

## Artist Resources – Sam Gilliam (1933-2022)



Gilliam at work, 2015

Photography: Kristine Larsen

[Gilliam at Pace Gallery, New York](#)

[Gilliam at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles](#)

[MoMA exhibited six drape paintings](#) of Gilliam's in 1971, just prior to his groundbreaking participation in the Venice Biennale.

"I've always asked myself what can you do in this medium to have at least some impact. Make it good, make it right, you know, direct...it's not only the challenge to the painter but the lengths to which he goes just to communicate, because that's what the art form is about," [Gilliam told the Smithsonian Archives of American Art](#) during a four-day oral history in 1989.

"Art becomes a process of doing and not doing, of making things happen and not making things happen," Gilliam explained in a [2013 interview](#) for PBS program, *The Artist Toolbox*, in which he discussed the art market, public perception of abstract art, and the conceptual and material work of his practice.

[Gilliam spoke](#) about his career, practice, defining himself as a Black artist in the 1960s, and a "holistic" vision of abstract art in 2016 at The Menil Collection in conjunction with the collaborative exhibition, [Affecting Presence](#).

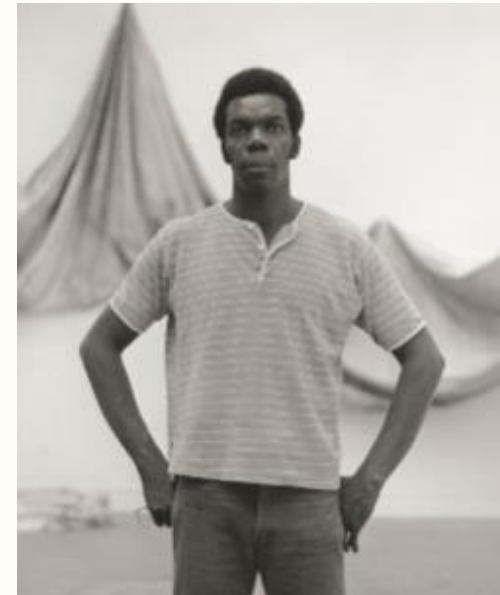
In honor of Gilliam's 2018 exhibition, [The Music of Color](#), at the Kunstmuseum Basel – the artist's first solo exhibition in Europe, which was also the first to focus on his early [innovative output from 1967 to 1973](#), *ArtNews* published an [interview from 1973](#) in which Gilliam spoke about spontaneity, stretched and hung canvas, and being a Black artist in America.

"You have to create some hope, I'm good at that... art is contained in the various ways that things call attention, that get you standing still, that get you puzzled, that get you thinking about it, and get you coming back," Gilliam reflected in a [2018 interview at his studio](#) in Washington D.C.

[The Brooklyn Rail](#) spoke to Gilliam in 2019 about his points of inspiration, early career in Washington, love of Jazz music, and how his practice continues to evolve, in conjunction with an exhibition of new works on paper at the [FLAG Art Foundation](#) and a display of early paintings at [Dia:Beacon](#). "Art comes from the idea of inversion, from the change you want to make to what you see and wherever you find it," Gilliam mused. "Repeated it in such a way that all the unused spaces between became activated."

Pace Gallery's [inaugural exhibition of Gilliam's work](#) in 2020 displayed three new bodies of work, including a recent venture into sculpture, in an immersive installation directed by the artist. Accompanying digital resources from the exhibition catalogue include essays looking back at Gilliam's career and the continuing relevance of his diverse practice as well as [an interview with curator and art historian Hans Ulrich Obrist](#).

In 2022, Washington D.C.'s [Hirshorn Museum](#) will honor Gilliam with a full career retrospective, his first museum survey in the states in 15 years.



Gilliam in D.C. studio, 1969  
Photography: John Gossage

Sam Gilliam (American, 1933-2022)

**Cut**, 1969

Acrylic on raw canvas with rawhide

Private Collection; L2026:15.1

Sam Gilliam moved to Washington, D.C. in the early 1960s and became an influential member of the Washington Color School. Among this loose group of abstract painters, Gilliam began exploring color as his subject and blurring the line between painting and sculpture. **Cut** is one of the artist's first "drape paintings" that continue to define his multifaceted career. The color-soaked, unstretched canvas is bound with cords and affixed to the wall, bringing painting into three dimensions. Gilliam later reflected: "When I did the drape paintings, I wasn't making sculpture, I was reacting against painting.... I didn't attack the canvas, I liberated it."

