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# ONE FROM LOUISVILLE TO WASHINGTON: BREAKTHROUGH

Sam Gilliam has, for as long as he can remember, made things. When he was a child, the objects of his preoccupation were wagons, decorating boards that he had help nailing together with Pop Tops, and other wonders of childhood. When he grew old enough to dream about making his own way in the world, he set out to become an artist. The seventh of eight children, he was a quiet child for whom being creative was the best way to avoid trouble—no trouble in particular, just the type that attracts little boys. To this end he was encouraged to draw, especially by his mother, Estery. One of her friends in Louisville, where Gilliam spent most of his childhood, further encouraged him when she bought one of his drawings for a nickel. Yet support for Gilliam's artistic interests extended beyond any one instance. As he recalls, "Almost all of my family members used their hands to create. My father was a carpenter; my mother was a member of a sewing group; my brother made a Model T Ford run; and my sister made paper dolls. In this atmosphere of construction, I too began to flourish."[1]

Gilliam's family moved to Louisville in 1942 from Tupelo, Mississippi, where he was born on November 30, 1933. Except for a stint in the Army (1956–58), during which he served as a company clerk at a base in Yokohama, Japan, and earned a sharpshooter badge, good conduct medal, and recognition as "soldier of the month," he remained there until after he earned his master's degree in fine arts from the University of Louisville in June 1961.

Louisville was legally a segregated city until the early 1960s, but its African American population nonetheless experienced many basic rights that were unavailable to blacks living in other cosmopolitan centers relatively nearby. In a monographic essay on Bob Thompson, an African American who studied

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painting at the University of Louisville just before Gilliam did, art historian Judith Wilson describes the history of race relations there as having an ambiguous character, reflecting the city's identity as neither a truly Southern nor a Northern locale. For example, despite being a bastion of slavery, Louisville was loyal to the Union during the Civil War and thereafter remained free of the anti-black violence and lynchings that were so prevalent elsewhere.[2] And whereas President Dwight D. Eisenhower had to send federal marshals to Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation ruling, a year earlier Louisville, only about 500 miles northeast of Little Rock, executed the "first successful school integration" plan without much difficulty.[3] Even so, by the time Gilliam was a graduate student, there were plenty of equal rights initiatives to defend and good reason, as he saw it, to organize public demonstrations. As president of the university's youth council and a regular participant in NAACP programs, he became schooled in civil disobedience strategies. He took part in many forms of activism, from sit-ins to pickets protesting segregation in public accommodations.[4]

By the end of graduate school Gilliam's creative focus was on making abstract figurative paintings similar to those associated with the Bay Area artists David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, and Nathan Oliveira. The California painters had been much in the art news, garnering attention for their strikingly anachronistic decision to give up nonobjective painting at a time when many believed that it offered the only avant-garde hope. The issues their art raised were at the heart of the debate Gilliam was already having internally and with which he would struggle for much of his early career: should he paint figuratively or abstractly; be controlled and articulate in his renderings or plumb more emotional resources in an effort to be expressive? In addition to reading about the Bay Area painters in *ARTnews* and *Arts Magazine,* Gilliam saw their work firsthand. In 1958, his first year in graduate school, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's *2nd Pacific Coast Biennial Exhibition,* which featured the work of the figurative abstractionists, traveled to Louisville's J. B. Speed Art Museum (now the Speed Art Museum).

A taste for the work of the Bay Area painters ran deep among students and professors alike at the University of Louisville. Ulfert Wilke, one of the city's most influential artists and a key figure in Gilliam's education, was especially partial to Diebenkorn.[5] Gilliam was more drawn to Oliveira as well as his and Diebenkorn's mentor, David Park. Like Oliveira's paintings, Gilliam's of the late 1950s are typically dark and muddy in tone, depicting single, faceless figures or groups of figures against blank canvas or dark backgrounds. The ambiguous atmospheres convey a sense of isolation and existential pathos, reflecting something of a literary sensibility.

The Bay Area painters were controversial and considered retrograde in some circles for having given up abstraction in favor of a so-called return to figuration. In Louisville they were regarded as exemplary precisely because of their apparent veneration of traditional approaches. Gilliam remembers the university art department as a conservative place that cultivated figurative imagery because of its perceived practicality. Louisville's professors imparted a cautious representational style and stressed "safe art working" and "safe art thinking," as Gilliam has stated, and directed their students toward sensible careers as art educators.[6]

During this period Gilliam wanted nothing more than to be an abstract painter, but nonfigurative approaches seemed foreclosed to him. Wilke, whose large-scale paintings depicted matrixes of calligraphic markings reminiscent of the work of Mark Tobey, was one of the few instructors who worked

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(far left)
**NATHAN OLIVEIRA**
*Man Walking*, 1958, oil on canvas, 60⅛ × 48⅛ in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. Photo: Lee Stalsworth.

**SAM GILLIAM**
*Untitled*, c. 1961, oil on canvas, 42⅛ × 33 in. Collection of the Artist. Photo: Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver.

in a nonobjective style. Nonetheless, he encouraged others to pursue a type of German expressionist figuration.[7] Charles Crödel, Gilliam's master's advisor and a fauve-inspired figurative painter, tore his student's thesis apart, arguing that it was too subjective and made no sense.[8] Crödel's instruction, which had a great impact on Gilliam, was historical in nature and grounded firmly in academic discipline. It may have inspired an abiding respect for art, art history, and the teacher-student relationship, but it also felt constricting to the young painter.[9]

Gilliam took to Oliveira and the Bay Area style not because it was safe to do so, but because it was an opportunity to flirt with abstraction—to be intuitive, extemporaneous, and, as he felt at the time, avant-garde. The Bay Area artists “were expressionistic,” he told *Washington Post* critic Benjamin Forgey in 1989, “and they were about painting and drawing at the same time, and they were about accidents.”[10] Gilliam admired their gutsy immediacy, the way they seemed to do everything at once: abstraction/figuration, drawing/painting, thinking/making, spilling paint and turning such random events into extraordinary accomplishments. The California artists may have turned to figures because they saw them as vehicles for the abstract, believing, in effect, that the difference between abstraction and figuration was not as great as received opinion suggested. But Gilliam saw the value of their work in opposite terms. Bay Area figuration was important to him because it was abstract, or at least because it represented a way for him to further the abstract quotient in his own work. The California painters may not have believed in an absolute distinction between the abstract and the figurative, but Gilliam

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did, and he wanted nothing more than to reject the tenets of his education and pursue a style that seemed to him more current, immediately personal, and potentially radical.

### TO WASHINGTON

Gilliam moved to Washington, DC, in 1962 to marry a young journalist named Dorothy Butler, who had recently been hired to work at the City Desk of the *Washington Post*. At the time he was not aware of the celebrated Washington painters Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, leaders of the so-called Washington Color School, or of the fact that post-painterly abstraction (one way to describe the style with which these artists are associated) was in its heyday and that Dupont Circle, a hip neighborhood in the heart of the city, was an art world boomtown. He does recall having heard that Washington had a good art scene but not necessarily for abstract art. Back in Louisville, Ulfert Wilke had recommended Robert Gates, a well-regarded painting professor who was interested in the Bay Area style and taught at American University. Gilliam's initial plan was to enroll in a course or two with Gates, in part to sustain the comfortable, sheltering experience of university life.[11] It is a testament to Gates's sharp eye and honesty that he turned Gilliam away after seeing his work, explaining that Gilliam would not benefit dramatically from being his student.

