Photos

“When you pick apart his market, at the end of the day it comes down to the work itself,” Kordansky says. “The A-plus work that comes to auction has set records.” As a result, he continues, “there’s a tremendous amount of opportunity” left in Gilliam’s market.

The Current Market

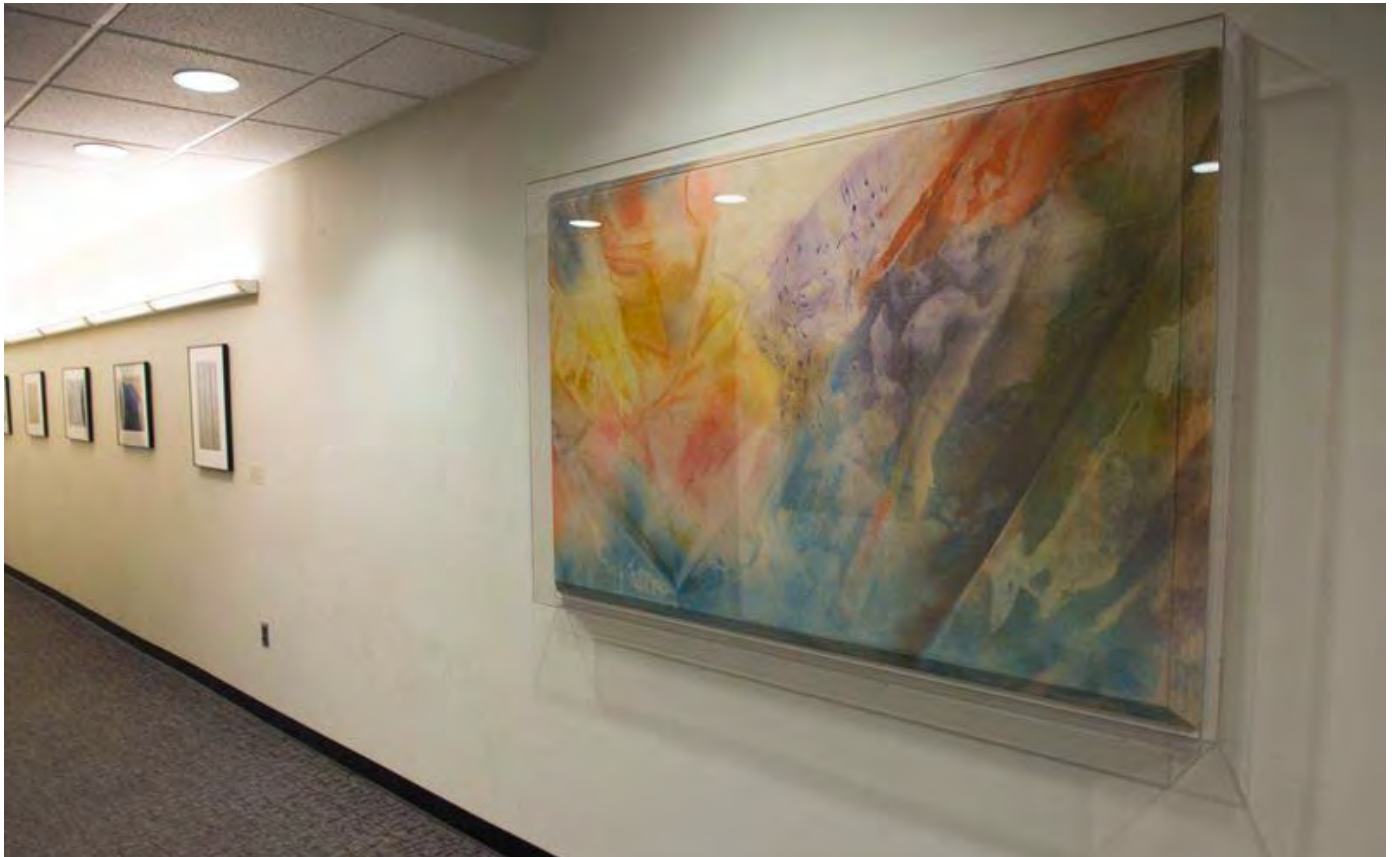
Gilliam’s market, Kordansky says, is driven by a combination of institutions (the Louisiana Museum in Denmark also recently bought a major work) and collectors.

“Privately, the best work is fetching between \$2 million and \$2.5 million,” he says. “But I want to be clear that it’s the work from the period between 1967 and 1973, when arguably the gestures he was making in the studio could be deemed [Jackson] Pollock-y.”

Many collectors are American, “but we’re starting to see some real Asian interest,” Pace President and Chief Executive Officer Marc Glimcher says. “Our job is to bring Gilliam to a larger collecting community that sees its collections as very focused on the 1960s and 1970s, or the legacy of abstraction.”

Many of these collections, Glimcher continues, “don’t have a Sam Gilliam painting—there are people with a great collection and a big hole where a Sam Gilliam work should be.”

Tarmy, James, "An Artist Born in 1933 Finds His Hottest Market in 2020," *Bloomberg.com*, February 6, 2020



Gilliam's (*P.A.C.*), *And Then*, from 1970. Photographer: Linda Davidson/The Washington Post

New Work

The key to Gilliam's market growth, Glimcher says, isn't just a museum exhibition. "The thing that impacts a market more than anything else is the artist's new work," he says. "For an artist at this point in his career, it's about how important and influential their shows are of their recent work."

Gilliam's more recent watercolors on paper sell for \$140,000 to \$180,000, Kordansky says, while his newer drape paintings are priced from \$500,000 to \$750,000.

If an artist is producing new pieces, it allows dealers and collectors to assign clearly delineated tiers of value. "You can buy something brand new or something else that's more expensive and older," Glimcher explains.

"An artist's 'late work' adds depth and texture" to people's understanding of their overall oeuvre, Glimcher says. "That drives the market in a different way, so that it goes up more slowly and is more diverse."

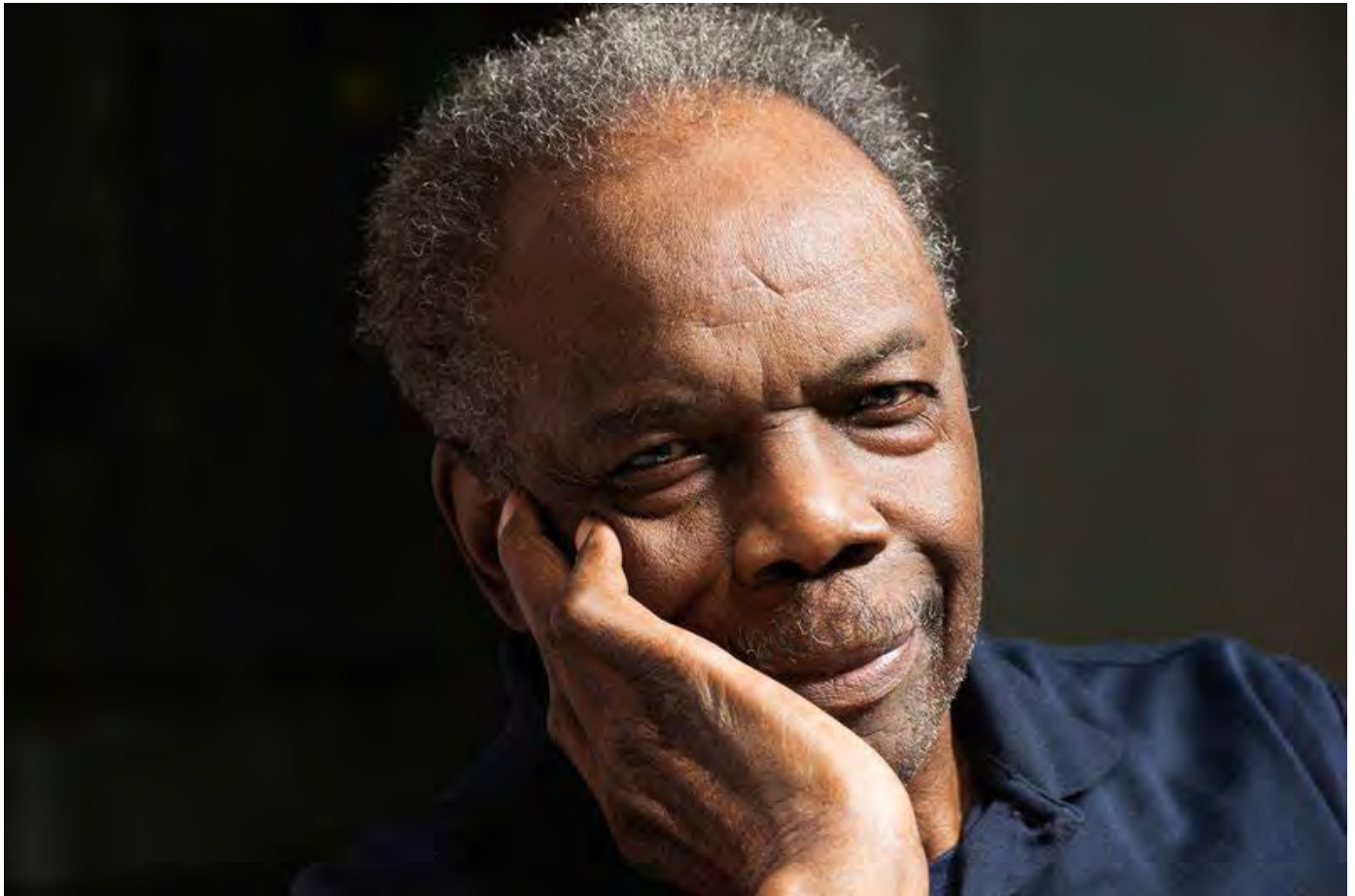
The Caveat

A museum retrospective can go a long way toward highlighting the many facets of an artist's career, but there's a notorious flip-side.

"Here's what happens: You have a true retrospective somewhere, and in the runup to that retrospective, the auction houses, the speculators, the traders, everybody runs up the [artist's] price," says Glimcher. "Then the retrospective happens, there's a lot of talk about the market, the retrospective closes, and then everyone puts their work [up for sale]."

The problem, Glimcher continues, is that "a lot of people who were interested in adding that artist's work to their collection did so before the retrospective," which means that after the show, there's a glut of work on the market and "it suppresses prices for all to see."

Tarmy, James, "An Artist Born in 1933 Finds His Hottest Market in 2020," *Bloomberg.com*, February 6, 2020



A 2016 portrait of Gilliam. Photographer: Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post

(Arguably, the markets for Maurizio Cattelan, Christopher Wool, and even Jeff Koons could be considered victims of this phenomenon.)

The Hirshhorn show though, Glimcher says, "isn't going to have that impact, because Sam's market isn't in that place." A retrospective's market-hangover, he says, usually happens when artists are better-known.

Gilliam, in contrast, while highly respected by artists and institutions (his work is in more than 50 public collections including the Tate in London and the MoMA in New York), still has a ways to go before he's a household name.

"What's going to happen," Glimcher concludes of the Hirshhorn show, "is that more people are going to understand the importance of this artist."

Raising His Profile

Now, both dealers say, it's simply a matter of raising Gilliam's profile, which the Hirshhorn show will certainly do.

"You know his market is going to get stronger and stronger, and more and more stable," Glimcher says. "Every institutional show adds to that."

"This show will be another opportunity to really bang home the point that the moves that Sam made from the late 1960s to the current day are historic," says Kordansky.

"He was a black individual working at the height of the civil rights era, producing abstract art," Kordansky adds. "It's a compelling American story, and Washington, D.C., is the perfect place for the show to take place."

ARTFORUM



BEST OF 2019

SAM GILLIAM

Dia:Beacon, New York

ARA OSTERWEIL



LIKE A PAIR OF ENORMOUS PAINT-SOAKED WINGS, Sam Gilliam's *Double Merge*, 1968, beckons viewers to enter into the fold. Consisting of two monumental swaths of raw canvas that have been stained, dyed, splattered, and encrusted with paint in a brilliant range of hues and then suspended from ceiling beams in an undulating, contiguous form, *Double Merge* is at once painting and sculpture, performance and installation, act and artifact. It is also an example of how Gilliam, a pioneer of postwar abstraction associated with the Washington Color School, expanded painting's rectilinear frame and put pressure on its dialectic of surface and form. In the late 1960s, he experimented with alternative modes of presenting his exquisite stains, eventually arriving at his distinctive thickly beveled stretchers and, most famously, suspensions of immense pigment-streaked scrolls. In homage to the cascading drapery that has entranced painters since the Renaissance, Gilliam's *Double Merge*, along with his other drape paintings, responds to the mimetic representation of fabric with an engagement with the liquidity of form. An ecstasy of color, the canvas ebbs and flows like a soft, supple skin.

Gilliam pushed past the modernist tension between Minimalism's site-specific awareness of space and Greenbergian essentialism by letting it all hang. Along with other innovative black abstractionists, including Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, and Jack Whitten, he is finally getting his due now that the institutions of American art are belatedly acknowledging that artists of color were indispensable to their heroic trajectories. Gilliam's work, in particular, attests to the radical transformation of art that occurred in tandem with civil rights struggles and other liberation movements of the '60s. Unfurling from our radical past into our uncertain present, where they have been hung anew as part of Dia's collection of visionary Minimalist art, Gilliam's scrolls dare us to abandon our preconceptions of how things must be. Decades before the contemporary obsession with painting's woven unconscious, Gilliam revealed the medium's repressed "double consciousness" as surface *and* structure.

Each of the skeins that make up *Double Merge* is titled *Carousel II*, as if the blur of colors streaming across the canvases might elicit the experience of spinning around and around at a fairground. The massive paintings do seem to be in motion, curtains in the midst of being drawn back from a theatrical stage. They underscore the medium's performative potential. And like the mythical Oreads, who "had music written on scrolls, in all the colours of the rainbow," Gilliam's paintings soar toward divinity without ever forgetting their provenance on the studio floor. □

On long-term view.

ARA OSTERWEIL IS A WRITER, PAINTER, AND PROFESSOR OF WORLD CINEMA AND CULTURAL STUDIES AT MCGILL UNIVERSITY IN MONTREAL.



Sam Gilliam, "Double Merge" (1968), installation view

the world that had not shown, were not showing, were not willing to show any art by any black artist. Yet everyone has not come aboard, you know that. And there's the same kind of tokenism as before."

Spoken over four decades ago, Gilliam's words have not lost their strength. While his "Carousel Change" (1970) is a centerpiece in the traveling exhibition *Soul of a Nation* — a group display that definitively maps out the contributions of Black artists in America from 1963-1983 — the scope of Gilliam's career has not matched his innovation or contributions to abstraction, until recently. In 1972, Gilliam became the first African-American artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. But it wasn't until this July that he finally gained New York representation through megagallery Pace.

"I'm just getting started," Gilliam told Jennifer Samet for Hyperallergic's *Beer with a Painter* interview series just over three years ago. The artist — still brilliant and brimming with artistic talent — will celebrate his 86th birthday on November 30.

Sam Gilliam is on long-term view at Dia:Beacon (3 Beekman St, Beacon, NY). The display was organized by Courtney J. Martin, former Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the Dia Art Foundation and present Director of the Yale Center for British Art.

The New York Times

Radiant Canvases Unbound

Sam Gilliam revels in fabric and the abstract at Dia:Beacon.

By DEBORAH SOLOMON

BEACON, N.Y. — Sam Gilliam, an abstract painter of 85, proves that optical prettiness can have depth. A longtime resident of Washington, he is loosely associated with color-field painting, which once turned our nation's capital into a capital of contemporary art. There is no easy way to explain how a city whose architecture and statuary can seem consistently colorless became, in the '60s, the locus of an art "ism" that spewed bright color in every direction.

This was the movement that, following the lead of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, endowed painting with the casual radiance of watercolor. Mr. Gilliam, too, soaked and stained unprimed canvas with

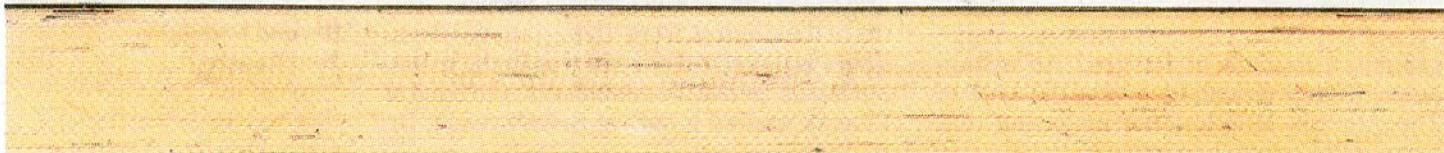


SAM GILLIAM/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; VIA DIA ART FOUNDATION; BILL JACOBSON STUDIO

pools of thinned-down acrylic pigment. It mattered at the time, at least to theory-inclined critics, that the paint merged with the weave of the canvas rather than sitting in clumps on top of it. A soaked canvas is likely to be at least half-an-inch flatter than a brushstroke-laden one, a distinction that helped spawn the now-historic Cult of Flatness. It was led by the critic Clement Greenberg, who believed that modern art lived its best life when it proclaimed the inherent limitations of its medium.

Color-field painting, which produced some bona fide masterworks and more than its share of decorative fluff, fell into eclipse in the last quarter of the 20th century. But Mr. Gilliam's early efforts have sprung into view again, and one hopes they remain vividly present. It's heartening to report that art-world fashion is now beginning to favor

CONTINUED ON PAGE C13



SAM GILLIAM/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; VIA DIA ART FOUNDATION; BILL JACOBSON STUDIO

Top, an installation view of Sam Gilliam's "Double Merge," 1968-2019. The canvases are each called "Carousel II" (1968), each unfurling about 75 feet. Above, "Spread" (1973), part of Mr. Gilliam's "Beveled-Edged" series.



SAM GILLIAM/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK, VIA DIA ART FOUNDATION, BILL JACOBSON STUDIO

once-overlooked abstract paintings by major African-American artists, who include, besides Mr. Gilliam, Ed Clark (whose first show at Hauser & Wirth opens this week); William T. Williams (whose recent paintings are on view at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery); and Alma Thomas (whose work is at Mnuchin).

As to Mr. Gilliam, the Dia Art Foundation is devoting two of its industrially-scaled galleries to a long-term installation of his work. The exhibition consists of just two pieces — the terrific, room-filling “Double Merge” (1968-2019), along with a radiant painting, “Spread” (1973) — but allows you to understand Mr. Gilliam’s innovations afresh. At a time when crafts inform the shape of so much contemporary artwork, it seems clear that Mr. Gilliam’s achievement has been to celebrate the under-acknowledged overlap between the history of fabric and the history of abstract painting.

Born in Tupelo, Miss., the seventh of eight children, Mr. Gilliam grew up in the shadow of the Great Depression. He was still in grade school when his family moved to Louisville, Ky., where his father worked for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. His mother, Estery, was a seamstress who belonged to a sewing group, and the artist later credited her for encouraging his boyhood love of art. In 1962, after graduating from the University of Louisville with both a bachelor’s degree and a master’s in fine art, Mr. Gilliam settled in Washington, where he developed his signature style.

The artist is best known for his so-called Drape paintings, which he began in 1968, when he did away with the tradition of the rectangular canvas by ditching stretcher bars, the wooden strips used to lend a painting its drum-taut surface. Instead, he hung up his canvases as if they were full-length curtains, creating droopy, sometimes swoopy objects that could be described, in mathematical terms, as a series of catenary

curves. They could sway gently, or subtly change their shape. They remind you that the history of art, wherever it roams, is inseparable from the history of humble cotton cloth.

“Double Merge” is a rousing sight. It conjoins two of the artist’s early Drape paintings into an exuberant, site-specific configuration that occupies a gallery of its own. At first, it appears to be floating or levitating in midair. It is monumental and carnivalesque, and can put you in mind of American architecture at its most vernacular, especially old-fashioned circus tents, with their bold stripes and peaked, cascading tops. But its heavy folds of cotton duck also convey a sense of gracefulness. Some observers have likened the Drape pieces to cathedrals. At the very least, they hint at a form of shelter, a cheerful one festooned with a startling rainbow of trippy, hippie, tie-dye colors and patterns.

The two canvases that were tapped for the installation are both titled “Carousel II” (1968), and each one unfurls at a length of about 75 feet. Which is not to say that they’re twins. The one on the left hews closer to the wall, and has soft-edged bars of color melting into each other with the unapologetic allure of a pink-streaked sunset. The second painting, which stands to the right, is comparatively chaotic and crossed with long lines that were apparently created by folding and creating a still-wet canvas, a technique that resembles the Japanese craft of shibori, or hand-dyeing. The painting protrudes aggressively into the viewer’s space, and raises a favorite art-historical conundrum: Is it a painting or is it a sculpture?

Another work in the exhibition — the only other one, in fact — might seem to pose a similar question. “Spread,” a large, horizontal, cherry-red abstraction crackling with citrusy oranges and yellows, has poles that tilt across its surface as if to offer a dyed-

fabric version of Pollock’s “Blue Poles.” Although “Spread” is not a Drape painting — it stays in place on the wall much the way paintings are supposed to do — it, too, comes with a novel twist. It belongs to Mr. Gilliam’s “Beveled-Edged” series, in which he slants his stretcher bars at a 45-degree angle, making them instantly visible to the viewer and adding an element of bulk or boxiness to the painting.

Is this detail important? An accompanying handout that is intended for the general public can feel a bit academic, emphasizing how Mr. Gilliam’s methods “transition his two-dimensional paintings away from the flatness traditionally associated with the medium and toward three-dimensional space.” He’s presented as a kind of post-Minimalist whose concerns happen to jibe with those of the sculptors collected in depth by Dia. They include Robert Morris, the master of draped industrial felt, and Anne Truitt, who is also from Washington, and whose spare, platonic, monochromatic objects occupy a teasingly ambiguous realm where painting leaves off and sculpture begins.

But Mr. Gilliam himself has not characterized his work in Minimalist or post-Minimalist terms. If anything, he has said that his work derives from more earthy and accidental inspirations. His Drape paintings, he said last month, “might have been inspired by seeing laundry hanging on a clothesline.” He made the comment in an interview with the art historian Barbara Rose, and added, intriguingly, that he could not discount the possible influence of a coterie of artists he had met in Paris in the early ‘60s who branded their efforts “*sans chassiss*” — which is French for “off the stretcher.”

At any rate, one wouldn’t want to pin the Drape paintings to a single source. They are richly and dreamily allusive. “Double Merge” has many layers of meaning, and its spirit, however festive at first glance, can

also feel mournful. As it hangs down from the ceiling, or rather from wooden slats that attach to points along the top of the canvas that are bunched and tied with brown leather straps, the piece can evoke an unsettling sense of hanging bodies, of lynchings, and the incalculable sorrows of the American past.

“When artists leave the South,” Mr. Gilliam once said to the historian William Ferris, “their Southernness takes on guises.”

Mr. Gilliam’s work deserves a deeper look and broader interpretations. In truth, abstract art was never as pure or self-contained as its champions liked to claim, and formalists who insist on seeing it as the polar opposite of representational painting do it an injustice. Mr. Gilliam’s abstract images tap into many kinds of experience, including the unpretentious pleasures of tie-dye fabrics and spin paintings and glowing summer sunsets. He allows you to see how abstract art has been shaped less by the lofty theories of yesteryear’s critics than by the teeming circus of everyday life.

While Sam Gilliam’s “Double Merge” can evoke circus tents at first glance, its spirit can also feel mournful. Its swoops of fabric remind viewers that the history of art is inseparable from the history of cotton cloth.

Sam Gilliam
A long-term installation at Dia:Beacon, Beacon, N.Y.
845-440-0100, diaart.org.

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

Art in America



Top, Sam Gilliam in his installation *Autumn Surf* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1973.
Bottom, Gilliam: *Spread*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 69 by 113½ inches.

Sam Gilliam

Abstract painter Sam Gilliam is best known for his experiments with vibrantly colored, draped, and suspended canvases. A member of the 1960s Washington Color School, a group of loosely connected artists who cultivated Color Field painting in Washington D.C., Gilliam soon began to move his canvases beyond the frame,

turning them into sculptural works and site-specific installations. In this show, the monumental “Double Carousel Merge,” consisting of two draped paintings (both titled *Double Carousel II*, 1969, and both suspended from the ceiling), is accompanied by a painting from the artist’s “Beveled-Edge” series.

Dia:Beacon, N.Y., Aug. 10, 2019–TBA.

Davis, Ben, "How to Look at a Sam Gilliam Painting: With One Eye on History and the Other on Color and Form," *Artnet.com*, August 29, 2019

artnet

How to Look at a Sam Gilliam Painting: With One Eye on History and the Other on Color and Form

Dia:Beacon has added Gilliam's "Double Merge" to its permanent display.

By Ben Davis | August 29, 2019



Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968) at Dia:Beacon. Image: Ben Davis.

Here's an old question that I find is still alive for a lot of people: How do you look at an abstract painting? Are you meant to just immerse yourself in the wordless presence of its colors? Or does it tell a kind of story too—about its author's ambitions, about its place in art history, about ideas of painting itself—that you are meant to enter into as well? How does it speak to you?

Sam Gilliam is certainly an artist who lends himself to wordless immersion. Now in his late 80s, the artist has a storied history, becoming the first African-American artist to represent the US at the Venice Biennale, in 1972, and winning the Presidential Medal of Arts in 2015. But he has been having a major moment lately, and if you'd like to contemplate why, Dia:Beacon has just unveiled a permanent gallery dedicated to him at its upstate temple of Minimalism. Its centerpiece is the ambitious, gallery-swallowing *Double Merge* (1968).

This is one of the first of Gilliam's signature "Drape" paintings—abstract painted panels that are then loosely hung from the wall, often at ambitious scales. Above all, these are lovely choreographies of paint and canvas, impressive presences. *Double Merge* is almost nostalgic to me in its tonic faith in the direct pleasures of color.

But there's also more to get out of it. In their deep structure, Gilliam's works are animated by a story too. Their specific dynamism condenses something about the historical moment when Gilliam had his inspiration for them, the late '60s—exactly when people were asking more of abstraction.

Davis, Ben, "How to Look at a Sam Gilliam Painting: With One Eye on History and the Other on Color and Form," *Artnet.com*, August 29, 2019



Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968). Installation view, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York. © Sam Gilliam. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York, courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

Double Merge consists of two large, loose canvas panels, one suspended at four points along the wall, the other suspended from six and made to bulge into the gallery as if creating an enclosure. In both, the fabric droops in a series of folds that nearly brush the floor, evoking kingly robes or theater curtains.

As for the surfaces, you see sweeps of thin lavender, green, pink, yellow, and sherbet orange, occasionally interrupted by a short, sharp ribbon of darker red or a splash of hard, metallic silver.

Sometimes the way the fabric is gathered together seems to concentrate the patterns of paint into starbursts or explosions. Other times the folds in the draped canvas seem to cut against the sense of motion implied by the painting on its surface, bluntly counteracting any illusionary ethereal atmosphere with a reminder of real gravity, real mass.

These contrasts and tensions play out along the length of *Double Merge* at a beat-by-beat, foot-by-foot level. Gilliam has talked of adding the tension between sculptural and pictorial qualities to the familiar "push and pull" of color in traditional abstract painting (coming out of the pedagogy of Hans Hofmann).

In this, Gilliam was both logically developing and defying the values of the art around him at the time. Raised in Louisville, Gilliam would discover a calling in abstract painting circles in Washington, DC, inspired by the pleasing palettes and expansive surfaces of painters like Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. Gilliam is known as a member of the Washington Color School, or sometimes as a "Third Generation" Color Field painter—which is to say that by the time he was trying to make his way, a long, heroic cycle of American abstract painting was in its late stages. Gilliam remembers that his mentors still taught art history as having a logical and natural progression: an artist's job was to understand the direction of painting heretofore, and find the next natural move to play to be successful.



Detail of Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968). Image: Ben Davis.



Detail of Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968). Image: Ben Davis.

But the '60s were unkind to genteel narratives of progress, including artistic progress, which came to seem unattuned to the gnarlier wavelengths of ascendant Baby Boomer taste. Pop Art and Conceptual art were both in different ways reactions to the previous dominance of Abstract Expressionism, with its lyrical and exalted sensibility. In their various ways, they brought in the everyday.

By the mid-'60s, even the arch congregations of manufactured elements found in Minimalism—marked rejections of old-fashioned painterly attachments to composition and the "hand of the artist"—were giving birth to what would come to be called "Post-Minimalism": all slouchy, perplexed surfaces and unconventional materials, the better to cypher the sense of chaos and disintegrative mental space of those socially turbulent times.



Detail of Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968). Image: Ben Davis.

For that matter, the mid-'60s transition from the Civil Rights to the Black Power period was making very clear demands on black artists like Gilliam for political content, and for disaffiliation from white power structures, of which abstract painting was sometimes thought to be one.

Artistically, Gilliam was in DC, not in New York, which was the heart of the more overwrought and trend-setting stylistic debates. As for political subject matter, though he would make abstract works whose titles and atmosphere referenced the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the subsequent urban rebellions (e.g. *April 4*, *Red April*), he also cherished abstraction as a model of freedom.

Gilliam had already been working through various experimental techniques with canvas by the time he hit on his signature draping. Like a lot of my favorite art, his most famous invention, which he came upon in the seismic year of 1968, summons together all the background historical energy into a simple, potent device that serves as both method and metaphor.

In his interview with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, along with such heroes of the day of the DC abstract painting scene as Howard Mehring and Tom Downing, Gilliam also mentions as an inspiration for his "Drapes"—unexpectedly to me—Robert Morris, the New York sculptor who bridged Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Post-Minimalism, known for his soft sculptures and heady polemics. The classic late defense of abstract painting, Michael Fried's delightfully severe "Art and Objecthood" of 1967, had slammed Minimalism—and Robert Morris's art specifically—for its "literalness," its obsession with scale as a substitute for visual interest, and its lack of commitment to the construction of a final, achieved epiphanic image. This was a hot debate of the day.

Look at *Double Merge* and you can see that all those values that Fried is attacking as a threat to painting are exactly what Gilliam breezily incorporates into painting with his "Drapes." He was inspired in making them, he says, by seeing clothes hanging on a line. That is, he very much meant to suggest the down-to-earth presence of objects in the world, resonating with the spaces of ordinary people: "what was most personal to me were the things I saw in my own environment," he told *Artnews*. As for scale, freeing the painting from the stretcher would also allow Gilliam to embrace a new kind of vastness.

Commitment to Fried's treasured sense of painterly "presentness and instantaneousness" also went out the window in Gilliam's "Drapes," in an interesting way. An effect of working with loose canvas is to accent the break between the original act of coloring the surface and its final, draped form in the gallery. A deliberate, improvisatory lack of finality is coded into Gilliam's "Drapes," both in the work's installation and in how you interpret what is going on when you are seeing it.

"How much serendipity is there in the way folds fall?", an interviewer asked in 1972. "There's a hell of a lot," Gilliam replied.



Detail of Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968). Image: Ben Davis.



Detail of Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968). Image: Ben Davis.

Davis, Ben, "How to Look at a Sam Gilliam Painting: With One Eye on History and the Other on Color and Form," *Artnet.com*, August 29, 2019



Detail of Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968). Image: Ben Davis.

And yet, if you go back and read Robert Morris's 1966 "Notes on Sculpture," it's not just that that text doesn't chime fully with Gilliam's art, it's almost as if Morris were directly writing against it: "the concerns of sculpture have been for some time not only distinct but hostile to those of painting," Morris theorized. A little later, he continued: "The autonomous and literal nature of sculpture demands that it have its own, equally literal space—not a surface shared with painting."

It was exactly a shared space of painting and sculpture that Gilliam embraced. And while Morris wrote, the same year as *Double Merge*, of embracing entropy and randomness as values in and of themselves, Gilliam's process embraced such

values at one level only to use them to find a fresh way to come back at ideas of composition and intention. While his draping suggests a certain (literal) taking painting down a peg and embrace of a certain "everyday-ness," Gilliam still very much flaunts the stuff traditionally celebrated by painting: color and canvas.

And this brings us very specifically back to *Double Merge*, because here's something very important about its contemporary incarnation at Dia: It is actually two works stuck together to form a new work (both were originally called *Carousel II*). That's the "Merge" of the title.

What is the effect of this operation on you, as a viewer? At first you contemplate the whole thing as one big, bold installation. Then, very quickly, it asserts itself as not one, but two distinct parts. This division is not subtle, when you stay with the painting. One is hung close to the wall; the other comes out from it. Both are Gilliam "Drapes." But they are marked as having their own logic.

At the level of their surfaces, too, the more you look, the more they distinguish themselves from each other within the common grammar of Gilliam's overall technique. The composition of the left "Drape" is airier, more diaphanous. The surfaces of the right one are denser, punctuated with those blotches of industrial silver. The former much more evokes movement and atmosphere, the latter more a section of rainbow earth.

For me, the title Gilliam has given to this collocation evokes the idea of a "double negative." The unique identities of *Double Merge*'s two paintings are at first negated by putting them together; but then, at the next level, their merger also cancels this cancelling—the *point* of uniting them is the juxtaposition that allows individuality to emerge once more, to break through the mental cliché that this art is just colors and folds, randomly distributed.

In that, Gilliam's work at Dia tells a story, via painting, of a specific historic trajectory that he has inhabited, looking deep into the surrounding entropy that seemed to be canceling out the world he loved, passing through it, and returning to a faith in seeing things fresh. It's a remarkably tough and subtle kind of beauty.



Installation view of Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge* (1968). Image: Ben Davis.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

At Age 85, Sam Gilliam Is Suddenly an Art-World Star

By BRENDA CRONIN

WHAT'S IT LIKE to become an art-world star at age 85? Sam Gilliam says that after six decades quietly building his reputation, the spotlight feels strange: "My thing is, I'm better not being known!"

He recently vaulted to a new level, breaking his sales records at auction in 2018, joining Pace Gallery in New York this summer and mounting solo shows, including one opening Saturday at Dia:Beacon in Beacon, N.Y.

"Sam is the great abstract artist who represents a bridge between abstract expressionists of the mid-century and the renaissance that

abstraction is enjoying today," says Jonathan Binstock, a curator of Mr. Gilliam's exhibit last year at the Kunstmuseum Basel in Switzerland.

The show focused on a creative frenzy between 1967 and 1973, when Mr. Gilliam sought to free his art from traditional limits. In his beveled-edge and drape paintings, he let bright blues, reds and yellows pool and spatter on the canvas, which he often rumbled and folded while still wet, and at times removed entirely from stretchers.

The drape paintings redefined painting and also redefined sculpture, says Josef Helfenstein, director of the Kunstmuseum Basel and another curator of the exhibit. The

works have "a performative aspect and come to life only when they are draped, like a creature."

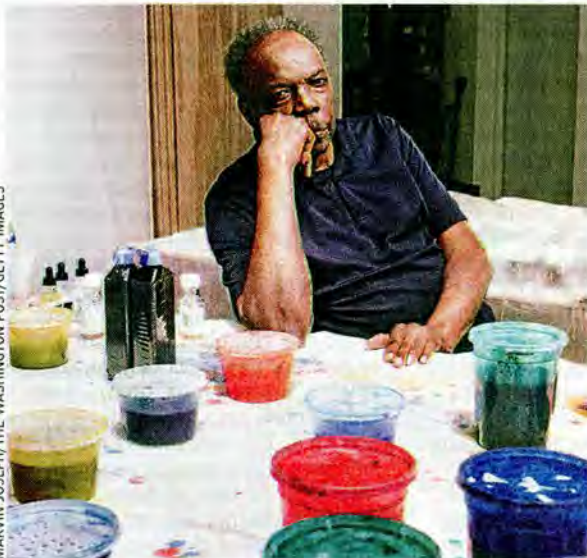
Anders Kold, curator and head of acquisitions at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek, Denmark, calls the Kunstmuseum Basel show an epiphany. "We were so moved by it and could

see how this artist was missing from our collection," Mr. Kold says. Within weeks, the Louisiana Museum acquired one of the works in the exhibit, "Change," a 1970 picture measuring more than 9 feet by 9 feet.

