

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

**T**he 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,

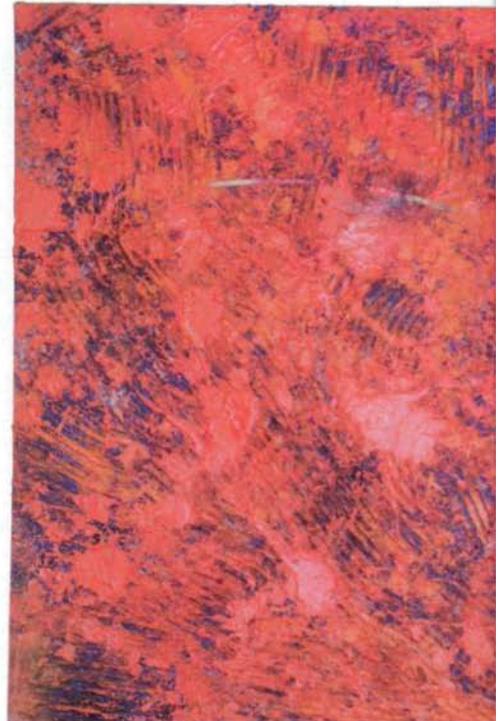


*Rail*, 1977, acrylic on canvas with collage, 90% by 181½ inches.  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

*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