Gilliam also sought out James Porter, the figurative painter and brilliant scholar of African American art who had been chair of Howard University's art department since the fall of 1953. Gilliam wanted a teaching position at the historically black university, but Porter denied him a job, telling him, as Gilliam recalls, that he was "too 'passionate' a painter to be worried about teaching."[12] This may have been a polite way for Porter to avoid having to enumerate all the reasons why Gilliam's Bay Area style did not ally well with the direction in which Howard's art department was moving at the time.[13] David Driskell, who had returned to Howard to teach in 1962, and Lois Mailou Jones were then dynamic and influential forces on Howard's faculty, talented painters working increasingly with artistic forms and content that were perceived to be specific to African American culture and, arguably, to black artists. Porter's aesthetic outlook may have been universalistic in character and closely linked with integration-era thinking and the idea that race should not play a role in the production of art or in determinations of its quality, but he still appreciated the changing cultural milieu of the 1960s. With the popularization of radical politics in the offing—the Black Power movement was just a few years away—and social insurgency continuing to rise owing to a variety of major factors, including the Vietnam War, Gilliam's somewhat ethereal and apparently raceless figures may have seemed irrelevant to Porter. He suggested that Gilliam think about teaching at the high school level, which, he said, would interfere less with Gilliam's goal of becoming an exhibiting artist. Gilliam heeded the advice and over time came to consider Porter a close friend and colleague. Gilliam ultimately took a job at Washington's McKinley High School, a public institution similar to New York's High School of Performing Arts. His five years there were the first of many spent teaching art.

Gilliam moved to Washington for one main reason, his wife, and he cultivated many ambitions there, but he did not aspire to participate in the civil rights movement. In 1963, shortly after he arrived, demonstrations for racial equality had reached new heights, with Martin Luther King's March on Wash-

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ington. Gilliam and his wife participated in the march, but in this high-pitched activist environment, he felt disillusioned. For all intents and purposes, this was his last public demonstration for social change. "Gilliam emerged from the movement disenchanted," wrote Vivien Raynor in a 1974 human interest story on the artist for the *New York Times Magazine:* "Not only did white intransigence, especially in the unions, remain virtually unchanged, he felt, but the sum total of his activism had amounted to little more than gaining political honors for others."[14] He adopted the position that art is at least as important as politics when it comes to creating new ways of thinking about society and moving it forward. Once he relocated to Washington, where most people believe that nothing is as important as politics, he became even more principled in his newly defined commitment to art.

"I've always been too involved in art . . . to actually get involved with the other," Gilliam said in 1994 as he recalled his decision, made more than three decades earlier, not to be an activist.[15] The idea that politics is "other" to the concerns of art waxes perennially in the annals of art. As the 1960s rolled into the 1970s, the war in Vietnam escalated, protests against it at home intensified, civil rights marches gave way to militant declarations of Black Power, and the debate over how to draw (or not draw) a line in the sand between art and politics became heated once again. Black Power, one among many protest movements of the day, influenced not only the goals and character of African American political activism but also the look, sound, and feel of broad swaths of culture, from popular forms to painting and the visual arts. As a result, for many artists of the time, especially African Americans, it was imperative that they distinguish sharply, or not distinguish, between the act of making art and acting for social change. For his part, Gilliam struggled mightily to avoid the political turmoil and keep his work removed from such associations. But these social forces tended to overwhelm artists, as will be explored further in this volume, regardless of the style of their work or their efforts to stay on the sidelines.

#### TOM DOWNING AND THE WASHINGTON COLOR SCHOOL

Tom Downing was a core member of the Washington Color School, a group of painters who were categorized as such not because they were intimate colleagues (in fact they did not always get along), but because of their closely related painting techniques. By the late 1950s Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, the first generation, as it were, had devised a method of making color-field paintings by staining unprimed, unsized canvas with acrylic-based pigment. Not long thereafter Howard Mehring, Gene Davis, Paul Reed, and Downing, the four artists who completed the group's nucleus, were working in similar ways. Their shared techniques grew out of their interactions with the District of Columbia's cultural milieu, and the resulting association has been a powerful and lasting one. To this day the Color School is remembered in the District, often with much nostalgia, as the only local movement to have transcended the city's regional status.

When Gilliam arrived in Washington in 1962, he was unaware of the accomplishments of the Color School and was blindsided by the excitement that its artists had generated. Although the leaders of the group no longer lived in Washington (Morris Louis had recently died, and Kenneth Noland had moved to New York), that did not spoil the thrill that Gilliam was experiencing as a new arrival in the

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city.[16] Collectors, curators, and critics across the country were taking notice of Washington's vital art scene, and the idea of the Color School was just beginning to hit its stride.

Downing was a professor at the Corcoran School of Art (now the Corcoran College of Art + Design) and unique among his Color School colleagues for his commitment to the city's art students. Writing for three different publications between 1968 and 1970, critics Andrew Hudson and LeGrace Benson, curator Diana F. Johnson of the Baltimore Museum of Art, and director James Harithas of the Corcoran Gallery of Art all affirmed the supportive role Downing played for young artists in the area during the 1960s.[17] Gene Davis, like Downing, was a professor at the Corcoran and known for taking a special interest in his students and attending almost every gallery opening in town.[18] But Downing's relationships with the younger generation extended beyond the galleries, classrooms, and studios. His casual Zen-like attitude made him particularly appealing to would-be acolytes, and the fact that he preferred to meet in bars made him approachable. He was friendly, down-to-earth, and, because of his success, a symbol of the normative art world. By 1966 he had participated in major group shows at the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Hanging out with him, a District artist with New York cachet, his young devotees must have delighted in being in some way connected to a select echelon of the art world.

Tom Downing was probably the greatest single influence on Gilliam's artistic development in the years right after his arrival in Washington. He befriended Gilliam in 1963 at the opening of the younger artist's first solo exhibition, which took place at the Adams Morgan Gallery, and he began encouraging him almost immediately. In 1965, two years following their initial meeting, Downing remembered how he had first come to admire Gilliam's art. What impressed him most were Gilliam's "sensitive watercolor drawings, unusually fine quality, better than the paintings."[19] Downing thus quickly recognized Gilliam's facility as both a watercolorist and an abstractionist, for the only nonobjective work in the show was a watercolor. His insight was prescient, coming to him years before Gilliam started treating his acrylic paints like watercolors and his canvases like sheets of paper, an approach that yielded the abstract paintings for which he first became famous.

Gilliam had been making small, freely organized abstract watercolors on Japanese paper as a standard part of his repertoire since graduate school. Professor Wilke demanded the works on paper because he felt that Gilliam treated his canvases with too much respect, as though the raw materials were somehow precious.[20] Watercolor painting, Wilke believed, would help Gilliam temper the overly controlling attitude that he brought to bear on the application of paint. Unable to stop the watery pigment from soaking into and spreading across the paper, Gilliam was indeed forced to concede to the medium. It was only after Downing singled out the one abstract watercolor in the Adams Morgan Gallery show, however, that Gilliam began to consider seriously his talent for painting loosely.