The newfound appreciation of Mr. Gilliam's work is part of a broader reassessment of African-American artists in recent years, says Nicole Schloss, head of Sotheby's Day Auctions of Contemporary Art in New York. Collectors and museums are focusing not only on African-American artists who are early in their careers. They are also "looking backwards and realizing, 'Who have the history books left out?'" Ms. Schloss says.

Mr. Gilliam was born in Tupelo, Miss., and educated in Louisville, Ky., before arriving in Washington, D.C., in 1962. He moved from figurative painting to the abstract style of the Washington Color School movement and then explored how to infuse his paintings with architecture. He showed at the 1972 Venice Biennale and built a following, but credits his Washington base with keeping him at some remove from the spotlight.

"Through all of the ups and downs, and all of the successes and periods when maybe the art world wasn't paying as much attention, Sam has remained absolutely true to his vision," says Dr. Binstock, the director of the Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester in New York.



MARVIN JOSEPH/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES

Cronin, Brenda, "At Age 85, Sam Gilliam Is Suddenly an Art-World Star," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2019, p. A9



After painting for six decades, Mr. Gilliam is seeing his work hit records—including 'Lady Day II,' which sold for \$2.17 million at Christie's in November.

Shows at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles starting in 2013 also buoyed Mr. Gilliam's profile. "With this attention comes a stage to perform on," Mr. Kordansky says. "And I think he very much wants to prove that the work that he is making today is as radical and important as the work he was making in the late '60s and early '70s."

A fan of jazz, Mr. Gilliam says he has worn out several stereos and amassed a music collection, including every record or CD he could find of Miles Davis's "Sketches of Spain." Mr. Gilliam says his process involves environment, sculpture and architecture as well as an interest in dancing, music and theater. "One thing about John Coltrane or Miles Davis or Ornette Coleman or any of the jazz artists is that they worked in a continuum," he adds. "There's no particular start, there's no particular end. You work in space."

Singer Billie Holiday shows up in the title of Mr. Gilliam's 1971 painting, "Lady Day II." At Christie's in November it fetched \$2.17 million—

an auction record for the artist. He isn't thrilled by such benchmarks. "It creates a sort of sensation around your work and you begin to be rated and ranked," he says.

And he bristles at the notion of overnight fame. "No one has ever discovered me!" Mr. Gilliam says. "I mean, I'm pretty advanced at what I do." He has built up a stockpile of work and still heads into his studio at least two days a week.

He also is a newlywed. In November, Mr. Gilliam married gallery owner Annie Gawlak, his companion of 30 years. "I paint for Annie," he says. "She's my critic and she's the first person to see" the work. They live in a house surrounded by trees at the edge of Rock Creek Park in Washington. His three daughters from his first marriage are grown and he has three grandchildren.

Although his wife makes sure that they get some time away, Mr. Gilliam's mind churns with ideas, and he says he never feels as if his pieces are finished. "I'm nervous all the time," he says. "I think fear of failure is the best thing for you!"

Kinsella, Eileen, "With Its New Show of Sam Gilliam's Painting, Dia Wants to Explode Our Assumptions About Minimalism," *Artnet.com*, August 8, 2019

artnet

With Its New Show of Sam Gilliam's Painting, Dia Wants to Explode Our Assumptions About Minimalism

A new installation of early work by Sam Gilliam will be on long-term view at Dia Beacon starting August 10.

Eileen Kinsella | August 8, 2019



Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge*, (1968). Installation view, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York. © Sam Gilliam. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York, courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

One could argue that a historian's most important job is not writing history, but re-writing it—pouring back over primary documents to determine who was left out or misrepresented in earlier drafts and correcting the record. By that measure, the historians over at the Dia Art Foundation, who specialize in the art of the 1960s and '70s, have been extremely busy.

In recent years, the museum has put on shows by artists including Dorothea Rockburne, Michelle Stuart, Anne Truitt, and Charlotte Posenenske; made acquisitions of significant work by Mary Corse and Nancy Holt; and also diversified its spotlights on male artists to include French neon artist François Morellet and the Korean painter Lee Ufan. Now, it is adding another previously overlooked artist to its ranks: Washington Color Field painter Sam Gilliam. The 85-year-old artist has been working for six decades, but has recently been enjoying a career renaissance after a long stretch of institutional neglect.

On August 10, Dia will unveil an exhibition of Gilliam's early work from the 1960s and '70s in Beacon, New York. The presentation includes two "drape" paintings, suspended in concert with one another from the ceiling, and a painting from his "beveled edge" series in which the work's edges extend off the wall and toward the viewer. The works will be installed within the museum's permanent collection, putting Gilliam in the context of his minimalist and post-minimalist contemporaries such as Robert Ryman and Mary Corse. The goal is not only to enhance our understanding of who was making minimalist art, but also to challenge the widely held belief that painting took a back seat to sculpture during this era.

Kinsella, Eileen, "With Its New Show of Sam Gilliam's Painting, Dia Wants to Explode Our Assumptions About Minimalism," *Artnet.com*, August 8, 2019



Sam Gilliam, *Spread* (1973). Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York. © Sam Gilliam. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York, courtesy Dia Art Foundation,

"I've known Sam's work since I was a child and the opportunity to curate a show with his work was top of my list," says Courtney J. Martin, Dia's former deputy director and chief curator, who oversaw the project before becoming director of the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven this spring. "I probably called Sam the week that I knew I was going to Dia full-time because I knew I wanted to work with him."

Gilliam first garnered attention in the mid-1960s for his beveled-edge and drape paintings, which sought to push the boundaries of what a painting could be. He was the first African American artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in 1972.

He is one of a number of painters active in the '60s and '70s who were celebrated when they emerged, but receded from view in the ensuing decades due to a mix of factors, including his race and the fact that he worked in Washington, DC, outside of a major art-market hub.

In recent years, however, the art world has appeared to wake up and take notice of Gilliam's importance. In 2013, he began showing with Los Angeles-based gallery David Kordansky. In 2017, Gilliam returned to the Venice Biennale with a vibrant, unstretched canvas *Yves Klein Blue* (2017), which welcomed visitors to Giardini's main pavilion. In 2018, he was the subject of a major retrospective at the Kunstmuseum Basel. Last month, he joined mega-gallery Pace.

Still, his early work in particular remains under-exposed in the United States. Martin recalls that, as a young art enthusiast, "I was very taken by works that I'd never actually seen, these early installations where he had these large scale drapes that would take up basically a full room." The works were site-specific and

Kinsella, Eileen, "With Its New Show of Sam Gilliam's Painting, Dia Wants to Explode Our Assumptions About Minimalism," *Artnet.com*, August 8, 2019



Sam Gilliam, *Autumn Surf* (1973). Installation view San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1973. © Sam Gilliam. Photo: Art Frisch, courtesy San

existed only as installations, meaning that they were rarely shown after their debuts. As a curator at Dia, "I was interested in whether he would want to revisit this idea, come to a place, and figure out its contours and work from there," she says. Gilliam readily agreed.

The beveled-edge and drape paintings "represent a radical approach to the medium," says Dia's director Jessica Morgan. "Architectural in scale, these works chart a crucial moment in Gilliam's early practice as he explored the possibilities of manipulating canvas in three-dimensional space."

The works will remain on view at Dia long term to encourage repeated viewings. "My hope was that people walk into the smaller gallery—where the bevel painting is at a 45 degree angle coming off the wall—and feel a compression," says Martin. "Then you walk into the bigger gallery and feel really loose and free once they see the drape installation."

The goal is to provide deeper context for Gilliam's work—and to offer viewers a richer understanding of the art coming out of the '60s writ large. "I hope that people come to see these works and ask the bigger questions about what happens with Minimalism at a certain point. Dia does a good job, particularly with the works by Donald Judd that are on view. The thing you begin asking yourself is, where was painting at that moment where there is so much conversation around sculpture? Painters were doing super interesting things too."



At 85, Abstract Pioneer Sam Gilliam Is Still Making Innovative Paintings

By Alina Cohen | August 6, 2019



Sam Gilliam with his work, *Autumn Surf*, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1973. © Sam Gilliam. Photo by Art Frisch. Courtesy of San Francisco Chronicle/Polaris.

In the 1960s, artist Sam Gilliam transformed his experience of a fracturing world into colorful, dramatic canvases that hung in folds from gallery walls. Performance art was emerging, American sculpture was blossoming as minimalism took hold, and the Civil Rights movement was energizing activists nationwide. Gilliam turned inward, using his Washington D.C. studio to incorporate all this noise into masterful paintings. "You arrive at what you do by challenging yourself and painting a lot," he mused over a recent phone conversation.

Gilliam, who's just shy of 86, moved to the U.S. capital in 1962 and has lived there ever since. Early in his career, he made clean-edged abstractions, in line with Washington Color School painters such as Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis. He gradually loosened up his style, soaking or pouring colors directly onto his canvases and folding them before they dried—a technique which created accordion lines and a deep sense of texture. Around 1965, he made his greatest stylistic innovation: He got rid of the stretcher bars that traditionally underpin a painting and draped his canvases from the wall like sheets from a clothesline. They bunched at the top, unfurling in color-splashed waves and adopting a third dimension, effectively becoming both painting and sculpture. This summer, the New York art world is giving Gilliam more attention than ever.

Last week, Pace Gallery announced that it would be the first Manhattan gallery to represent the artist. Gilliam is also represented by Los Angeles's David Kordansky Gallery, which has shown his work for many years.

"Sam never wanted New York representation," Pace Gallery founder Arne Glimcher wrote to me by email. "He avoided the influence of the art scene including its writers—he wouldn't be grouped into a Color Field niche." Glimcher plans to expand Gilliam's international reach, particularly into Europe and Asia, where he's not as well-known. That's not to say that Gilliam's own home city has forgotten about him: This fall, the Kennedy Center's new performance space, called *The Reach*, will debut with one of Gilliam's draped paintings.

Cohen, Alina, "At 85, Abstract Pioneer Sam Gilliam Is Still Making Innovative Paintings," *Artsy.net*, August 6, 2019



Sam Gilliam, *Spread*, 1973. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Across the street from Pace's major new flagship on West 25th Street in Chelsea, which is slated to open this fall, The FLAG Art Foundation is presenting an exhibition of Gilliam's new paintings. The 12 large-scale works, on view through August 16th, are made on Japanese washi paper, a medium strong enough to withstand Gilliam's intensive process. Hanging vertically against black gallery walls, the pieces feature Gilliam's signature folding technique, evoking curtains, tree trunks, and flags. Paint splatches and other traces of the artist's multistep process suggest skeletons and rorschach blots. The works' palettes range from psychedelic purple and orange to deep forest greens tinged with blue, creating an unconventional rainbow across the dark gallery walls. "They're examinations in pure color for him," FLAG associate director Jonathan Rider told me recently.

On August 10th, Dia: Beacon will present three Gilliam works from the 1960s and 1970s. Two large scale, 10-by-71-foot drape paintings from 1968, each titled *Carousel II*, will be on view. "They came out of uniting color field with the March on Washington," Gilliam explained. Through these works, he was also responding to Martin Luther King's assassination.

It's impossible to say what exactly the Dia:Beacon presentation will look like until opening day—Gilliam hangs his drape paintings differently every time he displays them. Each new installation becomes its own site-responsive, improvisational performance. "I do like the stage," Gilliam told me. No matter how the final presentation appears, the date of the works will be strongly suggestive. The year 1968 is a symbol of American turmoil and celebration: the year that Lyndon Johnson signed The Fair Housing Act—an expansion of the 1964 Civil Rights Act; Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated; and the Vietnam War raged.

Cohen, Alina, "At 85, Abstract Pioneer Sam Gilliam Is Still Making Innovative Paintings," *Artsy.net*, August 6, 2019



Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 2019. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Detail of Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 2019. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Gilliam was an activist himself. He took part in the March on Washington in 1963—"we got close to the Lincoln Memorial," he recalled. Later, he co-organized "The Deluxe Show," a 1971 exhibition in Houston that may have been the first in the U.S. to show the work of black and white artists together. Major art collectors John and Dominique de Menil supported the exhibition, which was presented in the city's dilapidated Deluxe Theater. Alongside Kenneth Noland and painter Peter Bradley, Gilliam helped curate the show that included artists ranging from Al Loving to Ed Clark, Larry Poons to Jules Olitski.



Detail of Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 2019. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Detail of Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 2019. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Cohen, Alina, "At 85, Abstract Pioneer Sam Gilliam Is Still Making Innovative Paintings," *Artsy.net*, August 6, 2019



Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 2019. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Detail of Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 2019. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Living in Washington for decades, Gilliam has long been surrounded by an intense political climate. He remembers the "romantic involvement" that surrounded John F. Kennedy's presidency and says that the Trump administration is great for making an artist want to get away from politics and do other things. Withdrawing into the studio isn't an escape for him, but a way of "building beyond this time." In their own way, Gilliam said, "artists always deal with drama. They get caught up." Instead of wreckage and linear history, he'll leave behind works of beauty that offer an alternate story about his time.



Sam Gilliam, *Changing Again (Getting Undone)*, 1998. Hollis Taggart

THE
NEW YORKER

Sam Gilliam

Flag Art Foundation

CHELSEA Twelve large vertical paintings on paper hang, vibrant against dark walls, in this concise and elegant show of the Washington, D.C.-based artist's new works. Gilliam is known for his tactile approach to abstraction: in the late nineteen-sixties, he began to drape, fold, and rumple unstretched canvases, a provocation against color-field painting's then dominant strain of soak-and-stain formalism. Although the artist presses his new, handsomely striped compositions flat, they maintain a corrugated sense of depth through the process of being pleated and stained. Their bleeding, pooling, and marbled surfaces—in colors that are by turns murky, verdant, and fiery—are charming foils to their geometries. These untitled pictures are unarguably abstract, but they have pleasant affinities with flags, patchwork quilts, tall thickets of grass, and stained-glass windows. (On Aug. 10, an exhibition of Gilliam's work from the sixties and seventies opens at Dia:Beacon.)—*J.F. (Through Aug. 16.)*

The New York Times

At Last, Sam Gilliam's Star Ascends in New York

Pace will be the first New York gallery to represent the 85-year-old abstract painter, while his work debuts next month at Dia:Beacon.

By Lauren Messman | July 19, 2019



Sam Gilliam, an American Color Field painter, at his studio in Washington in 2018. Sam Gilliam/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Gabriella Demczuk for The New York Times

Sam Gilliam, the abstract artist who rose to prominence in the 1960s with his large-scale draped canvas paintings, will join Pace Gallery's roster of artists, the gallery announced Monday. It will be the first time in the 85-year-old painter's long career that he will be represented by a New York gallery.

Considered a master in the third wave of Color Field painters, Mr. Gilliam has spent much of his career in Washington, where he first started to experiment with unsupported canvases. His signature draped and beveled-edge paintings, which are suspended from the ceiling or stretched across beveled frames, were considered a radical reimagining of the medium. In 1972, he became the first black artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. Yet, despite his early success, Mr. Gilliam has never been represented by a New York gallery. Arne Glimcher, the founder of Pace Gallery, attributed that to the artist's nonconformist sensibility, saying the artist has "really steered his own career and steered it clear of what we know as the art market."

"He's had many, many opportunities," Mr. Glimcher said. "He didn't want it and I think, I hope, it was that he was waiting for the right moment to show his work in broader venues."

In recent years, Mr. Gilliam has enjoyed somewhat of a renaissance, thanks in part to the Los Angeles-based art dealer David Kordansky, who started representing Mr. Gilliam after visiting his studio in 2012. The acceleration in attention has also brought more lucrative auction sales for the painter. Last June, a large-scale beveled-edge work called "forth" sold for \$1.16 million at Sotheby's London. The sale beat Mr. Gilliam's past record of \$885,000, for an untitled work that was auctioned in March 2018 at Sotheby's New York.

Moving forward, Pace will work in close collaboration with Mr. Kordansky in representing Mr. Gilliam's art. Mr. Glimcher said he hopes that Pace will give Mr. Gilliam more of an "international platform."

"We'll be able to introduce the work to cultures that haven't seen it," the dealer said. But next month, Mr. Gilliam's work will be shown to a more local audience. On Aug. 10, his work from the 1960s and 1970s, including his pioneering drape paintings, will be presented at Dia:Beacon, alongside the museum's permanent collection and in dialogue with the work of the minimalist painter Robert Ryman and the sculptor Anne Truitt. Later this year, Mr. Gilliam will be honored at the annual Dia Fall Night in New York City. "There are few artists who change the course of possibilities in painting," Mr. Glimcher said, "and he's one of them."

ARTFORUM



Sam Gilliam with his *Carousel II*, 1969 (on right), Washington, DC, 1969.

BEACON, NEW YORK

SAM GILLIAM

Dia:Beacon

Opens in August

Curated by Courtney J. Martin

After completing a series of hard-edge abstractions that placed him alongside the Washington Color School in the early 1960s, iconic American painter Sam Gilliam experimented with soak-staining his canvases, taking the works off the stretcher, and suspending them from the wall or ceiling. This August, Dia:Beacon will exhibit one of these large-scale works, *Carousel II*, 1969, which will fill an entire industrial-size gallery. The artist's Dia debut, organized by Gilliam in collaboration with outgoing chief curator Courtney J. Martin, will also feature a selection of his hard-edge and draped paintings. Though Gilliam has always seen his work as being in dialogue with the likes of Robert Morris and Donald Judd, Dia offers a broad Minimalist and post-Minimalist context for the artist. Viewers are not only in for a delight—they'll walk away having experienced a long-overdue radical shift in the story of postwar art.

—Jessica Bell Brown

COLOR IN LANDSCAPE

Though lately pegged as a "rediscovery," abstract painter Sam Gilliam has been working successfully for decades, alternating between public commissions and studio experiments.

by Greg Allen

Sam Gilliam:
Ruby Light, 1972,
80 by 56¼ by 11¾
inches. Hirshhorn
Museum and
Sculpture Garden,
Washington, D.C.
Photo Cathy Carver.

All artwork this
article © Sam
Gilliam/Artists
Rights Society
(ARS), New York.

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See Contributors
page.

IN LATE OCTOBER, the abstract artist Sam Gilliam was in his studio in Washington, D.C., making final preparations for his third exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, the artist's fifty-fourth solo gallery show. Gilliam had been finishing and selecting works for LA since returning from his retrospective at the Kunstmuseum Basel in June—his twenty-fifth solo museum exhibition, yet only his second at a European institution. Gilliam's iconic, large-scale, draped canvases have been shown in two pavilions at the Venice Biennale—the US in 1972 and the Italian in 2017—but in group shows. He has never had a dealer in New York. This thumbnail biography only hints at the exertions Gilliam has made to sustain an authentic artistic practice over six decades in an art world that is fawning and fickle, embracing and exclusionary, and whose self-justifying narratives are routinely distorted along axes of race, geography, critical theory, or taste. In recent years, as Gilliam's work has gained ever greater recognition, his story has often been characterized as a comeback (though he never left) or a rediscovery (though he wasn't lost). If, at some periods in his extensive career, Gilliam seemed invisible, it's simply because people refused to see him.

Gilliam works in his studio's storefront office, at a glass table strewn with large color photos of the artworks visible in the adjacent workshop. Or rather, the artworks' constituent elements. In addition to the stained and painted sheets of fabric dangling in elongated cones from the ceiling, several geometric plywood forms, smooth and monochrome, rest on dollies for

easier repositioning, like refrigerator-size game pieces. The artist sits between color charts and paint tests on one side, and shelves holding miniature reproductions of Hieronymus Bosch triptychs on the other. Assistants approach periodically to get instructions or to deliver new photos. "[Art] involves a lot of thinking," Gilliam said in a 2011 interview, "and figuring out where to start. Then figuring out what the next step is, step by step. There's not a sight, an idea of where the end is."¹

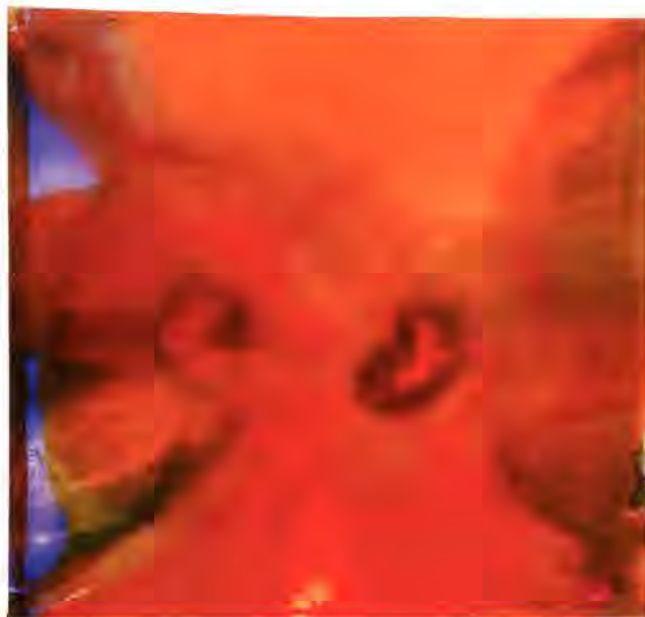
When I visited him in his studio, the artist said nothing of this. He did not want to be interviewed. He did not want to be recorded or transcribed. Instead he spoke about Washington, and especially about Rock Creek Park, a 1,754-acre national park that follows a small tributary of the Potomac River from the northern border of the District of Columbia, past the National Zoo, to the Georgetown waterfront. The park is a thickly forested landscape in the heart of the city, a wonderful place to hike, rest, or observe an extensive range of species of flowers, plants, trees, and wildlife.

The deep, rugged gorge also served historically as a barrier between the wealthy, predominantly white neighborhoods to the west and the browner population to the east. When Klinge Road, one of just three original traverses of Rock Creek, was damaged by erosion in 1991, the west side fought for twenty-three years to keep it closed. It was replaced in 2017 by a bike path. Rock Creek Parkway, the winding, two-lane road that runs through the park and tunnels under the Zoo, also gives

Allen, Greg, "Color in Landscape," *Art In America*, February 2019, pp. 58-63



Red Petals, 1967,
acrylic on canvas,
88 by 93 inches.
Phillips Collection,
Washington, D.C.



Maryland suburbanites a way to avoid D.C. streets. This was especially important in 1968, Gilliam recalled, when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. The artist and his young family witnessed the protests that followed from the window of their D.C. home. These recollections were repeated with some variation when I visited the studio again a week later. But the view into the workshop, of compositions of forms and structures and canvases, was completely different.

GILLIAM MOVED to D.C. in 1962 to be an artist and to marry Columbia Journalism School graduate Dorothy Butler, who had just been hired as a reporter at the *Washington Post*. The year before, he had received an MFA from the newly integrated University of Louisville, where German Jewish refugee professors maintained a rigorous approach to both art training and general education. That way, Gilliam once explained, when they discovered that other art-related opportunities remained closed to them, black artists could at least teach.² In D.C., Gilliam found both a studio and a teaching job. He immersed himself in the local museums—studying Frans Hals at the National Gallery and the Rothko Room at the Phillips Collection—as well as the local art scene, where the idea of a Washington Color School was taking hold. It was a heady time when it seemed the self-declared capital of the free world might also become a full-fledged art capital. It did not. But D.C. remains important as the formative context where Gilliam developed his own artistic practice. He has always insisted on his freedom to see and think and explore abstraction beyond both the Color Field and the color line, while remaining inextricably grounded in his chosen city.

Getting to know older D.C. painters such as Thomas Downing and Kenneth Noland accelerated Gilliam's switch from representational painting to abstraction. He worked through the tech-

niques and materials the Color School artists had adopted from Helen Frankenthaler and Hans Hofmann: staining and pouring paints on unprimed cotton canvas. To these, Gilliam added another tool set: analytic experimentation, jazz-inspired improvisation, and extended contemplation of process. Beginning with watercolor on paper, and moving to acrylic on canvas, Gilliam investigated the behavior of his materials when subjected to pouring, soaking, staining, scrubbing, crumpling, folding, drying, and reworking. He studied each changed state through Polaroid photographs. In 1970 Gilliam reflected on the freedom of letting things be, or happen, and "trying to believe in the materials or the kind of tools that I actually use and [to] let them excite . . . possibilities, and not to get too mental, you know, about what's really going on. Just to sort of sit back and observe what you're doing as much as you can, you know—just work and let things go."³

This combination of discipline, chill, and ambition did not go unnoticed. When collector Marjorie Phillips saw Gilliam's early reworked

canvases in the Jefferson Place Gallery, she promptly gave him a show at the Phillips Collection and bought a work (*Red Petals*, 1967) for the museum. The frenetic director of the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Walter Hopps, did even more, orchestrating grants, long-term studio space, museum shows, and commissions for Gilliam and other emerging local artists, including Anne Truitt, Rockne Krebs, and printmaker Lou Stovall, all as part of a hothouse scheme to nurture a community of artists who wouldn't flee Washington at the first hint of success or get displaced by rising rents. At Dorothy's urging, the Gilliams used his first grant stipend to buy a house. Hopps's curatorial engagement was catalytic for some of Gilliam's earliest projects, but this matrix of relationships, collaboration, and dialogue has also helped the artist sustain his practice over time.

The drape paintings coalesced out of Gilliam's comprehensive questioning of his materials and the traditions of painting. He reconceived the space his colors created within the canvas. He created chromatic tension through atypical combinations and layers of pigments. He upset the distinction between the front and the back of a rolled up, saturated canvas that had been painted on the floor or while hanging from the ceiling. He used beveled and chamfered stretcher bars to reshape his canvases, then dispensed with stretcher bars altogether. And he used poles, clamps, and hooks to project his canvas off the wall and into the space of the viewer. These experiments led to new questions: How could these canvases be held up? Should they move? What is their relationship to their space? These questions challenged the prevailing critical dialogue around painting, as well as the Washington Color School, which was concerned with the autonomy and flatness of the picture plane. Gilliam's answers are the now iconic works that astonished viewers, critics, curators, and collectors in Washington and beyond.

If, at some periods in his extensive career, Gilliam seemed invisible, it's simply because people refused to see him.

A sculpture show at the Corcoran Gallery of Art seems to have made a significant impression on Gilliam. "Scale as Content" was the first time the museum commissioned new works. Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* stood in front of the museum, and two massive sculptures—Tony Smith's *Smoke* and Ronald Bladen's *X*—filled the skylit grand atrium. "Scale as Content" opened on October 7, 1967, the same day as Gilliam's show at the Phillips. Jonathan Binstock argues that the show led Gilliam to dramatically boost the scale of his own work as soon as June 1968, when he showed a 30-foot-long beveled painting at Byron Gallery in New York.⁴ Marjorie Phillips had advised Gilliam that, as an emerging artist, he should keep his prices at a moderate level, within the reach of young collectors.⁵ But by 1968, when he was asked to donate a painting for "In Honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," a benefit exhibition for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Gilliam decided he had emerged. The \$24,000 price he set for his beveled-edge painting *Away* (1968) was the third highest of the eighty-one works in the show, after those quoted by Tony Smith (\$25,000) and Barnett Newman (\$50,000).⁶ A few months later, in 1969, Hopps, newly appointed director of the Corcoran, invited Gilliam to install a "far out" work in the museum's atrium, the same space Smith and Bladen had used.

Gilliam suspended several architectural-scale drape paintings around and across the Corcoran's two-story, Neo-Classical atrium—the largest of which was *Baroque Cascade*, a 10-by-150-foot stained canvas. Despite his concerted push into three dimensions, Gilliam initially resisted association of his paintings with sculpture. He has discussed multiple references for his drape paintings and their accompanying structures, including the sawhorses and tools of his Washington Color Field colleagues, "clotheslines filled with clothes with so much weight that they had to be propped up,"⁷ and European art from Giotto to Dürer to Velázquez. In his work, Gilliam emphasizes, ideas come from his environment, and the world and life around him, including the art he sees. But even his smaller drape paintings resonated with the gravity and structure of contemporaneous works like Richard Serra's "Props" and rubber pieces or Robert Morris's felt works, while surpassing them in scale.

After the Corcoran presentation, more museums wanted to show Gilliam's drape paintings. He made ever-larger canvases for projects at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, MoMA in New York, the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, and the US pavilion (curated by Hopps) at the 1972 Venice Biennale. In 1969, at the



A' and the Carpenter I, 1973, acrylic on canvas draped over wooden sawhorses, dimensions variable
Art Institute of Chicago.

An artist with years of experience must "use this experience to really look at things," Gilliam said in 1989.

new Studio Museum in Harlem, Gilliam joined William T. Williams and Melvin Edwards for the first of what would become five group exhibitions of abstract art by black artists.⁸

AFTER 1969 GILLIAM did not show again at the Studio Museum until 1982. According to Mary Schmidt Campbell, the museum's executive director from 1977 to '87, institutions of black culture like the Studio Museum and Howard University in Washington were "caught up for the next few years in a Black nationalist fervor and . . . declared abstract art as irrelevant to Black American life."⁹

But black American life was never irrelevant to Gilliam's abstract art. A group of paintings made beginning in 1969 was given the title "April 4"—the date of King's assassination and the beginning of the related protests and riots, events whose aftermath was still starkly evident a year later. The red and black colors that permeated the "April 4" works struck a tone—elegiac, wounded, even violent—that reverberated for years, as Gilliam revisited the hues in combination and in monochromes. *Composed (formerly Dark as I Am)* is an assemblage of thickly painted boots, coveralls, tools, and eventually a door, which lingered in Gilliam's studio for six years, until he showed it, then revised it, in 1973 and 1974. Laden with autobiographical allusions that recall Rauschenberg's Combines, it confounded reductively formalist readings while reasserting a generative human presence—the artist's own. At the Corcoran Biennial in 1975, Gilliam presented *Three Panels for Mr. Robeson*, a room-filling drape installation that was hailed as an attempt to build canvas cathedrals and, later, as Gilliam's masterpiece.¹⁰ It was dedicated to Paul Robeson at a time when Dorothy Gilliam was writing a biography of the singer, actor, and activist.

While he continuously expanded his vocabulary of materials, gestures, and techniques, adding collage, cutting and reassembly, impasto, and relief, Gilliam made paintings for sites and spaces beyond conventional galleries. He began producing monumental installations, designed for buildings and landscapes, that were explicitly intended to reach non-museum audiences. For *Seahorses* (1975), he swagged six sail-size paintings on the Greek Revival facades of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where the works could be seen by passing motorists. He later hung five of the canvases in different configurations on the back of the Brooklyn Museum. *Custom Road Slide* (1977), meanwhile, was a 900-foot-long intervention—part painting, part assemblage, part earth-work—at ArtPark, a public sculpture park in Lewiston, New York. Gilliam unfurled painted panels along the Niagara River Gorge, draping them into compositions over polychrome wood scaffolds, trees, bushes, and shale outcroppings. That project begat *Niagara* (1977–78), a *Robeson*-scale indoor environment composed of paintings, sculptures, and rocks, erected for an exhibition at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

The work staked a bold artistic claim to being, in effect, somewhere between Frederic Edwin Church's monumental 1857 painting of the falls and the real thing.

These outdoor projects echoed an instance at the beginning of Gilliam's career in Washington, when he suspended canvases in a meadow in Rock Creek Park. The works rippled through the next thirty years of his practice, as he developed a series of significant commissions for public spaces, including airports, train stations, churches, libraries, and government buildings. With a relatively stable commission process as a base, Gilliam continued his experiments with paint and materials, adding composition and construction to a repertoire rooted in improvisation and chance. His experience with permanence brought mosaic, aluminum, and plywood into his work, fostering more complex, sophisticated structures involving solids and voids in multiple planes. In the "Slatt" series (2002–), Gilliam balances mutability and fixity by joining wood or aluminum panels together with piano hinges. An artist with years of experience must "use this experience to really look at things," Gilliam said in 1989, describing the self-critical path that he has continued to pursue.¹¹

He has been in active dialogue with students and fellow artists around Washington, teaching at the Corcoran School, the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, and the University of Maryland. A decades-long print collaboration with Lou Stovall serves as a virtual map of their community, with benefit editions for organizations ranging from equal-rights and pro-labor advocacy groups to elite D.C. private schools and Gilliam's own childhood elementary school in Louisville. Gilliam promoted the work of friends Delilah Pierce and Alma Thomas, both D.C. artist-teachers who remained committed to abstract painting, even when it was out of fashion. When confronted with the distraction of multiple simultaneous art trends, Gilliam said, an artist should "form one's own problem and have tenacity."¹²

In the last fifteen years, artists, museums, and collectors have developed a growing appreciation of Gilliam's tenacity, the abiding relevance of the problems he set for himself, and the significance of his solutions. At first this realization seemed mostly confined to D.C. The Corcoran organized a 2005 retrospective that traveled to Louisville and Houston. In 2011 drape paintings filled the Katzen Arts Center at American University, and the Phillips commissioned a three-story installation to cascade down the museum's central stairwell.¹³ Then important younger artists, including Rashid Johnson and Mark Bradford, African Americans who drew inspiration from Gilliam, pulled his work back into the contemporary discourse and into a fuller, more multifaceted reading of art history. That process continues apace, as the whiter, more blinkered segments of the art world get caught up on what Gilliam has been seeing, thinking, and doing.



Gilliam with his installation *Custom Road Slide* at Artpark, Lewiston, New York, 1977. Andrew L. Strout. Courtesy Artpark Archives, Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo, New York.

In a public conversation at the Phillips in April 2011, Gilliam was asked what works in the collection inspired him. "Well, there are those magnolia trees in front of the museum," he replied, before also mentioning Kenneth Noland and Georges Braque.¹⁴ The observation resonates with a comment he made that year to the National Endowment for the Arts:

The older you get the more you think about what your beginning was like. So that I think the South has a lot of influence in my work. You can see that you're responding to an environment that you may not have necessarily thought was still present. I think of the color of plants, spring plants. . . . If you live in Washington you discover azaleas or you see forsythia for the first time. And at some point of discovery, you think back to the first time that you noticed color in landscape.¹⁵

Thinking back in that manner also helps one to see the afternoons the artist spent talking to an inquisitive stranger about the riots, and the tunnels and trees of Rock Creek Park, in an entirely new light. And to see the work and the world of Sam Gilliam a little bit more as he sees it. ○

1. "Sam Gilliam, Interview by Don Ball," *NEA Arts Magazine*, Issue 2011, No. 4, arts.gov.
2. Oral history interview with Sam Gilliam, Sept. 18, 1984, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, aas.si.edu.
3. Quoted in LeGrace G. Benson, "Sam Gilliam: Certain Attitudes," *Artforum*, September 1970, pp. 56–58.

4. Jonathan P. Binstock, *Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005, pp. 36–37; Binstock curated Gilliam's 2005 career survey at the Corcoran Gallery.

5. Sam Gilliam interview transcript, 2011, Washington, D.C., Phillips Collection Library, p. 3.

6. Press release and checklist for "In Honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," Oct. 31–Nov. 3, 1968, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

7. Quoted in Donald Miller, "Hanging Loose: An Interview with Sam Gilliam," *ARTnews*, January 1973, artnews.com.

8. Gilliam rejects the notion that he makes "black art," while readily acknowledging he is a "black artist." In 1971 Gilliam and fourteen other artists boycotted the Whitney Museum's controversial exhibition, "Contemporary Black Artists in America," after the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, which had negotiated with the Whitney for the show, criticized the museum's failure to involve black curators. He did participate in 1971 in "The De-Luxe Show," an integrated survey of vibrant abstraction in a repurposed movie theater in Houston, which was curated by the African American artist Peter Bradley at the invitation of collectors Dominique and John de Menil. These two shows, staged months apart, are the subject of Darby English's book *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016.

9. Mary Schmidt Campbell, "Sam Gilliam: Journey Toward Red, Black, and 'D,'" in *Red & Black to 'D': Paintings by Sam Gilliam*, New York, Studio Museum in Harlem, 1982, p. 10.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 9. Campbell calls the work a masterpiece and attributes the "cathedrals" description to *Washington Star* critic Benjamin Forgey.