*On view May 6 – August 9, 2026*





Sam Gilliam (American, 1933-2022)

**Soft Melting**, 1972

Acrylic on beveled edge canvas

Private Collection; L2023:137.1

Sam Gilliam was an influential artist in the Washington Color School, a group of abstract and color field painters active in the Washington, D.C. area in the 1950s and 1960s. He was interested in blurring the line between painting and sculpture throughout his career, physically extending canvases out into space. **Soft Melting** is one of Gilliam's iconic "beveled edge" paintings that brings bright, contrasting colors towards the viewer. It is one of the earliest examples of the artist's experimentation with this reversed process, which he understood as "constructed painting." To Gilliam: "The surface is no longer the final plane of the work. It is instead the beginning of an advance into the theater of life."

*On view January 24 – April 28, 2024*

Sam Gilliam (American, 1933-2022)

**Wind Song**, 1965

Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection, Los Angeles; L2022:18.1

Sam Gilliam was a key member of the Washington Color School in the 1950s and 1960s, a group of abstract and color field painters active in the Washington, D.C. area. Along with artists including Morris Louis (1912-1962) and Kenneth Noland (1924-2010), Gilliam was interested in color as the subject of non-representational painting. Though he is best known for his “drape” paintings of color-soaked, unstretched canvas, Gilliam’s early work was inspired by European modernists and the geometric, saturated compositions of Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). The precise lines and rich colors of **Wind Song** are characteristic of this early moment in the artist’s career. Gilliam passed away in June 2022, leaving a rich legacy of contemporary abstract painting.

*On view July 6 – October 9, 2022*





Sam Gilliam (American, 1933-2022)

**Butterflies-Butterflies**, 2021

Acrylic, copper chop, aluminum granules, tin shot, encaustic medium, sawdust and flocking, paper collage

Private Collection; L2021:129.2

In the 1950s and 1960s, Sam Gilliam was a key member of the Washington Color School, a group of abstract and color field painters active in the Washington D.C. area. The African American abstractionist blurs the line between painting and sculpture, most recently by building up layers of paint, digging into the surface, and adding sculptural materials. **Butterflies-Butterflies** is one of the artist's "beveled edge" abstract paintings; the angled frame creates an illusion of flatness that disguises the work's physical depth. The painting was recently included in a solo exhibition at Pace Gallery in Hong Kong, the first display of Gilliam's work in Asia. Now in his late eighties, the artist continues to produce a prolific body of work that challenges the very definition of form, texture, canvas, and abstraction in contemporary art.

*On view January 19 – April 24, 2022*

Sam Gilliam (American, 1933-2022)

**Thrust**, 1967

Acrylic on canvas with beveled edge

Private Collection; L2020:118.5

Painter Sam Gilliam pursued a conceptually and materially diverse art training through scholarships at the University of Louisville in the 1950s before and after his service in the US Army. He rose to artistic prominence in Washington D.C. in the 1960s as a daringly radical Color Field painter with a ferocious appetite for art history and a wide range of friendships with other artists. Gilliam's sustained contributions to American abstraction over the next sixty years—such as his innovative beveled and draped canvases—are now receiving a surge of due recognition, placing him in the art historical canon alongside contemporaries and friends such as Ed Clark and Kenneth Noland (both on view).

With its ethereal constellations of color and liquid movement frozen in motion, **Thrust** is a stunning early example of Gilliam's beveled canvases, begun in 1967. Elaborating on the techniques developed by mid-century abstract artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, Gilliam poured paint directly onto unprimed, unstretched canvas, which he then folded and wrinkled to move the paint across the surface before attaching to custom-made stretchers with beveled edges. "I pour to experience the effect of gravity," Gilliam reflected in 1973. "I'm interested very much in impasto—even to the point where it escapes and cracks, when it really determines its total materiality and goes beyond the limit of what we would call control."

*On view January 13 – April 18, 2021*

#### **Extra Resources**

*Thrust* exhibited [in Mnuchin Gallery's 2017 exhibition](#), Gilliam's first in New York in twenty-five years