At his best, Downing was as gifted a painter as any, but his recognition did not extend beyond Washington or the decade of the 1960s. *Washington Post* art critic Paul Richard considers Downing to have been "the least lucky of the Color Painters."[21] According to J. W. Mahoney, an artist and critic who was one of Downing's students in the mid-1970s, the reason for Downing's misfortune and, later, his historical neglect was his "general intransigence" in the face of dominant forces, namely, Clement Greenberg, the renowned and trenchant modernist critic, which "cost him notoriety and influence."[22]

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**THOMAS DOWNING**
*Ring Three*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 109¾ × 109⅜ in. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift of Vincent Melzac.

Greenberg was indeed a powerful critic of modern art (in the survey text *American Visions* Robert Hughes describes him as the most influential of the twentieth century), and nowhere was his impact more strongly felt among artists than in Washington in the late 1950s and early 1960s.[23] In 1960, when Greenberg published the essay “Louis and Noland,” which introduced the young artists and the burgeoning Washington art world to his international readership, his authority was reaching new heights. Collectors, curators, and museum directors were following his lead with an almost religious devotion and buying art that he deemed significant, notably paintings by Louis and Noland. The consequence was a worldwide self-perpetuating network of power that reflected his tastes.[24] That same year he delivered his paper “Modernist Painting” for the United States Information Agency (USIA) as part of its Voice of America forum lecture series. His audience was estimated at more than 5 million people.[25] Probably Greenberg’s most famous and widely read essay, “Modernist Painting” is a pointed rendering of the formalist theories behind his critical opinions. In grand historical terms it lays the groundwork that explains why, for example, he viewed Louis and Noland as the best up-and-coming painters of their day.

For a number of reasons 1960 was a banner year for Greenberg, and his decision to endorse Louis and Noland was providential, both for these two unknown artists and for their hometown.[26] Greenberg was absolutely crucial to the flowering that was taking place in Washington. When he anointed Louis and Noland, his pronouncement washed like a wave over the art world. The artists became stars

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**HANS HOFMANN**
*Golden Blaze*, 1958, oil on canvas, 72 × 60 in. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift of the Friends of the Corcoran. © 2005 Estate of Hans Hofmann / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Peter Harholdt.

overnight, and Washington went along for the ride. For years to follow, DC-based critics fantasized about the city's future as both a political and a cultural capital that might, in the case of culture, even rival New York.[27]

Downing's paintings, such as *Ring Three* (1969), a work from his striking Dial series, look like ideal and poetic manifestations of Greenberg's formalist theories. Their lyrical, almost magical brew of color, shape, and canvas evokes a calm celestial order and makes for some of the most elegant minimal images of the 1960s. But Greenberg never wrote about them. And in response to the great critic's implicit disapproval, Downing became antagonistic, especially to his colleagues who had won Greenberg's favor. He criticized them to his young cohorts and espoused theories of his own that were meant, at least in part, to prick the ears of the many people who had embraced Greenberg's ideas and espoused them through their own writings.[28]

Greenberg may have been Washington's most important catalyst during these years, but for Gilliam it was Downing. The latter's ideas represented brazen contradictions of Greenberg's—and the art world's dominant—mantra about post-painterly abstraction, the stylistic name that Greenberg gave to Color School and similar types of painting. In contrast to the critic's narrow formalist take, which focused almost exclusively on color, surface, and the framing edge, Downing's ideas were expansive,

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and Gilliam found in them fresh intellectual challenges. Gilliam suggests as much in his vivid recollections of Downing's sweeping explications of the Color School: "[Tom] was one of the first persons that . . . let me know that Washington Color School painting wasn't about what was being written by Greenberg. . . . Tom would interestingly tell you that it was only about seeing; and then later he would tell you that it was only about color; or that it was only about the music of color; or the way that you could structure color. And then later he would say that it was like pop art."[29]

If Greenberg was a formalist, then Downing was a free-formalist, formalism having been just one among many tools in his store of analytical resources. For Downing, modernist art's implicit meanings were various, evolving, and derived from a much broader outlook than what Greenberg was proposing in the 1960s. One finds traces of Greenberg's dictates in Downing's thinking—Downing was deeply invested in the two-dimensional formalism of his designs—but also copious antithetical ruminations, including attempts to delve beyond the surface into the spirituality of abstraction.[30] Gilliam absorbed the lessons well, and they were nonprescriptive, liberal, and rooted in a philosophically universalist midcentury ethos. Gilliam has always remained open to the idea that abstraction's potential, both visual and conceptual, is limitless.

Downing was, in essence, a shocking influence for Gilliam. His paintings, ideas, and of course his positive appraisals of the small watercolors on Japanese paper helped propel Gilliam to the turning point in his career when he renounced the figure and embraced abstraction with zeal.[31] Gilliam remembers the decisive moment when the switch occurred: "It happened that once when I was doing a figurative study the construction of that composition paralleled a construction of an artist I was interested in—Hans Hofmann—so, immediately, instead of painting the figure I changed courses and started to paint the structure."[32] It was Hofmann's pragmatic and classical approach to composition building, his often-repeated catchphrase, "Push answers with Pull, and Pull with Push," that initially appealed to Gilliam. *Study Scape* (1963), a painting from about this time that no longer exists, except as a 35mm slide image in the artist's archives, evokes Hofmann's late work and paintings like *Golden Blaze*. Gilliam was dedicated to exploring not only Hofmann's theories but also the look of his paintings.

Hofmann was the first of a number of artists working with nonobjective imagery whose styles and techniques Gilliam researched in detail and tried on for size. These admired artists represented both new directions that Gilliam might take in his own work and obstacles to overcome as he sought to make his own contributions to the history of modern art. From 1963 to 1965 Gilliam experimented broadly, rapidly moving through a variety of styles and formats. He made a series of striped paintings that reveal the long glance he must have given to the work of Gene Davis. Later came a series of symmetrical grids and rectangular shapes in muted colors that have a distilled formal atmosphere. The nod here is not so much to a particular artist but to a prominent aesthetic of the day, minimalism, and the paintings of artists like Jo Baer and Tony Smith.

Gilliam's work from this period did not represent his own language as much as it did attempts "to get away from the look of so many painters who were capable of opening my eyes," as he once stated.[33] His efforts in this regard link him with a venerable tradition of artists who learned by mimicking the work of esteemed forebears.[34] For the numerous artists who adopt this method of study, co-opting another artist's style might become appropriation or another interpretive strategy whereby something

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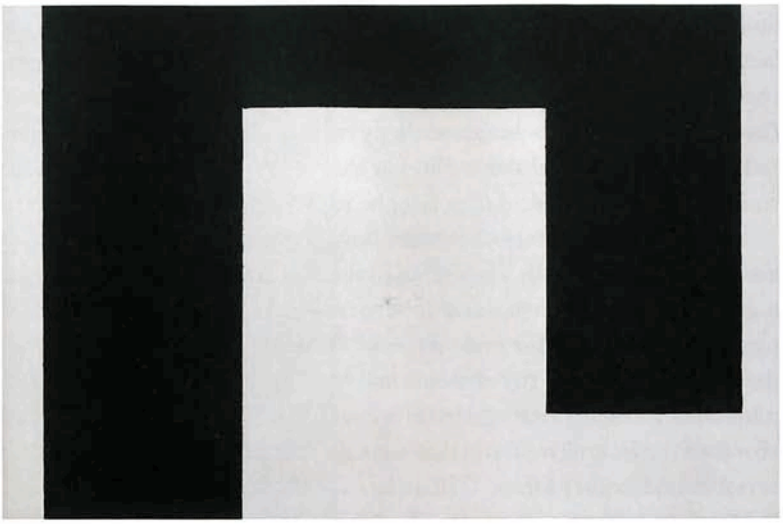

(left) **SAM GILLIAM**
*Untitled*, 1964, oil on canvas, 71 × 16½ in. Collection of the Artist. Photo: Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver.