11. Audio excerpt of an oral history interview with Sam Gilliam, Nov. 4–11, 1989, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, aas.si.edu.

12. Quoted in Miller, "Hanging Loose."

13. The museum did not acquire this work, however. In 2003 the Phillips deaccessioned a major beveled-edge painting from 1971 for \$4,500. The piece sold in November 2018 for \$2.2 million.

14. Quoted in Amanda Jiron-Murphy, "Sam Gilliam on Inspiration, Part II," Phillips Collection blog, Apr. 4, 2011, blog.phillipscollection.org.

15. "Sam Gilliam, Interview by Don Ball."

“The Most Influential Living African-American Artists,” *Artsy.net*, February 25, 2019



The Most Influential Living African-American Artists

February 25, 2019

In 1926, the historian Carter G. Woodson instituted Negro History Week. The second-ever African-American recipient of a Ph.D. from Harvard (after W.E.B. DuBois), Woodson wanted to acknowledge the vibrant cultural achievements of African-American individuals that were rippling through the country. At the time, Harlem was brimming with poets such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, while Louis Armstrong and Fats Waller were developing Chicago’s jazz scene. In 1976, President Gerald Ford officially transformed Woodson’s initiative into the month-long celebration we honor to this day: Black History Month. While it’s impossible to capture the full impact of black artists on art history, we asked prominent art historians and curators to reflect on 20 living African-American artists who are making a mark on painting, photography, performance, and sculpture.



Sam Gilliam

B. 1933, Tupelo, Mississippi. Lives and works in Washington, D.C.



Sam Gilliam, *Construct*, 2018. Photo by Lee Thompson. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Sam Gilliam, *Crystal*, 1973. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

From Carrie Dedon, Assistant Curator of Modern & Contemporary Art, Seattle Art Museum:

Sam Gilliam’s long and distinguished career is defined by constant experimentation. He’s pushed the envelope on abstraction and the medium of painting itself. When he moved to Washington, D.C., in 1962, Gilliam diverged the Color Field Painting of the day as he innovated not just with paint and color, but with the materiality of the artwork’s surface. He began to pour paint directly onto unstretched canvases, folding or crumpling them while the paint was still wet, and leaving them to dry on the studio floor. The creases allowed the paint to pool, forming lines and patterns determined by the natural qualities of the materials—the pliability of canvas, the fluidity of paint—and by an element of chance.

The resulting work blurs the line between painted image and three-dimensional object—an effect that was heightened when, in the 1960s, Gilliam took the radical step of draping his canvases on the wall, where they bunched and billowed like tapestries. The painted canvas rad-

ically subverts the academic distinctions between the sculptural, environmental, and architectural realms. Gilliam continues to experiment with his work—in the beveled edges of his stretched canvases; in the dense, stucco-like surfaces of the “Black” and “White” paintings; in the insertion of collage elements onto canvas, and in many other ways. He’s opened the door for new conversations about the possibilities of abstract painting.



Hard At Work At 84, Artist Sam Gilliam Has 'Never Felt Better'

Susan Stamberg | August 30, 2018



Artist Sam Gilliam is known for his vibrant, draped fabrics such as *Swing* from 1969. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Sam Gilliam found inspiration for his signature artworks in an unlikely place — a clothesline. In a Washington, D.C., studio that was once a drive-through gas station, the 84-year-old artist works surrounded by yards of vividly-painted fabric, hung like laundry from a line. The sheer, silky polyester puddles to the floor, catching light on the way down. The idea, he explains, is “to develop the idea of movement into shapes.”

Over the decades, Gilliam’s made plenty of other artworks — black paintings and collaged pieces — but it’s the 3D draping that made his name in the 1970s, and is getting renewed attention now. Back then, “it was in the air,” Gilliam says. Jackson Pollock and others had been dribbling, spraying, pouring paint onto canvases spread on the floor. Then they picked up the works, and framed them. Gilliam’s big idea was to eliminate the frame and hang his radiantly painted cloth in graceful free falls.

He likes that it will never be hung the same way twice — as the soft folds change, so does the painting. Gilliam also works with paper — he folds it like a fan, and then pours color into it. “Once it’s open you have a rhythm,” he says. How it turns out is always a surprise.

These are small pieces — multi-colored Rorschach blots — and they sell nicely. They help Gilliam make the big stuff — such as the yards of draping, or a large public work at the National Museum of African-American History and Culture. Gilliam’s art can be hard to categorize, says Jonathan Binstock, who directs the Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester.

“His art is painting, but it’s also not painting,” Binstock says. “It’s sculpture — it’s also not sculpture; it’s architectural — it’s also not architecture. He’s really established himself in a unique way in the history of art through this form.” “I’ve never felt better in my life,” he says. “I stopped drinking, I stopped smoking. I live for this period of being in the studio and actually working.” It’s exciting — moving colors around, seeing how it will turn out.

And all that work is paying off; Gilliam’s works are in major museums around the world, and he’s enjoying a resurgence in popularity, with commissions, six-figure sales and recently, a one-man show in Switzerland. In his bright, northwest Washington studio, rambling a bit, his voice soft, an occasional twinkle in his eyes, Gilliam says “every work of art has a moment.” This is clearly his.



Gilliam poses in his paint-splattered Washington, D.C., studio in 1980. Anthony Barboza/Getty Images

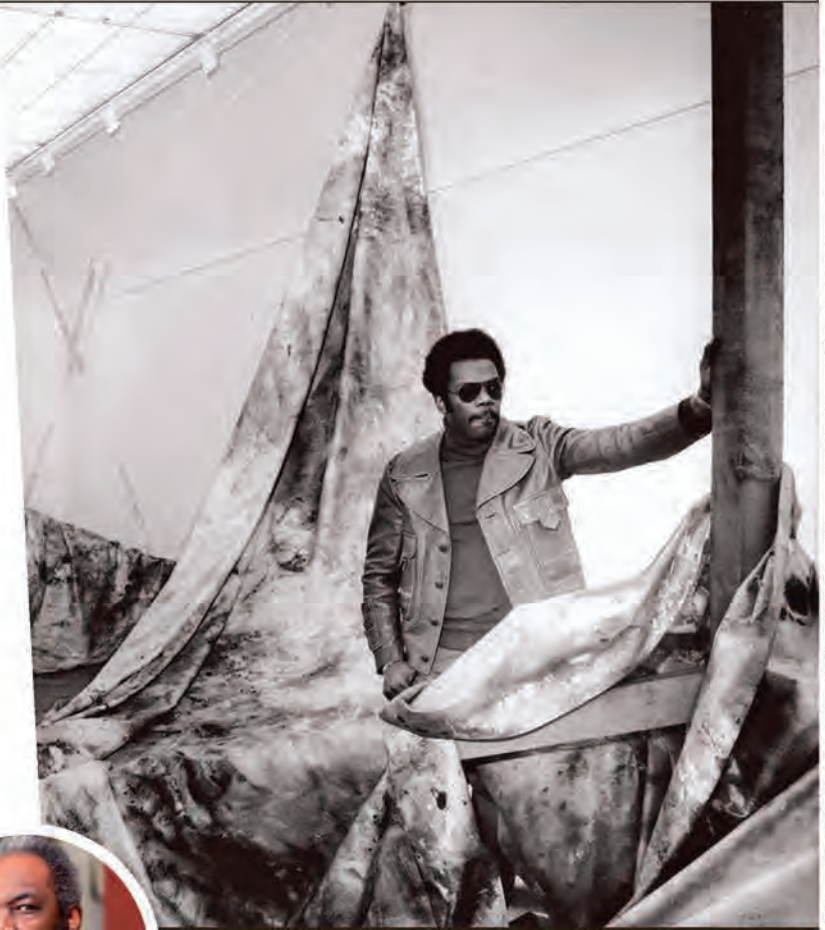
INTERVIEW

Artist

Sam Gilliam: A life beyond the frame

With a show of his unstretched canvases at the Kunstmuseum Basel, the lyrical abstractionist is enjoying a late resurgence in popularity.

By José da Silva



I've always listened to everyone, from Coltrane to Beyoncé, but not always while I work," says Sam Gilliam during the installation of works for his show at the Kunstmuseum Basel (until 30 September), which focuses on the period from 1967 to 1973. This is the 84-year-old US lyrical abstractionist's first major European exhibition.

Although "the relation between music and my work isn't so direct, the structure of jazz is important", Gilliam says. "My Drape paintings are never hung the same way twice. The composition is always present, but one must let things go, be open to improvisation, spontaneity, what's happening in a space while one works."

The African-American artist embodied the late 1960s jazz ethos in pushing his medium to its limits, creating experimental abstract works just like his musical heroes. In 1962, the Mississippi-born Gilliam moved to Washington, DC, where he came into contact with Colour Field painting. But Gilliam took a different path from the abstract painters of the period, peeling right back and dismantling the starting point for most

painters – the canvas. In 1967, he began a series of works called slices, or bevelled-edge paintings, pouring diluted acrylic paint onto the unstretched, unprimed canvas, then folding or crumpling the fabric before stretching it on a bevelled frame after the paint had dried.

He went a step further when he started his Drape series in 1978. "That is when he made his most radical decisions, to completely get rid of the stretcher, to really advance painting in a way no one had done before," says Josef Helfenstein, the director of the Kunstmuseum Basel and co-curator of the show. Almost like curtains or tapestries, Gilliam began to hang the canvases in corners, from the wall and ceiling.

Gilliam was "blurring completely the territory [of painting] and widening it in three-dimensional space, and also, in a way, in time: these pieces have a performative component; they're never the same," Helfenstein says.

The artist's work "compares really interestingly" to that of his peers and he was "not the only one to have used canvas without stretchers," Helfenstein says. "At around



Sam Gilliam, pictured above in San Francisco in 1973, was influenced by the Colour Field artists of Washington, DC. Rondo (1971, left) has been acquired by the Kunstmuseum Basel

the same time, Richard Tuttle started doing this, and also some French artists from the group Supports/Surfaces," he says. "But it was very different; it was still very much in the tradition of classical painting. And Tuttle's works were not paintings; they were coloured fabrics. No one had done it in this huge architectural way that Gilliam did."

His works from this period are often political – a reflection of the turbulent times in which they were made. While Gilliam has always believed that "abstraction is as political as representation", some writers associated with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s disagreed, as noted by Mark Godfrey in his catalogue essay for the recent Soul of a Nation exhibition at London's Tate Modern, in which Gilliam's work was shown. Some writers felt that "the role and responsibility of black artists was to create empowering images for their people". Further still, black artists making abstract works were said to be "prostrating themselves before

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GILLIAM AT UNLIMITED

Gilliam is also showing a new large-scale work, *Unpainted* (2018), in the Unlimited section of Art Basel with Los Angeles's David Kordansky Gallery. "Gilliam is one of the most important US artists of his generation. It is long due that he gets more international presence," says Unlimited's curator Gianni Jetzer, adding that he is "thrilled" that Claude Viallat—who was a key member of the Supports/Surfaces group and is "another master of staging painting as three-dimensional installation art"—is also appearing in this year's Unlimited. "The French and the American artist are the same age and for me they are soulmates with different backgrounds and origins," Jetzer says. **J.S.**



Gilliam's new piece *Unpainted* (2018) can be seen at Art Basel!

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

white institutions and producing work according to established white aesthetic ideals", Godfrey writes.

But Gilliam argues that "the expressive act of making a mark and hanging it in space is always political. My work is as political as it is formal. Sometimes the politics are foregrounded by titles. For example, *Green April* (1968-70) [which is in the Kunstmuseum show] is the largest example of a suite of works responding to the April 4, 1968 assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr."

Although "he really comes from the Washington Colour Field group, he goes

"The expressive act of making a mark and hanging it in space is always political"

The show at the Kunstmuseum Basel focuses on Gilliam's work from 1967 to 1973

wildly into a new territory", Helfenstein says. This difficulty in categorising his work is, Helfenstein believes, one of the reasons that Gilliam was forgotten for so long. "It was the time of Minimalist art, it was the late period of Pop art, conceptual art," which Gilliam did not fit neatly into, either. "Now he's seen again in the broader historical context, which is really the goal of our show," Helfenstein says.

The curator also notes that Gilliam was "sidelined" as an African-American for making abstract work that was not obviously and figuratively political. "You could see in that context [of the *Soul of a Nation* exhibition] how unique he was; there were very few abstract black artists at the time," he says.

The recent resurgence of looking at histories of art that are not skewed towards white male artists has led to a renewed interest in many African-American artists who influenced today's generation. Furthermore, "there are now African-American collectors with significant means

who are very much focusing on African-American art," Helfenstein adds.

One of the major markers of a renewed interest in Gilliam—and one that could not be missed by visitors—was his huge work *Yves Klein Blue* (2017) at last year's Venice Biennale. This marked the return to Venice for Gilliam, who in 1972 became the first African-American artist to represent the US at the biennial when the curator Walter Hopps invited him and five others, including Diane Arbus, to participate. "I spent a week living in the American Pavilion, installing my work," the artist says. "Showing at the entrance of the Central Pavilion 45 years later was liberating: one's work is experienced more broadly; the reading is universal rather than national."

"The reason why I thought this show would be especially appropriate here in Basel is because we have a well-known collection of post-war American art," Helfenstein says, who had come to know Gilliam from his time as director of the Menil Collection in Texas. "But when you

look at the Kunstmuseum's collection, like in every collection, there are gaps," he says. The exhibition includes the museum's recent acquisition, *Rondo* (1971).

Gilliam was very involved in hanging the show. "These works are a little bit site-specific, and what I find more interesting is that they are kind of time-specific," Helfenstein says. "Depending on the space and the place and the moment, they need to be almost performed—you don't just hang them like most paintings."

"It is historically very important to document what he says about the work and to learn how it was intended, as it has not been shown for decades now," Helfenstein says. "As a curator you have a certain space to interpret things, but it's up to you—because at a certain point he won't be around any more—to show this in a responsible and ideal way. There is also something very generous about it—in a way it's like the jazz of the time."

• *The Music of Colour: Sam Gilliam, 1967-73*, Kunstmuseum Basel, until 30 September

Sam Gilliam fires up his competitive spirit

The innovative painter, now 84, has two new showings in Europe

BY TED LOOS

Imagine a rainbow that has burst into a million colorful blooms.

That's the first impression you get upon entering the artist Sam Gilliam's studio here in the Petworth neighborhood, filled with a dozen of his signature draped canvases, tall lengths of nylon all hanging from wires and poles, stained in wild hues in varying combinations. The pinks seem pinker and the greens greener than normal.

And you should expect nothing less from Mr. Gilliam, now 84. He's known as a master of the third wave of Color Field painters. He came to prominence in the 1960s, and in 1972 he represented the United States at the Venice Biennale, the first African-American artist to have the honor.

Much of the success over the decades, including prominent exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, stemmed from the moment Mr. Gilliam had the one big idea that every artist hopes for: He took the canvas off the stretcher and hung it up, partly inspired by laundry on clotheslines.

Mr. Gilliam is riding a wave of attention right now. Earlier this month, a major exhibition of his work went on view at Switzerland's Kunstmuseum Basel: "The Music of Color: Sam Gilliam, 1967-1973." It is his first solo museum exhibition in Europe after more than 60 years of painting.

And at this year's edition of Art Basel in Switzerland, the Unlimited section includes an installation by Mr. Gilliam featuring new work, including the same nylon drapes seen in his studio.

In person, Mr. Gilliam is as intense as his color choices. Despite being slowed a bit by age and health challenges — he goes to dialysis three times a week — he is as scrappy as ever.

"Well, you get four hours to contemplate and do nothing and then a full day to work," he said last month, seated in his studio, of the treatment schedule. "It doesn't stop my work."

The Unlimited installation has fired his competitive spirit, which was considerable from the start. "When you do these enormous projects, it's a competition between artists," Mr. Gilliam said. "You want to be the best."

To that end, he intends to employ a

"Hell, yeah," Sam Gilliam said about whether his work will have an impact at Art Basel. "I'm going to blow them all away."

theatrical lighting device known as a star machine to project onto the piece, creating what he called an "aurora borealis" effect.

Mr. Gilliam is deeply versed in the history of painting but always open to innovation based on his constant studies of color and form.

"That's the fun of the work," he said. "You discover new things, and you're off in that direction."

Josef Helfenstein, the Kunstmuseum director who was the co-organizer of the show of Mr. Gilliam's work there, said the exhibition "fills a gap" for European art audiences who might be unfamiliar with it.



GABRIELA DEMAZUK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

"He was off the map for a while, especially in the international context," added Mr. Helfenstein, who previously ran the Menil Collection in Houston.

The focus of the show is the pioneering moment when Mr. Gilliam developed his draping technique.

"Every time you show it, it's unique — you can't drape it the exact same way twice," Mr. Helfenstein said. "It has to change. And that's why it's so radical."

In its improvisatory quality, the works can be likened to jazz, Mr. Helfenstein said, a comparison that suited the artist just fine. Mr. Gilliam is a jazz fan, "and the more far out the better," he said.

Mr. Gilliam added that his own work evoked "the drama of music and the drama of colors coming together."

Born in Tupelo, Miss., Mr. Gilliam was raised in Louisville, Ky., and attended the University of Louisville. After a stint in the Army, he moved to Washington in 1962 and has made it his home since.

A visit to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where he saw the work of painters like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, made an impression. He said the lesson he took from the visit was that "I could gamble" on abstract art.

The nation's capital fostered the work of the loosely affiliated movement known as the Washington Color School in the 1950s, though Mr. Gilliam arrived just after the departure of two of his idols, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. "We were the so-called third generation," Mr. Gilliam said.

But there was a hitch in terms of achieving wider renown. "Once you started to make it in Washington, they didn't want you to show in New York," Mr. Gilliam said of the "covetous" dealers to the north. Asked whether it hindered his career, he said no.

"You need a place to think, you need a place to work, and New York is much more political and combative," Mr. Gilliam said. "In Washington, you have the trees and Rock Creek Park. Make your paintings, and be your own critic."

That strategy worked, insofar as it led to his draping breakthrough.

"That was radical," said the San Francisco collector Pamela Joyner, who specializes in the work of African-American abstract artists and owns more than a dozen of Mr. Gilliam's works.

"When we think of people in the canon and how to judge that, innovation has to be part of that," Ms. Joyner said. "And he did it."

Around the same time, he created his beveled-edge paintings, which also had a great reception in the art world. He has gone on to employ many different painting modes, including hard-edge, single-color works, some of which were in the studio last month.

Turning away from the signature draped canvases — as well as taking a teaching job in Pittsburgh in the 1970s and raising three children — may have accounted for what Mr. Gilliam called a "hiatus" of exposure that followed.

Ms. Joyner sees race as a factor contributing to why Mr. Gilliam isn't a household name on the level of, say, Ellsworth Kelly and other top abstract artists of his generation.

"It's not a side note," she said. "It happened to artists of color. It's a factor for that generation."

That's not Mr. Gilliam's take. "Color doesn't matter," was how he put it. He did acknowledge that earlier in his career, there was pressure on black artists to do figural works that somehow chronicled racial struggle and progress, versus abstraction.



GABRIELLA DEMCZUK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Basel bound
Clockwise from far left, Sam Gilliam, a master of the third wave of Color Field painters; his studio in Washington; and "Ruby Light" (1972), which will be shown at Kunstmuseum Basel: "The Music of Color: Sam Gilliam, 1967-1973."



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The New York artist Rashid Johnson, who shows with Mr. Gilliam's Los Angeles-based dealer, David Kordansky, has been a fan of Mr. Gilliam's since the age of 19. Five years ago, he organized a show at the gallery of the older artist's work.

"There's something radical about his

decision to not include the black body in his work," said Mr. Johnson, 41.

He added that, apart from subject matter, the way Mr. Gilliam trusted his instincts served as inspiration. "If a master like Sam is doing that, maybe I'm on the right track," Mr. Johnson said.

For his part, Mr. Gilliam is working on a grand scale that he compared to that of the 19th-century Hudson River School painter Albert Bierstadt and enjoying the rekindling of interest in his paintings.

He was especially pleased with the large commission he did for the National Museum of African American History and Culture when it opened in 2016, "Yet Do I Marvel, Countee Cullen."

That commission and what he called "rising prices" for his work allows him to paint free of other cares.

As for whether the Art Basel installation would have the desired impact, Mr. Gilliam laughed at the question.

"Hell, yeah," he said. "I'm going to blow them all away."



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Installation
Mr. Gilliam with his work "Autumn Surf" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1973.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Collecting

Scale factor

Q & A | Gareth Harris asks four
artists in Art Basel's Unlimited
sector about the challenges of
showing large-scale work at a fair

Sam Gilliam

At David Kordansky gallery, the 84-year-old US artist presents "Untitled" (2018), a room of suspended painted fabric.

Is showing at Unlimited important at this point in your career?

Unlimited is a fun moment for me to show something new, a complement to my concurrent historic survey at the Kunstmuseum. It's always exciting to install a major work for the very first time, seeing how the forms and colour shape the space and, in turn, seeing how viewers – crowds in this case – navigate the work.

Is this work one of your typical drape paintings?

"Untitled" is typical of room-size installations I made as far back as the early 1970s, into the 1980s, in which painted colour becomes dynamic sculptural form – architecture and



One of Sam Gilliam's 'Untitled' drape paintings — Brian Forrest

experience. We'll hang over 20 lengths of acrylic-stained nylon in a labyrinth-like construction. I have a few tricks up my sleeve, too – but you'll have to wait to see them at the fair.

With another show opening at the Kunstmuseum Basel, does this moment feel like a career renaissance?

It feels like a career, period. I've been working steadily all these years. The spotlight is welcome, and I appreciate the opportunity to show my work at the Kunstmuseum, which has an excellent collection of minimalist work by Donald Judd and Carl Andre.

Have younger artists acknowledged your innovations?

Yes, implicitly; and recently more explicitly, too. There's a show on right now at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Ohio (to August 12) with two of my Drapes hung with paintings by younger artists.

“I’ve always insisted on remaining an artist”: Sam Gilliam,” *Apollo*, June 2018, pp. 39-40

APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

Q & A

‘I’ve always insisted on remaining an artist’ Sam Gilliam

When he folded and draped canvases in the late 1960s, Sam Gilliam challenged the traditional premises of painting. Five decades on, he tells *Apollo*, his need to make art is as urgent as ever

1. *Crystal*, 1973, Sam Gilliam (b. 1933), acrylic on canvas, 235.6 x 75.6 x 19.1cm



Photo: Friedrich Nissen/Courtesy the artist and David Korabitnsky Gallery, Los Angeles; © 2018, Pol/Innis, Zurich

The exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Basel is titled ‘The Music of Color’. How important has music been to your work?

That’s a title which the director of the museum has given the show. It’s actually in honour of Walter Hopps, who was one of the best curators of contemporary art in America. His first statement to me was that he liked me because I liked John Coltrane. I never told him that I liked Thelonious Monk or Dave Brubeck or Miles Davis too; I grew up listening to jazz and certain classical music – Tchaikovsky and particularly Ravel.

Do you feel that your work shares things with music?

Art and music are about structure: the way you put things together, and the end point. The way that you arrive at concepts through practice, through experimentation. Things are situational; I determine what I’m going to do next by the path I’ve already taken or what I already think about.

The exhibition focuses on your work from 1967–73. Do you look at those pieces in a different way with five decades of hindsight?

I certainly do. For me, the period that the museum is concentrating on is simply a palette to think about the whole of the time between the late ‘60s and what I’m doing now. When you’re old you start thinking about structural concepts all over again.

You took some radical decisions at the time – taking the canvas off the stretcher, folding it,

INTERVIEW

2. Sam Gilliam with *Autumn Surf*, installation view of 'Works in Spaces' at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1973



and draping it, too [Figs. 1-3]. What motivated those choices?

I'd learned that there is no difference between painting and sculpture, or sculpture and architecture. Or at least, there are ways that the three-dimensional aspect of space is defined by the flatness of the plane. I thought a lot about these things through teaching, and wanting to be as defining as the people whose art I liked. Living in Washington, I was interested in Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, and the younger artists here that were following them – one of the painters, Thomas Downing, was a very good friend. And I ended up going to shows in Europe quite early. I looked at the whole of other artists' careers to see what they arrived at in the end, and made that a starting point, a point for experimenting, to see if I could go further. You have to go outside the frame in order to make work.

I realised that a couple of things were happening in my work. Colour is one of the most fundamental; it's a fundamental part of painting, but also one of the most adventurous aspects. Taking the canvas off the stretcher to make it free was another adventure. It happens in Asian art, in the

art of India, or in something as simple as tie-dyeing. The folding created structure, movement through the work. I still do the same thing that Velázquez or Rubens or Rembrandt would have done. I think the end point is the same, but I just moved the needle. The old is refreshed by the new, the new refreshed by the old.

It must be satisfying to have seen your work celebrated in a number of exhibitions in recent years. What has it taken to reach this point?

I've always insisted on remaining an artist. When there's been a struggle, I've insisted on the struggle, and on the content that I wanted. By teaching – I've taught a lot – I never forgot the lessons that I learned while I was a student about the importance of process, the process of actually thinking carefully about the things you ought to do.

I've always been a part of a workshop, and I've never stopped thinking about what I consider prominent paintings – in the National Gallery in Washington, or in New York or Europe. I've also been very much stimulated by my race, and the process that's come through Mandela or Martin



3. *Ruby Light*, 1972, Sam Gilliam, acrylic on canvas, 203.2 x 144.8 x 30.5cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

Luther King, as well as the concept of what democracy is now, the peace movement, and things like that. I think that there's a way of looking at things as a whole that defines what we should do. When you take things as a whole, like an orange, then you can remove the peel and get the fruit.

Do you still find painting exciting?

Yes, but I'm more excited by sculpture, and doing large-scale things with the drapes. I still do a lot of teaching, too, because we're still thinking about how to build art galleries, art museums, and art careers for young people. What we ask now of America is the same freedom upon which it was founded, and not the deprecation that's coming about through Trump and the Republican Party. We ask for a future for the young and for continuity of the earth, for maintaining it as a clean space. Art is a type of criticism now – of Trumpism, of the rewriting of fascism, of what is evil. It makes me glad to be an artist.

'The Music of Color: Sam Gilliam, 1967-1973' is at the Kunstmuseum Basel from 9 June-30 September. To find out more go to www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch.

Photo: Art Frisch/Courtesy San Francisco Chronicle; © 2018, ProLitteris, Zurich / Photo: Cathy Carey/Courtesy the artist and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; © 2018, ProLitteris, Zurich

Kinsella, Eileen “At Age 84, Living Legend Sam Gilliam Is Enjoying His Greatest Renaissance Yet,” *Artnet.com*, January 2, 2018

artnet

At Age 84, Living Legend Sam Gilliam Is Enjoying His Greatest Renaissance Yet

The market for Sam Gilliam’s work is stronger than ever. Just don’t call it a comeback.

Eileen Kinsella | January 2, 2018



Installation view of “*Sam Gilliam : 1967–1973*” at Mnuchin Gallery. Photography Tom Powel Imaging. Artwork © Sam Gilliam.

Critical and market attention for the abstract painter Sam Gilliam is at an all-time high. But longtime collectors and fans of the artist—who have watched him rack up accolades for at least five decades—consistently, and perhaps a bit defensively, caution against the word “comeback.” Whatever you call it, Gilliam has been enjoying an unprecedented level of attention in recent years. The 84-year-old artist represented the US at the Venice Biennale way back in 1972; he was the first African American artist to do so. But his market has been slow to catch up—until now. “This is his greatest renaissance yet,” says Jonathan Binstock, who organized Gilliam’s retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art over a decade ago. “He’s had a couple of them at the very least.” Binstock is currently co-curating another major Gilliam show, “The Music of Color” at the Kunstmuseum Basel, scheduled to open ahead of Art Basel in June. Eleven of Gilliam’s top 20 auction results were set in 2017. All of them have been set since 2013. And the three highest auction prices ever paid for his work came in quick succession this past fall. His current record is \$684,500 for *Rays* (1971), a large acrylic on canvas that smashed its presale estimate of \$100,000–150,000 at Sotheby’s in late September. Nevertheless, Gilliam’s auction prices still lag behind many of his peers (who, not coincidentally, happen to be white). Fellow Washington Color School painter Morris Louis’s auction record is \$3.6 million; Kenneth Noland’s is \$3.3 million.

A Late Renaissance

If it feels like you’ve been seeing Gilliam’s work everywhere lately, it’s because you have been. Forty-five years after Gilliam first represented the US at the Venice Biennale, he returned to the city this past summer. His brilliantly colored unstretched canvas *Yves Klein Blue* (2017) exuberantly welcomed visitors to Giardini’s main pavilion. In 2016, a major new commission, *Yet I Do Marvel*, was hung in the lobby of the highly anticipated National Museum of African American History and Culture in his hometown of Washington, DC. In London, Gilliam’s work figured prominently in the Tate Modern exhibition “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” (which opens at the Crystal Bridges Museum in Arkansas next month) and in Pace Gallery’s recent group show of Washington Color School painters. Meanwhile, in New York, Mnuchin Gallery mounted a presentation of his early paintings from 1967 to 1973. Surprisingly, it was the artist’s first solo show in the city for more than three decades. Gilliam’s career is long “and it has been a successful one for many years,” says Binstock, who is now director of the Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester. “As with many artists, there’s a cycle. There’s a process of growth or expansion and then perhaps a cooling or retrenching period. It’s hard to be the focus of everyone’s attention incessantly.”

Kinsella, Eileen “At Age 84, Living Legend Sam Gilliam Is Enjoying His Greatest Renaissance Yet,” *Artnet.com*, January 2, 2018



The Central Pavilion, with a work by Sam Gilliam.

A Long Time Coming

Gilliam’s late-breaking commercial success comes despite—or perhaps because—he eschewed a conventional path for most of his life. He did things his own way, Binstock says, “by not signing on with a gallery; by selling out of the studio; by making abstract art when abstract painting was unfashionable; and by making abstract painting when black artists were being called upon by other culturally influential people in the black community to make art that was in line with the political cause. In other words, he actually did nothing that he needed to do in order to become successful.” Indeed, for years, Gilliam showed only with smaller galleries: Marsha Mateyka in Washington, DC, and the now-shuttered Galerie Darthea Speyer in Paris. (It was, of course, also harder for a black artist to get major gallery representation.) But things began to shift four and a half years ago, when Gilliam had his first show with Los Angeles power dealer David Kordansky.

The gallerist, a longtime fan of Gilliam’s, visited his studio with contemporary art star Rashid Johnson, who organized a show of Gilliam’s work at the gallery in 2013. That show was quickly followed by solo presentations at Frieze New York (2014) and Frieze Masters (2015), another show at the gallery (2016), and an accompanying monograph (2017). Yet another solo show is on the schedule for 2018. During this period, Gilliam’s prices have risen dramatically. As recently as five years ago, a small painting with his signature beveled edges might bring about \$10,000 to \$15,000, says John McCord, a specialist in Phillips’s 20th Century and contemporary art department. “Now, you’d see that work would bring well over \$100,000 or \$150,000.” Prices for classic drape or beveled edge paintings from the late ’60s and early ’70s—Gilliam’s most sought-after work—can be significantly higher on the private market, ranging from \$350,000 to just shy of \$1 million, sources say.

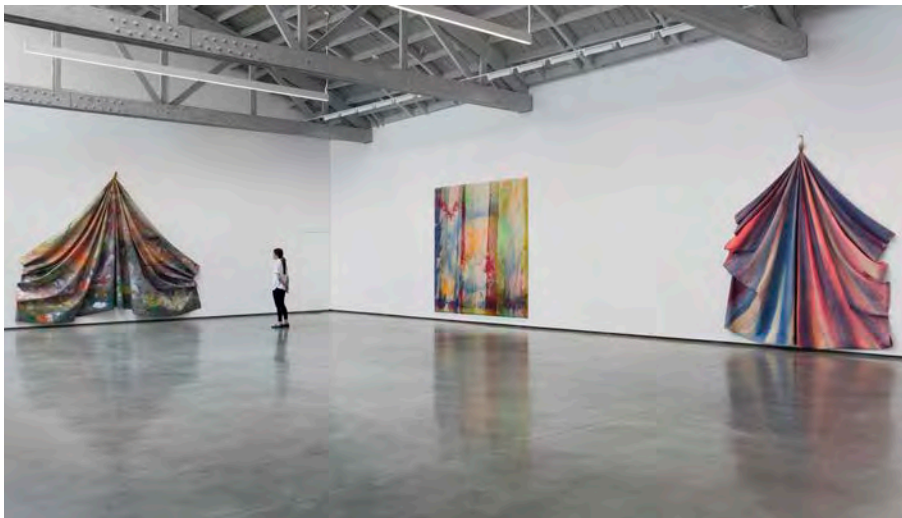
A Market Finding Its Footing

Nigel Freeman, the director of the African American fine art department at Swann Galleries in New York, agrees that the market for Gilliam is “at an all-time high” following an acceleration over the past two years. But some believe the work is still undervalued, particularly “when you consider how seminal some of the 1960s and ’70s paintings are,” McCord says. He notes that Gilliam’s auction prices have consistently outperformed relatively conservative estimates, a sign that the market is still finding its footing. Indeed, Gilliam’s current record of \$684,500 was more than four-and-a-half times its high estimate. His second- and third-highest prices, also achieved this past fall, vastly eclipsed expectations too. A 1970 drape painting, which sold for \$370,000 at Freeman’s Philadelphia, was estimated to sell for a mere \$50,000–80,000, while a 1970 abstract painting sold for \$332,400 at Weschler’s in Maryland, more than double its low estimate of \$150,000.

“Demand surged this year,” says Sukanya Rajaratnam, a partner at Mnuchin Gallery, citing the gallery’s show, as well as the Tate exhibition and the Venice Biennale, as catalysts. At Art Basel Miami Beach earlier this month, the gallery sold a work on paper from 1974 priced at \$80,000. (That price is very close to Gilliam’s auction record for a work on paper, \$81,250, set at Phillips in 2015.) The artnet Price Database lists 400 auction results for Gilliam. Of these 326, or nearly 82 percent were sold. The lowest price listed is \$100 for a 1974 print sold at Leslie Hindman in 1993.

The Birth of the Drape Painting

Gilliam first rose to fame in the late 1960s with his drape paintings, which came out of his experiments with unsupported canvases. He said the works were partly inspired by watching women



Sam Gilliam, *Green April* (2016). Installation view at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo Brian Forrest. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Kinsella, Eileen "At Age 84, Living Legend Sam Gilliam Is Enjoying His Greatest Renaissance Yet," *Artnet.com*, January 2, 2018



US Secretary of State John Kerry congratulates Sam Gilliam during an Art in Embassies Medal of Arts Award event at the US Department of State in 2015 in Washington, DC. (BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/Getty Images)

A Growing Re-Evaluation

Kurt Mueller, a director at Kordansky Gallery, notes that in addition to being formally innovative, Gilliam's work has another important element going for it: "undeniable beauty." Museums that had moved their Gilliam paintings into storage are now organizing shows around them, he says. And institutions that did not own major examples spanning his entire oeuvre—including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Rose Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art—have acquired pictures in recent years. The Met, for example, owns two major Gilliams. It acquired Whirlirama (above) from Kordansky in 2014. It bought the other, Leah's Renoir (1979), the year it was made—a testament to the artist's long track record of institutional interest. So what's behind the uptick in attention today?

