Art in America

Color in Landscape

By Greg Allen
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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 Klingle 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 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 techniques

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.

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 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 earthwork—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.

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.

Endnotes

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, aaa.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, aaa.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.”