(above) **TONY SMITH**
*Untitled*, 1962, oil on canvas, 24¾ × 36½ in. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift in memory of Thomas E. Carnes, M.D. © 2005 Estate of Tony Smith/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Mark Gulezian/Quicksilver.

is given back to the discipline just as something has been ostensibly taken away. Gilliam's desire was to master those artists who mattered to him, with an eye toward transcending their accomplishments.

Working through past styles to present ones, it seems inevitable that Gilliam would eventually come face to face with the towering figures who were his neighbors. And so it was that by early 1965 he was trying on the mantle of Washington Color School painter. Downing, of course, was Gilliam's key resource in this regard, and he dutifully provided his cohort with information about all the tools and techniques he needed to make authentic Color School work. As was characteristic of Color School paint-

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ing, Gilliam began with bare cotton-duck canvas, unsized and unprimed. He drew his initial design using adhesive tape—it was typical for Color School painters, except for the late Louis, to rely on some form of mechanical assistance to establish their compositions. Using a brush, Gilliam proceeded to paint with exactly the same brand of acrylics employed by his colleagues, Magna acrylic resin paints, a medium first invented and put on the market by Leonard Bocour in 1946.[35] The viscous pigment soaked directly into the fabric and stained the cotton fibers. In the finished product, as in all classic Color School painting, surface and color are indistinguishable from each other. Surface and design are one.

Gilliam's first works in the style are compelling ventures in color theory and two-dimensional design. *Long Green* (1965) is rectangular with a deep red field divided diagonally by stripes in assorted hues of yellow, green, and blue and by the bare strips of canvas that separate them. Not as dim as some of his other pictures from this period, it is nonetheless a rather leaden rendition of the generally ebullient Color School palette, as exemplified by one of Morris Louis's last works, *Hot Half* (1962), which has a similarly spare and cerebral composition.

Each development in Gilliam's work became a foundation for the next stage. He moved forward by accretion—of ideas, styles, and forms. Compositions like *Long Green* gave way to the Pennant paintings: for example, *Shoot Six* (1965), which appears to combine the previous diagonal compositions with a fan format that Kenneth Noland was using in 1963. *Shoot Six* is a restive work whose composition may be dissected in multiple ways. Bare and stained canvas areas suggest negative and positive spaces that separate into small triangles or combine to form larger ones. The geometrical play may cause the organizational structure to appear to shift, depending on how one visually assembles the triangles that make up the picture's formal armature. *Shoot Six* is thus simultaneously monolithic and divided, holistic and in a constant state of flux. Its geometric order emanates from the lower right-hand corner, the vanishing point as it were, which gives the impression that the image is shooting out into the space of the canvas, into three dimensions. There, in the corner, where Gilliam let the colors bleed together, the tight structure of the composition disintegrates into a murky blend. *Shoot Six* is decidedly not "one-shot" painting, as Noland liked to describe his work, a gestalt able to be perceived fully in a glance, like an icon or a sign. Rather, it is animated. The composition seems to have a different design emphasis depending on how or when one looks at it.

Gilliam showed his Color School paintings in 1965 at the Jefferson Place Gallery, then the city's premier commercial venue for contemporary art.[36] Jefferson Place was frequently in the art world's spotlight and visited by such luminaries as Henry Geldzahler, who made purchases there for the Woodward Collection, and Clement Greenberg. Downing secured the opportunity for Gilliam when he suggested to Nesta Dorrance, then the gallery's owner and director, that she include him in a group show planned for the 1965 season.[37] Instead, Dorrance gave him a solo showcase.

Gilliam sold only one painting from the exhibition, which garnered very little critical attention, probably because the paintings were perceived as derivative. In a magazine article published about the time of the exhibition, Cornelia Noland characterized Gilliam as "one of the younger (31), less touted 'Washington Color Painters.'"[38] Benjamin Forgey, who was then a critic at the *Washington Star,* echoed this characterization a year later when he wrote that Gilliam was "one of the minor followers in the wake of the color school."[39] And in a review of the 1966 group exhibition *The Hard Edge Trend* at the

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(left) **SAM GILLIAM**
*Long Green*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 24 in. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift of Walter Hopps in memory of Bradley Pischel. Photo © Peter Steinhauer.

(above) **MORRIS LOUIS**
*Hot Half*, 1962, acrylic resin on canvas, 63⅛ × 63⅛ in. Courtesy Diane Upright Fine Art LLC. © 1993 Marcella Louis Brenner. Photo: Steven Sloman.

National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum), *Washington Post* critic Andrew Hudson offered the following: “Sam Gilliam’s ‘shaped canvas’ painting is poorly executed. One wonders whether Gilliam wants his colors to run into one another or not, and why he doesn’t try giving up sharp edges and defined color areas and see what happens. Too much of the work here seems restricted within a concept: these present-day Washington ‘Color Painters’ are a long way still from reaching the emotional imagination and freedom of Noland or Louis.”[40]

Gilliam was clearly not winning accolades, but he had nonetheless successfully worked his way into the Washington Color School, a connection he appreciated because it represented a form of art world

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**SAM GILLIAM**
*Shoot Six*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 56 × 56⅛ in. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift of Walter Hopps in memory of Bradley Pischel. Photo: Ed Owen.

acceptance. As he said in a 1985 interview with curator Joseph Jacobs: “There was a sense of being associated with a very radical group within Washington. Because abstract painting wasn't that accepted, there was the feeling that your understanding of it was personal and that it had a necessary significance for your personal survival. Your understanding of it made you part of the rest of the community. For the first time I felt like an artist ought to feel. Not only did I create an image, but my personality took hold. It became very important to become known as one of the youngest members of the Washington Color Field School.”[41] Gilliam's association with the Color School has endured and has been enormously significant in determining how critics and art historians have understood his accomplishments.

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**SAM GILLIAM**
*Paleo*, 1966, acrylic on canvas, 78⅞ × 78⅞ in. Collection of Annie Gawlak. Photo: Mark Gulezian/Quick-Silver.

To this day he is often celebrated as a member of the group's second or third generation, depending on one's point of view, and its most important heir.[42] It is telling that the work he actually produced in this style fell shy of contemporary critical standards and that his signature achievements, which would come later, incorporated ways of working and aesthetic ideals that were overtly antithetical to Color School modes and tenets.