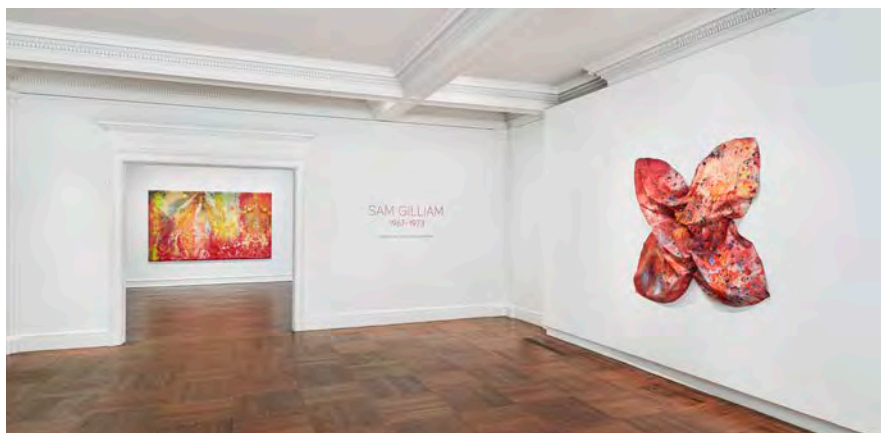
Binstock sees a combination of factors at play, including recent interest in the work of older African American artists, particularly those who worked in abstraction; a broader push to re-examine artists from the '60s and '70s who have either "fallen through the cracks or not been the focus of the lens"; and the "sheer importance of Sam's contribution to our understanding of what painting can be." Roxanne Cohen, director of art advisory at Pall Mall Partners, notes that market interest in the artist coincided with a shift away from young, emerging painters whose prices eclipsed those of Gilliam during the recent art-market boom. "Collectors are looking to see something new and different, but at the same time to collect an artist who already has an established career," she says. "They are moving away from the emerging market as it can be more volatile." Gilliam was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1933, the seventh of eight children. He began painting when he was in elementary school and graduated from the University of Louisville in 1955. After serving in the US Army in the late '50s, he completed his MFA in 1961. He has lived in Washington, DC, since 1962.

After making his name with the drape and slice paintings, his approach changed dramatically in the 1980s, when he began adding multiple layers of thick acrylic paint to the canvas. These so-called "quilt" paintings involved cutting geometric shapes from the encrusted surface and rearranging them in patterns reminiscent of the African American patchwork quilts he remembered from his childhood. Freeman of Swann says that as many of the '70s works find their way into museum collections, there is growing interest "in his earlier '60s hard-edge paintings and his later collaged paintings made in the early 1980s." For those who have followed his career for decades, this latest embrace of Gilliam's full body of work is already overdue.

Gilliam, Binstock notes, "is the missing link in the history of abstract painting from the mid-century to its current state of absolute glorification by museums and the market. He's the missing link not because he was an African American artist making those paintings. It was because he was making those paintings."

hang laundry on clotheslines from his studio window in Washington, DC. He began to drape and suspend large paint-stained canvases, imparting an innovative sculptural element to the works. "These are perceived to be his biggest contribution to the history of art because they took painting off the wall and off the stretcher," says Rajaratnam of Mnuchin. The other particularly sought-after body of work is Gilliam's "beveled-edge" or "slice" paintings, which he began creating in 1967. The works' edges extend off the wall and toward the viewer.

Both series "highlight his interest in pushing the traditional boundaries of painting and creating innovative works that alter our perception of the picture plane," says Dunham Townend, head of the modern and contemporary art department at Freeman's, where the \$370,000 drape painting sold last month. Rajaratnam notes that Gilliam has been influential to younger artists who similarly blur painting and sculpture, from David Hammons to Oscar Murillo. "People are only now realizing the huge debt that is owed to Gilliam," she says.



Installation view of "Sam Gilliam : 1967-1973" at Mnuchin Gallery. Photography Tom Powel Imaging. Artwork © Sam Gilliam.

Krasinski, Jennifer, "A Half-Century After Hitting the Art Scene, Sam Gilliam's Legacy Blossoms," *VillageVoice.com*, November 15, 2017

the village
VOICE

A Half-Century After Hitting the Art Scene, Sam Gilliam's Legacy Blossoms

by **JENNIFER KRASINSKI**
NOVEMBER 15, 2017



"Temple Fire" (1970)

It's a story the art world loves to tell itself: how it valiantly recovers and revives the career of a forgotten artist. In the case of painter Sam Gilliam, the story should be told thusly: It was Gilliam who recovered and revived something lost from the art world when it finally regained sight of his work. Born in Tupelo, Mississippi, on Thanksgiving Day in 1933, Gilliam moved in adulthood to Washington, D.C., and by the 1960s had made his name as part of the Washington Color School. His reputation thrived for decades, with solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, among others, as well as inclusion in the 1972 Venice Biennale.

The market's appetite for Gilliam's work had slowed in recent years, until artist Rashid Johnson and gallerist David Kordansky paid him a studio visit in 2012. At that time, Gilliam was 79 years old and in poor health. Like many artists, he had no pension, and was worried about how to sustain and support himself. When Johnson and Kordansky arrived, they were already fans of Gilliam, but were astonished to discover a mass of early canvases they'd never known about. Here before them was a major force in American abstraction who very likely hadn't been canonized because he, a black man, didn't fit the art world's expectations of what an artist of color should produce. They offered him a solo show in Los Angeles, and thereafter his career took off like a shot. At this very moment, his work is hanging in the Central Pavilion of the 57th Biennale, 45 years after he first appeared there — and a breathtaking exhibition at Mnuchin Gallery of fourteen paintings made between 1967 and 1973 presents an origin story of sorts, bringing together some of the earliest examples of the innovations and ideas that have now secured Gilliam's status as a seminal American abstract painter.

Krasinski, Jennifer, "A Half-Century After Hitting the Art Scene, Sam Gilliam's Legacy Blossoms," *VillageVoice.com*, November 15, 2017



"Bow Form Construction" (1968)

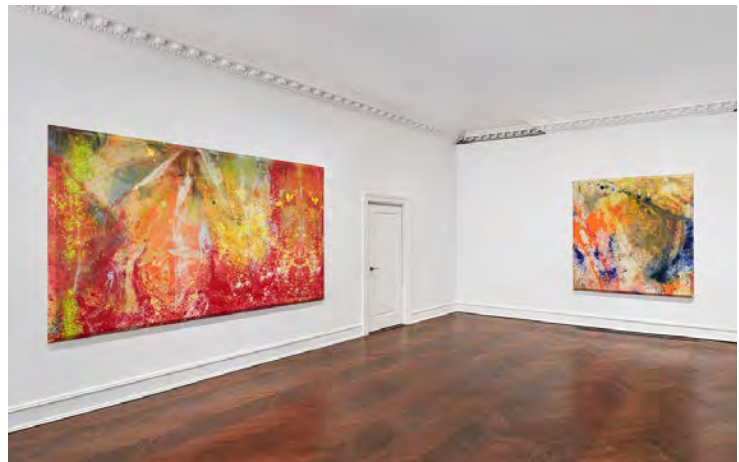
At the outset of his practice, in the early to mid-1960s, Gilliam was producing minimal, non-representational paintings, vivid discourses in line, color, and geometry in a spirit similar to contemporaries Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, Morris Louis, and others who were also dubbed part of the Washington Color School. These paintings flexed the two-dimensional to assert riotous, intelligent optical pleasures within the confines of flatness. To look at the artist's work from those years now (not on view at Mnuchin) is a bit like watching a jazz musician mastering the scales, fine-tuning himself and his instrument, preparing to receive the transmissions of higher dimensions. (Gilliam has cited the visionary composer John Coltrane as one influence for his thinking).

In 1967, Gilliam radically shifted his approach to create his Slice series, for which he stretched canvases onto beveled-edged frames so — like a tile

or a tablet or some sort of architectural element — the painting's surface appears to push away from the wall and into the gallery space. At this time, the artist also embraced a different approach to the medium itself, setting his brush aside for a moment to first soak raw canvas in diluted acrylics, so the colors would run and bleed. From there, he would improvise a sequence of actions, gestures — folding, hanging, shaking — to compose the rest. Lighter colors were applied first; darker, after. Depth was achieved by layering the paint, building the surface; whether the pigments sink in, or are daubed on top, the colors blend, overlapping to create still more tones and textures. In a bit of reverse engineering, when all was dry, the canvas would finally be stretched around its frame. The combination of applied alchemy and freehanded choreography in Gilliam's Slice works lands them in a rich, affecting territory bordering the states, the conditions, of painting, sculpture, and textile.

Thrust and *With Blue*, both on view, are two of the radiant results from that year, each in possession of their very own mood. At eight and a half feet tall, *With Blue* is the most melancholy work of the exhibition, its dark blue-to-gray palette lifted, made luminous, by the aluminum powder Gilliam applied throughout. Shimmering lines from where the artist creased the canvas run from top to bottom of the painting, and something about its verticality along with its silvery aura gives it a contemplative quality. *Thrust*, in counterpoint, is a more fiery and gregarious work, with wilder whirls of color — from lilac to ruby red, tangerine to khaki green — marbling across the surface, which appears purer (as in more painterly), unbounded by line or composition, but propelled instead by rhythm, roil.

It would seem paradoxical for a painter that chance or improvisation would allow for mastery, and yet they push an artist to attend to other facets of craft — or at least attend to their other



"Spread" (1973) and "Spring Thaw" (1972)

Krasinski, Jennifer, "A Half-Century After Hitting the Art Scene, Sam Gilliam's Legacy Blossoms," *VillageVoice.com*, November 15, 2017



"Idle Twist" (1972)

its massive folds seeming to take on the weight and appearance of ceramic, or carved marble. *Little Dude* (1971) and *Idle Twist* (1972) are hung like punctured blossoms — rather, small, stilled explosions — loosely bunched in the middle, their corners tacked up on the wall, spreading outward.

The exhibition's grandest piece is *Carousel Change* from 1970, for which seventy-six feet of canvas is gathered and tied at the top in five places. Monumental in scale, its overall palette is light, joyous, splashed, soaked, and slapped in hot pinks, peaches, yolky yellows, dark sky blues. It is, as the title suggests, dizzying. The eye has nowhere to land, no choice but to keep moving over its lush, popping terrain. At the risk of overreading, there is something prophetic about it too — how the painting speaks to the ways in which attention (of an audience, of the art world, and otherwise) like a carousel ride is cyclical, moving "forward" only to come back around as it must, as it will, and as it rightly should.



"Carousel Change" (1970)

angles. Throughout the exhibition, one sees how Gilliam's hand commands a canvas. The life force within the spontaneity of his approach never dims, but it is harnessed. Time is the secondary subject of the artist's work — captured in paint that was pushed this way or pulled that way, dripped here and plopped there, never to be repeated; color becomes its marker. *Temple Fire* (1970) is nine feet of Day-Glo pink, periwinkle blue, livid yellow, foggy gray, and more and more all running together, fanning over each other so the colors never settle, are ever vibrating, emitting, or soaking up the light depending on their proximity to one another.

It was apparently an accident that led Gilliam to his most beloved and influential Draped works in 1968. Simply told, one of his unstretched canvases fell to the ground one day, sparking the idea to create and install paintings without a frame — paintings that would instead be draped, tied, folded, and hung in space, and thereby placed in more intimate conversation with sculpture. *Bow Form Construction* of that year is ten feet of canvas tied at either end and suspended from the ceiling as oversize fabric swag. With bulky grace and terrific drama, it shape-shifts before the eye,

theguardian

America in the age of Malcolm X

Tate Modern's compelling show, *Soul of a Nation*, puts the battle for civil rights in a brutal, brilliant new light, writes **Jonathan Jones**

★★★★★

Sam Gilliam's 1969 painting April 4 is an epic cascade of purple tears, a huge curtain of sorrow. Agony stains it. Melancholy seeps through its delicate clouds of colour. You don't need to know what its title means to be moved by it. When you know it was painted to mark the first anniversary of the murder of Martin Luther King on 4 April 1968, this abstract painting becomes a funeral elegy for assassinated hopes. It is one of the most powerful things in an exhibition that unconverts an entire lost history of American art.

Tragedy, suffering and violence pervade this exhibition like the dark blotches that soak into Gilliam's tear-soaked handkerchief of a painting.

It starts in 1963 with the March on Washington when King spoke immortal words to more than 200,000 people from the steps of the Lincoln Monument. A group of African American artists called Spiral started, at the height of the civil rights movement, to make art that reflected its ideals. This exhibition traces the twists and turns of that aspiration to represent black America in the following two decades as King's dream gave way to disillusion.

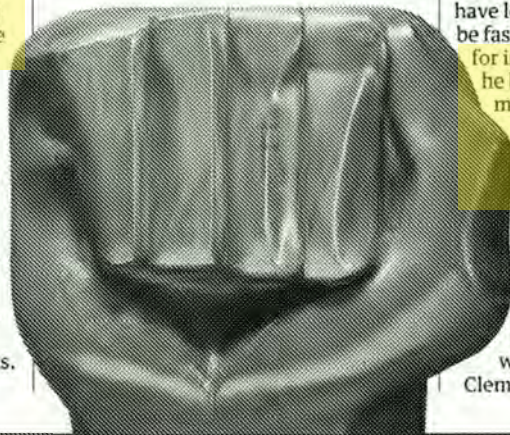
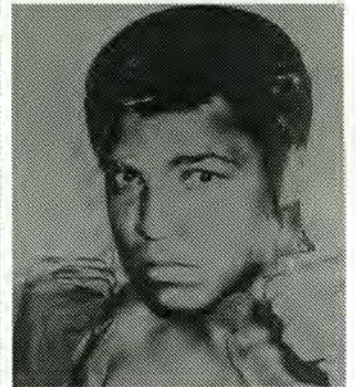
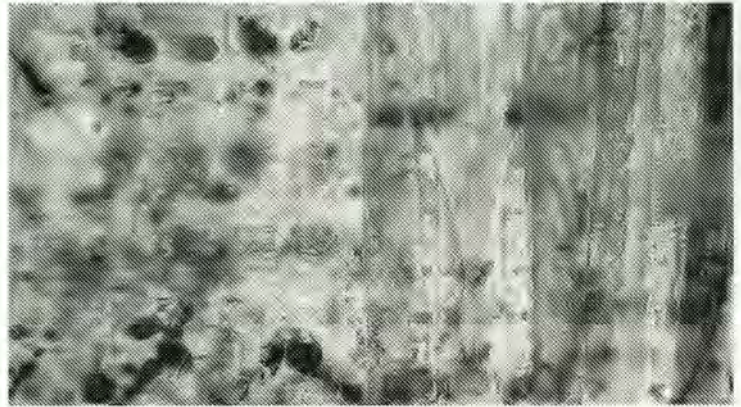
How could black consciousness be expressed in art? That question turns out to open dazzling new vistas on a brilliant epoch in art history.

Soul of a Nation transforms how we see American art in the age of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol (who makes a cameo appearance with his portrait of Muhammad Ali). All those artists were white, and all are enshrined as American icons.

By contrast, Sam Gilliam was until recently forgotten. He has only now, in his 80s, started getting the attention he deserves.

The achievement of this exhibition is the simple one of recovering the talent of a legion of artists who have been kept out of the American canon of genius in a way that is utterly unjust.

Yet it does more. The curators have looked far and wide in their search for the forgotten riches of art in the age of Malcolm X. They include everything from copies of *The Black Panther* magazine to the witty, deadpan self-portraits of 1970s ironist Barkley Hendricks. When a critic described Hendricks as



a "brilliantly endowed" painter, he immediately responded with a nude self-portrait called *Brilliantly Endowed*. Sadly, he died this year, too soon to bask in this exhibition's starshine.

The open and imaginative way curators Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley have delved into the archives means they have looked far beyond what happens to be fashionable now. One reason Gilliam,

for instance, is not well known is that he belongs to the colour field movement, often dismissed as a soggy aftermath of abstract expressionism. This exhibition rescues not just some great abstract painters but colour field painting itself.

Another mighty exponent is Frank Bowling. That's Frank Bowling RA, OBE, the Guyana-born painter who is usually seen in a context of post-colonial British art. In the 1960s Bowling went to the US and met the critic Clement Greenberg, who had spotted



Can't for my
Man Superman,
1962, Bunkley
Hendricks; Keep
Your Spirits
Free; Carolyn
Lawrence; Eva
Die Babyfitter,
Louisa Amey,
Muhammad Ali,
Andy Warhol;
April 4, Sam
Gibson; We shall
overcome, Without
a Doubt; Emory
Douglas; Black
Unity, 1968,
Elizabeth Gaddert
Photographs:
Tate Modern



the genius of Jackson Pollock and also acclaimed him. Bowling's vast, addictive 1971 canvas *Texas Louise* is a romantic blaze of desert light almost seven metres wide in which a map of the Americas glows like a dying vision of an anguished history. It is an unforgettable painting.

In 1960s Los Angeles, Noah Purifoy and Betye Saar created mysterious totems of what seems their own private religion. They have something in common with Rauschenberg but more with the Watts Towers, the masterpieces of outsider art built by Simon Rodia that soar giddily over LA. In fact Purifoy co-founded the Watts Towers Art Center. His work *Totem* is a kind of miniature Watts tower with an African aesthetic, made from anything he could find. Saar meanwhile creates altars, icons and mobiles that mix world religions and recycle junk to create one the most magical bodies of work in American art.

Saar is still alive, aged 90, to receive

the homage of an entire room dedicated to her by this exhibition. She ranks with Joseph Cornell as a surrealist of everyday life who weaves found stuff into poetry. Like others here she has never had a fraction of the museum space allotted to the great white men of American art.

This exhibition does not destroy the canon. It enlarges it, showing how the history of American modernism that started with Pollock released radical visions of uncommon beauty and eloquence.

A photograph of John Coltrane is a reminder that American modern art has its roots in African American music. Pollock listened to jazz while he worked. In this exhibition Coltrane's contemporaries translate his artistic intensity and courage into colours that start in rage but ascend to a love supreme.

Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, Tate Modern, until 22 October

Campbell, Andrianna, "Sam Gilliam," *Artforum.com*, 500 Words, July 11, 2017

ARTFORUM

Sam Gilliam



Sam Gilliam, *Yves Klein Blue*, 2017, acrylic on Cerex nylon. Installation view, central pavilion, Venice, 2017. From the 57th Venice Biennale. Photo: David Velasco.

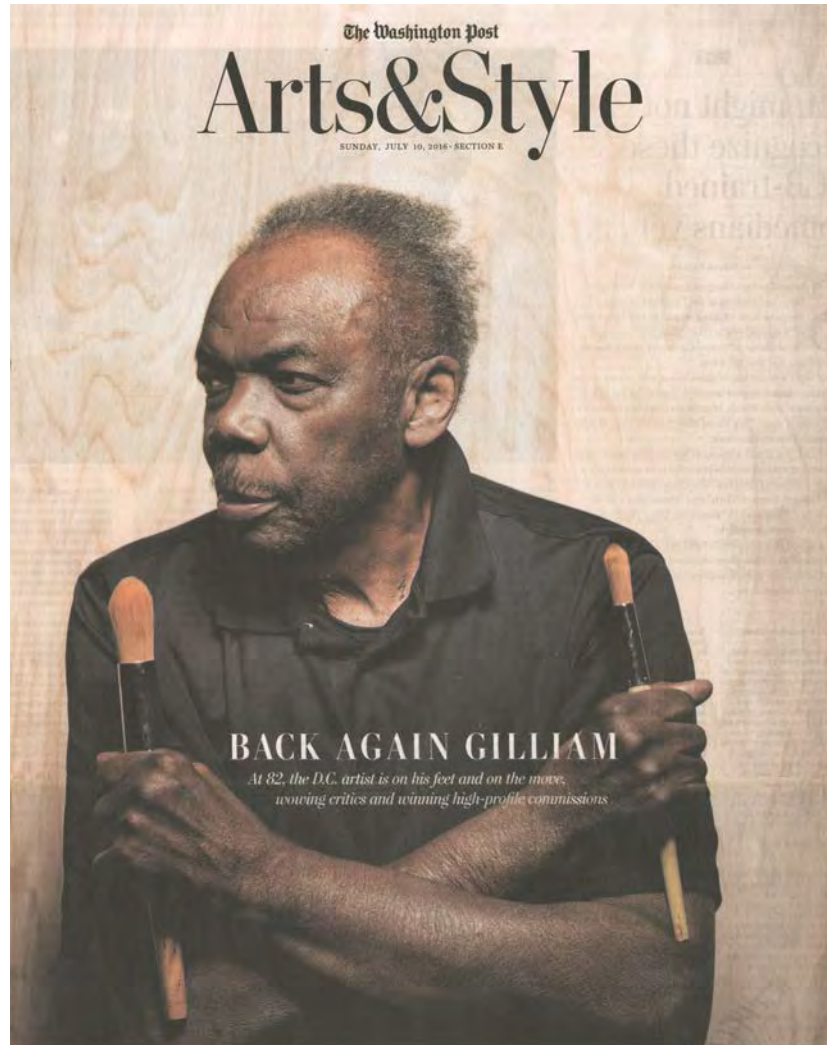
*Sam Gilliam is a Washington, DC–based artist whose vibrantly hued unstretched canvas *Yves Klein Blue*, 2017, will be draped across the entrance to the Giardini’s central pavilion at the Fifty-Seventh Venice Biennale until the show closes on November 26, 2017. Here, Gilliam speaks of his earlier participation in the Biennale, forty-five years ago, and his continued investigation into the expanded field of painting. His work is also featured in “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” which will be on view at Tate Modern from July 12 to October 22, 2017.*

IN VENICE, I’m showing *Yves Klein Blue*, an outdoor drape piece that hangs on the front of the building. Suspended from the ceiling of the colonnade entrance, it blows in the wind. Seahorses was my first outdoor drape, which I did in 1975 for the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Installing that piece on the outside of the museum was fantastic because we used a hook and ladder truck from a division of the fire department. We got up to the rings along the building, and we did the installation. Around 8 PM that night we finished, and, sure enough, there was a major storm coming off the Atlantic. We went to dinner, and we came back. There was this really beautiful moment when the strong winds inhabited the piece—rays of light shot through the fabric, creating shadows in the folds. I wanted *Yves Klein Blue* to billow like that early work.

I first encountered Yves Klein while stationed with the army in Japan. There was a Klein exhibition in Tokyo. The Gutai group was being born, and I was in the army, and I thought nothing about whether I would be an artist or not. In fact, I probably thought that I would never be an artist. But Klein had an effect on me, and I thought about making art beyond the interiors that it is usually presented in, about making art more in the outside world. In 1972, I was in Venice to install my work *Baroque Cascade*, which measured ten by seventy-five feet when undraped. I was there alongside Ron Davis, Diane Arbus, Keith Sonnier, Jim Nutt, Richard Estes, and Walter Hopps. I went over early to assist with the installation. I was particularly excited to show my work because of my desire to connect painting and architecture.

All that is happening now—the immigration crisis, the bombs, the gutting of the National Endowment for the Arts, the presidential corruption—was present in the 1970s. It seems worse now, but history, like art, is cyclical. Yet, I think we’re in a much worse place than we were in the ’60s, when the NEA was initiated by the Johnson administration. This time, it’s almost the same, but where are our educational institutions? To gesture at the cycles of history is art at its greatest capacity. *Yves Klein Blue* is about participating in a continuum—it’s about connecting the precursors with the present. After all, blue is what we think of first when we imagine a Klein, but there is something autobiographical there for me as well, which harks back to my early formative years. To me, art is about moving outside of traditional ways of thinking. It’s about artists generating their own modes of working. We need to continue to think about the whole of what art is, what it does. Even though my work is not overtly political, I believe art has the ability to call attention to politics and to remind us of this potential through its presence.

— As told to Andrianna Campbell



BY GEOFF EDGERS

I am outlandishly famous," Sam Gilliam says on a recent afternoon as he walks across his sunlit studio in the District's Brightwood Park.

He's joking, though a little swagger would be understandable at the moment. At 82, Gilliam is coming off the opening of a critically acclaimed exhibition in Los Angeles. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and MOMA recently acquired works of his. Come September, the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture will unveil a sprawling piece, 28-feet-long, that is one of the highest-profile commissions of his career.

This artistic rebirth has caught even those closest to him by surprise. Just a few years ago, Gilliam was unable to work or really function at all. Then a new set of doctors, prodded by his family, determined that what ailed the artist wasn't his health but overzealous attempts to manage it. Changes were made, medications dropped, and recovery came quickly.

"He went from somebody who was sort of catatonic on the couch to somebody who realized he was fit enough to travel extensively," says Melissa Gilliam, the second of his three daughters. "He went from not

GILLIAM CONTINUED ON E14

It's going to be much easier to remember Sam Gilliam

GILLIAM FROM E1

knowing whether he was able to paint again to climbing five flights of stairs. It's been transformative for him."

These days, Gilliam is a working artist. He heads to his studio five days a week, talks about acquiring another sports car and explores his latest artistic shift — the vibrant wooden panels varnished as deliciously as Icelandic glaciers. When his five-paneled piece is displayed in September, it will be the first time any of this new work has been shown to the public. And there's more to come.

"After 30, 40 years of painting, 30, 40 years of wondering what I should do, it's now like this," he says, and snaps his fingers.

Gilliam is not easy to categorize. His work has been acquired by some of the world's most important contemporary art collectors, but he's not a household name. He's a black artist who came of age during the civil rights movement, and he has a major piece going into the nation's first federally owned museum devoted to African American culture. Yet he's never been one for marches or political protests. If anything, he's fought hard to keep his work from being defined by race.

In 1971, Gilliam pulled out of an exhibition of work by black artists at the Whitney Museum of American Art because, as he wrote in a letter signed by six other artists also protesting, the show represented "the worst form of tokenism without any regard for our real qualities."

"In black studies or on television now," he says today, "they take blood, and they tell you where you came from. I don't give a damn about that."

Gilliam has painted on canvas and worked in mixed media, created in galleries and on the sides of dirt hills. He has been called an abstract expressionist and a color field painter. Those who know his work don't try to define him with

art-world catchphrases.

"I call him Sam Gilliam, an extraordinary artist who has broken all sorts of boundaries," says Spelman College's president, Mary Schmidt Campbell, who showed Gilliam's work decades ago when she ran the Studio Museum in Harlem.

He was born on Thanksgiving Day, 1933, in Tupelo, Miss., the seventh of eight children. When he was 9, the family moved to Kentucky, where Gilliam received his master's degree in fine arts from the University of Louisville in 1961. He moved to the District in 1962 because Dorothy Butler, whom he would marry, got a job at *The Washington Post*. She was the first African American woman hired as a reporter by the newspaper.

It was a good time to be in D.C. You could see Monk or Miles at the Bohemian Caverns and mingle with other artists at gallery openings in Adams Morgan. That's where Gilliam met the artist Tom Downing, who was older and had studied with the pioneering Washington Color School painter Kenneth Noland. Downing went to Gilliam's first solo show in 1963.

"He teased me," Gilliam remembers. "He said, 'You're scared to paint.' Hell, everybody else is painting abstract art and pop art."

A painter's progress

Suddenly, he moved away from figurative works to a series of hard-edged pieces that could have come out of a Morris Louis catalogue. He began to strip off tape, letting the colors bleed and swirl. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, Gilliam reinvented himself again. He dropped the frame altogether.

This doesn't sound dramatic, but wait until you see it. The "draped" paintings, as they would be called, were abstract works on

canvas but without a frame, the canvases could be stretched across walls, bunched up like bed sheets, even hung from ceilings.

The first draped works were unveiled at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1969 in what Paul Richard, then a critic for *The Post*, called "an enormously important show." Later, they would be displayed all across the United States, including a dramatic installation on the outside walls of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1975.

So why did he do it? How did and does he make such radical changes?

Talking to Gilliam about his creative impulses is like trying to analyze a John Coltrane solo. You can feel the energy, the innovation, the fact that this music could only be coming from this horn. But it's hard to explain exactly how it came into being. Eventually, you both look

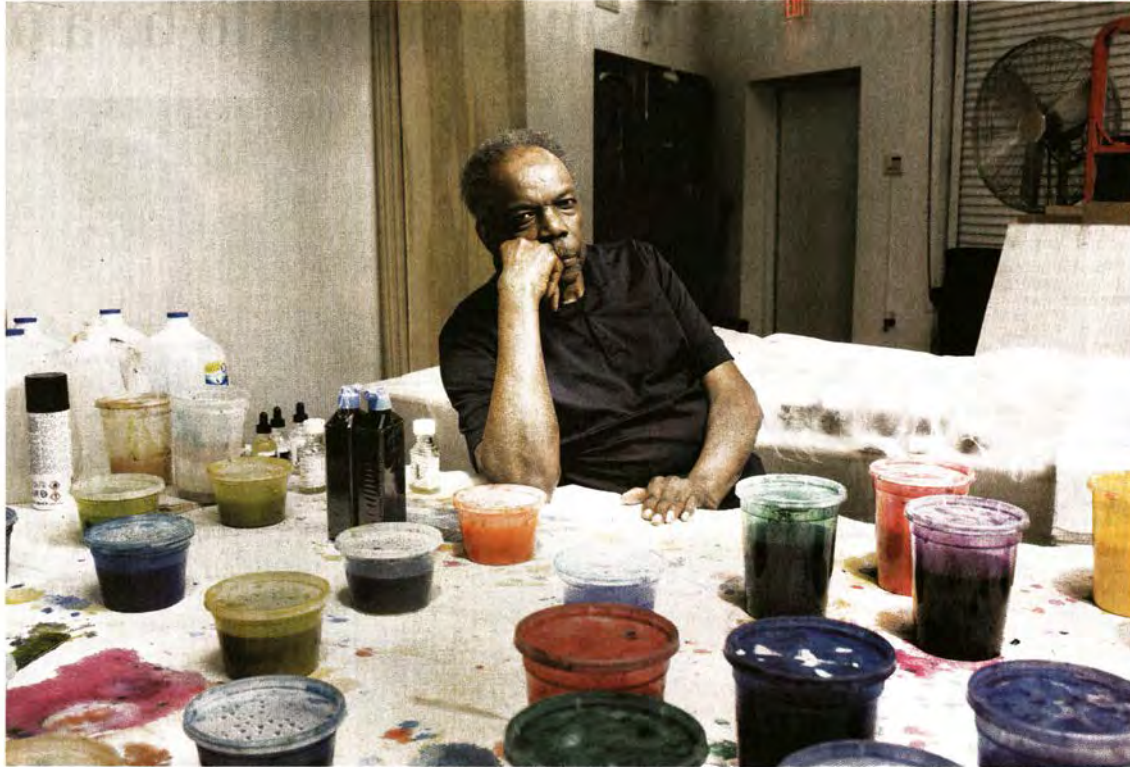
at the wall, admiringly, and realize intellectualizing is futile.

He is inspired by everything, his own history, the books he reads, the lifetime of traveling and the examples set by artists who came before. A conversation with Gilliam darts across disciplines, continents and time. He talks of the Sistine Chapel, Monet's water lilies and Countee Cullen, whose poem "Yet Do I Marvel" provided the title of the new piece for the national African American museum.

Sticking to one style, Gilliam says, never struck him as a good idea.

"There are theories in art, just like in music," he explains. "You switch from Little Jimmy Dickens to Bob Dylan and Miles Davis to Art Blakey."

"Integrating of classical music and jazz, that's the same thing you do in painting," Gilliam continues. "From the floor to the wall. Hanging from the ceiling.



MARVIN JOSEPH/THE WASHINGTON POST

You just restructure what you do in terms of its history.”

Here he pauses and laughs.

“That’ll get you in a lot of trouble.”

Again, he’s joking but behind that joke is a kind of truth. “Trouble” may be a way of saying “less marketable.”

Regaining visibility

Pamela Joyner, a San Francisco-based collector who has amassed works by some of the country’s most important 20th-century black artists — including Romare Bearden, Mark Bradford and Gilliam — says the artist’s range and approach held him back commercially.

“This is the dawn of the civil rights movement, and what the African American community wanted to see was uplifting images of African Americans,” she says. “That’s understandable. That’s why Sam and others toiled away without any recognition or any acclaim for many, many years.”

Campbell, executive director of the Studio Museum from 1977 to

1987, also felt that frustration.

“I wish he had more visibility,” she says. “Over the 40-year period I’ve known him, I see his work get recognition, and then it’s radio silence.”

In recent years, a narrative emerged that portrayed Gilliam as more than underappreciated. It talked of glory years, with museum exhibitions and his selection to represent the United States at the 1972 Venice Biennale. Then, the artist disappears and goes nearly broke and fades into “oblivion,” as the *London Guardian* put it. As the story goes, Gilliam even traded art for laundry detergent, a claim made in *T*, the *New York Times* style magazine, and corrected later because it wasn’t true.

“When I first heard it, this narrative and how terrible things were, I sort of took it as an affront,” Melissa Gilliam says. “But what I realized is that, given that he was in the Biennale in the early ’70s, he should have experienced more of a sustained high. That’s why they’re using ‘rediscovered.’ It’s not that someone

was lost. It’s getting their career back on track.”

“I really wasn’t that down on my luck,” says Gilliam, noting that he has a house with a swimming pool. (He also sold his old studio, on 14th and U NW, for \$3.85 million in 2010.)

But he did stop working for a time. Annie Gawlak, his long-time partner, had a bout with throat cancer. (Gilliam and his wife, Dorothy, divorced in the 1980s.) Gilliam, diagnosed as bipolar in the 1960s and put on lithium, found his kidneys were badly damaged. Gawlak got better, and Gilliam got off the medication. He also changed his diet, cutting out red meat and adding fruits and nuts.

Then David Kordansky called. The Los Angeles gallerist was one more person who felt that Gilliam needed more attention.

When they met in 2012, Kordansky found Gilliam’s work being shown in the District, New Mexico and what he calls “decentralized markets outside the art market essentially.”

"It needed to be brought to the curators. It needed to be seen at the international art fairs, and it needed a voice behind it," Kordansky says.

Instead of organizing a retrospective or putting Gilliam's newest works on display, Kordansky started with a show of hard-edge works that Gilliam created between 1963 and 1966. He then brought works created in the late '60s and early '70s a few years later to the Frieze New York art fair in 2014.

"This was one of the ways we began to reshape his position within the art world," Kordansky says. "By simply retelling the story. It's an incredible story, and you can't devalue the story. The story is powerful enough to shape the perception of his work within the art world."

Melissa Gilliam agrees. She notes that her father, from a relatively poor family in segregated Kentucky, has three daughters who have attended Ivy League schools. He's also realized that, even in his 80s, he can work and travel freely.

"I guess it was last summer," she says, "Annie [Gawlak] finally convinced him to take a trip, to get back on an airplane. He had basically said he wasn't going to travel again. She ended up slipping and ended up with this broken ankle and wrist. He had to do everything. What he discovered is he could do everything. So he traveled. After that, he was like, 'Oh, I can go travel again and see other artists and be giving talks.'

"He had a trip to New York, and he went to Philadelphia, and then he had his show in L.A. And then he gave a talk in New York. He is discovering that there is some more art to come and life to come. Who knows what happens next?"

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PAUL FENBERG

TOP: Sam Gilliam, shown last month, has been very busy of late, including a commission to do a major piece for the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture. A few years ago, the D.C. artist had slipped into obscurity and was so unwell that he was unable to work. With his health restored, he "went from not knowing whether he was able to paint again to climbing five flights of stairs," daughter Melissa Gilliam said recently. ABOVE: Gilliam, in 1969, was a daring, hard-to-categorize artist whose work was widely admired and would be displayed across the country.



MARSHA MATEYKA GALLERY

"Tinkerbell's Bookcase," 2010-2011.

Acrylic on canvas.



SAM GILLIAM

Works from the "Screen for Model" series, 2012. Acrylic on birch.

Muenzer, David, "Sam Gilliam," *Artforum.com*, Critics' Picks, June 8, 2016

ARTFORUM

Los Angeles

Sam Gilliam
DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY
5130 West Edgewood Place
June 4–July 16

Are Sam Gilliam's paintings improvisations, meticulously structured formalism, ethereal attempts at going beyond substance, social objects inextricably embedded in political struggles, or all of the above? The works in his current show, "Green April," dating from 1968–70, crisscross these once well-policed boundaries that helped modernist painting lay claim to objectivity.

Consider the show's eponymous piece from 1969, a large rectangle of shifting emerald.

