Rappolt, Mark, "Sam Gilliam," ArtReview, Issue 67, April 2013, pp. 76-79



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: Helies, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 184 cm, photo: Stephen Frietch; 65, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 141 x 142 cm, photo: Stephen Frietch

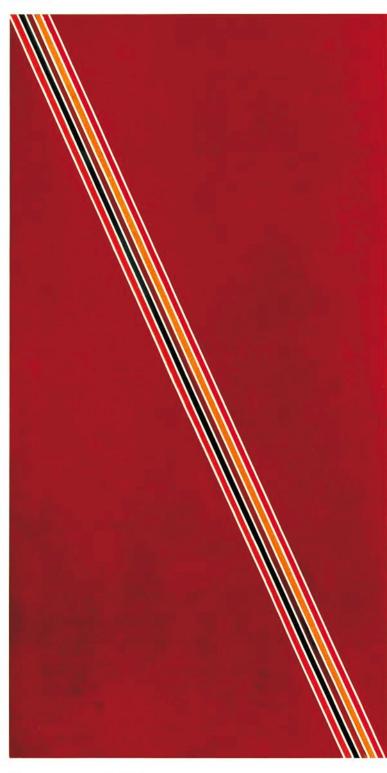
facing page:
Blue Let, 1965, acrylic on canvas,
181 x 119 cm, photo: Brandon



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

Rappolt, Mark, "Sam Gilliam," ArtReview, Issue 67, April 2013, pp. 76-79

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