Always searching, in 1966 Gilliam began work on a new painting by drawing on the canvas using adhesive tape, as was his wont, and then staining the unmasked portions, either with a brush or sponge. This time, however, he removed the tape while the paint was wet and allowed the different colors and

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**SAM GILLIAM**
*Medley,* 1966, acrylic on canvas, 81 × 80 in. The Baltimore Museum of Art, National Endowment for the Arts and Matching Trustee Funds, BMA 1972.12.

shapes to bleed into each other. The work in question, *Paleo* (1966), marks Gilliam's first application on large-scale canvas of the watercolor methods that had yielded some of his most admired work to that point. *Paleo*'s image was loose, the design much more elusive than the hard-edge paintings he had been making. Beginning on the left with light green, a series of colors fanned out with fluency across the canvas: yellow, red, a narrow swath of blue violet, and finally orange. The gentle shifts from one hue to the next endowed the underlying triangular shapes with an organic quality. Gilliam was turning away from the geometry that characterized the work of almost all other Color School painters and toward the fluidity that distinguished Morris Louis. *Medley* (1966), which soon followed *Paleo,* represents a push further into the territory of the improvisational. Here, the surface has given way to a grand melange of swirling gray and steel blue, but deep within one may still discern the vestiges of the Pennant composition.

Paul Richard argued in 1967 that the most successful works from this transitional period were those that lacked any evidence of premeditated design, such as *Red Petals* (1966). The all-over compositions and vaporous effects of these paintings are the consequences of a radically different way of working. In contradistinction to *Shoot Six, Paleo,* and *Medley,* when Gilliam set out to make *Red Petals,* he had no preconceived notion about how it would look when finished. Rather than determine beforehand *what* to paint, such as a pennant shape, he reconsidered a preceding assumption. He turned his attention to the issue of process. The question now was *how* to paint. He continued to work with thinned acrylics on raw canvas, which he later stretched, but he added a single procedural directive: paint fast.[43] He intensified his improvisational engagement with the canvas by pouring the paint directly onto the surface. He wanted the image to emerge automatically, as if by itself.

The technique recalls that of many abstract expressionists who made gestural and other seemingly automatic modes of painting—dripping and splashing among them—stock repertoires of the

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1950s. Gilliam was walking back across the bridge between Pollock and post-painterly abstraction that Helen Frankenthaler, one of the first soak-stain painters, famously represented for Louis and Noland. He was digging up the roots of the post-painterly style and exploring the guttural, painterly methods against which many a cerebral contemporary artist—whether post-painterly abstractionists, pop artists, or minimalists—was still reacting. While these contemporaries used adhesive tape (Kenneth Noland), photomechanically derived silkscreens (Rauschenberg and Warhol), and industrial manufacturers (Judd and LeWitt), Gilliam was bucking the trend and cultivating an unmediated relationship with his materials. At the height of mid-1960s *cool,* he was adopting a *hot* and expressive aesthetic attitude.

The only suggestions of order in *Red Petals*' brooding acrylic outpouring are the traces of the process by which Gilliam created it, marks caused by the impromptu intermingling of red, yellow, and blue paint. The ringlike halos to the left and right of center and the diagonals that crisscross through them, dividing the composition more or less into quadrants, give structure to what would otherwise be a thoroughly elusive torrent of color. Gilliam purposely created the circular forms by allowing the colors to pool together on the canvas where they now appear. He made the crisscrossing diagonals by manipulating the canvas and the paint so that the colors would rest adjacent to each other in some areas and bleed into one another in other places. There was intentionality to the process, but it did not necessarily equal the final design. *Red Petals* evinces a delicate balance between control and chaos, one that Gilliam would continue to explore.

*Washington Post* critic Paul Richard was very taken by Gilliam's work from this period, but he argued astutely that it revealed an artist not yet mature and still in the throes of transformation. Thinking ahead to Gilliam's future output, he wrote, "it is [his] willingness to discover, experiment, reject and then move on, that is Gilliam's greatest strength."[44] Richard not only suggested that Gilliam's best work was yet to come but also pinpointed at an early date one of his distinguishing characteristics as an artist: a virtually boundless creative spirit and voracious hunger for new aesthetic experiences.

### WALTER HOPPS AND THE WASHINGTON GALLERY OF MODERN ART

As Barbara Rose put it, "The reason Sam is Sam, and he's not Ken Noland, and he's not any of those other people, is because his dialogue was not with Greenberg, it was with Walter Hopps."[45] Hopps was already a legendary figure in the art world for his visionary contributions to the Los Angeles scene when he left California in 1966 to become a fellow at Washington's Institute for Policy Studies, a liberal think tank.[46] According to Calvin Tomkins, the institute's founders, Marcus Raskin and Richard Barnet, brought Hopps to town because they "were interested in having a resident fellow who could think (and write) about issues of art and public policy."[47] As Hopps described the opportunity in 1967, it gave him "a good, long chance to think through public policy towards the arts, to examine *who* does *what* for *whom*."[48]

Raskin remembers Hopps devoting much of his time to strategizing about how to revitalize Washington aesthetically through art.[49] One idea was to strengthen the role of artists in the low-income, inner-city neighborhoods where they lived as a way to foster cultural growth and community development. Regular open studios enabled folks living in the same area to share the same space, an aesthetic

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**SAM GILLIAM**
*Red Petals*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 88 × 93 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. Photo: Ed Owen.

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context, and use it as a starting point for discussing how to improve their immediate environment. Like many cities at the time, Washington was a hotbed of race-based tension and conflict, a fact made abundantly clear by the riotous outbreak in early April 1968 following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Even DC's art community was changing, though it had a history of being integrated and fostering constructive relations among people of various cultural backgrounds. A major loss to the scene occurred in 1969, when the Barnett Aden Gallery closed. It was African American owned and operated, and as a key venue for art by Europeans as well as white and black Americans, it had been vital in cultivating an audience for modern art in the capital. The shift from the civil rights era to the Black Power movement was affecting interactions between black and white artists, and African Americans were participating less and less in Washington's mainstream art world.[50] At the Institute for Policy Studies, Hopps attended seminars with people like Herbert Marcuse and Stokely Carmichael, and he met Paul Goodman, one of his intellectual heroes.[51] These were radical thinkers theorizing about social change. The institute encouraged Hopps's aspiration to transform Washington and, more specifically, according to Gilliam, to figure out ways "to better integrate the needs of black artists into Washington as a city."[52]

No single individual contributed more to Washington's art scene from 1966 to 1972—and to Gilliam's professional development during that period—than Walter Hopps. He put his research into practice beginning in 1967, when he became curator and acting director of the Washington Gallery of Modern Art (WGMA). Throughout the 1960s Washington was blossoming as a contemporary art center, in large part because of the WGMA. Plans were developing for the new Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the National Gallery of Art's East Wing, both of which opened in the 1970s, but in the 1960s the most proximate sign of growth on the institutional front was the WGMA, whose doors opened to the public in October 1961.[53] In the end, the WGMA remained open for only seven years, but during its short life span it was *the* major institutional force in contemporary art in Washington.[54]

The WGMA was in dire straits financially when its board of trustees sought out and hired Hopps. He quickly turned the institution around and rescued it from imminent demise. "Beginning with a deficit of some $2000," reported Joanna Eagle in the *Washington Post*, "Hopps managed to build up a surplus of over $23,000" by the end of December 1967 and "almost tripled the Gallery's membership."[55] The man who had been the WGMA's hope had become its curatorial and administrative star. In 1968, with the WGMA seemingly out of the woods, Eagle reminded her readers that when Hopps had taken over the struggling institution in 1967, the *New York Times* had named him "the most gifted museum man on the West Coast (and, in the field of contemporary art, possibly in the Nation)."[56] She, like a number of DC critics at the time, was imagining a golden future for the city's art scene: "[Hopps] was one of the people responsible for Los Angeles becoming the second-most important center for contemporary art in the United States. It is possible he could do the same here."[57]