The thin cascades of acrylic with aluminum dust conjure a portal while remaining indexical. The quality of light and wide format of this piece, created by folding unstretched canvas over wet paint, recall a verdant landscape equally arboreal and watery. The image is disrupted by a mark on the lower left side of the canvas—perhaps a scuff from the hard-to-control process—and the gesture brings the viewer's attention out from the inner world of the picture and back to its material. This quality is heightened by the beveled edges that make the painting a faceted object rather than a support for a distinct picture plane.

The title also reflects a concern with the world outside. Unlike Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950, which can be seen as evoking a season either metaphorically, universalizing it, or reflexively, marking the time of his painting's creation, *Green April* refers to a social history that is not purely aesthetic—the April 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. What to make of the calm sense of elsewhere that pervades it, a work that also marks a violent death? By maintaining visual and material decisions as expressions of personal freedom, Gilliam's work complicates the transcendental aspirations of abstract painting by reminding us *who*, exactly, is allowed to forget their own bodies.



Sam Gilliam, *Green April*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 98" x 22' 7" x 4".

— David Muenzer

Fowler, William, "Searching for Sam Gilliam: the 81-year-old art genius saved from oblivion," *The Guardian.com*, October 15, 2015

Searching for Sam Gilliam: the 81-year-old art genius saved from oblivion

by William Fowler

In the 1960s, he was hailed as an artist as radical as Jackson Pollock - but the art world somehow forgot Sam Gilliam. Here's how two savvy fans tracked him down and brought him back into the spotlight.



Artist Sam Gilliam in his Washington DC studio. Photograph: Jocelyn Augustino/the Guardian

Three years ago, Sam Gilliam was living in obscurity and his money was running out. He was nearing 80, his health was bad and he had no pension. But there was one thing he still had, one thing he had never given up on: the studio near his apartment in Washington DC.

In the 1960s and 70s, Gilliam was known for his "drape paintings" – huge, colourful canvases torn from their surrounds then knotted and swagged into sculptures. He was considered one of abstract art's great innovators, one of the first painters to break the frame. Critics at the time described his work as "magisterial", "enormously important" and "one of those watermarks by which the art community measures its evolution". He had shows at the Whitney in 1969, MoMA in 71 and the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 72. But he hadn't had a major exhibition or representation for years, and was cut off from the art market.

Little did he know that, as he struggled to hold on, wheels were in motion to restore his reputation. The story of his extraordinary comeback culminates this week with a show of his work at Frieze Masters in London, rubber-stamping his credentials as a living master. But it starts in LA, where two young men were drinking heavily one night.

Fowler, William, "Searching for Sam Gilliam: the 81-year-old art genius saved from oblivion," *The-Guardian.com*, October 15, 2015



Fan Craze, 1973, by Sam Gilliam. Photograph: Fredrik Nilsen/Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Little did he know that, as he struggled to hold on, wheels were in motion to restore his reputation. The story of his extraordinary comeback culminates this week with a show of his work at Frieze Masters in London, rubber-stamping his credentials as a living master. But it starts in LA, where two young men were drinking heavily one night.

One was David Kordansky, a gallerist with a taste for artists who are off the radar. The other was Rashid Johnson, an artist known for tackling the role of race in US culture. Kordansky was trying to woo Johnson to his gallery, and the two were sniffing each other out, name-checking artists they loved. At one point, the conversation turned to 1970s abstract artists – and it emerged that the pair were both enormous fans of Gilliam. “I’ve always loved geeking out over artists who have been ‘decentralised,’” says Kordansky.

Why was no one paying attention to this artist whose innovations, they thought, were on a par with Jackson Pollock’s paint-pouring? They believed Gilliam had been written out of art history because he was a black artist whose work, paradoxically, didn’t look black enough. It made him hard to classify. Not to mention the fact that his palette – all acid greens and hot pinks – seemed so ahead of its time.

“I knew he was still out there,” says Johnson. “But it wasn’t until David talked about curating a show of his work that I thought, wow, I might actually get the chance to meet the man.”

Fowler, William, "Searching for Sam Gilliam: the 81-year-old art genius saved from oblivion," *The Guardian.com*, October 15, 2015



Swing Sketch, 1968, one of Sam Gilliam's innovative 'drape' paintings. Photograph: Fredrik Nilsen/Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Their first attempt to make contact was rebuffed, but on their second, they were invited into Gilliam's studio. There they found not just the painter himself, but a whole body of work the world had never seen: pieces that preceded the drape paintings. In fact, they were their jumping-off point, with bright colours, taped lines and bevel-edged canvases.

"We were both like, 'Whoa! What are these?'" says Kordansky. "And 'Have you got any more of them?'" adds Johnson.

It was clear these paintings could form the basis of an entire exhibition. But when the two men suggested this, Gilliam began to weep. "I actually thought he was laughing at us," says Kordansky. "Like, 'you little burgermeisters, coming into my studio, thinking I would let you do anything with my work'. Then it turned out he was crying."

"It was like a light in a dark place," the artist tells me. "I did cry – at the idea that I might make some money and guarantee myself a future. It really caught me off guard."

That first show in LA was a huge success. Not only did Gilliam sell nearly all of his early paintings, but over the coming years Kordansky placed many of them with major institutions like MoMA. "Sam stayed constant – it was the world that turned," says Laura Hoptman, MoMA's curator for painting and sculpture. "Finally, he popped back into focus."

"Even when artists of colour are embraced by the canon," says Johnson, "there is often a strict focus on a particular moment, rather than their career as a whole." His goal now is "for people to gain the same familiarity with Gilliam that we have with Matisse or Picasso".

Fowler, William, "Searching for Sam Gilliam: the 81-year-old art genius saved from oblivion," *The-Guardian.com*, October 15, 2015



New work in glass by Sam Gilliam at his Washington studio. Photograph: Jocelyn Augustino/the Guardian

Whenever Gilliam's work is shown at Kordansky gallery, people say: "Who's this exciting young Brooklyn painter?" They're stunned when they find out he's 81 and living in Washington surrounded by his family."

Being rediscovered has brought about one further change in Gilliam. "I'm painting again," he says. "I feel like I'm starting all over. I feel like I'm just beginning."

Capps, Kriston, "Return to Splendor," *WashingtonCityPaper.com*, March 27, 2015

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

Capps, Kriston, "Return to Splendor," *WashingtonCityPaper.com*, March 27, 2015

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



Capps, Kriston, "Return to Splendor," *WashingtonCityPaper.com*, March 27, 2015

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."

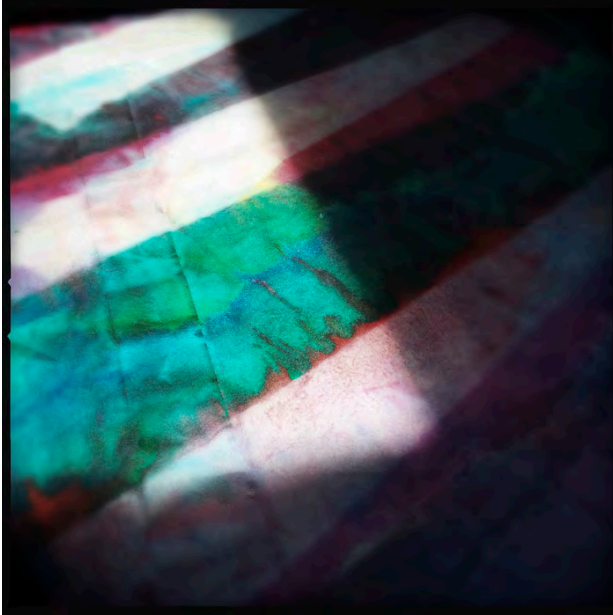
The other coach in Gilliam's corner was Walter Hopps, a mercurial curator who left an outsized footprint in the District. "No single individual contributed more to Washington's art scene from 1966 to 1972—and to Gilliam's professional development during that period—than Walter Hopps," Binstock's monograph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

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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-

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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.

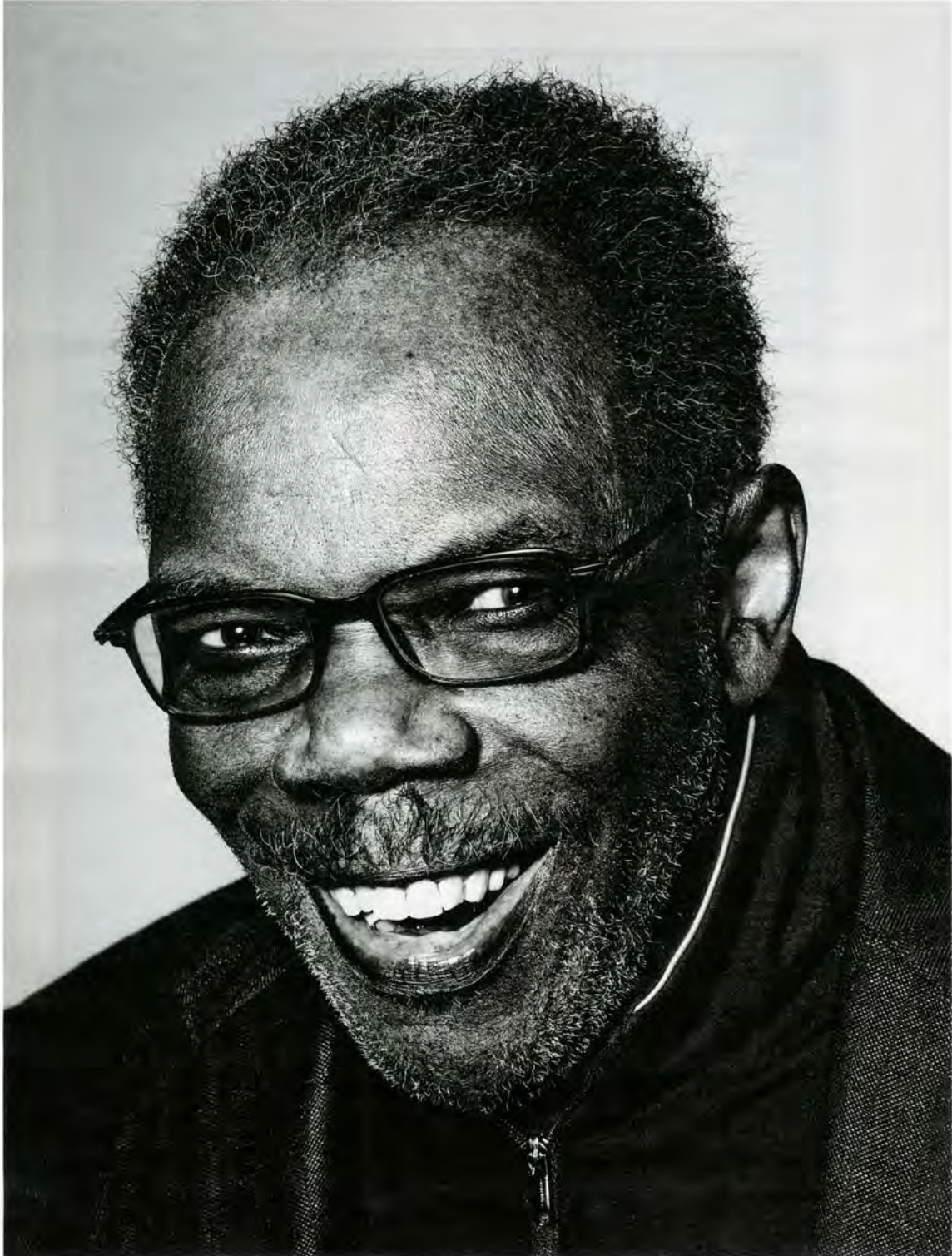
"There is growing interest in African-American artists who came up in the 1960s and 1970s and remained true to abstraction despite pressures to embrace subject matter driven by politics or identity," Cooper writes. "Gilliam is among the best of these."

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."

Lewis, Jim, "Red Orange Yellow Green and Blue Period," *W Art*, December 2014/January 2015, pp. 86-89



RED ORANGE YELLOW GREEN AND BLUE PERIOD

*At 81, the painter Sam Gilliam is in the throes of what might be the most brilliant moment of his career. By Jim Lewis
Photograph by Richard Burbridge*

the rediscovery of an artist is always endearing. It seems to happen every couple of years: An older painter with a sterling record, who has nonetheless escaped notice for a few decades, is suddenly taken up again. The work looks great, the artist is rescued from oblivion, and everyone is bracingly reminded of how fragile and mutable our sense of history can be. It happened in the late '90s to Bridget Riley; it happened a few years ago to Lee Bontecou. It's happening now to Sam Gilliam, who is 81 years old and living, as he has for more than 50 years, in Washington, D.C.; and no one is more cheered by the rediscovery than he is.

On a recent visit to his studio, a renovated gas station in the largely residential Petworth neighborhood, he comes to the door clad in standard issue artist black—a tall, slender man who moves as elegantly as a dancer. We sit, and Gilliam speaks softly, gently, thoughtfully, and with muted but evident emotion. He was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, one of eight children, and grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. To hear him tell it, he had an idyllic childhood, marked by just the right amounts of doting and benign neglect. The classic narrative of an artist's life depicts a selfish man devoted to boozing and painting, a disappointed wife at home, and surly and estranged children. Gilliam's is quite the opposite. In the early '60s, his wife got a job as a city reporter at *The Washington Post*; he followed her to D.C. And while the marriage eventually ended, he stayed in town to be close to his three daughters and kept his studio hours strictly 9 to 5. "There's an adjustment between being the father and being the artist," he says. He smiles softly. "Anyway, 'Dad' is the sweetest word I've ever heard."

Hanging in the studio are a dozen or so paintings, fashioned in the manner known as Color Field, a style that

involves pouring layers of acrylic paint onto unprimed canvases and letting it soak in. The result is an unruffled surface that conveys a striking combination of flatness and depth. Like a lot of artists, what Gilliam loves to talk about most is process: how the work is made, the properties of various materials, and the way the materials respond to handling. I ask him a banal and somewhat goofy question—What's your favorite color?—and he answers with the sort of delight that most people bring to a list of their favorite movies, or songs. "Purple," he says. "The purples, the blues. Purple colors have a depth. It's just a romantic color. It's royal. I used to never use greens; I used to be a great yellow person." These things matter when the word "color" is in the very name of your triumph.

Gilliam is considered a third-generation Color Field artist (a "generation" in this kind of art history lasts perhaps four or five years), and he came to it obliquely, drawn in by his friend the late painter Tom Downing, who threw down a gauntlet. "I was painting figures," Gilliam says. "I had a show of figural painting—sort of California school, Diebenkorn—and Tom Downing asked if I was afraid of art. He said, 'Why not paint real paintings?'" He laughs. Gilliam was 28; had he, in fact, been afraid of art? He laughs again. "I'd always been afraid of art. I was afraid in college. But that fear is a goal, in a way: It makes you hesitate, and then you delay your start, and then you have a breakthrough."

Gilliam started painting stripes—sharp, bright, and dynamic, in saturated colors, playing off Downing's abstractions, and earlier paintings by Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland—and inspired, above all, by music. "Before painting, there was jazz," he tells me. "I mean cool jazz. Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, the Ayler brothers, Miles Davis. It's something that was important to

Gilliam (photo © ArtK1) in his Washington, D.C., studio in September.

my work, it was a constant. You listened while you were painting. It made you think that being young wasn't so bad. All the young painters were into jazz."

there are fewer solid firsts in art history than you might think—even within modernism, which made a fetish of innovation. One of the first artists to be known for pouring paint, rather than applying it only with a brush, was Joan Miró. From there, the technique leads to Jackson Pollock, and then Helen Frankenthaler, and then Louis. Gilliam has a first of his own, a breakthrough at least as important, if lesser-known—it came in 1967, a few years after the stripe paintings, and the way he describes it, it was almost an accident. He'd been experimenting with folding and creasing his canvases before he stained them, creating furrows and channels where the pigment would become particularly concentrated; he took the paintings off the stretcher and laid them on the floor, turning them into something more like tarpaulins, which he worked from all four sides, creating a rosy, translucent effect, much like Chinese screens. "We used to talk about Coltrane," he said in a 1984 interview with the Smithsonian Institution. "That Coltrane worked the whole sheet; he didn't bother to stop at bars and notes and clefs and various things, he just played the whole sheet at once." Gilliam was playing the whole canvas.

In 1967, his old friend and mentor Walter Hopps—one of the great curators of last century—became the director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., and offered Gilliam a show in the rotunda. "He said, 'I'm going to give you an opportunity.'" Gilliam recalls. "You'll take the upper floor of the atrium, the space is 30' by 60', and you'll paint. And these little paintings that you're making won't fit." In anticipation of the Corcoran show, Gilliam was in his studio working on a large painting called *Niagara*. As he was putting it on the wall, one side became dislodged, and the canvas fell to the floor. "I just thought, This is something," he says. He began deliberately draping the canvases, creating fluid, semi-sculptural objects out of two-dimensional paintings. It was the first time anyone had taken a painting off the wall and transformed the cloth into folds and swaths and wraps, and they circumvented a whole series of formal painterly concerns: the frame, the shape, the wall. What's more, as powerful as the *Drape* paintings were, treating the canvas as malleable cloth rather than pristine surface was a nod to dress-making and window treatments, which undermined the machismo associated with painting in general, and Abstract Expressionism, in particular. For that—for all of that and more—Gilliam earned a place in art history.

this was a period of considerable recognition for Gilliam—he was included in the American Pavilion at the 1972 Venice Biennale and had a major installation of *Drape* paintings at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art the following year. But then, as the '80s and '90s arrived, with their hyperactive, theoretical, media-saturated art scene, Gilliam went into eclipse. Though his work redoubled in density and complexity, the world's attention didn't follow. There was a retrospective at the Corcoran in 2005, and then nothing. In part, that's the natural cycle of history: Ways of working come and go. In part, too, it was because Gilliam had veered away from the Color Field painting that had brought him to prominence, reversing its emphasis on flatness by making his work almost architectural. He'd been looking into origami and string games, like *Cat's Cradle*, for inspiration—these were heresies. Painting in the 1960s was meant to be a terminal affair, the moment when the entire

"COLOR FIELD PAINTING WAS A KIND OF ENDGAME. BUT FOR GILLIAM, IT WAS JUST THE BEGINNING," SAYS HIS DEALER, DAVID KORDANSKY.

history of painting absorbed all its own verities: image, surface, brushstroke. As his current dealer, David Kordansky, puts it, "Color Field painting, as brilliant and amazing as it was, to some extent was kind of endgame painting. Where Gilliam is very different is that for him, it was just the beginning. He was looking for new ways to experiment and push painting forward." The style couldn't hold him—he would put down a body of work and then circle back years later and resume it. That made him hard to track, hard to categorize. And so did his reluctance to treat his race as significant to his art. "It's not," he tells me. "It's important to me as a man, but to the work, no."

There followed years in the wilderness—regular shows in a loyal D.C. gallery but little public recognition. And there were personal struggles: Gilliam suffers from bipolar disorder, a fact he speaks of openly. He spent decades on Lithium, which damaged his kidneys and eventually left him in a depression so severe that for three years he scarcely left the house; he's been off the drug only a few months when we meet. But even as he was working his way through the darkest times, things were starting to happen for him. He was included in group shows, in museums, and, in 2012, at Gladstone Gallery. Around that time, Kordansky, a longtime admirer of Gilliam's work, flew to D.C. to meet him. He immediately asked for a show; the artist wept at the offer (Kordansky says he came close to doing the same). His first solo exhibition took place at Kordansky's gallery in Los Angeles in 2013, a selection of early, *Hard-Edge* paintings curated by gallery-mate Rashid Johnson. "The interest," Kordansky says, has been "kind of mind-blowing." In the past year, both the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have acquired Gilliams—in the first instance, a spectacular, tripartite *Drape* painting from 1969; in the second, a bright multicolored bevel-edge painting from 1970. Several major private collections have also bought pieces. At the same time, *Color Field* is making its own comeback, with shows in New York of work by Louis and Frankenthaler, Jules Olitski, and Kenneth Noland, all in this year alone.

As for Gilliam, this is his moment, and one can't help but enjoy it with him. His work is pure, a relatively rare thing in this day and age, but more than that, he's a gentleman (though I'm sure he's quite capable of being irascible), and his happiness seems hard-won. This is what we want artists to be: ambitious but not vulgar about it, original but not gratuitously so, confident but not immodest, and, above all, in love with their medium. This is what we want to hear: that sooner or later, the prophet gets the honor he deserves. ♦

Opposite page:
Gilliam's *Crystal*, 1973

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL GOODMAN FOR ARTS AND LETTERS; PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL GOODMAN FOR ARTS AND LETTERS

Lewis, Jim, "Red Orange Yellow Green and Blue Period," *W Art*, December 2014/January 2015, pp. 86-89



reviews: national

Sam Gilliam

David Kordansky

Los Angeles

79-year-old Sam Gilliam cast off the restraints of the Washington Color School in the late 1960s, when he stopped using stretcher bars and started draping stained canvas in massive sculptural forms. The paintings that came before those signature "Drapes" were the subject of this illuminating show, "Hard-Edge Paintings 1963–1966," curated by artist Rashid Johnson.

For the gallery's main exhibition space, Johnson selected seven paintings from 1965 that had been rolled up in Gilliam's studio for decades, only one of which had been previously exhibited. Lightly cleaned and newly stretched, the rectangular acrylic on canvases composed a lively but harmonious assembly that looked startlingly fresh and smart. In each work, a diagonal band of five colored stripes, each separated by a line of raw canvas, cuts across a solid-hued background. Some of the stripes seem to quiver, while others read as wide ribbons or streaks of colored light. In *Stems*—a more or less monochromatic painting—a narrow track of various greens zips from corner to corner of a darker-green ground. In *Helles*, a broad, boldly articulated highway of bright hues cuts through a field of white.

Despite the serial nature of Gilliam's

working process, there is nothing mechanical or formulaic about it. For each of these works, he first chose a pigment for the ground, and only after he had applied it to the canvas did he work out the palette and width of the stripes. The clearly hand-painted works have slightly mottled, almost velvety surfaces—and though their compositions appear crisp and clean, their "hard" edges are slightly ragged.

This little-known early chapter of Gilliam's career owes a debt to older Color



Sam Gilliam, *Blue Let*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 71 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 47 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x $\frac{3}{4}$ ". David Kordansky.

Field painters, including Kenneth Noland. But the work is a strong statement by a young artist who was finding his way and would soon establish himself as an independent force. —Suzanne Muchnic

THE EXCHANGE



MENTOR/PROTÉGÉ

THE ART OF INSPIRATION

This spring, rising art star Rashid Johnson pays homage to the colorful, defiantly abstract paintings of 79-year-old Sam Gilliam by curating an exhibition devoted to Gilliam's early works.

BY CHLOE SCHAMA PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHU PLACEK

"SOME OF THESE ARE GESSOED?" asks the artist Rashid Johnson, gesturing at several colorful canvases leaning against a wall in 79-year-old Sam Gilliam's airy Washington, D.C., studio. "No," Gilliam corrects, speaking more deliberately than Johnson's enthusiastic clip. "They're all raw." Johnson, 35, furrows his brow, bends over and peers at one of the paintings as though it contains code.

Last summer, Gilliam—known for his vibrant, often monumentally scaled paintings—received a call from Johnson, who wanted to curate an exhibition of the older artist's work. Gilliam first made his name in the 1960s as a member of the Washington Color School, a group of D.C. painters that used similar techniques: staining large unprimed canvases, embracing abstraction and energetic color. Unlike many black

artists of his generation, he shied away from addressing race head-on, producing geometric paintings, and then, in the late '60s and '70s, the large, draped canvases for which he is best known. In 1976, three Gilliam canvases covered almost an entire external wall of the Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art—like a giant's tie-dyed laundry hung up to dry. "I wanted to brighten things up," Gilliam says, "rather than just be concerned with the problem."

In recent decades—though still admired among contemporary art aficionados—Gilliam has slipped into semi-obscurity. A review of his 2006 retrospective at Washington's Corcoran Gallery in *The Wall Street Journal* was titled "A Master of Color Too Long in the Shadows." Johnson hopes to change all that.

A rising star of the art world, Johnson has had

dozens of solo shows, including one at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 2012, the same year he was nominated for the prestigious Hugo Boss Prize. Around Gilliam, however, he is an eager and attentive pupil. Johnson first learned of Gilliam in the early 2000s while in his twenties and still an undergrad in his hometown of Chicago. It seemed to Johnson that Gilliam had been overlooked in favor of black artists who had engaged more directly with identity politics. This spring, Johnson will curate a show of some of Gilliam's early work at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles (March 28–May 11), where both artists are signed.

"Surprised the hell out of me," says Gilliam about the initial call from Johnson, an amused smile playing across his face.

GILLIAM ON JOHNSON

"The Washington Color School gave me a chance to fit into a future, rather than fit into what was domestic. In Washington, in the '60s, you could see where you wanted to go; you could see what you were thirsty for. You could feel the beckoning of the future—the ability to open up, to think about universals, spiritualism, all the things that a world contains.

Rashid is different. He's more of a documentary-type artist. He talks about history. He thinks about the questions that the man on the street wants to think about. That's been the tenet of the younger generation: to handle close problems rather than to be more objective. Rashid is more like a lot of artists today: writes well, speaks well and thinks well. I'm a picture artist; he's conceptual.

Young artists today walk into the art world on their own and do what they want to do. It's the making of the career that's hard. They can't find the shiny path that seems to be what successful artists have. The conflict between what happens in the studio and what happens on the outside is still there—the public wanting things to go a certain way and the artist wanting things to go another way in terms of a career. Figuring out what a career is, how to work, when to work and what to work on—that's the dilemma you talk about with younger artists.

I encourage young artists to know what's in books but to go beyond books, to see what is going on outside of school, because that's what you're actually training for. To see the variables. The fact is, I'm still the same, perhaps, as I was when I was younger. The idea of the work is still the same. You see something as an extension of a certain time or a certain date, rather than the observation that the optimism of the '50s and '60s still continues—quieter but still the same. I see a kind of optimism when I talk with Rashid."



CONCEPTUAL APPROACH From top: Johnson's *Souls of Black Folk*, from 2010, features vinyl, shea butter, space rocks and other mixed media; part of the artist's 2012 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. "Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks."

JOHNSON ON GILLIAM



"[Gallerist] David Kordansky and I came down to Sam's studio for the first time about a year ago. It felt like a life-changing experience for both of us to see the breadth of the work. We saw a small early canvas and we were like, 'What are these?' And Sam said, 'I made more of them, I was making them in the '60s.' The show that I'm going to be curating focuses pretty heavily on some of those earlier works. It gave me an opportunity to wrap my hands thickly around a moment.

I think that Sam's work deals with bigger human concerns about art and life. You think about Sam making these abstract geometric paintings in 1965. And you think about all the things that are happening in 1965—it's very specific to avoid representation of those things. It's kind of like escape as a protest: I'm going to refuse to participate in this problem, and I'm going to continue to manufacture and make things that I think are part of this bigger conversation.



One of the things I specifically learned [from Sam and his generation] was that when racial discourse was brought to their work, there was a lot of opportunity for projection. What I really hoped to do with my work was to at least be able to define my relationship to race. My composition often goes toward the black middle class, or the black super-wealthy, or strong historical black figures. After starting my work thinking about those signifiers—having loaded my

narrative with that stuff—it's given me the flexibility at this stage in my life to deal a lot more with art-making and material. I wanted my art to deal with very formal concerns and to deal with very material concerns, and to deal with antecedents and art history, which for me go very far beyond just the influence of African-American artists.

There's a tremendous amount of respect between us. In some ways I'm still very intimidated by Sam. It's been great to be able to talk to him, to talk a little about his influences. I don't want to bug him too much. I just want to pick up what I can. He's been really generous letting me follow him around, asking him questions for the exhibition. I thought maybe he'd say, 'OK, well, let the kid have a couple of pieces,' and maybe even dictate to me what he thought was the correct approach. But he's really given me a lot of flexibility. He's kind of like, 'Run, young fellow, you like this stuff.' "

ABSTRACT IMPRESSION For the exhibition of Gilliam's work at David Kordansky Gallery this month, Johnson, acting as curator, draws heavily from Gilliam's early paintings. From top: Gilliam's 1969 *Red Stanza*; 1965's *Ionesco*.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: RIGHT: SAM GILLIAM, *RED STANZA*, 1969, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 64.0" X 48.0" X 1.0"; COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, L.A., CA. PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN FURUTSU; SAM GILLIAM, *IONESCO*, 1965, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 70.0" X 48.0" X 1.0"; PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANSON WEBSTER; RASHID JOHNSON, "MESSAGE TO OUR FOLKS," 2012, MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO, PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATHAN BRAY; RASHID JOHNSON, *SOULS OF BLACK FOLK*, 2010, BLACK SOAP, WAX, BOOKS, VINYL, BRASS, SHEA BUTTER, PLANTS, SPACE ROCKS, MIRRORS, GOLD PAINT, STAINED WOOD, 14" X 14.33" X 54.25"; COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, L.A., CA. PHOTOGRAPHY BY FARZAD OVRANGI



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:
Red Stretch, 1965, acrylic on
canvas, 239 x 125 cm, photo:
Stephen Frietch



by workers before it was installed – they had thought it was merely a drop cloth left behind by decorators.

Given all that, you'll be surprised to know that this artist, Sam Gilliam, is not more of a household name (in the kind of household, of course, in which art is an everyday topic of conversation), sitting alongside other artists who have made great leaps – Robert Rauschenberg, for instance. He's celebrated as one of the leading lights among the artists associated with the Washington Color School (a grouping that took its name from a 1965 exhibition of painting at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, in DC, and included artists such as Kenneth Noland and Gene Davis) and as a pioneer of American colour field painting. But mainly by those in the know.

Oh yeah, one more fact about Gilliam. You don't need to know it to appreciate his works and you wouldn't necessarily guess it by looking at his works, but it can be useful when it comes to understanding their context and history: Gilliam is African American. And this month David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles is putting on a show of a group of Gilliam's works made between 1963 and 66. It's curated by another, younger African-American artist, Rashid Johnson.

"Sam and I share race, first thing, but that's not the reason for the show," Johnson is quick to point out when asked about what brought the two artists together. "Sam and a few other artists affected me early through their ability to build bodies of work through projects and processes," he continues, mentioning in particular the ways in which the older artist made him think about "the opportunities for gesture in abstraction, an expressionist palette and ways of approaching a surface".

It's natural, when one artist curates a show of another artist's work, for the viewer to try and locate something of the curator in the work of the curated, but this show promises to operate in a more subtle manner. Johnson, of course, is among the most prominent contemporary American artists. His work, which began with photography and has expanded to incorporate video, audio, sculpture and installation, frequently grouped under the umbrella label of post-black conceptualism, often incorporates specific references (from stacks of books by African-American authors or about African-American identity, musical or pop-cultural references in the titles of works – the *Cosmic Slop* series, for example, whose title is borrowed from a 1973 Funkadelic album – or the connotations of the branding technique he deploys in a series of works executed on wood-panelled floors) to African-American history (homages to other artists included) and its contribution to pop culture. Where Gilliam's work projected its message through the (sometimes extreme) manipulation of form that linked to cultural issues that existed outside the work, Johnson's tends to fuse formal experiments with a direct

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

LeGro, Tom and Stother, Annie, "In a Station of the Metro, an Apparition of Color From Sam Gilliam,"
PBS.org, August 18, 2011



In a Station of the Metro, an Apparition of Color From Sam Gilliam

by Tom LeGro and Annie Strother

Sam Gilliam's studio has the airy feel of a warehouse, but it boasts densities of colors and shapes. Sculptural paintings hang like scarves over the walls, and slabs of plywood are thick with hardened acrylics. Prints with more delicate, geometric patterns are stacked in various corners of the space.

Gilliam has only been in this studio for less than a year, but he's been in Washington, D.C., for 49, "an artist [who] grew up around the Washington Color School painters," he says, downplaying his role in the movement in the 1960s.

In that time he's become one of the foremost abstract artists in the nation, someone who's helped reconfigure perceptions of painting and who continually augments his own approaches to making art. Famous for taking his paintings out of the frame and draping them in sculptural formations, Gilliam has also made prints and worked with metal and other materials.

His most recent piece, a mural for the Takoma Metro station on the D.C.-Maryland border dedicated this summer, puts these efforts squarely in the public view. "From a Model to a Rainbow" is a mosaic of ceramic and glass mounted on aluminum. Luminous and rich in color, the piece faces the Metro entrance from its perch in a concrete tunnel below the elevated tracks. The movement and mechanics of the activity overhead is reflected in a large, three-dimensional circle -- a wheel -- that extends from the surface.

Spanning more than 400 square feet and topping 2,000 pounds, its design and assembly was a cross-continental effort. The mural was manufactured in Italy, where artisans worked from smaller sections of the design. The work arrived at Gilliam's studio in pieces before it was erected.

"What they wanted was light," Gilliam says. "Actually something that would make the tunnel...beautiful or lighted, so that it wasn't a place that you feared when you got off the train late at night."

That requirement influenced another aspect of the project: Gilliam's interest in translating one his draped paintings from the 1970s into a mosaic. Gilliam and his assistants refracted and rearranged colors and forms from the original painting into flat pieces. Changes in lighting cause the mural's depth, brilliance

LeGro, Tom and Stother, Annie, "In a Station of the Metro, an Apparition of Color From Sam Gilliam," PBS.org, August 18, 2011

and tone to shift from day to day.

The architectural quality of the original painting, and the movement implied by its muscular ripples and folds, are echoed by the materials of the new piece and its deference to environment and light.

The draped paintings spurred national interest in Gilliam, but they were part of a shift in the art world, emblematic of new ideas about color, the canvas and how artists might use them in challenging ways. The nation's capital was an important center for these conversations and experiments by the time Gilliam arrived in 1962, after the city's first generation of post-painterly abstractionists and Color Field painters had already become well-known in the art world. Gilliam befriended influential artists living and working in the city like Thomas Downing and Rockne Krebs, his work began to change, and he focused on "making it."

"The first thing I did if I sold a painting would be to go to a paint store and stock up," he says. "Always having materials to work with became the thing that catalyzed the work. Everybody was into transferring their thinking from oil paint to acrylic so that when you got together you talked paint, or you talked about how to make paint.

"The thinking about painting started with the idea of making the material, or using the material, and I think that these kinds of ideas enforced the way one worked, particularly with me."

Gilliam started to work directly on the floor, folding his canvases and experimenting with the paint. These were ways of "letting things happen naturally with the paint by handling it," he says. By taking his work off the frame, he could work directly into the space of the gallery. As he continued to pursue large-scale projects, many of them public art works, he started to incorporate metal and other architectural materials, among them aluminum and steel.

The light brings constant novelty to the new piece, encouraging frequent passersby to spot the way in which components of the image alternatively chafe and interact with one another. Various creases in the refracted painting repeat, and red, green and sapphire twist across a pale background of grays, whites, and muted blues and emerge or recede with the elements. Glass pieces flash and glitter when the sun is bright.

"Every time someone comes to the studio we offer them a trip to see the mural," Gilliam says. "That becomes our Eiffel Tower, in a sense. It becomes our present and a sort of monument to what we are doing."

Tresscott, Jacqueline, "Sam Gilliam: An ever-changing force," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2011

The Washington Post

Sam Gilliam: An ever-changing force

By Jacqueline Tresscott

Artist Sam Gilliam's signature strokes on draped cloths, towering panels and traditional canvases are part of our everyday lives, on display in museums as well as at libraries, banks and Reagan National Airport. For almost 50 years, Gilliam has been an ever-changing force in Washington's arts circles, even as his work and recognition have grown far beyond the city.



In 1967, Gilliam received his first solo show at the Phillips Collection, where he was saluted as an innovator in Washington's Color School, a movement in the '60s and '70s that produced bursts of color in geometric forms and fanciful shapes.

Gilliam's work is included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Gallery in London and the Moderne in Paris. The Corcoran Gallery of Art mounted a retrospective of his career in 2005.

This week, Gilliam, 77, returns to the Phillips, where as part of its 90th anniversary, he was asked to make a work to complement its elliptical stairway. The panels he created, between 10 and 8 feet long, are suspended on wire in a 24-by-24-foot well. They radiate with delicate and intense bursts of color. Some of the banners have cutouts of empty frames so views of each bold explosion are not blocked.

