

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

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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.



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"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.



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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.