Before Hopps's arrival, the WGMA drew national and scholarly audiences with stellar exhibitions of blue-chip international masters, such as Franz Kline and Vincent van Gogh. In part because of budget constraints, Hopps changed the orientation and adopted a regional focus. He appealed to local crowds through exhibitions and special events, and he worked especially hard to involve the city's large African American population.[58] One among many such instances took place in 1967 when he commissioned Lloyd McNeil, the African American painter and musician, to do a major installation "to which," reported the critic Douglas Davis, "Hopps regularly bussed, thanks to an outside grant, hundreds of schoolchildren."[59]

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Hopps reached out to serious artists throughout the area and was treasured by them as a result.[60] In an unpublished history of the WGMA, art historian Sue Scott writes that his programming was impressive even if "the original strategic vision of the gallery and its founders had been lost."[61]

Walter Hopps was "the glue," to quote master printmaker and artist Lou Stovall, at the heart of Washington's contemporary art world.[62] Even more than Clement Greenberg, he was an incredible catalyst for the city. He was more generous than Greenberg. He invigorated the art scene at large by playing a pivotal role in the careers of many artists, as opposed to just a select few.[63] In addition to bringing artists together, in 1968 he enabled the remarkable merger of the WGMA into the Corcoran Gallery of Art. With its new Dupont Center, the Corcoran became a newly vital force. "No other art institution in town of late," wrote Benjamin Forgey in 1969, "has done [as] much to support the kind of healthy fermentation necessary to the creative accomplishment."[64]

Hopps's support directly affected the careers of the artists he championed. Rockne Krebs, Ed McGowin, Carroll Sockwell, and a number of others benefited from exhibitions that he organized and an artist-in-residence grant program that he established through the WGMA. But no one benefited in more ways than Sam Gilliam. In addition to being a supportive curator and source of financial assistance, Hopps was, especially for Gilliam, a friend, intimate critic, and great emotional resource.

Hopps began to play a crucial role for the artist in 1967 as he was preparing for his solo exhibition at the Phillips Collection. About this time Gilliam was awarded an individual artist's grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which he used to take time off from teaching at McKinley High School and, at the urging of his wife, Dorothy, to purchase a house in the Mount Pleasant area of Washington.[65] Gilliam was making impressive strides professionally, but he was just managing to get by financially. By then he and Dorothy had two children, Stephanie and Melissa, and were about to have their third, Leah. Dorothy "was as nervous as hell" during this period, as Gilliam recalls, because she, as he, was not sure how they were going to make it from month to month.

Having spent his NEA grant, Gilliam faced the impending need to return to work as a teacher. It was around December 1967 when Hopps reported to Gilliam that he had at last secured the finances to institute the WGMA artist-in-residence studio program. He promised Gilliam that in January he would deliver $5,000 in grant money, a studio workshop downtown, and $50,000 to fund the studio's ongoing operations. Gilliam did not move into the studio until April 1968, when it was finally made available to him. And it was not until around June that he received his $5,000 check. In other words, Gilliam lived and worked full time as an artist for at least six months on the mere promise of financial support, both from Hopps and from sales at the Jefferson Place Gallery. Although unnerving, even at the time he was able to see the value in risking his family's financial security and not returning to his day job. He remembers exactly how he felt at this critical juncture: "I said, 'God, I used to go to work *every day*. And here I survived at least six months [pounding the table for emphasis] just on the promise of $5,000 but [laughing] I still don't have it!' I said, 'Hell, I'm learning how to do something. . . .' It took a lot of guts just to make out like that."[66] By making promises and eventually fulfilling them, inspiring hope, and forcing Gilliam to trust his instincts, Hopps was the stimulus and guide that enabled the artist to take his first and greatest leap of faith as a professional artist.

The grant and studio workshop program that Hopps administered under the auspices of the WGMA was funded by the Washington philanthropists Leni and Phillip Stern and the Stern Foundation and

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by deaccessioning the WGMA's permanent collection, which by that time included Gilliam's *Sky Cord* (1966).[67] The program's purpose was to invigorate the struggling WGMA and the local arts community by reaching out and bringing people in, artists and audiences alike.[68] Hopps created three studios, each with a different focus, and many of the grantees later participated in exhibitions at the WGMA. The Johnson Avenue workshop included Gilliam and Rockne Krebs and was geared toward painting and sculpture. Another studio accommodated printmaker Lou Stovall and photographers John Gossage and Joe Cameron. A third consisted mainly of architects, the first grantees being Douglas Michaels and Robert Fields. These artists each received about $5,000, but their studio spaces were not equally funded. Gilliam and Krebs's Johnson Avenue workshop was the best endowed financially. Hopps also instituted a system within the program by which present grantees could nominate younger artists or apprentices for subgrants of $2,500 on a yearly basis. Some of these recipients were Bob Newmann, Bill Dutterer, Franklin White, Chun Chen, Genna Watson, and John Dickson, the last of the younger artists to benefit from WGMA fellowship money.[69] While the program lasted for about three years, from 1968 to approximately 1971, Gilliam and Krebs made their initial $50,000 studio grant last for ten years, in effect extending the life of the workshop for seven years beyond the duration of the actual grant program.[70]

Hopps understood how regional art centers worked, and he always intended, or so it would seem, to establish something in Washington that would last. Stovall has said that "Walter knew . . . that he was making history, that he was feeding into the history of what was going to happen later."[71] Gilliam made a similar observation when he remarked how perceptive Hopps was to conceptualize the development of Washington's art world in terms of making a history for it. In Gilliam's words, Hopps showed him and his colleagues how to tunnel "into a place that didn't have much of a history . . . [and how to] *give* ourselves a history."[72] Hopps accomplished this by linking artists with institutions, galleries, and collectors—that is, by building up the entire system.

## BREAKTHROUGH AND RECOGNITION

Marjorie Phillips, the wife of Duncan Phillips and then director of the Phillips Collection, first offered Gilliam the opportunity to show his work at the museum in late 1966, about a year prior to the exhibition's scheduled opening. This invitation was based on the quality of his hard-edge paintings and the transitional works that followed, such as *Paleo* and *Medley*. Not content to remain stagnant, however, Gilliam searched intensively for a new direction in anticipation of the looming exhibition.

While reexamining various experiments of the past few years, he came across two paintings with poured surfaces, as he later described them.[73] It was this discovery that gave way to the group of ethereal free-form abstractions that included *Red Petals*. Encouraged by the success of his research and self-evaluation, he engaged in more of the same, continuing to revisit his store of finished works, when he hit upon a new and even more promising approach. He remembers the moment vividly: "Later in 1966 I was offered a show at the Phillips and I tried to find paintings to see how much I had and how much else I had to do. It was then that I came across a painting called *Green Slice,* the first of the vertically sliced paintings. . . . Not only did I not recall painting it, but I knew at that time that it was

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something that I had not seen, that it was something that had literally not been done."[74] Gilliam had been working fast, producing paintings and storing them without fully understanding their distinctive merits and flaws or the achievements for which they may have been setting the stage. His statement that he had not seen *Green Slice* before suggests how close Gilliam was to his work, and how he had been unable to gain perspective on it while making it. The more he poured and the more involved he became in the immediacy of his processes, the less likely he had been to wield an instantaneously critical eye. Gilliam had been deepening his investment in the materials and processes and leaving appraisals for later. His paintings and watercolors were objects to be worked through rather than made precious; they were vehicles for moving forward rather than ends in themselves. A performative element was brewing.