Dressed in jeans and a gray sweater, Gilliam talked about his inspiration as a crew hung the long panels.

"I'm calling the work 'Flour Mill.' I started thinking of the approach by studying one of the early abstract paintings I first saw here in Washington. Arthur Dove and his 'Flower Mill II' inspired the painting. Let's see, that's 1938. He used landscape as a way of connecting with painting. There's also a real connection

Trescott, Jacqueline, "Sam Gilliam: An ever-changing force," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2011

to Mondrian. The green relates to landscapes. Some of the areas connect more to water. That's something I wouldn't have said in the 1960s.

"I didn't look at the staircase and the space. I didn't want to worry about it. These panels are 10 feet tall. The material is nylon, and I used an acrylic paint. The acrylic has a wetting agent that stains the nylon, so the plastic on the table has the same pattern.

"In the studio, I hung them on a rod away from the wall. Now I have to arrange it to make it into a work. Now I'm going back to the studio because I think I need more - maybe two more panels. The next one is bronze and green because it needs some accents.

"The painting never closes in that sense."

The installation will be on view until April 24.

Wei, Lilly, "In Living Color," *Art in America*, April 2007, pp. 116-121

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW



Light Depth, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 10 by 75 feet (flat). Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Photo Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver.
Opposite, Green Slice, 1967, watercolor on paper, 38 by 23 inches. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. All photos this article courtesy Corcoran Gallery.



Living Color

In a 40-year retrospective currently in Houston, painter Sam Gilliam reveals a restless concern with freeing color from its familiar constraints.

BY LILLY WEI

A medley of large, rainbow-colored, tobacco-muslin balls, scrunched up like giant, bouffant flowers, were suspended at different heights above the stairwell that led to "Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective" at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville. Originating at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., this traveling exhibition is dedicated to 40 years of work by the Washington, D.C.-based abstract artist. Accompanied by an excellent catalogue with a thorough and insightful essay by Jonathan P. Binstock, the Corcoran's curator of contemporary art, it is now at its final destination, the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston. The most





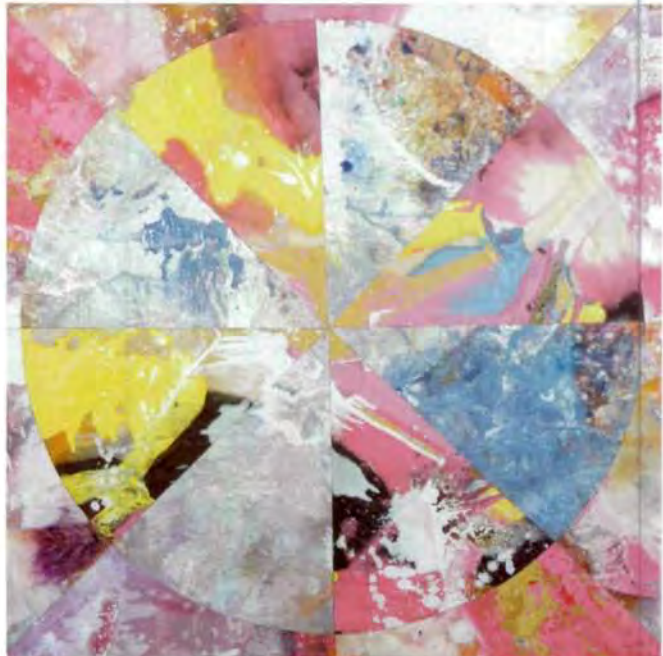
April 4, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 110 by 179½ inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

comprehensive exhibition to date of this prodigiously gifted and prolific talent, it includes more than 40 works, mostly large-scale paintings, mixed-medium constructions and installations, each typically standing in for a series of related pieces. The show's run at the Speed served as a welcome home for Gilliam, who, although born in Tupelo, Miss., in 1933 and a resident of Washington since 1962, was raised in Louisville and graduated from the University of Louisville with an MFA in 1961, spending 20 years of his early life there "waiting for things to start," he says, with a laugh.¹

Gilliam is best known for his draped or otherwise unconventionally suspended paintings, considered by many to be a major contribution to the history of American formalism. While other artists of the time stained and painted unsized, unstretched canvases—and Gilliam was certainly influenced by the works of Morris Louis, Ken Noland and others of the Washington Color School, as well as by the greater Color Field movement—no one else in the late '60s used canvas to create such grand, glowing environments of color, integrating actual space into the installation. Part painting, part sculpture, part architecture, these works were early examples of the cross-disciplinary, multi-medium hybridizations that became an increasingly familiar practice from the 1970s onward. Gilliam explains, in his wry, quietly self-deprecating way, "It was 1968, and I was making a very large painting at the

time—it was about 30 feet long—but a painting that large is rather difficult to sell and not particularly exciting to a dealer. So I thought I'd remove the stretchers."

These usually enormous swaths of cascading canvas, hung



For Day One, 1974-75, acrylic on canvas with collage, 49 inches square. Speed Art Museum, Louisville.

from walls and ceilings, sometimes painted in Day-Glo hues for psychedelic luster, dominate the exhibition. Soaked and stained with colors, both pale and vivid, from rosy to cool, the canvases were first painted, then shaped—gathered up at intervals and tied, for instance, into knobs. Often supported by ropes or hooks, the fabric could also be arranged into billowed folds over sawhorses stained or burnt to suit the painting, as in the baroquely exuberant *A and the Carpenter I* (1973) or *Softly Still* (1973), in which a blond wood sawhorse is adorned with flowing draperies, like a beautiful gown abandoned by some precipitate Cinderella, evidence of the figurative impulse that consistently underlies Gilliam's abstraction.

The draped works in the exhibition are mostly from 1968-73 except for one eye-catching, exceptionally modest-sized, rakishly angled drape, which was dipped in clear red, green and yellow

In *Double River* (1976) Gilliam cut off the left and right edges of the painting and placed them vertically in the center, resetting parameters.

varying lavishness, it extended the lengths of two adjacent walls at the Speed, rhythmically, stylishly, breaking free when turning the corner, then hugging the wall again for one more curved length. These works are site-specific and "negotiable," depending upon architectural constraints for their ultimate configuration. *Rondo* (1971) is another such piece, the canvas in this case held by ropes looped over a ceiling bar, then brought downward and tied around an oak beam leaning diagonally against the wall, appearing to be a tautly balanced system. "It's a fake," Gilliam explains. "It's not



Double River, 1976, acrylic on canvas with collage, 90 by 180 inches. Collection Don and Nancy Eiler/Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

paint shading into more ambiguous hues. Titled *All Cats are Gray at Night*, it is from 1996. Gilliam does not feel compelled to proceed in a linear manner but often circles back instead, returning to earlier solutions in order to find something new to consider, something he had previously missed. He circles but does not repeat, although his work always has an element of geometry; of the constructed and the improvisational; of playing with and adjusting color, tonality, scale, texture, shape—all the vocabulary of a formalist painter in love with process and materials—shadowed by the quasi-narrative element implicit in the piece's making.

The glamorous *Light Depth* (1969), another draped piece, measures 10 by 75 feet. A kind of soft sculptural relief with swags of

really counterweighted, but for me, the interesting thing is just to discover good relationships." "It's an easy language," he says, looking at the nearby *Bow Form Construction* (1968), a curved drape that resembled the huge grin of the Cheshire cat. "A child could easily do a pirouette because of this."

Gilliam, as an African-American artist, has throughout his career been criticized by some for not choosing race and identity as his subjects. However complicated his response to those issues may be, one thing seems clear: Gilliam's choices should be as unrestricted as those of any other artist of any ethnic background. He did make a series of paintings for Martin Luther King, Jr., including *April 4* in 1969, to commemorate the first anniversary of his assassination,



Rall, 1977, acrylic on canvas with collage, 90% by 181½ inches.
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

Right, Lion's Rock Arc, 1981, acrylic on canvas with collage, 3 panels,
72½ by 190½ inches overall. Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

and *Red April* (1970), but these are the exceptions and difficult to distinguish from his other abstractions. Nonetheless, both paintings are tethered to their subject by their titles. The blurred and scattered images evoke bullet holes and clots of blood, even as they evoke things seen through tears. The sadness and sense of failed hope are conveyed by a mournful, pale purple, the main color in *April 4*, and the painting's ambitious scale is emblematic of King's stature.

Gilliam has always been courteous but elusive on the subject of race and art, on the vexed, intricate ideologies of separatism. Often he pays homage to his heritage in subtle ways. His draped canvases; his foldings, soakings, stainings; his interest in textiles, collage, cutting and sewing; and his often improvised, serendipitous, handmade, labor-intensive projects are ultimately based on the folk traditions of handicraft, albeit filtered through more urbane esthetic systems. Even as a child, Gilliam was an inveterate maker, as was his entire family. In addition to being a painter, he is also a printmaker, a creator of public art, a set designer and a professor of art. Gilliam volunteers that he knows how to work with clothes, as we regard *Composed* (formerly *Dark as I Am*), 1968-74, a vertical assemblage consisting of government surplus overalls (his standard work uniform), artist's tools, a backpack, hammer, ladder and pole, all piled and compressed onto a wooden door. Densely splattered and soaked with paint, a long, dark streak running through it, the work is clearly a life-size self-portrait.



In Louisville, "Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective" was installed more or less chronologically and gave his signature draped paintings a context. The earliest works were from 1967, such as *Member*, part of the "Slice" series of paintings initiated by *Green Slice*, a watercolor that—with its use of folds and creases to create lines—marked an important breakthrough for Gilliam. In 1967, he renounced the hard-edged geometry of most of the other Washington Color School artists in favor of the fluidity of Morris Louis; it was also the time of his well-received exhibition at the Phillips Collection. In the retrospective, this grouping also includes the rhapsodic *In Seconds* (1968), characterized by a silvered, riverine light (created by aluminum powder mixed into the paint), as well as by tender hues and foldings and crumplings that provide an underlying geometrical structure of verticals and diagonals for the splash and flow of lyrical color. These paintings are also beveled at the edges and seem to hover away from the wall or to cleave tightly to it, depending upon which way the bevel is angled, one more indication of Gilliam's attention to the details of construction. For this, he has the instincts of a good architect or, more accurately, a good carpenter.

The mid-1970s are represented by *For Day One* (1974-75), *Baptistry Senior II* (1975) and other collaged paintings that are relatively modest in scale. Always experimenting, Gilliam made paintings that he then cut up and reassembled on other canvases. Although he didn't have a preconceived plan, a pie-sectioned or irregular circle was often the motif. By 1976, he had conceived the idea for the "White" paintings. *Double River* (1976), with its

A 1980 show of Russian Constructivist art at the Hirshhorn inspired Gilliam to create a series of shaped-panel paintings, stretched and puzzlelike.

allover, stubbled, white blizzard of a surface, fissured to reveal the many colors beneath, is one of the largest and most compelling of the group. It is also collaged; Gilliam cut off the left and right edges of the painting and placed the two resulting narrow strips in the center, bringing the outside in, resetting its parameters. The "White" paintings led to the "Black" paintings of the following year, a move prompted, no doubt, by inevitable associations centered on both identity and formal concerns, but one staking out no definitive stance. With their thick, raked surfaces that resemble buckled, cross-hatched asphalt embedded or cracked with shards of other colors, works such as *Firefly Blacktop* (1977) and *Rail* (1977) are some of the strongest paintings since the early draped works. In one room of the museum, four of these "Black" paintings and two "White" ones were installed. One white work is a slim vertical, the other a horizontal rectangle. These are two of the most delicate works in the show, their small, dainty strokes glowing with a gentle light.

The ruddy three-paneled *Lion's Rock Arc* (1981) and the black four-paneled *The Arc Maker I & II* (1981) belong to the "Red" and "Black" series, respectively—although, as always, there are



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.

O'Sullivan, Michael, "The Insightful Sam Gilliam," *The Washington Post*, October 21, 2005

The Washington Post

The Insightful Sam Gilliam

By Michael O'Sullivan

ARTISTS ARE NOT always the most articulate when it comes to talking about their own work. That's why they're artists, not writers. Still, Sam Gilliam said something pretty intriguing at the press preview for the Corcoran Gallery of Art's "Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective" the other day. Along with the Marsha Mateyka Gallery's "Sam Gilliam -- Sunlight: New Paintings," the exhibition celebrates the work of the longtime Washington-based painter, whose career, as both venues demonstrate, goes well beyond the draped, dropcloth-like unstretched canvases stained and spattered with paint that first brought him celebrity in the late 1960s and 1970s.



"All of the works remain on the floor," Gilliam said, seemingly apropos of nothing (since no one at that point had asked about his creative process) and with perhaps unintended irony (since one of the paintings, a piece commissioned by the Corcoran called "30,000 Knots," is suspended from the ceiling of the museum's rotunda).

"What do you take for lower back pain?" joked artist and critic William Dunlap, apparently taking Gilliam (who turns 72 next month) literally -- an easy thing to do considering the obvious debt at least some of his art owes to Jackson Pollock's drips and splotches. "Two weeks off," came the answer.

Ba-dum-bum.

This, however, was not the interesting part.

Gilliam went on to describe his process of collaging, folding, cutting and reassembling; of incorporating metal and other media; of switching back and forth among styles and series and materials with a kind of restlessness that belied his laconic delivery. "All the work is alive," he said.

All the work is alive.

It made me think of something I once heard by writer and documentary

O'Sullivan, Michael, "The Insightful Sam Gilliam," *The Washington Post*, October 21, 2005

film producer Paul Gardner, who said that a painting is never finished, it just stops in interesting places.

Looking back on Gilliam's work feels a bit like looking at a well-worn road map. There's a beginning. That would be the flat, intellectually severe, hard-edged geometric stuff of his early- to mid-1960s period, which he made shortly after moving to Washington from Louisville and taking up with the Washington Color School crowd. And there's an end. That would be the droopy billows of "30,000 Knots" (2005), which despite its full-speed-ahead nautical title, resembles, as much as anything, tie-dyed sails with the wind taken out of them; the sensuous, glazed color of his wooden puzzle-piece compositions known as "Slatts" (all from 2003); and the hinged plywood panel constructions of recent years, several of which are on view at Mateyka.

In between, as curator Jonathan Binstock says, "the middle is a little more complicated." For, if Gilliam has a hallmark, it is that he has never been content to keep making whatever it is that critics -- and collectors -- like.

In between the beginning and end points of the generally nonchronological Corcoran show, the artist can be seen moving forward and backward stylistically, dropping one thing, only to pick it up again years later. "30,000 Knots" -- whose title also plays on the number of times Gilliam and his studio assistant must have tied up various soft, swaglike drape pieces -- looks nothing like his "Slatts," whose candylike poured acrylic surfaces have an almost enameled coat. Nor do the "Slatts" look anything like the thickly impastoed, raked and decalcomania-ed surfaces of some of his 1970s paintings, which bear just as little resemblance to the deeply striated, rubbery texture of such works as 1989's "The Generation Below Them."

Still, even with fewer than 50 pieces, Binstock has placed enough dots on the map that you can connect one stop on Gilliam's crisscrossing journey to the next. If anything seems missing from the retrospective, though, it is a piece to rival the impact of "Baroque Cascade," a massive draped work originally hung overhead from the Corcoran's sky-lit atrium during Gilliam's first museum exhibition in 1969, and whose convention-busting eclat is still remembered today by those who were there to see it. (I

O'Sullivan, Michael, "The Insightful Sam Gilliam," *The Washington Post*, October 21, 2005

was just a lad and had parents who were more interested in dragging me to the Phillips Collection to see the "Luncheon of the Boating Party" for the umpteenth time.)

There are works in the Corcoran show that approach that grandeur. Like Jennifer Steinkamp's recently de-installed "Loop" computer animation, "30,000 Knots" makes great use of the Rotunda's architecture. Still, I can't help feeling that there's something small and sad about it, like a bouquet of partially deflated helium party balloons.

That sadness isn't necessarily a bad thing. Few of Gilliam's other works invite you to feel much of anything, with the possible exception of "April 4," a traditional stretched-canvas abstraction created on the one-year anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., and whose composition evokes dried blood on curtains.

Gilliam's work is, at least as far as the tightly edited Corcoran show is concerned, almost uniformly handsome. There can be felt, however, even in the frenzied and scarred surfaces of his so-called "Black" paintings, which roil with depths of color beneath tarry skins, a kind of reserve on the part of the artist. In a way, that cool, clinical detachment -- not so foreign after all when you consider Gilliam's early formalist work -- keeps viewers at arm's length, too. It's almost as if the artist, despite all the acclaim he has gotten and all the success he has achieved, has never really allowed himself the satisfaction of arriving -- or staying very long -- at any destination that matters.

Binstock, in the show's catalogue, describes Gilliam's career as "fluid," identifying as the artist's greatest asset his "willingness to lose everything in order to gain something else." I'm not sure that Gilliam, for whom artmaking seems to be more about the trip than the destination, would necessarily disagree. "The paintings were fun," he said at the preview, "because they were always getting somewhere."

"Not that we got it right," continued Gilliam a moment later, with a tone of almost wistful reminiscence, "but we got what we wanted."

Since the mid-1960s Sam Gilliam has effected one of the most powerful deconstructions of colour field art. Soon after moving to Washington, DC, where he encountered the work of the Washington Colour Painters Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Thomas Downing and Howard Mehring, among others, Gilliam began his enduring investigation of colour. His work quickly evolved and, by the late 1960s, he expanded upon pouring, staining and soaking techniques to include scrubbing, rubbing and mopping paint onto canvases that he would subsequently roll, fold and crumple. The painting became a thing rather than a surface, which the artist manipulated.

By fundamentally questioning the techniques of paint application, Gilliam also came to investigate the framing properties of the artwork. He dispensed with the stretcher and the received notion of the painting as rectangular and began to drape or suspend his canvases, allowing them to occupy space. Viewers were required to walk around and under his work in order to explore properties of colour, light, depth, volume and form.

Cloud Kilimanjaro is indicative of Gilliam's subverting of the parameters of modern painting. Affixed directly to the wall with a single nail, the canvas hangs limp, cascading downward like a deflated memory of prior authority. By giving the work an evocative title, Gilliam rhymes the shape of his canvas with the African mountain. Such descriptive reference infects a strictly formalist reading of the work with landscape connotations. Such willingness to embrace a range of possibility indicates Gilliam's quest to explore his own intellectual, cultural and aesthetic interests, rather than conform to strictures of a single direction. Gilliam's work skirts the periphery of the colour field movement, critiquing it from within in order to heighten awareness of its parameters and ultimate limitations. By simultaneously embracing yet contesting the grandeur of colour field art, Gilliam charts new territory, which he continues to explore today, unfurling a discourse in painting that shuttles between two and three dimensions.

DAVID MOOS

SAM GILLIAM

American, born 1933

Cloud Kilimanjaro, 1970

Acrylic on canvas
165,1 x 165,1 x 40,6 cm
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, gift of Dorothy Butler
Gilliam in memory of her parents, Adele Conklin
Butler and Jessie Norment Butler
© 2005 Sam Gilliam

Moos, David, "Sam Gilliam," *The Shape of Color*, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2005, pp. 78-79



Gilliam, Sam, excerpts from, "The Transformation of Nature Through Nature," *Theories and documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, edited by Kristen Stiles and Peter Selz, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 727-729

SAM GILLIAM The Transformation of Nature through Nature (1986)

Graduates, Mr. President, teachers, proud parents, and other guests: Ever since I was asked by Bob to address this illustrious group, I have been filled with a certain sense of pride and anxiety. One, I have finally made it to Tennessee, and, secondly, there is nothing more responsible than speaking to a group of artists who are about to embark on their maiden voyage in a great occupation. I have sat in many audiences where one has bemoaned the artist. Thus, I have come to praise the role he plays as a transformer of nature. I have also come to challenge the process of that transformation to greater heights.

Robert Henri, in his book *The Art Spirit*, a collection of lessons and orations given to his students, encouraged them to "Keep your old work. You did it. There are virtues and there are faults in it. You can learn more from yourself than you can from anyone else." I have always used this quotation to my students and particularly to the group of students I have taught the past two years in a seminar course on survival. I like its meaning in that it proposes that the work that you have done is a treasure chest that should be savored. The work that you have done is much like a knapsack of your anticipated belongings. The work that you have done is also a crystal and when held up to the sun will radiate the aspirations of the whole of society whom it is your intention to serve.

Let's look at the artist in this way. They tell me that once upon a time in a very mythical land that was filled with small huts there existed a huge volcano. It had an amazing fire that came from within it. This was such a great fire that it kept the valley warm, lighted and always with pleasant weather. What was not known was that behind the volcano was a team of little people armed with bellows and logs fanning the fire and making it blaze higher. These little people formed a long lineage. I will name only a few: Rembrandt, Leonardo, Monet, Van Gogh, Eva Hesse, Cézanne, Pollock, Avery and many others. And now you have been called to join that team. For the illusions, the spaces, the forms that you create will keep your fellow persons warm, lighted and always in good weather.

* Sam Gilliam, excerpts from "The Transformation of Nature through Nature," commencement address, Memphis College of Art, May 1986. By permission of the author.

Gilliam, Sam, excerpts from, "The Transformation of Nature Through Nature," *Theories and documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, edited by Kristen Stiles and Peter Selz, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 727-729



Sam Gilliam, c. 1978. Photo
© Paul Feinberg. Courtesy of
the artist and the photographer.

I am reminded of a statement that was made to my class when we graduated from the University of Louisville in the 1960s. We had been blessed by having a very great teacher who had taught at the Bavarian Academy in Germany. Unfortunately, he had been captured and placed in a concentration camp as an artist during WWII. He mentioned to us how he had run and hidden in order to keep his life. He also mentioned how in appreciation to whatever being that kept him alive, he drew every day while on the run. He said his reasons for drawing were to keep his memories of life alive. He pointed out that even when captured and placed in prison, he made art in his head to keep his sanity. And how upon repatriation, he afforded himself a trip around the world, mostly to check out if things were still the same and when he was assured that things were, he went back to making his art.

However, this time he resumed his art with things from Japan, India, Greece, etc., in a crazy quilt way. He also said that one of the things that entered his work was the figure of a Centaur and that this symbolized for him the mythical aspect of being the artist. Hence, among Greece, Italy, India there stands the mighty Centaur. The most special thing that I remember from this period of my life was that he suggested, "Keep on working. For in the work you not only see, but you also help others to see."

He said during this time he had one complaint. That in Munich where he had taught, he had taught many students who had great talent. However, when he visited them, many had gone on to become teachers of art. And, of course, they readily showed him the work of their students. And when he asked for their own work, they said they had stopped. This, young graduates, shocked the old man and hurt him. He said, "You, by stopping your art, have erased the Centaur from the work. You have allowed the fire to go out." An artist must stay an artist. For without the artist in him, he cannot see and others cannot see through him. . . .

It is said that at this time in 1986 there is a lull in art, that the thing that was sought in Post WWII years by many immigrants coming here has been lost. It is said that even the sense of this land as honored by the Hudson River School is lost from American art. What has come to replace this great inheritance is known as rampant commercialism and production. It is suggested that there is not a transcendence between the public and the art, that only a special group counts. It sounds like Sodom and Gomorrah reigns in this mythical land with the gigantic volcano.

Many of us have come to recognize the absence of the Centaur, the lowering of the light. But do we recognize, more specifically, the possibility of losing the nature of humanity in this way? Do we realize that there is a need for the artist to act as an artist? Where does this come from?

Gilliam, Sam, excerpts from, "The Transformation of Nature Through Nature," *Theories and documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, edited by Kristen Stiles and Peter Selz, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 727-729

I guess the most immediate answer is contained in something I have already expressed earlier in this speech. That is of the professor who even though on the run, made drawings, who even though imprisoned, kept art alive in his head and who upon release went around the world to make sure that the world was still there, who created the mighty Centaur as a symbol of himself, as an artist to remind himself that the artist was still there.

Picasso in his series about the artist and the model keeps himself there. Rembrandt in his self-portrait keeps his presence in art. My teacher chided his students for not keeping themselves present as artists before their students. Now, I challenge you that the most important thing you must do is to keep the artist present in you, keep the artist present in your work, to use the artist in you to secure you on the nights when you have to run and hide, to keep the artist in your presence and mind in times when you are hostage to situations, difficulties, like bad grades, and keep the artist in you even though you cannot work as an artist. You are coming aboard the Grand Armada. You have first watch. The nature of nature is your quest. It is the only way that the valley can be warm. It is the only way that the valley can be lighted and it is the only way that the valley can have good weather.

I have not been around the world as my teacher had, but I have found a clever way to climb aboard the Grand Armada and to experience the world. It is something I figured out in 1962 when I first came to Washington. I realized that in any day I had four hours I could go to the National Gallery and walk the entire gallery which extends some two blocks and look at paintings, allowing trails of man's existence to criss-cross and interface in various beautiful rhythms. In four hours one can see all of the paintings in the National Gallery. I remember that one: "In order to see a painting, one must be a painting." Thus, having remembered this, I know that the nature of man as defined by art is in me. Secondly, in many hours alone in a studio I have often thought about such trips. . . .

Thus, I want to say to you, as the artist, you are nature. I must say that you as the artist must always make new work. You as the artist must keep the Centaur present. You as the artist must keep the fire blazing.

It is the hope of the world. More importantly, it is the hope of America; it is the hope of Tennessee. It is the hope of each individual that we are immediate to.

We are, as was Georgia O'Keeffe, or as are Louise Nevelson, Frank Stella, and many among you, avatars, all of whom, including you, have chosen to transform the sense of nature through yourselves for others.

Let me end as I have begun. "Keep your old work. You did it. There are virtues and there are faults in it for you to study. You can learn more from yourself than you can from anyone else."

Represent the Centaur. Stock the volcano. Good luck. God bless you all.
Hello and Good-bye to you all.

art journal

Solids and Veils

SAM GILLIAM, WITH ANNIE GAWLAK

My work consists of solids and veils: the union of solids, or metal forms, seen as volumes against a raked and grooved paint surface. It is constructed painting, in that it crosses the void between object and viewer, to be part of the space in front of the picture plane. It represents an act of pure passage. The surface is no longer the final plane of the work. It is instead the beginning of an advance into the theater of life.

I have been holding court with all of painting. I saw that this notion of passage existed for Rembrandt as well as for Braque. I found lots of clues on how to go about working from Tatlin, Stella, Hofmann, Braque, Picasso, and Cézanne. Their work is an edict suggesting a system for working in relief and, more specifically, for defining the painting in terms of the result of constructed relationships or as an object.

My painting is based on the fact that the framework of the painting is in real space. I am attracted to its power and the way it functions.

The first works to exploit this space were the gravity-formed or suspended paintings. They consisted of paint poured directly onto raw canvas and exhibited in a way consistent with the manner in which they were made. They were painted on the floor and in part suspended from the ceiling. It became unnecessary to force the convoluted canvas back into the single plane and flat surface of the stretcher. The liquidity of the colors was reinforced by the fluidity of the canvas. Paint and surface took on an added, third-dimensional reality. Now the canvas was not only the means to, but a primary part of, the object. The suspended

paintings began by celebrating the working process and ended with the involvement of the wall, the floor, and the ceiling. The year 1968 was one of revelation and determination—something was in the air, and it was in that spirit that I did the drape paintings.

In retrospect, I can see that these canvases reflect certain tendencies in the art of the time. Many artists were searching for ways to shape a work so that its overall configuration was a result of the process.

In 1970 I wanted to return to painting on stretched canvas and did so with a textural and painterly pastiche that included virtually all methods of handling paint. During the mid-seventies this work took a more dimensional direction. I invented a beveled stretcher with the forward edges chamfered, resulting in a frame made by canvas that extended beyond the painting itself, increasing its dimensions. Subsequently, these stretchers gave the paintings a slablike concreteness consistent with the heavier painting I was making then. The beveled stretchers enabled me to be as free within the confines of the object's geometry as I felt I had to be.

My work with suspended canvas has undoubtedly led to my being chosen several times to work in the public forum, beginning in the late seventies and extending to the present. These works in turn have expanded my vocabulary of materials to include those of sculpture. A piece for Art Park in the summer of 1977 moved far from the aesthetic of my indoor paintings. In the earth, on top of the earth, through a gorge, constructions of fabric, wood shale, and pigment, cut in simple sections, rose out of the ground. Custom Road Slide was a series of some fourteen "sculptural placements" on the side of a roadway along the Niagara River for some three hundred yards. The strong, luminous areas of uniform color contrasted starkly with the subtly modulated and muted earth tones of the surrounding landscape.

Sculpture with a D, a work installed inside the Davis Square subway station in Somerville, Massachusetts, was commissioned by the Boston Mass Transit Authority in 1981. It is an example of direct conversion of the ideas behind the draped paintings into a more formal material—metal. This piece, made entirely of aluminum, is reminiscent of Cubism and Constructivism, and with it came a new way of working. The piece projects out from the wall, from metal armatures attached to the back of each panel. The work is guided by the sense of painting on the surface.

The following year, 1982, marked the inauguration of my work with constructed painting. In the Vertical D paintings, a metal D-shaped piece was added to a wedge-shaped niche in the lower right of each painting. The aluminum shape was painted with enamel, and as I looked at it I noticed that the little D formed a diptych with the painting and called attention to the edge. I realized that this was an opportunity to construct the painting not only within the confines of the canvas but, in apposition, farther along the plane of the wall.

Since 1968 I had been involved in a workshop situation

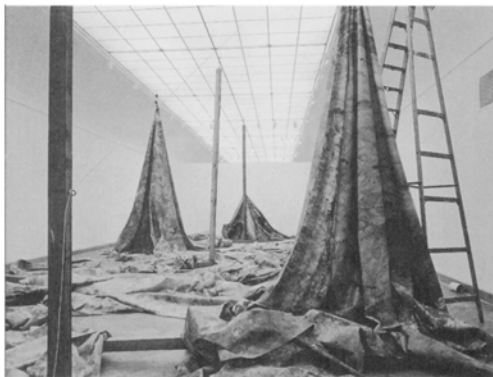


FIG. 1 Sam Gilliam, *Autumn Surf*, installation, 1973, acrylic and aniline dye on polypropylene, 15 x 450 feet. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

that included both sculpture and painting, sponsored by the Washington Gallery of Modern Art. There, the other workshop members and I got in trouble when we repeated that, according to David Smith, there was no essential difference between painting and sculpture. In spite of the truth of the statement, there was a prevailing dictum to the contrary.

I was fortunate in 1985 to see a number of paintings by Murillo, and it struck me as curious that the sense of perspective in them was reversed from that of most perspective schemes. The movement, rather than receding into the depths, advances to the viewer. Through Murillo, I was able to discover the feel of volumes added to the surface of the picture.

I retained the use of metal pieces on the periphery of subsequent paintings to make up one part of a diptych, or to relate as a frame. I explored variations on this apposition in expressive ways in 1984, culminating in the State series of

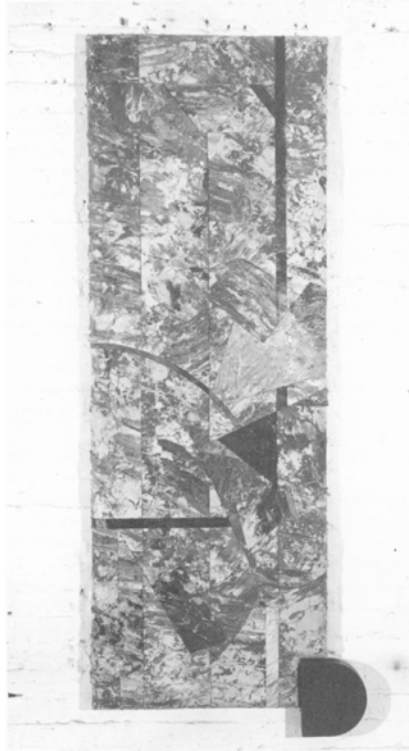


FIG. 2 Sam Gilliam, *Vertical D*, 1982, acrylic on canvas and enamel on aluminum, 73 x 29 x 3 inches. Private collection. Courtesy the artist.



FIG. 3 Sam Gilliam, *Waking Up*, 1989, acrylic on canvas, acrylic and enamel on aluminum, 72 x 95 x 12½ inches. Hallmark Card Corporation, Kansas City.

1985. These paintings are triptychs with a lot of movement at the edges, which suggests transparent interactions of shape. The pieces work in a circular manner. They work with an explosion of moments as holistic object.

Later paintings continued to use the metal elements, placed in even, circular configurations, but always on the edges, until 1988, when the metal pieces protruded from the surface of the painting. At this time I felt a need to compose from the center and not just from the edge, and I allowed the metal to move in front of the canvas.

More recently, in 1989, the use of color and the process of moving paint across the surface limited the movement into space by creating a tension that drew the eye back into the canvas. All of the elements are tuned proportionally to command the viewer's attention.

The use of the circle was a resolving element in the paintings of the last year and a symbolic one as well, to some degree, suggestive of a sphere. The paintings take their titles from the maturation rites practiced by the Masai: *Waking Up* is a metaphor for growth and development in the world.

The mystery is over; in the paintings of 1990, the works are in full relief and maintain high sculptural content. The work is presented as a sculpted or faceted object in space. They have been constructed to extend the feeling of the draped paintings of 1969. They are objects that abstractly embrace the content of painting and sculpture through solids and veils.

Note

This article is based on interviews of Sam Gilliam by Annie Gawlak in the fall of 1989 and 1990 and on a catalogue essay by Jay Kloner, "Indoor Paintings," in *Sam Gilliam: Indoor and Outdoor Painting 1967-1978*, University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1978.

SAM GILLIAM is an artist living in Washington, D.C. Until June 1989 he was professor of painting at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh.

ANNIE GAWLAK is director of McIntosh/Drysdale Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Driskell, David C., "Sam Gilliam," *Contemporary Visual Expressions: The Art of Sam Gilliam, Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Keith Morrison, William T. Williams*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987, pp. 22-28

Sam Gilliam



Figure 7. Sam Gilliam

I am continually amazed to read the rave reviews on exhibitions of Sam Gilliam's work and find that there is only casual reference to the fact that he is Black—a Black artist in whose veins the creative blood of Africa still flows. America's obsession with race, as well as the negative connotation that mere mention of the word "black" conjures up, is unsettling. Who could, for that matter miss the strength and beauty of Gilliam's Blackness? Is it really as invisible as Ralph Ellison wrote? Physically, I think not. Majestic in appearance and nobly fitting the classic description of an Oba, Gilliam's six-feet three-inch frame is as telling about who he is as is his art. I marvel not at the fact of quality a Black man is able to bring to abstract painting, but at the notion that so few people see these handsome works of art for what they really are: visual expressions equivalent to jazz, blues, gospel, and all of the highly improvisational forms with which Black Americans have richly rewarded the artistic sensibilities of millions in the Western world.

So Gilliam is in many ways a bluesman. He is a farmer of the untilled "bottoms" of rich sonorous soil refined and polished to visual perfection. His art sings the blues that were blue before Picasso knew that African art contained a blues formula, or even before the Cubist and modernist experimenters bothered to examine the shrines of Gilliam's African

ancestors, and once having been informed, then "invented" assemblages and installations. So I caution the viewer; "do not go gently into that good night" of Gilliam's artistic statement hoping to find only a second-generation Washington Color Painter or an abstractionist preoccupied with Euclidian geometry and expressionist and neo-plastic patterns. There is in the words of the untutored bluesman "more to be seen there than what meets the eye" in Gilliam's art. Here one sees the raw account of impromptu inventiveness associated with change and the physical reaction one makes of it in the visual world.

Gilliam, who was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1935, has consciously moved his art along the dusty roads of the South, following the flow of rivers that meet and move on. In 1951 he ventured north to Louisville, Kentucky, where he studied art in what was one of the first places in the South where Blacks and whites mingled together peacefully in the studios of able painters at the University of Louisville.