Gilliam remembers *Green Slice* as a painting, but the only object with that title whose location is known is a watercolor, dated 1967, that was featured in the Phillips exhibition. Insofar as Gilliam had typically experimented first with watercolor before executing new forms and techniques on canvas, it may be that the piece he happened upon while reexamining his past work was the watercolor. For the present discussion, however, the distinction may not be essential. The word "slice" in the title refers both to the way in which Gilliam created the work and to its appearance. *Green Slice,* the watercolor, which is now in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, is a relatively large sheet of Japanese paper suffused with amorphous, lyrical musings of blue, green, and rose. Various lines, many of them diagonal, reveal where Gilliam creased, bunched, or otherwise crumpled the paper while it was wet. These lines define the drawing that structures the composition. They are the armature for the rush of his color.

What helped Gilliam to recognize the value of *Green Slice* was a visit he had made to the WGMA's Morris Louis exhibition, which was on view in March and April of 1967. Seeing a large body of Louis's work exhibited together for the first time triggered a deeper understanding of Louis's accomplishment and new insight into the direction his own work would take.

Of all the artists Gilliam held in high regard, Louis was recognized for having perfected the brushless painting technique. Among his three major series from the final four years of his life, the Veil paintings (1958–60) held special importance for Gilliam. Like Louis's Veils, Gilliam's 1966 paintings were made by soaking many pigments into the canvas weave. Whereas Gilliam's colors from this period sometimes seem muddy, however, Louis's have a lustrous, transparent quality, no matter how many pigments he applied or how dark they were. Gilliam later learned that Louis was using a special paint additive, the "secret" chemical solution of the Color School—a water-tension breaker, like a soap or detergent—which caused each successive layer of Magna to integrate with all the previous ones so that later colors effectively glazed the underlayers. Mixing colors *in* the canvas yielded hues that were impossible to produce otherwise, whether by mixing them on a palette or in a bucket. The stunning impact of Louis's paintings does not come from a viewer's ability to separate out the different layers of pigment, though traces of the various pourings are usually apparent. Rather, it is the monumental, monolithic efflorescence that hits one most powerfully. The effect is mysteriously singular, despite the variegated internal composition that inevitably makes up any given work.

Much of Louis's technique remains an enigma, but it is fairly certain that he made the Veils by tacking

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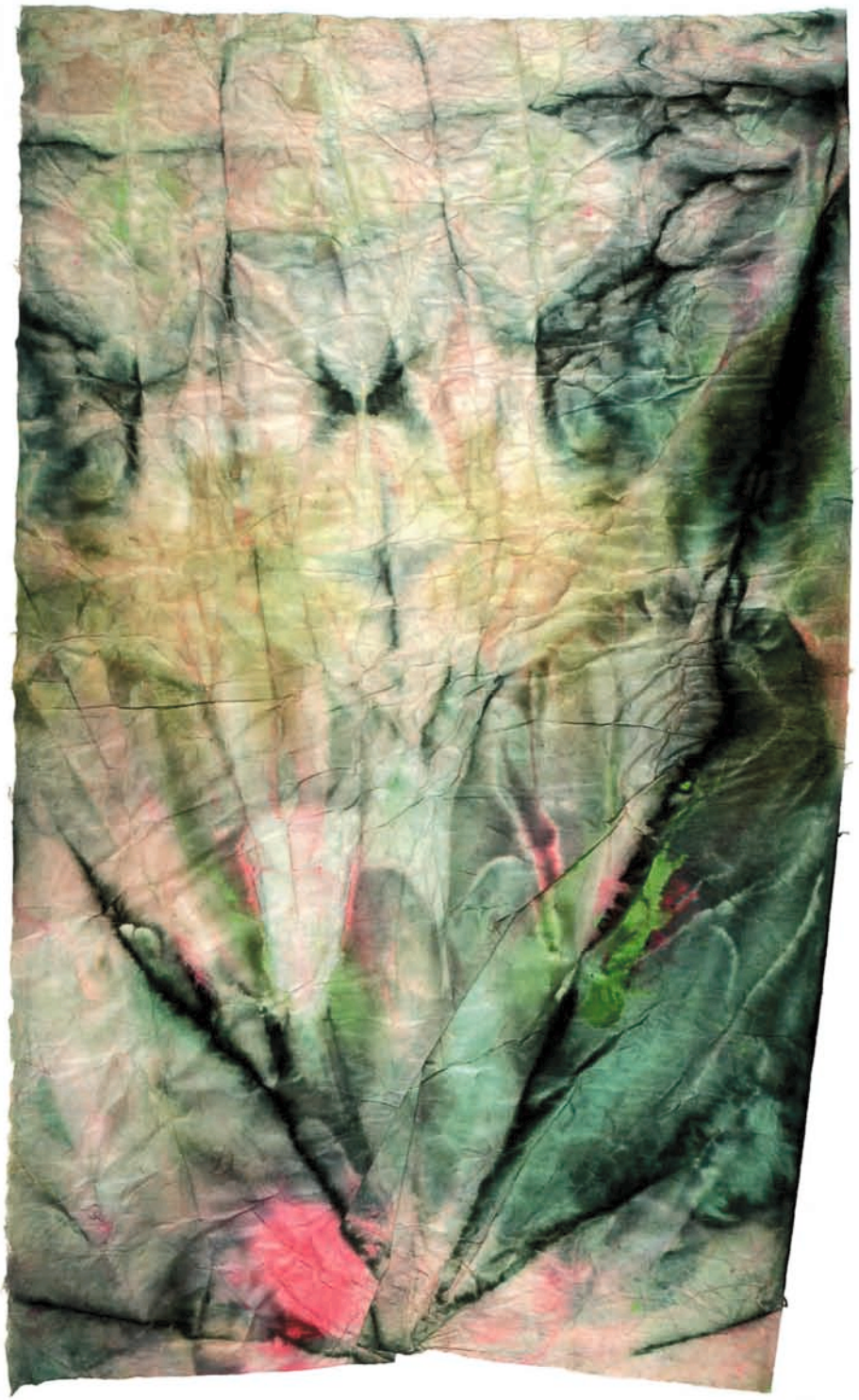

**SAM GILLIAM**
*Green Slice*, 1967, watercolor medium on Japanese paper, 38 × 23 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of John Hale Stutesman.

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**MORRIS LOUIS**
*Broad Turning*, 1958, acrylic on canvas, 90 9/16 × 151 3/16 × 1 1/4 in. Dallas Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Algur H. Meadows and the Meadows Foundation Inc. © 1958 Morris Louis.

unsized, unprimed canvas to a working stretcher, then pouring rivulets of thinned Magna onto the fabric. According to curator John Elderfield, Louis probably adjusted the canvas to guide the paint by tilting or otherwise manipulating the stretcher, and he likely used a large swab, perhaps in conjunction with some type of masking material.[75] Nearly half of Louis's roughly 125 Veil paintings are called triadic Veils because of two vertical lines that divide the composition into three unequal parts. These marks are the traces of vertical uprights that braced Louis's working stretcher, and they are located in exactly the same place in every triadic Veil painting: on the center axis and about three feet to the right of center. This distinctive feature bears at least a theoretical resemblance to the lines and creases that structure the wild chromatic shifts in *Green Slice* and another watercolor from this moment, *Least Rivers* (1967). It also recalls the rhythmic play of diagonal impressions in Jackson Pollock's celebrated *Blue Poles* (1952), a key painting in the lineage that led to Louis and one that Gilliam had long admired. Like the triadic divisions, Pollock's poles establish their own structure, a form of pictorial punctuation for that painting's cacophony of color. Seeing so many examples of Louis's work at once, Gilliam sensed intuitively how they derived their logic and, as a result, how he might exploit the happy accidents and inadvertent accomplishment suggested by *Green Slice*. He set out to fold and crease in earnest.