A decade later, in 1961, Gilliam brought to Washington, D.C., a sound background in figure painting, a style he would adhere to until around 1965. Even then, Gilliam showed a recognized sophistication of artistry with which the average painter would have felt comfortable. Not so for Gilliam. He looked within himself, consulted often with the "Black Heads of State" in Washington art—namely, James V. Herring, James A. Porter, and Alma Thomas—at the same time building a lasting alliance with members of the Washington Color Painters for dialogue and support. While it is true that Gilliam absorbed the magic of the colorist formula and found his work modestly informed by it, nevertheless, his sensitive look to the future saw beyond the liquid, flowing, and often circular motifs color painting offered. Gilliam kept in reserve many sources on which he could draw for inspiration. His own childhood experiences of grow-



Figure 8. Professor James A. Porter. Courtesy Dr. Dorothy Porter-Wesley.

ing up in racially segregated Mississippi offered an untapped source for seeing the raw core of Black Southern life. Professor Ulfert Wilkie had exposed him to the best of Black African sculpture in his teachings at the University of Louisville, and in Washington, Gilliam for the first time settled into the company of professional Black artists who took their calling in art seriously. His work was less aligned with the art of Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis than with that of Afro-American artists Mel Edwards, William T. Williams, Joe Overstreet, and Al Loving, some of whom had relied heavily on the improvisational character of African textiles as well as the encrusted surfaces of African sculpture to inform their art. The innovative process which Gilliam brought to painting in the early 1960s—that of freeing the canvas of stretchers and allowing

it to become a free-flowing draped-like sculpture—is closely linked to his keen observation of African textiles. Working a few years ahead of Christo, whose unconventional wrappings caught the critical eye of the nation, Gilliam created canvases that should be credited as being among the major innovations to have occurred in modern painting.

As a student under Morris Louis's tutelage at Howard University in the early 1950s, I vividly recall Louis standing by quietly, giving a wide word of approval for every nonobjective stroke I placed on the canvas. He never pointed me to sources and references for my journey into the nonfigurative world beyond the studio. He exuded the kindness of a gentle man, delighted with the notion that his approach to the teaching of painting had fallen on welcoming ears. Just as I had, Gilliam himself greatly admired Noland's and Louis's willingness to work with young Black artists, but he was also acutely aware that these colorist masters had been graciously helped along the way to fame by the Barnett Aden Gallery, Washington's most important Black gallery of the century.

Gilliam's sources are self-evident. His wellspring of forms is inspired by the mythology of African art, abstractly rendered in a way that manifests itself in the rugged and often raked surfaces of his paintings. Diatonic patterns of color shimmer, as in ghostly appearances, on and off surfaces that are often red-hot from a saturation of cadmium reds, warm pinks, and cobalt violets in an orchestration that can only be described as Black. If you do not believe my chauvinistic claim to Gilliam's color choices as Black—then go to Harlem and walk casually up 125th Street between 5th and Lenox avenues, and observe with care, the clothing and body language of the people. Or in Northwest Washington, go to 7th and T streets or 14th and U streets near Gilliam's studio, and watch the myriad display of colors worn by people who are confident of

their aesthetic taste without societal approval. The results will be the same: a personalized mixing of color combinations knowing no age limitations nor color compromise. These color sources from the ordinary people in the Black community have inspired Black artists in other communities such as Chicago where the AfriCobra artists worked.

But color is not all that Gilliam's art is about. His art annexes ancestral forms such as the tie-dye process of African textiles and the roughly textured surfaces found in the encrusted figure sculptures, mislabeled African fetishes, signaling well-planned color coordinates and responses. The mildly hot or cool jazz tonality that is coded in chromatic stages in Gilliam's work is complimentary to the structural way he paints: he cuts apart and pieces together as though he were building an architectural edifice. The crescendo of color culminates in the drama these works present. Colors explode over large surfaces like fireworks, reminiscent of a celebration of an emotional ending, based on events remembered.

Indeed, many such events and incidents have made a lasting impression on the artist and his treatment of form. The drama and energy centering around the death of Black civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968 deeply affected Gilliam. Immediately thereafter, he created a series of paintings that provided a new direction in his work. These paintings move away from the sculptural and more Gothic—horizontal forms that were often draped and unstretched canvases—to a more static and conventionally spatial idea. Some of the works of that period seem to lay bare a soulful response which builds upon emotion, psychological quietude, and tranquility of mind. *A Warmth, A Lightness, A Glow and Then*, 1969, is a canvas from this period, 9 feet high and 25 feet long (figure 9). Moving in four parts from a small format to a larger one in each unit is a decided characteristic of Gilliam's work of this period.

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The historical fact of Dr. King's death brought home to Gilliam more than anything else that he was a Black artist, shut out from the inner circle of things, so to speak. He would have to earn his stripes in a most convincing way if ever his art was to take its rightful place in American culture. Not only did he discover that he was an outsider to the white art establishment but also that he was two times removed from the center of things by being a Black abstract artist. He had to ask himself the serious question, What does one do under these circumstances? Does one stop painting, or wait for acceptance? His immediate response was an emphatic NO! One moves on, as stated in the Negro hymn:

*... there is a balm in Gilead,
to make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead,
to soothe the sin sick soul.*

The answer came in knowing that an important resource in the Black community had not been tapped. Gilliam, along with sculptor Mel Edwards and Bill Williams, neither of whom turned directly to figural or racial idioms as salient features of their work in the 1960s, began organizing their own exhibitions. They met from time to time in each others' studios, first in New York City, then in Washington, D.C., at College Art Association meetings in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, where they aired their concerns with other Black artists across the nation. They began by organizing shows at Black galleries, colleges, and universities—Morgan State, Howard and Fisk universities, and The Studio

Figure 9. Sam Gilliam, *A Warmth, A Lightness, A Glow and Then*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 9' x 25'.
Courtesy of the artist.



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Museum in Harlem among many. Their art was received enthusiastically by Black viewers. The idea paid off. Soon large public and private institutions such as the Wadsworth Atheneum, the Albany Institute of Art, and other well-known mainstream institutions requested exhibitions of their work. These artists would be the first to admit that their goal was not simply to show their work in white museums, but to provide a way of getting works before a larger public, always a paramount goal of the artist.

In many ways, this small group of artists, strengthened by the support of Richard Hunt, John Dowell, and others of their generation, was reviving an important tradition that had existed among Black artists of the Harlem Renaissance and their immediate predecessors who too had few places to show their work. They were moving forward in the spirit of those pioneering souls such as James V. Herring of Howard University Department of Art and Alonzo J. Aden, director of the Barnett Aden Gallery. Aden also founded the College Art Service in 1943 in Washington, D.C. to promote the exhibition of works by Black artists. The College Art Service had received assistance from the Carnegie Foundation, the Harmon Foundation, and the College Art Association of America in its enlightened endeavor to promote what was then called Negro Art. This historical lineage was fresh in their minds.

Gilliam had the good fortune to live in Washington, D.C., at the right historical moment. He often conferred with James V. Herring about plans for his art and that of his fellow artists. Herring was forthright in advising Gilliam to "strive to engineer his own life" and not be wholly dependent upon the will of others. Herring emphasized the need for certain archival institutions where Black artists could see their own work in relation to the work of other Black masters such as Robert S. Duncanson, Henry O. Tanner, and Aaron

Douglas. "Record keeping," he advised, "was as much the responsibility of the artists as that of the archivist." This, Herring advised, ascertained for the record "a Black point of view" and assured accurate record keeping.

In seeing the many dimensions of the man, one realizes how important it was that Sam Gilliam did not come to the Washington art scene neatly packaged and ready to be absorbed into the system as a token Black artist. Yet, after all, doesn't each city have one? And will they even permit more than one at a time and in one place? This kind of parochial thinking did not hinder Gilliam. He is a man of his own calling, and, more specifically, he is a man of his own making. He has helped to chronicle his own achievements by moving at the pace of one step at a time. He fought in places where the battle is not given over to swiftness or strength but to knowing and making significant creative forms. He learned to endure the insults of mediocrity which often come from those less creatively embodied and grossly misinformed about his creative accomplishments. Although he looms high as the most innovative painter, the very best that Washington has to offer, Gilliam is still regarded by the mainstream art establishment as a "black artist," or someone to be avoided. A "black artist," in establishment terms, means, a person, "not one of us," to whom white institutions owe nothing other than an occasional glance.

While I do not wish to dwell upon the overspent subject of what is a Black artist, in defining Gilliam's contribution to *Contemporary Visual Expressions*, indeed, one does confirm that he is a Black artist or, more importantly, a Black person whose artistic sources are informed by his own psyche and play a vital role in his own artistry. He is not just "an artist who happens to be Black." And I would hasten to say that figural imagery has little to do with my thesis here. Instead, it is the state of being,

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Figure 10. Sam Gilliam, *Helix Composition*, 1982, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 180". Courtesy of the artist.

of knowing and doing that plants Gilliam firmly into a Black heritable posture. He knows by action and deed that he remains on the outside of majority culture.

Perhaps more than anything else, Gilliam has immeasurably gained his ends by having to be hard-nosed in his approach to art. He may have taken blows that came from society but he has turned these experiences into positive sources on which to draw. And in drawing from these sources, the artist often graphically makes and remakes a canvas by placing geometrically-charged pieces of a painting out of range of its original space. This jazzlike process of creating the harmony and tonality of a given work by rearranging Euclidian shapes out of sync with each other has come to be looked upon as a special invention of this artist. It works well as process and statement for Gilliam. As process, it shows the direct work of his own hands, manipulating surfaces and establishing for purposes of contrast, those spatial relations that metaphorically and symbiotically carry the weight of a colorful idea. As statement there are the solid interaction and interplay of forms that take place in this exchange process. The cutaway spaces from a square shape, the addition of a metal piece, as occurs in the *D* paintings series and in *Helix Composition*, are a vital part of the process



Figure 11. The artist's work boots

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that Gilliam uses to ensure drama and formal movement in a work of art (figure 10). The drama of these works, in an attempt to get the viewer from one plane to another in the composition, goes hand-in-hand with the act of establishing a sound regard for design and spatial purpose with a given subject.

In describing how he moves forms on and off the canvas, for example, from the floor to a wall, Gilliam concisely states the importance of texture in his painting. He further explains how his painting has, over the years, vacillated between a two-dimensional format and a sculptural presence (*Saga*, plate 1). He explores the importance of color, texture, and pattern in these works for reasons that add to their import as major modernist statements, but also "... because that was the fabric of Africa that we dreamt and recreated." This statement has specific bearing on how Gilliam sees himself following in the tradition of older Black American artists such as Augusta Savage, Aaron Douglas, Hale Woodruff, Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden, all of whom inspired his generation. He notes that these artists did not have to force abstraction into

their work: "It had always been there." Like Alain Locke, Gilliam recognized these artists as the rightful inheritors of the African continuum in America.

Sam Gilliam speaks of a seasoned cast of younger artists, of and nearing his own generation, in the Washington area, who have been part of that community of Black artists he had longed to meet in Louisville before he arrived in the nation's capital. He observed that such artists as Lou Stovall, Bill Taylor, Sylvia Snowden, Leo Robinson, Lloyd McNeil, Yvonne Pickering Carter, Kenneth Young, and Carroll Sockwell are among those who know the Washington art scene for the good and bad things it has to offer. Certainly, for years they have been among the ranks of those who have struggled to keep their art alive in a community where support is not always forthcoming. Gilliam remains in the ranks of his peers a creative artist of great skill. But he is also highly regarded as a person who uses his art to reach out to help others. Many young emerging artists will attest to his generosity in this regard as will his artist colleagues in *Contemporary Visual Expressions*.

SAM GILLIAM: Journey Toward Red, Black and "D"

In 1967, the Phillips Collection honored Sam Gilliam with his first solo museum exhibition. The painting, *Red Petals*, 1967, which the Phillips Collection acquired from that show, is a large (224 x 236 cm.), awesome piece. Intense, bleeding red stains and dark, almost black blue, brushed at the outskirts, define the image of an oversized flower. Like Van Gogh's tortuous yellow bouquet, *Red Petals* appropriates color and the natural world for the artist's own symbolic purposes. Red, a color of unsettling emotional power, becomes even more visceral set against the dark blue-black vortex of color at the painting's center.

Gilliam's process, color poured directly onto a canvas which has been draped—color, sponged, daubed, manipulated into the canvas—lends an immediacy to the works of this period. As one Washington critic observed of the paintings in the Phillips' show, this process allowed Gilliam to maintain a precarious balance between discipline and reckless improvisation. The tensions in Gilliam's work, between order and chaos, between the intimate delicacy of a flower petal and the overwhelmingly large arena of the canvas, build up like electric charges and are aptly summarized by the chromatic tensions of red and black.

Almost fifteen years later, Sam Gilliam would return to the dialectic between red and black, this time not within a single painting but among individual paintings which he could assemble in a variety of configurations depending upon the space available. The Studio Museum in Harlem has brought together a group of these red and black paintings for its current exhibition, along with a selection from Gilliam's "D" series. Though not the thin stained surface of his early abstractions, these most recent red and black counterpoints are no less expressionistic. Gilliam first showed them, in 1981, at the Nexus Gallery in Atlanta. The large, shaped canvases, encrusted with layer upon layer of color, are a kind of two-dimensional improvised architecture. With each new installation, Gilliam imparts new life to his ensemble. Always, though, the basic tension between the red—a red that is

deliberately raw and eviscerated—and black—a dense celestial black, streaked with arcs of pale green and red light—is the focus of the paintings' metaphorical content. How did Gilliam come to these monumental red and black paintings?

Gilliam's journey from flat, stained painting to a shaped canvas, thick with impasto, has been what he refers to as a series of revelations. In the fifteen years following the Phillips exhibition, Gilliam's revelations have moved his art in an extraordinary number of directions. Autobiography, history, and contemporary events weave their way in and out of canvases that were draped and hung in monumental billows in the late 1960's, twisted over landscapes out of doors during the 1970's, or unfurled from buildings or strung across trees, while, at the same time, his interior paintings were drawn taut over bevelled edges or constructed, assembled, crumpled or collaged. Gilliam has characterized his restless pursuit of a language as the pursuit of a hunter tracking his prey, stalking it doggedly until he has it irrevocably entrapped. From time to time in his career, he has captured it, taken hold of what he has pursued, and when that happens—as it does in this remarkable ensemble of red and black paintings—the works speak with a force and clarity rare in abstract painting. They bear within them not only Gilliam's fifteen years of development since his first museum show, but also a complex set of motivations, social as well as aesthetic. Too often, though, Gilliam has been interpreted only in terms of his aesthetics.

During this fertile fifteen-year period, Gilliam, as his bibliography attests, received a generous share of critical attention. His dense multidirectional growth was more often than not imprisoned in a language of art historical formalism. One critic after another repeated like rote the minimal details of his biography and the development of his art in terms of its relationship to post-World War II Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. The standard interpretation is as follows: Sam Gilliam was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1933. He grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, where he received a B.A., in 1955, from the University of Louisville and after serving in the United States Army from 1956-1958, an M.A., in 1961, from the University of Louisville. In 1962, he left

Louisville and came to Washington, where Morris Louis, who died shortly after Gilliam arrived, and Kenneth Noland had established an approach or, better yet, an attitude towards abstract painting known as the Washington Color School. Critically sustained by Clement Greenberg's neo-Kantian belief that painting strives towards purity, towards relieving itself of any literal subject matter, the Color School artists became a major direction within the second generation of Abstract Expressionists. By the mid-1960's, Gilliam had adopted the major technical innovation of the Color School artists: that of pouring paint directly onto unstretched, raw canvas. In these early years in Washington, Gilliam was drawn to the paintings of Mark Rothko in the Phillips Collection, quietly reverential pieces with the luminous quality of stained glass windows. When he went to New York, he sought out Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, a masterpiece of minimalist abstraction. In Washington, he came under the direct influence of the abstract painters Tom Downing and Howard Mehring. By the time of his one-man exhibition at the Phillips Collection, though Gilliam was steeped in the traditions of post-World War II abstraction, he was heralded, by Paul Richard of the *Washington Post*, as a painter "who works in the tradition of the earlier color painters, but does so with unparalleled originality and skill." A figurative painter when he first arrived in Washington, Gilliam became an ardent student of the Abstract Expressionist traditions. By his account, he read every book on Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland and took every opportunity to look at their works. Not only the Washington Color School, but the precursor, Hans Hofmann, and the inaugurator of Abstract Expressionism, Jackson Pollock, were the subjects of Gilliam's early analyses. In fact, Gilliam's protean development permitted him to absorb an enormous range of abstract vocabularies. His use of these traditions also has made him accessible and comprehensible to modernist critics and they have discussed him interminably in formalist terms. The most perceptive, however, acknowledged that there were motives, other than aesthetic, that compelled his restless pursuit of formal processes. To understand how Gilliam arrived at the red and black paintings, it is necessary to trace the progression of his expressive

vocabulary. It is a progression that has moved sometimes in slow, evolutionary turns, sometimes in dramatic, breathtaking leaps.

To commemorate the first anniversary of The Reverend Martin Luther King's death, Gilliam painted *April 4*, 1969, a stained painting that hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. As was the case with *Red Petals*, *April 4*, makes use of a dialectic between shades of red and shades of black. Almost by accident, however, Gilliam varied the staining process; the result was startling. After painting on a sheet, wet with water tension breaker, he folded the canvas and left it to dry overnight. When he opened the canvas the next day, he found that the weight of the folds had replicated the tie-dye process. The emphatic allusion to an African aesthetic gave this heroic monumental painting a historical depth, a territorial reference. The colors in *April 4*,—reds, stained like open wounds—would reappear in the current red and black series, but with radically changed expressive weight. The tie-dye affect was but one revelation; yet another—the suspended canvas—would have an even greater affect on Gilliam's language.

Late in 1969, Walter Hopps, Director of Washington's Corcoran Gallery, invited Gilliam to exhibit. In response both to the space, the thirty-foot ceiling, the staid, rigid columns of the Corcoran's Greek revivalist architecture and to his own aesthetic direction (he was already working with large masses of unstretched canvas), Gilliam decided to hang his unstretched canvas. These immense folds, cascading from the heights of the museum's interior, created a new dynamic in Gilliam's work between the artifact and its space. Integrating his art with his environment, like the chromatic tensions of his earlier stained pieces, would become, for many years, a theme on which he would play many variations in his outdoor as well as indoor paintings. As with his stained paintings, however, it was a specific subject matter which gave the aesthetic discoveries their particular cogency. The suspended canvases culminated in Gilliam's masterpiece of the 1970's, *Three Panels for Mr. Robeson*.

According to Sam, his wife, Dorothy, a syndicated columnist for the *Washington Post*, was working on her book about Paul Robeson. One morning, Sam came into the kitchen of their home

Schmidt Campbell, Mary, "Sam Gilliam: Journey Toward Red, Black and 'D'," *Red & Black to "D": Paintings by Sam Gilliam*, New York: Studio Museum, 1982, pp. 5-12



THREE PANELS FOR MR. ROBESON, 1975, *Acrylic on canvas, 6 x 12 x 18 (meters)*

Schmidt Campbell, Mary, "Sam Gilliam: Journey Toward Red, Black and 'D'," *Red & Black to "D": Paintings by Sam Gilliam*,
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APRIL 4, 1969, *Acrylic on canvas, 2.5 x 4.5 (meters)*

and found a letter on the table written by Melissa, one of his three daughters. Melissa had taken it upon herself to make a special plea, on her mother's behalf, to Paul Robeson's son. The letter was a request for Robeson's son to send her mother material for her book. As Melissa explained, her mother was working so hard, and "the book will be good and she spells good, too." Sam read the letter and decided that he, too, would add something to his daughter's plea. The result was *Three Panels for Mr. Robeson*, 1975. The three panels, (6 x 12 x 18 m.), hung in the Corcoran Museum's 34th biennial. The red, yellow and white canvases were immediately hailed as a masterpiece. Benjamin Forgey, a critic for the *Washington Star*, wrote that Gilliam was trying to build cathedrals out of canvas. Gilliam has retained the reverential attitude of *Three Panels for Mr. Robeson* in the current red and black series. The intense reds, with the color raked across the surface and the other worldly light that emerges from the black canvases, along with their classical architectural structure, give the paintings a shrine-like quality not unlike the feeling from Rothko's paintings in the Phillips Collection, or Gilliam's own *April 4*. The red and black series, of course, is not a specific personal event as was *Three Panels*. Rather, these paintings carry within them the more elusively abstract references of music, nature and architectural detail.

Gilliam's daring liberation of the canvas from its stretcher has been compared in its risk-taking to the adventurousness of John Coltrane. Gilliam's cascades of color are not unlike Coltrane's sheets of sound. Like Coltrane's music, Gilliam's art has been at the cutting edge of the *avant-garde*. Like Coltrane, Gilliam, too, has driven his art to the edge of chaos but always circumscribes the chaos, the improvisation, within carefully controlled parameters. In *Three Panels for Mr. Robeson*, his masterpiece of suspended canvases, Gilliam's subject matter—the heroic content of Robeson's life—controls the reams of painted folds that hang majestically, like folds of Baroque drapery.

In the red and black series of this exhibition, the surfaces are wildly energetic, but controlled by the crisp hard edges of the shaped and bevelled canvases and by the rhythmic sequential placement of the shapes.

Gilliam's introduction of the suspended canvas was rapidly followed by his use of collage. At first, he explored with bits and pieces of paper. Assemblage, a nearly three-dimensional build-up of objects, followed. The *Jail Jungle* series, which he worked on from the late 1960's to the mid-1970's, makes use of often ironic and satirical assemblages. Photographs, old clothes, antiques, toys, and other relics found their way into the assemblages. Unlike his stained paintings or draped canvases, an assemblage, like *Dark As I Am*, incorporating the artifacts of the artist's life—shoes, trowel, paint-filled clothes—is thick with encrusted materials as if the framed doorway that is the format of the *Jail Jungle* series would not fit everything crammed into it. The almost confessional autobiographical opening up of the *Jail Jungle* series is uncharacteristic of Gilliam's work. His identity as a Black artist is usually couched metaphorically within a tie-dye process, an historical allusion or an "attitude" in the paintings. The messiness of this piece, begun in 1968 and continued into the 1970's when it became transformed and took on the title *Composed*, may be reflective of the turmoil that often confronted Sam Gilliam, the Black American abstract painter. Social tensions, being a Black abstract painter at the height of the "revolution," was as much a challenge in 1969 as the decision to hang a liberated canvas from the ceiling.

In the winter of 1969, William T. Williams, also a Black abstract artist, invited Sam to participate in a show Williams was curating at a new space in New York City: The Studio Museum in Harlem. Williams, who was showing his large canvases, also invited the Black sculptor, Melvin Edwards, who was working with barbed wire and metal chains. A white painter, Stephan Kelsey, completed the quartet for the exhibition "X to the Fourth Power." At its inception, The Studio Museum was to have been a forum for the working artist and, most importantly, for the *avant-garde*. It was The Studio Museum show that first brought Sam, Mel and Bill together. They shared the pleasant shock of discovering that there existed among them a certain aesthetic collegiality. It was a vitally important alliance. After their exhibition, The Studio Museum, like Howard University's art department, in Sam's hometown of Washington, D. C., found itself

caught up in a Black nationalist fervor for the next few years and, like Howard's art department, the Museum, as an emblem of the 'real' Black culture, declared abstract art as irrelevant to Black American life. But Sam Gilliam, Melvin Edwards and William T. Williams were steadfast in their aesthetic integrity. From 1969 to 1976, they would show together five times in museums and galleries throughout the country. And, though Gilliam's work has never been explicitly protestant, he has spoken of the isolation of the artist, of his need to follow his own direction from within in spite of what compels him from without. The interludes with Edwards and Williams were important affirmations of what often was derided elsewhere. Gilliam's autobiographical *Jail Jungle* series is the closest he comes to revealing the effects of those social challenges in his art. Something of the fury of his persistence, nevertheless, remains in the work to this day.

In the red and black paintings, Gilliam's tenacity is felt in the energy of his surfaces. Dense, cumulative, the surfaces of the red and black paintings are complexly structured. Gilliam builds them up, adding paint, rhoplex, and slices of paper and canvas, so that, even as flat, two-dimensional paintings, there is a depth that is the result not of an illusory perspective but of a rich bas-relief surface. What was unabsorbed in the *Jail Jungle* assemblages has been completely enmeshed in the current built-up surfaces.

The current red and black paintings also derive from Gilliam's outdoor constructions, inaugurated in 1977 at Artpark. Like the suspended canvas, the outdoor constructions summarized several aesthetic directions and thematic motifs. Even more than the suspended canvas or assemblage, outdoor works integrated the artifact and the environment. Nature, always a motif in Gilliam's work, becomes an integral part of these pieces: a rocky landscape at Artpark gives definition to his twisted canvases, or the wind causes his sail-shaped canvases, in Atlanta, to flutter. In his current indoor red and black series, the architecture of the Museum served the same function as a natural setting. Studio Museum's atrium, overlooking a large open space, with a seventeen-foot ceiling, becomes an active environment in which

the artist configures his shaped canvases, sequencing them rhythmically to fit the internal architectural rhythms.

Nature, organic life, is ubiquitous in the red and black paintings. *Elm*, a vertical red painting, is unusually literal. The raking striads of paint on the surface mimic the striads of an elm leaf. Most of the canvases, however, are more metaphorical. *Lion's Rock*, for example, has the visual energy and glow of fire. Light, pale green and red, in the *Arc Maker*, a black painting, shines through in carefully circumscribed arcs, like streaks of lightening, giving this painting an enigmatic celestial look, alternating between allusions to the natural world—the organic, the uncontrolled—and allusions to architectural details—the man-made, the planned—the dialectic between red and black has been extended considerably since it was first used in *Red Petals*.

In the years Gilliam was introducing his outdoor paintings, he also began to explore monochromatic paintings. He completed, first, a series of white paintings and then a series of black paintings. Gilliam has maintained the ability to pursue multiple directions at one time and that ability is demonstrated in this exhibition by the inclusion of his "D" series. Happy, almost festive in tone, the "D" series are collages of a much smaller scale than the red and black. Some are laden not only with strips of paper and layers of paint, but with the metallic structure, a "D," in the right-hand corner. Each painting has a light decorative feeling. In some of the "D" series, the surface is flat, space created illusionistically. The contrast in the exhibition between the lighthearted canvas, the "D" series and the solemn grandeur of the red and black convey the fundamental shifts in tone that have pervaded Gilliam's work and, often, appearing within the same work. They remind us that classifying him is as difficult as decoding the content of his work.

Sam Gilliam is a collector. He collects marbles and antique toys. He will search worldwide to locate the "right" marble to add to his extraordinary collection, displayed in his home as if they were precious gems. He has marbles of all sizes, textures and colors, obviously revelling in the sheer beauty of their patterns and the joy of searching them out. Within his collection of antique toys he is especially attracted to old banks, the kind that,

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"Extensions" Exhibition, Wadsworth Atheneum, 1974

Schmidt Campbell, Mary, "Sam Gilliam: Journey Toward Red, Black and 'D'," *Red & Black to "D": Paintings by Sam Gilliam*,
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when you drop a coin in the bank, a mule kicks over a stand and then an old Black man falls on his head—the derogatory kind, the kind of image someone else makes of us for amusement and delight. As he strives towards the beauty of his abstract images, Gilliam does not forget what happens when we lose control of our own images. As he works in his Washington studio, at 14th and U, in the middle of inner-city Washington, D. C., he never loses sight of the integrity of his own work. To do so is to lose control of the image making, to be at the mercy of the images on old banks. He has said that, as a mentor to younger artists (artists such as Houston Conwill, who, as an art student, assisted Gilliam in his studio and whom Gilliam considers exceptional), he tries only to teach them that they must make their own work. He teaches them how hard that is, how isolated, how much they may have to go against current fashion. But Gilliam has prevailed and he returns to The Studio Museum with these red and black paintings and, typical of his satirical bent, he has permitted the green light to glow from within them in a refreshingly liberating way.

Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell,
Executive Director
The Studio Museum in Harlem

Davies, Hugh M., "Outdoor Paintings," *Indoor & Outdoor Paintings 1967-1978*, Amherst: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 1978, pp. 1-3



Circular Place Reflection, 1978, acrylic and oil enamel on fabricated canvas, 15' diameter, commissioned by the University Gallery and temporarily installed at the Fine Arts Center, University of Massachusetts/Amherst.

OUTDOOR PAINTINGS

Sam Gilliam's first outdoor painting, *Seahorses*, was made specifically for the Philadelphia Museum of Art and exhibited in the summer of 1975 as part of the Philadelphia Festival. The installation consisted of six colorful canvas elements draped in symmetrical groupings of three on the two long side walls which adjoin the grand facade of the neo-classic structure. Each brightly stained canvas (the largest measured 30' x 90') was attached to the building only at the corners of the fabric and hung from the large metal rings placed in a row below the entablature as part of the original architecture of the museum. Cascading into generous long curves they provided a sensuous counterpoint in color and texture to the severe rectilinear stone architecture. At rest they appeared like Renaissance swags, the play of light and shadow across their deep folds echoing the rigid fluting of the facade columns. The slightest breeze ruffled this enormous drapery revealing previously concealed passages of color while larger gusts tossed the canvases into a tumult of constantly shifting composition.

This manner of draping outdoor paintings was a direct outgrowth of Gilliam's innovative achievement in the late sixties of abandoning stretchers and frames in certain of his paintings. With this major step he deflected the course of the history of painting which had previously clung to the convention of applying pigment to a two-dimensional surface. Literally speaking, he did not free the painting from the confines of the stretcher and frame — he never let the painting reach that point. When Gilliam first draped paintings in the spring of 1968 it was almost a spontaneous decision to display the paintings in a way which was more consistent with the manner in which they were made. They had been painted on the floor, occasionally supported by sawhorses and partly attached to the wall. It seemed an unnecessary and almost misleading step inherited from the tradition of painting to force the convoluted canvas back into the single plane and flat surface of a stretcher and frame.

In retrospect it is possible to link Gilliam's draped works to ecclesiastical vestments (Gilliam has himself in his *Cowl* series), and to secular costumes of flowing robes, dresses and cloaks, as depicted in the illusionistic paintings and

prints of Rubens and Dürer among others. At the time of their inception, however, it was an infinitely more radical departure than the large scale of Pollock or the shaped canvases of Stella.

Seahorses was essentially an indoor draped painting installed outdoors. Released from the visual and spatial confines of the indoor exhibition space the painting took on a new dimension. While exposure to the elements offered the benefits of constantly shifting wind and light it also revealed the hazards of bleaching, tearing and rain soaking. The outdoor paintings currently on exhibition at the University of Massachusetts were designed and constructed, in terms of both fabric and configuration, specifically as outdoor pieces. During the interim period between the Philadelphia installation of *Seahorses* and the conception of the U.Mass. paintings, Gilliam reinstalled *Seahorses* at the Brooklyn Museum.

While the Philadelphia installation involved a neo-classic cube, the Brooklyn Museum, like a stage set, presents a massive, horizontal, neo-classic facade supported by and extended into a series of equally large but architecturally undistinguished rear wings. As most visitors enter the museum from the parking lot at the back of the building, Gilliam was asked to reinstall *Seahorses* on this utilitarian rear facade. He chose to hang four of the canvases vertically from single points at the top of walls, draped a fifth horizontally between two windows and eliminated the sixth element.

While the symmetrically arrayed *Seahorses* of Philadelphia clung like pilasters to the building's exterior surface and echoed the processional rhythm of the neo-classical structure, the asymmetrical Brooklyn installation was a fanciful, more casual arrangement which reveled in the disorder of its architectural context. The ravages of sun, wind and rain eventually brought about the demise of *Seahorses* as the raw canvas material was exhausted by two summer-long outdoor installations.

At *Artpark* in Lewiston, New York, during the summer of 1977 Gilliam continued to work with fabric outdoors, but the products of this summer's work were more properly "constructions" with fabric, wood, shale and pigment. Gilliam describes *Custom Road Slide* as a series of some fourteen "sculptural fabric placements" created along 400 yards of roadway lining the Niagara Gorge. "The initial phase was performed rather than constructed, in that lengths of cloth and fabric hung over the cliff and were destroyed by a series of storms until they lay like ordinary objects on a slope of shale thirty feet below." [Letter from Sam Gilliam, August 18, 1978.] These fallen paintings, made of stained and painted tobacco muslin and scarlet and white polypropylene, became the starting point for the remainder of the month's work. Incorporating

redwood poles, four by fours and sawhorses, Gilliam and his assistants selectively sculpted the fabric, elevating sections on wooden supports and redistributing the accumulations of shale. Individual "placements" were then unified by pouring bright single colors of paint and food dye over broad passages. The strong, luminous areas of uniform color provided a stark contrast with the subtly modulated and muted earth tone of the surrounding landscape.

The *Artpark* outdoor construction derived from indoor constructions such as *A and a Carpenter I and II* of 1973, in which Gilliam draped stained and painted fabric over wooden sawhorse supports. *Niagara*, 1977, included in the present exhibition, is one of the most ambitious and successful indoor constructions to date. It operates like a veritable landscape with peaks of fabric suspended from the ceiling and raised on partially concealed timber supports while cascades of colored pigment run through the valleys of drapery. Like all his draped works, *Niagara* is recomposed with each installation, acknowledging and incorporating the vagaries of new exhibition spaces. Gilliam's constructions and paintings alike draw their inspiration from an expressionistic heritage encompassing Schwitters' *Merzbau* and Pollock's gestural paintings.

The four U.Mass. outdoor paintings draw heavily on the three previous summers' experience with fabric in outdoor situations. The problem posed by the outdoor situation was to find a fabric not only durable enough to withstand the elements, but also able to accept stained or painted pigment. As Gilliam's achievement in art and manner of working depend so heavily on the effects of staining, a completely sealed fabric would prove unsatisfactory. On the other hand, an unsealed fabric such as the canvas of *Seahorses* has the disadvantage of absorbing rain water and eventually rotting. With an unbroken surface of fabric, wind presents an even more serious and immediate problem. While hanging the 100 foot lengths of canvas on the Philadelphia Museum, Gilliam soon realized he was operating in the realm of sailing technology rather than that of pure aesthetics. The stresses encountered at the anchoring points were phenomenal when the wind picked up during rainstorms and began to toy with the already heavily rain-soaked canvases.

In planning the U.Mass. paintings the problems of wind and rain were major considerations and during the eighteen months prior to this exhibition Gilliam solicited the opinions and expertise of architects, engineers, sail makers and awning manufacturers. To minimize the ravages of rain he selected an awning quality fabric which is sufficiently sealed to repel the accumulation of water but still permits a degree of staining. Each of the four paintings is composed of a series of loosely overlapped and

interwoven panels of varying widths. The gaps at the intersections of this collapsing grid permit wind to pass through the paintings, thereby circumventing the spinaker syndrome of a continuous unbroken surface. As the paintings breathe, literally opening and closing with the wind, they reveal new areas of color tucked behind panels. At the same time the practical expedient of the collapsing grid of interwoven panels acts as a formal structuring device — an idea adapted from his stretched paintings of the past few years.

While Gilliam is affiliated by geography and technique with the "Washington color art" exemplified by the paintings of Louis and Noland, as his work of the last decade has unfolded it has become clear that he has an even stronger affinity with the more emotionally charged, energetic work of the original Abstract Expressionists. His technique of staining canvas to achieve a unity of surface and color, the saturated bright palette, and the pouring of paint and manipulation of it in its fluid state through troughs of canvas all derive from "color art". However the "overall" quality of the finished paintings, the gestural handling and manipulation of impasto in more recent works, and the cultivated chaos of incident which characterizes all his work since 1968 reveal him to be more fundamentally linked to the action painting or gestural wing of Abstract Expressionism represented by Pollock, de Kooning, and Hofmann. As opposed to the elegant, emblematic quality of color field painting, Gilliam's work has the rugged energy and messy toughness of Pollock.

Walter Hopps and other critics have long observed that in Gilliam's best paintings "there exists a delicate balance between improvisation and structure, a sense of chaos controlled." [Walter Hopps, *Sam Gilliam: Paintings and Works on Paper*, The J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, 1976.] Throughout his work he has come up with a variety of devices to structure and discipline the potential anarchy of color and texture resulting from his high speed, intuitive manner of working. In paintings like *Restore*, 1968, and *Elephanta*, 1970, the wet stained canvas was folded on itself in a form of "rorschaching" to create symmetrical images or axial bands which act as a rhythmical infrastructure much like the poles in Pollock's *Blue Poles*. To articulate an order in works such as *Darted Again, Over*, and *For Day One* of 1974-5, heavily impastoed canvases were cut into geometric pie-shapes, then reassembled and collaged on circular and square canvases. With all the draped paintings structure is imposed by their points of attachment to the wall or ceiling and the resultant gravity produced curves. In the black paintings of the last year Gilliam has returned to the technique of cutting and collaging large canvases. He recomposes constituent

elements to form a grid within a horizontal rectangle in the lower central section of the canvas as a subtle means of providing focus and order for the entire painting.

Gilliam visited the Fine Arts Center at U.Mass. several times during the year preceding his exhibition and on each occasion spent a great deal of time selecting locations for his outdoor paintings. Unlike the buildings at Philadelphia and Brooklyn, the Fine Arts Center is a complicated sculptural array or massing of various sized interior and exterior volumes which, throughout the course of the day, provide an exhilarating play of sun and shadow. Moreover, the uniformly colored concrete surfaces of the complex provide an ideal foil or passive monochrome background for Gilliam's active polychrome paintings.

Before settling on the shifting structural grid solution of interwoven panels, he decided to make five canvases which conform to the basic geometric shapes of square, triangle, circle, horizontal rectangle and vertical rectangle. Later, when financial pressures reduced the number to four, he eliminated the square since it was the most obvious and perhaps redundant shape. In placing the four paintings Gilliam took full advantage of the variety presented by the Fine Arts Center and chose four prime walls which offered very different architectural settings.

The canvases were fabricated to Gilliam's specifications by the same Philadelphia awning manufacturer that had made *Seahorses*. Gilliam selected the various striped and solid color panels, determined their size and woven configuration, and located the attaching grommets. Although some red and blue panels were included, the basic colors of the supporting material are brown, yellow, black and white, and hence, in comparison to his finished paintings, the prepared canvases were relatively pure and quiet. Over a three-day period in early August he extensively painted and stained these pristine canvases, establishing a "messy" surface which partially obscured and thereby minimized the assertive quality of the clean underlying grid.

In preparation for painting, the canvases were placed on the floor and casually folded on themselves. Exposed surfaces were saturated with several layers of poured and manipulated paint. As the paint was drying the canvases were opened up allowing puddles of pigment to flow into previously pristine surfaces. Further painting eased abrupt transitions between painted and unpainted areas. The completed works revel in the alternation between robustly painted passages and the constantly re-emerging grid. Gestural areas of free-form pigment resonate in counterpoint to the calculated, underlying pattern. In attaching the paintings to the building Gilliam further obscured their fundamental structure. They are not stretched taut as rigid geometric shapes but are loosely

attached and occasionally bunched. This method of installation allows gravity to express the weight of the fabric and facilitates the action of the wind.

The U.Mass. paintings represent to some extent a synthesis of Gilliam's stretched and draped paintings. The grid of interwoven panels which structures the works both physically and formally has a precedent in his folded and collaged, stretched paintings. The manner in which they are installed clearly derives from his draped works, yet the structure imposed by points of attachment in the earlier draped paintings serves now to confound and obscure the existing grid. Out of this amalgam of coexisting systems of order emerges an alliance between spontaneity and calculation. The U.Mass. paintings represent an unprecedented approach to painting for Gilliam. Rather than imposing structure on spontaneously painted fabric by means of folding, collaging or draping, Gilliam here reversed the process to one of obfuscating a self-imposed, structural grid by the gestural application of paint.

Hugh M. Davies
Director, University Gallery

Kloner, Jay, "Indoor Paintings," *Indoor & Outdoor Paintings 1967-1978*, Amherst: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 1978, pp. 15-19

INDOOR PAINTINGS

Sam Gilliam was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1933 and grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, where he had the good fortune to be encouraged by teachers who had the gift of nurturing. He attended the University of Louisville in the fifties, and later in the early sixties, after serving in the Army between 1956 and 1958. He had his first one-man exhibition at the University in 1956 and received his B.A. (1955) and M.A. (1961) degrees there with a major in art.

Early stylistic influences include the fluidity of Nolde's watercolors and the scumbled paint of Klee and the California figurative expressionist Nathan Oliveira. More important, perhaps, was the brooding isolation apparent in Nolde and Oliveira, as well as Klee's lighter moods. Gilliam's few remaining earliest paintings are shrouded in loneliness. Sometimes the mood leans toward Klee, but for the most part, his people are quietly absorbed, surrounded by atmospheric darkness. Such work gives the distinct impression of expressive maturity beyond his years, as students usually prefer not to record their emotional world as deeply.

The *Park Invention* watercolors executed after moving to Washington, D.C., in 1962, with their bright and lighthearted, freely cursive impressions of Rock Creek Park near his home, reflect a changed view on life. He was married, teaching high school, and looking ahead with optimism.

He would go up to New York to keep current. He was impressed most by Newman, Hofmann and Rothko. Their frontal structuring of color, their sense of surface and edge, and their sensitivity to mood appealed directly. He felt awe before the formal power revealed in Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, and contemplated Rothko's muted paintings in the Phillips Collection with virtual reverence. He retains strong feeling for their work to this day.

In Washington he met Tom Downing and Howard Mehring among others, who conveyed an assurance to proceed with purely abstract painting. Along with Gene Davis, they constituted the more familiar artists in a second wave of color oriented painting in Washington, D.C., following the initial impetus by Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Ann Truitt and others. Gilliam's first abstract paintings have flat, broad color surfaces contained

by framing elements within wide margins. In 1964-65 he turned to a striped format related to explorations by Louis and Noland, developing the style in a personal direction. From the outset, his central concerns in abstraction were structure, color and surface. At this point these essential components were clearly emphatic.

He was too much the expressionist, however, to stay with rigid frameworks. In 1966 he came more into his own by way of another dimension opened by Louis. He began to pour and manipulate paint in entirely new ways, using the canvas as a tool. *Petals*, 1967, the earliest work in the exhibition, is remarkable for its stained patterns recording the flow and settling of poured colors. Canvas with blue brushed in at the sides was set sagging into a frame, as a vessel, and warm colors were poured onto it. In related highly varied works he extended the pouring technique by folding the canvas back over itself, after wetting with water tension breaker. The folds create intervals between stained color cliffs, bringing surfaces into tension with edges, and in essence, bringing linear and painterly styles into a new consonance.

Restore, 1968, and *Elephanta*, 1970, are outstanding examples of an amplified folded-stained approach using varied pigments such as fluorescent colors and aluminum powder. The canvases are richly atmospheric. Their colors and patterns appear and reappear, changed, so the paintings continually refract within themselves as monumental visual fugues. All their complexity is intimately bound to the canvas itself. By making with canvas, the canvas structures the end result: in the folds, in pigment traces resting on the surface, and in the larger areas where canvas is stained — unifying canvas and color as one.

Between 1965 and 1973 he had seven one-man exhibitions at the Jefferson Place Gallery in Washington, D.C. His first one-man museum exhibition was at the Phillips Collection in 1967. It occupies a pivotal position in his career, bestowing special recognition at the very time he was progressing with the folded-stained technique. It gave him the kind of support, along with backing by Jefferson Place directed by Neta Dorrance, which allowed for work on an increasingly ambitious scale.

In reviewing the Phillips exhibition for *The Washington Post*, Paul Richard emphasized Gilliam's spontaneity. He believed Gilliam's prior experience with hard-edge painting helped him blend discipline with improvisation. Not by chance, Gilliam listened to John Coltrane a great deal at the time, and there are obvious parallels to be drawn between sheets of color and sheets of sound, created in a spirit of enormous risk. In the end, Richard agreed with the foresight of the Phillips Collection for purchasing *Petals* from the exhibition since he saw Gilliam, "still in his early

thirties," as "an artist of solid accomplishment and enormous promise."

The year 1967 was a turning point. In addition to his first museum exhibition, he received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts allowing him to leave full-time teaching to concentrate on art. Then in 1968, a grant from the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, lasting five years or more, coupled with a large rent-free studio in an old building, gave him the ability to explore new approaches on a large scale. The building was shared with Rockne Krebs who was executing prismatic, transparent sculpture in plastic and developing concepts for his subsequent laser works. Through his example, Krebs helped to spur Gilliam towards expansive possibilities.

Gilliam's manipulation of canvas went hand in hand with manipulating watercolors by crinkling. This experience with dimensional watercolors and painting grounded in pliant canvas led in good measure to his new work on an expanded scale. The result was a major breakthrough: suspended canvases freed from the stretcher. Gilliam would compose paintings, often around seventy-five feet long, in different attitudes: amply arcing, flat against a wall, or extending aggressively into the central space of a room. His liquid colors were now reinforced by the fluid canvas. Paint and surface took on an added third pictorial dimension in reality. Now the canvas was not only a means, but also shared a primary role in the pictorial result.

After the suspended canvas, painting could not remain what it was before. Dimensional possibilities were expanded into new modes of experience, endowing painting with a presence previously unknown, allowing for an active, more direct relation to people and places.

The suspended canvases received their first definitive exhibition at a group show with Rockne Krebs and Ed McGowin at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1969. The exhibition was conceived by Walter Hopps who allocated seven immense galleries and the upper atrium level. The galleries were designed to meet the artists' specifications and the artists had time to actually work and experiment with the museum's spaces. Photographs of Gilliam's installations attest to the remarkable integration achieved between paintings and settings.

There are more affinities and fewer differences between the suspended canvases and the folded-stained paintings than one would initially suspect. Both reveal the process by which they were made. Both are marked unmistakably with Gilliam's personality. Atmospheric moods blending sobriety with lightness abound everywhere. His lightest passages have their somber side and vice versa. Improvisation is tempered by calculation. Edges formed at suspension points echo prior edges made by folding, and

each acts as a structuring element. In both approaches line or edge has a controlling value, while color is more random and emotive.

One cannot but ponder the function between external events and the internal history of an artist's achievement. His invention of the suspended canvas at the very time the activist phase of the civil rights movement came to an end hints at a private determination to pursue change in one's own sphere with vigor and enterprise. Perhaps a clue to this is in two folded-stained paintings associated with the death of Reverend Martin Luther King: *Excursion*, 1968, and *April 4, 1969*. The first suggests, in its flowing reds, an emotional outpouring. The later painting, which hangs in the central hall at the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C., has a restrained dignity befitting a commemoration. Gilliam was expanding his emotional vocabulary. He was also about to embark on a period rich with invention, unparalleled in his career.

Gilliam is a protean artist. He is not satisfied with merely repeating a successful approach. He constantly moves ahead, searching, inventing, exploring. The early seventies finds him working with both stretched and suspended canvases in diverse new ways. In the stretched canvases his color becomes more spectral. He turns every technique he has used before to new color visions, alive with liquid atmospheres of stained canvas and tints deployed on the surface. The shifts in feeling, from radiant to somber, are tremendous. Yet, there always is a light note in the dark paintings and a dark note in the light paintings. Here it seems are the seeds which will eventually become the white and black paintings of later years.

In the early seventies Gilliam demonstrated further possibilities for the suspended canvas through prodigious variations. Some were executed on a vast scale. *Autumn Surf*, 1973, for example, made with one hundred and fifty yards of polypropylene for the San Francisco Museum of Art was a painting in the round, free of the walls, fully observable from all sides. Its immense suspended, draped and spreading shapes — from, over and around long redwood beams — shaped a constantly shifting and newly connecting environmental experience. *Three Panels for Mr. Robeson* at the 34th Corcoran Biennial in 1975 was a magisterial, nearly triangular configuration of three pyramidal, room-sized open yet enclosing forms. Benjamin Forgey, writing in *The Washington Star*, described *Three Panels for Mr. Robeson* as "Gilliam's best work to date, his masterpiece." He explained how their great presence was sustained through the stark contrast of two luxuriantly, warmly painted panels and an ice cool predominantly white form. Their interaction on every esthetic level contributed to a profoundly moving experience.

Kloner, Jay, "Indoor Paintings," *Indoor & Outdoor Paintings 1967-1978*, Amherst: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 1978, pp. 15-19

Niagara, in the present exhibition, comprising canvases and an armature from different works created in the last three years for specific locations (including the Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y., and Rutgers University, 1976), was conceived in relation to the gallery columns as structural frameworks. Six lengths of polypropylene were deployed between them in four pointed crests rising from canvas tumbled in great swells across the floor. The floor to ceiling composition refers back to *Three Panels for Mr. Robeson*. Wooden beams set at angles, akin to those in *Autumn Surf*, rest on and inward toward an armature at the center. With this placement, the armature can be compared to inset, rectilinear collage elements in his recent black paintings.

On small scales he experimented with varying modes of suspension from one to four points. The so-called "cows", suspended from a single point, are canvases about eight feet high with a folded flap in the upper region, painted with dramatic paint bursts and then constructed for different effects. Within this series alone, he achieved a surprising variety and range. While the "cows" are conceived from a purely formal standpoint, they convey an almost atavistic sense of totemic personages. This is not intended. As in all the suspended work, the canvas bears a certain association with posture or gesture. At human scale the association is intensified without interfering with abstract qualities, since their abstraction is readily apparent.

If the "cows" hinted even remotely at human associations, this tendency took another turn by way of quilting and of incorporating small relics from everyday life in collage paintings executed during 1973. This shift toward collage represented a significant step in a new direction and persists in different forms in his work to this day.

Quilting appears in the *A and the Carpenter* paintings, 1973, in which sawhorses are employed as supports for billowing, long lengths of canvas spread across the floor. Due to proximity and medial scale (the works do not extend over around twelve feet in length when installed), they invite close attention. Perhaps this explains details of appliqued fabric, beads, trim, etc. Yet, in addition, the quilted edges serve to introduce linear factors, framing opulent rolling colors within. The sawhorse also serves as a contrasting linear structure, as does the armature in *Niagara* and poles in extremely diverse works from 1971 to the present.

Four collages included here from the *Jail Jungle* series, 1973, attest to Gilliam's ability to combine opposites. In this instance, he combines high seriousness with earthy whimsy, and reality with abstraction. It was as if his persistent experimentation was leading toward figurative

possibilities. This is rare in his art and as close as he would come. To more fully comprehend the *Jail Jungle* series one would have had to visit the Mount Pleasant area where Gilliam lived, as it was five years ago, and to meet an extraordinary man known as Logan. His antique store is the archetypal treasure-trove filled to the brink with rusting and tarnished delights luring one's fascination. Gilliam, who collects antique toys, is in a special kind of paradise in Logan's store. So he took the tuxedo lapels, the bells, the pop tops, the black rose, the old photograph in Van Der Zee style (Van Der Zee is one of his favorite photographers), and other relics he found there and put them together in a series bordering on Dada and the surreal, but intended as abstraction. Each painting is self-sufficient, and the specially crafted cases with bowed fronts act as linear frameworks. Logan's influence even extends to the hangers from which three of the works are suspended and the clearly printed laundry tickets. He owns a laundry across the street from his antique store.

Composed (formerly *Dark as I Am*), from the series, is a brooding silver and deep gray relief composed from the painter's jacket and overalls. He would see the clothes this way daily in the studio and in the spirit of Duchamp isolated them as works of art. The objects dissolve in color and become transformed into an abstraction. The dark shoes covered with silver paint on the "pedestal" covered with Pollock-like paint drippings complete the self-portrait, which speaks of his roots in American art and the nature of his own methods and results.

One Ring Dinger, also from the series, is an abstract portrait of a fast woman, inspired in some degree by the Van Der Zee-like photograph attached to her as a badge or icon. She wears flashy clothes and a sleigh bell on her finger. The strong articulation of personality reveals Gilliam's warm personality. The ease with which the assemblage knits together reveals his ability to bring harmony out of nearly discordant improvisation. The canvas surface encrusted with finely spattered warm acrylics discloses his feeling for atmospheric nuance, here suggesting the passage of time.

The *Jail Jungle* surfaces, built up from finely wrought, interwoven color networks with a monochromatic effect, point in a new direction for Gilliam's painting. He becomes more partial to a dominant color or tone as in the *Ahab* series represented by *On a Landless Sea*, 1973. His intent in this series was to find his own perfect, predominantly white composition, which he ultimately does in the white paintings three years later.

On a Landless Sea is remarkable for its atmospheric dimensions. White glaze, dispersed with lacquer thinner, dances over the surface in a liquid notation, spreading

thick and contracting thin. This drawing in paint binds the canvas as a whole, and veils a darker ground occupying half the canvas. The vertical edge down the center between darker and lighter halves is akin to the folded divisions in the earlier stained paintings. Here, though, pigment is not absorbed into the canvas, but lies upon the surface.

In the intervening years between the *Ahab* and white paintings he was producing the most radiantly spectral canvases of his career. Collage segments of a circle which are divided and spun together form a profuse array of colors comparable to luminous rose windows suffused with movement. Polychrome acrylics and dyes melted together as stains and rivulets. The turn, then, to more placid, monochrome styles which follows these segmented paintings emerges out of a larger continuity and an immediate apposition.

The white and black paintings, while tending toward monochrome, contain a surprising amount of color. In the white series, various characteristically bitter-sweet hues, often high-key, are strewn with random calculation in layers. These are partially covered with continuous openwork layers of white, applied both thick and thin and raked for texture. Some of the canvases are highly glazed while others are not. Yet they all emit a liquid luminosity. All the paintings contain one or more collage strips placed horizontally or vertically from edge to edge. The collage bands are cut from the canvas edges where less white may have been applied, so other colors are more pronounced. When these bands are introduced into the painting proper they cause chromatic shifts at their edges enhancing atmospheric nuances, while structuring color flows with lines and strengthening the surface. At times these chromatic shifts are so subtle as to be barely observable.

The smallest white paintings have highly concentrated luminosity and a nearly jewel-like compactness. The larger ones tend towards a brighter, more high-key and dispersed openness. *Misty Sagittarius*, 1976, fuses these opposites, gaining additional power from color and directional displays notable among its companion paintings. Salmon, pale blues, bright yellow and pale greens show through the white, all under a deep glaze, and all enlivened with continuously changing directions of color patches with their streaking and raking. Four horizontal bands, around one and a half inches thick individually, occupy the lower half, creating atmospheric horizons through an interplay established by color shifts between neighboring bands and the painting ground.

The black paintings demonstrate, once again, how Gilliam creates by apposition. As with the white canvases, the prevalent near-blacks loosely frame layers of varied hue, and collage elements are introduced from cut edges.

Unlike the white paintings, they generally have more closed, orbital compositions hinged around clustered geometric forms near or below center.

Coffee Thyme, 1977, and *Black - Blues - Muse*, 1977, the two black paintings included here, are representative in the massed power residing in heavily encrusted color, which suggests weight, density and compression. Yet, at the same moment the canvases are everywhere alive with contrasts. Color masses float in spreading and tightening spaces. Densities yield to volumes. In *Coffee Thyme*, a cool, relatively light collaged rectangle below center, segmented in horizontal divisions and punctuated by a dark triangle acts as a locus for the warm surround with its sweeping reds and directional textures. Though the collage elements are as tangible as the surround, both share the same pervasive and richly inflected atmosphere. The collage center in *Black - Blues - Muse*, on the other hand, is barely discernable. With observation it emerges into perception, only to dissolve again out of view. This dance with recognition is consonant with the pulsing atmospheric and textural energies throughout. While stained canvas at the edges enhances an atmospheric sense, the paint is piled thickly in patches, mostly blue with contrasting minor chords in warm mauve and yellow, which stresses surface qualities. As in all his previous work, surface and space are locked in dynamic tension, reinforced here by the tactile hachure in a constantly shifting notation lending vigor in both topographic and atmospheric terms.

Perhaps the black paintings underscore a romantic sensibility in all he has done, but a sensibility now concentrated in moods and abstract images inspiring awe and grandeur. These somber color fields are poems of emerging light. Light appears to push outward from within, against assertive darkness. Light, then, is at the heart of his structured color.

Other recent works reveal his involvement with collage beyond the stretcher limits. *Homage to a Pole* was specially conceived for this exhibition although the canvas portion, at the core, was executed in 1973. Taking a cue from its silver, burnished paint he covered the surrounding wall with a light, aerial network of crayon marks, joining drawing and painting together. As in the *Jail Jungle* series he joins seriousness with whimsy. The work has an obvious, improvisational freedom, consonant with his intention to allude to certain art and artists. The pole and rope are reminders of Pollock's *Blue Poles* and of an esthetic fusing the straight and the curved in an interlacing, active system. The arcs and verticals over the core canvas bring Johns to mind, and a sense of the work making itself, as in the actually drawn shadows cast by the pole and rope.

This pictorial broadening into spatial extensions is further apparent in *Red/Blue - Blue (Cut Cowl)*, 1978, in

Kloner, Jay, "Indoor Paintings," *Indoor & Outdoor Paintings 1967-1978*, Amherst: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 1978, pp. 15-19

which five segments intentionally cut from a "cowl" painting and added wooden members float in apparent dispersion on the floor and across the wall. This is a more sculptural complement to the aerial counterpoints in his stretched canvases.

There are certain recurrent motifs in Gilliam's art. One is immediately struck by the artist's restless, energetic searching for new modes of expression and technique; in essence, his expressionistic intensity. There is also his enormous productivity, his sensitivity for atmospheres, and his ability to weld opposites into a unified whole, whether line and color, surface and space, somber and light moods, or chance and control. Furthermore, he uses canvas as a tool, whether in manipulating paint or assembling collage elements. In short, Gilliam has a keen sense of structured color.

His atmospheres are evocations of color and light evolving from stained surfaces with evanescent sprays to heavy impastos and resonant glazes. The work as a whole has progressed in more dimensional directions, whether in terms of suspension, paint quality, or other factors. His invention of the bevelled frame is illustrative. When he was producing stained paintings, he chamfered the outer, forward stretcher edges. The result was a frame made by canvas wrapped around a bevel. Atmospheres adhering to the canvas as stains extended ever so slightly beyond the painting itself, increasing its dimensions. Subsequently, in the white and black paintings the bevelled frame imparts the solidity of a slab or tablet, adding a more tangible concreteness to the thick color strata.

His new work in other media also indicates this tendency toward spatial extension. The silkscreen prints, *Philly* and *Philadelphia Soft*, both executed last year at the Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia, directed by Marion B. (Kippy) Stroud, are 7'10" and 8'5" in height. These dimensions exceed the usual print scale to the point where they become suspended canvases, not only in size, but in the way they are displayed with folds and overlaps. Even the extraordinary translucence achieved with collage components and shifting colors lends further depth. His watercolors further illustrate the point. Their surfaces, activated through crinkling, bending and folding, become more and more physically spatial. Now, in a new approach paralleling the stratified paints in his recent painting, he creates watercolors by building up paint thickness and obtaining sculptural reliefs, previously achieved through paper alone.

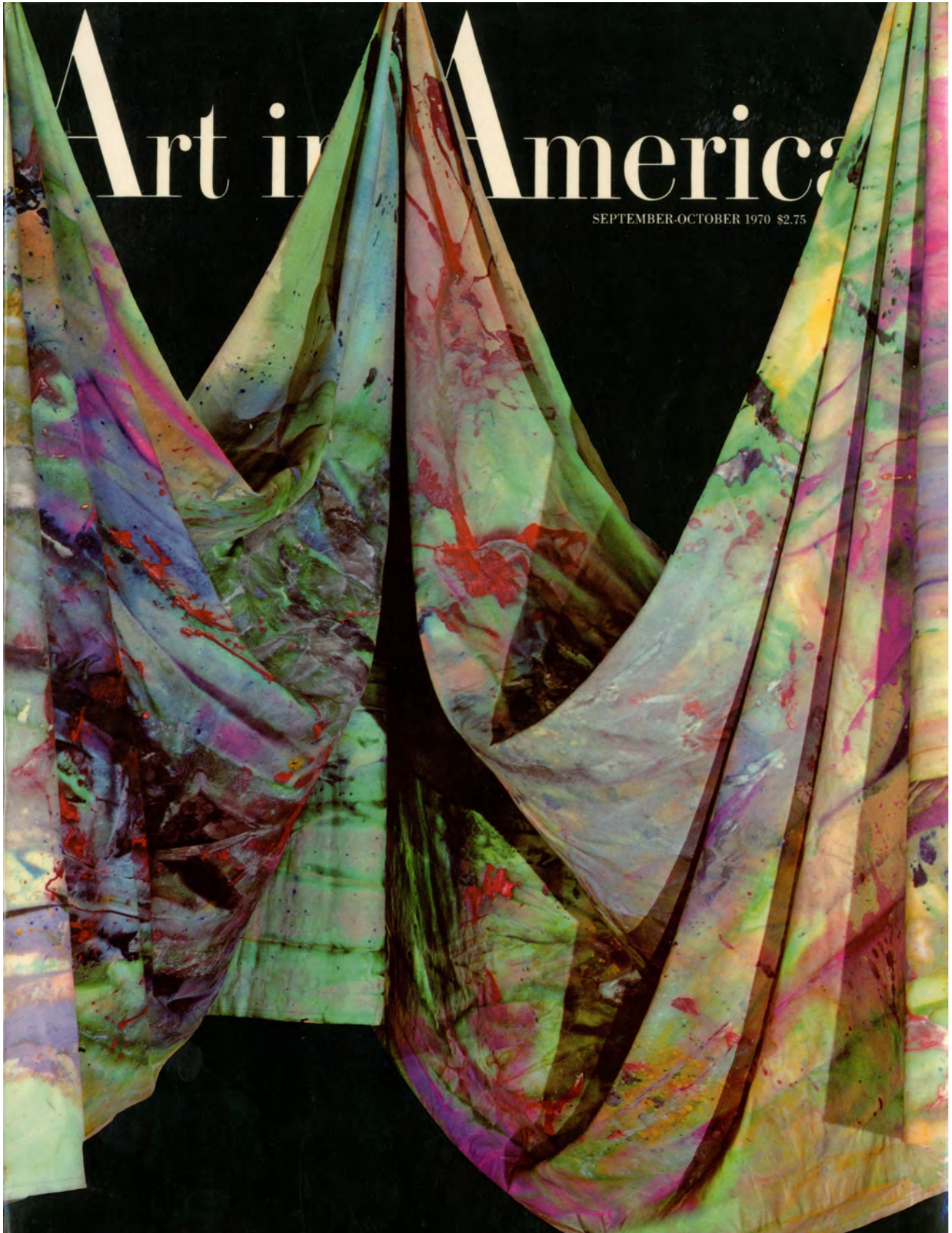
While Gilliam's work can be viewed as a progression, it may also be seen as a partial return. The orbital compositions characteristic of the black paintings relate back in time to the radiating nodes in *Petals*, a work associated with his first significant recognition as an artist.

The collage bands in the white paintings take us back in memory to the early striped paintings. Furthermore, his recent preference for near monochrome echoes the earliest surviving examples of his painting.

The unity and consistency in an extensive body of work so rich in its variety and invention is remarkable. Gilliam is clearly a protean painter and his art is centered. He has had the courage in a time prone to emotionally detached art to convey feeling and personality. In the process, he has opened new paths in American painting.

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Rose, Barbara, "Black Art in America," *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-55, 57



BLACK ART IN AMERICA

Barbara Rose

Barbara Rose—who has written frequently for this magazine about new talent—has selected a group of works by black artists, some known and some unknown, most of them young, who she feels have special promise

What is black art? For some, "black art" refers to a specific subject matter or content relating to the black experience. Others define it as a rejection of the forms of European art in favor of primitive African forms. In researching this article, I found that definitions of black art varied from generalizations as broad as art made by painters and sculptors of Afro-American descent, to art made in imitation of primitive styles. Indeed, the heterogeneity of activity among black artists has already led to a certain factionalism. Extending from the black nationalist artists exhibiting crude expressionist works in storefront cooperative galleries in Harlem, the range broadens to include thoroughly Europeanized black painters and sculptors living as expatriates in Paris.

Because of the differences of personality and background, not to mention tastes and politics, there are a variety of attitudes the contemporary black artist may have toward the concept of black art. Reviewing the material I was able to gather—and there was a large quantity, since black people are becoming increasingly active as artists in America—I found essentially four attitudes developing among black artists toward the predominantly white American culture in which they are forced to function. Most extreme was the position of artists like James Sneed of the Harlem Art Gallery and Dr. Ademola Olugebefola of the Countee Cullen Library Community Gallery. Such artists wish to establish an autonomous black art movement closely linked with black separatist politics. Working within black communities like Watts and Harlem, directing their art exclusively to the needs of a black public, they reject the modern European tradition as a decadent style serving a white bourgeois Establishment. Many are self-taught, and most paint in neo-primitive or expressionist styles that deliberately evoke the bold patterning and bright colors of African textiles. Their themes stress values basic to the black social struggle: they paint families united or idealized workers and leaders of the black community like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

Other black social-protest artists like Dana Chandler, William Curtis and David Hammons, to name but a few, have had extended formal art training. Like social-protest art in general, the work of black social realists is basically illustrational and hortatory. Both stylistically and thematically, it has a great deal in common with the social realism of the thirties, which stressed poster-like clarity, the better to deliver a message which was often a call to action.

Although black separatists and social-protest artists use specifically black subject matter, others, while employing the forms and techniques of modern art, refer either implicitly or explicitly to the black experience as content. In deliberately "funky" idioms,

they allude, in forms, materials, techniques or images, to an environment different in many respects from that of white America.

Black and white sociologists recently have argued that Afro-Americans have created a distinctive culture-within-a-culture in America. Up until this point, however, the black cultural contribution has been more acceptable in the popular arts and as entertainment. Now, however, the black artist wishes to make his contribution to what have formerly been considered the "high" arts: painting, sculpture, theater, poetry, etc.—that is to say, the elite arts of the museum and the university. His attacks on these institutions are part of the complex process of cultural democratization that this country is now undergoing. Developing a far more ambitious concept of himself as a cultural as well as a political force in America, the black artist today does not aspire to become a tap dancer, but an architect.

The major source of conflict between black artists and white institutions is that the former feel they are being discriminated against by the latter because their art is being judged exclusively by white European esthetic standards. Establishment taster-makers for their part reject much, if not all, black art on the grounds that it falls short of their esthetic standards. The question of an absolute scale of critical values is being debated today on many grounds. The problem in this context is whether such absolutes as "significant form" exist, and whether art being made by black artists qualifies in terms of a hierarchy of such established values. My own experience with black art causes me to conclude that its quality today is largely on a level with what was produced in America during the thirties. Many of the characteristics of prewar American art—social protest, illustration, deliberate or unconscious primitivism, work derivative of established artists—exist among black artists.

Like the precisionists, realists and American-scene painters who tried to find dignity in native American themes and authenticity in native American forms, many contemporary black artists are attempting to reclaim their own heretofore repressed cultural heritage.

Whether one recognizes the possibility of a uniquely black art depends on one's recognition of black culture as distinct and separate from white American culture. How much of an African heritage has actually been preserved by black Americans, however, is debatable. Yet many black artists understandably feel that their dignity depends on redeeming their own cultural traditions. Within the black community as well as within universities and museums, new attention is being paid to African art. Exhibitions like the recent "Impact Africa" at the Harlem Studio Museum are presented now with regularity.

The direct influence of African art on contemporary black artists is an incredibly complicated matter, since African art was, in the beginning of the century, one of the most important sources for the whole modern movement. Without African prototypes, neither Picasso's nor Brancusi's break with the academic tradition is imaginable. The question is: can a contemporary black artist forget Picasso and Brancusi, turn directly to African sources, and produce anything of consequence in terms of world art?

Barbara Rose's recent publications include monographs on Claes Oldenburg and Helen Frankenthaler; she is also the author of "American Art Since 1900" and "American Painting." Her criticism in periodicals won the College Art Association's Mather Award in 1966 and 1969. She has taught at Queens College, the New School for Social Research, Sarah Lawrence College, the University of California at San Diego and, most recently, at Yale.

Bob Thompson, Judgment of Paris, oil, 1954, and Study for Last Painting, ink on paper, 1966; both Martha Jackson Gallery, New York

Although Bob Thompson died in Rome in 1966 at age 29, he left a large body of work testifying to his seriousness as an artist. In paintings like the Judgment of Paris, he turned the great themes of classical painting into haunted expressionist fantasies. The drawing for his last, unexecuted painting was based on Titian's Venus and Adonis. The struggle to record his personal nightmare is apparent in the authentically expressed anguish of his statement.

There is a lesson here, I believe, to be learned from the recent history of American art. American art rose above a provincial level mainly for two reasons: the W.P.A. provided work and exhibition possibilities for thousands of unknown artists (some of whom turned out to be Pollock, Gottlieb, Gorky, Rothko and Reinhardt); later the influx of European artists allowed firsthand experience with the most advanced art. Today the black artist faces a situation analogous to what faced the majority of American artists in the thirties: lack of funds and patronage, lack of exposure and criticism, lack of opportunity to practice technique and to experience the quality of masterpieces, not only of African art, but of all world art. Black artists today need and deserve time and space to work, patronage, encouragement and exhibitions. Wrongs are beginning to be righted, and museums are beginning to acquire works by neglected but genuinely gifted black artists of the past like the Colonial limner Joshua Johnston, and Eakins' pupil, the genre and landscape painter Henry O. Tanner.

Today the white Establishment is suffering from a healthy collective guilt complex toward black artists. Even though many would prefer the term "black art" to recede from memory as black artists are allowed more opportunities to participate in American culture at all levels, for the present they will use it to attract attention from the media and museums, which need labels in order to operate. Obviously, "black art" is a meaningless term if it encompasses everything from the unconscious surrealism of Minnie Evans to the academic landscapes of Richard Mayhew, to the sophisticated collages of Romare Bearden and the elegant welded sculpture of Richard Hunt.

For the first time, the black artist is in a position to keep pace with if not outstrip the innovations of advanced art. Essential to this development are the community art programs sponsored by institutions like the Brooklyn Museum, the Walker Art Center, the Corecoran Gallery and the Whitney Museum. Providing materials, instruction and field trips, these programs introduce ghetto youths to esthetic experiences closed off to them in the past. Uninhibited by any feelings of cultural inferiority, these young people are at last beginning to find outlets for their creative potential. Their work, with its boldness and directness, and its powerful imagery and expression, points to what black artists might contribute if allowed the opportunity.

My purpose in assembling the photographs on the following pages is to show the great range of work being done by black artists today in painting, sculpture, architecture, graphics and photography. Another article could easily be done illustrating the exceptional work in the minor arts and crafts such as jewelry, ceramics and textiles now coming out of the black community. The diversity and vitality of the work indicate to me the immense contribution black artists have to offer. Whether "black art" exists is basically a political question whose answer depends on the ability of America to become a genuinely integrated nation, both culturally and politically. For the present, however, one thing is manifestly clear: American culture desperately needs the infusion of fresh energy and creativity that black artists are in a unique position to contribute today.



(illustrations continue through page 67)

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Norman Lewis, Arrival and Departure, oil, 1968; collection of the artist.

Among the mature black artists, color abstractionist Norman Lewis is one of the most gifted. His gentle landscape abstractions, with their allusions to nature, clouds, sky and water rely on subtle color contrast to evoke a poetic image.

Sam Gilliam, Carousel Form II, acrylic on canvas, 1969; Jefferson Place Gallery, Washington, D.C.

A leading member of the Washington school of color painting, Gilliam has moved away from his early stained canvases (which were indebted to Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland) toward a highly original statement. Like a number of young American painters who are attempting to push abstract painting beyond the easel convention, Gilliam has begun to take his brilliantly splattered and tinted canvases off the stretcher, treating canvas as fabric and draping it informally on the wall or suspending it from the ceiling.