It was also around this time that Gilliam, while helping Downing move, noticed a canister filled with a silvery solution in the artist's studio. He asked what it was, and Downing responded, "You don't need to know." Gilliam laughed as he recounted the story: "It was like their secret! . . . I mentioned [this] to Noland when I saw him, and he told me I should go see Leonard Bocour, the owner of Bocour paint, and ask him for some free art material, and also ask him for water-tension breaker. And even [Bocour] said 'how did you find out?' [Gilliam laughing] So that when I got it . . . about $150 worth of water-tension breaker . . . I could make those paintings."[76]

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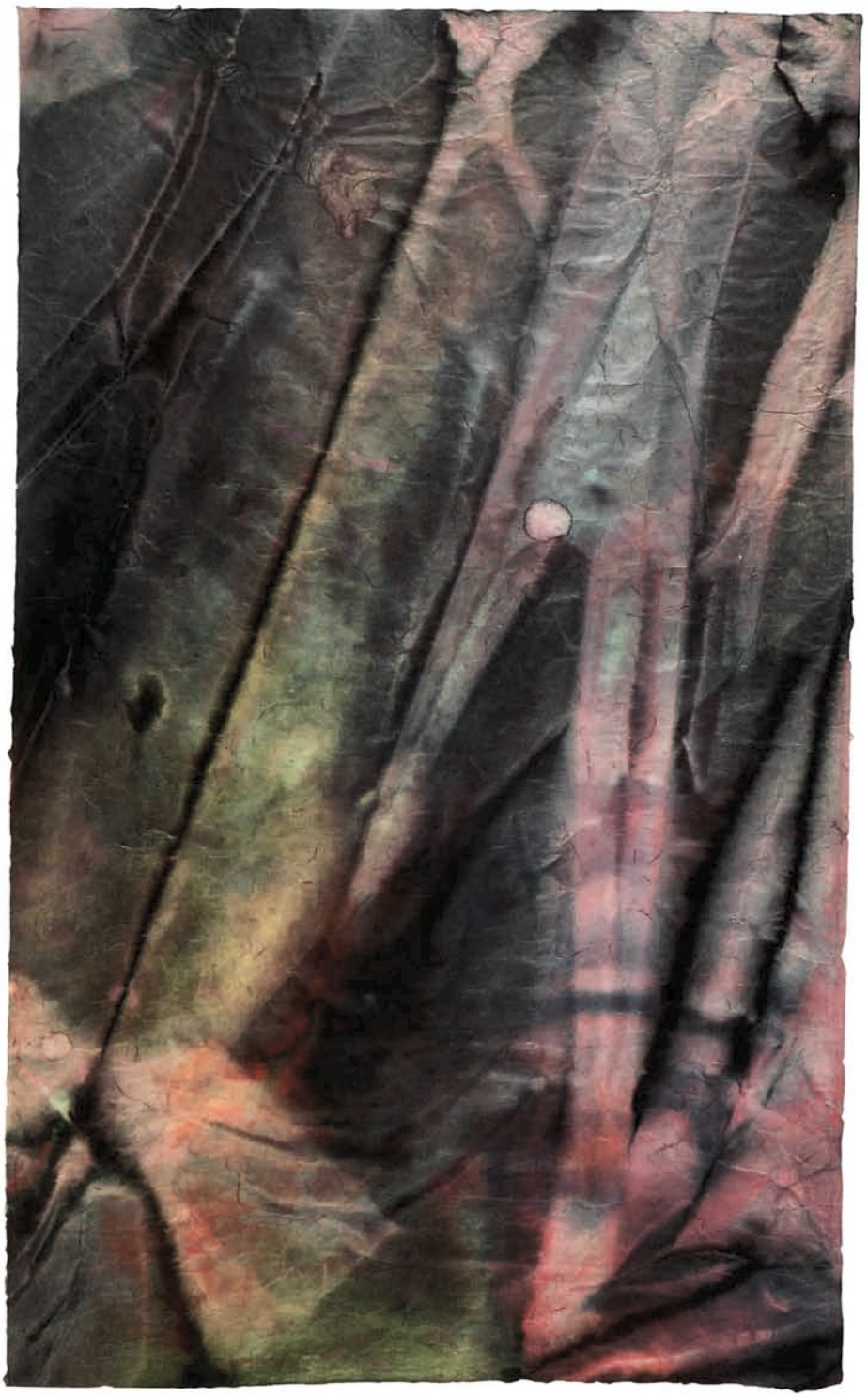

**SAM GILLIAM**
*Least Rivers*, 1967, watercolor medium on Japanese paper, 38 × 23 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of John Hale Stutesman.

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**JACKSON POLLOCK**
*Blue Poles*, 1952, enamel and aluminum paint with glass on canvas, 82⅞ × 110⅝ in. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. © 2005 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Those paintings, the Slice paintings, represented Gilliam's first breakthrough, his first signature style. To make them he began by soaking and splattering the lightest colors of the composition, like the pinks and lavenders of *In Seconds* from 1968, keeping in mind the spaces he wanted to leave white, light, or empty of color. He then applied the darker hues, glazing over the earlier, lighter layers, much as Louis had done. The canvas was then folded back and forth on itself and left to dry in a heap on the floor. When the work was still in a pile, Gilliam often applied paint one last time to its exposed surface area, to give it texture and punctuate the composition in ways that only became known to him later, when the work was spread out and examined. For *In Seconds* these final applications included red, yellow, and blue, and for the stunning *Red April,* red and yellow (p. 72). Later, when the paint had dried and Gilliam unfurled the canvas, the creases translated into lines and, depending on how the paint had pooled, Rorschach patterns that straddled those lines.

Whether the work is *In Seconds, Red April, April 4* (pp. 68–69), *Scatter* (p. 96), or the Corcoran's *Blue Twirl* (p. 95)—the last two being among a number of exceptionally beautiful paintings made between 1971 and 1973—the Slice paintings have an engrossing physicality. The effect is caused, in part, by their beveled-edge stretchers, which create the impression that the paintings are emerging from the wall as objects of weight and substance.

But more important, this physicality obtains in the painted images themselves, where it is immediately perceived. There, on the surface, the images conjure potent visceral dimensions because of the way they so brilliantly integrate the textural qualities of their own canvas supports. The paintings get their look directly from the unique properties of canvas, specifically its pliant character and the way it behaves when handled in its relaxed state, without the aid of a stretcher. Louis, Noland, Downing, and the other Color School painters also successfully integrated image and material, but primarily on a literal level. Their respective Veils, Targets, and Dials, however deeply embedded they may actually be in the fabric weave, derive their appearance not so much from the nature of the support as from

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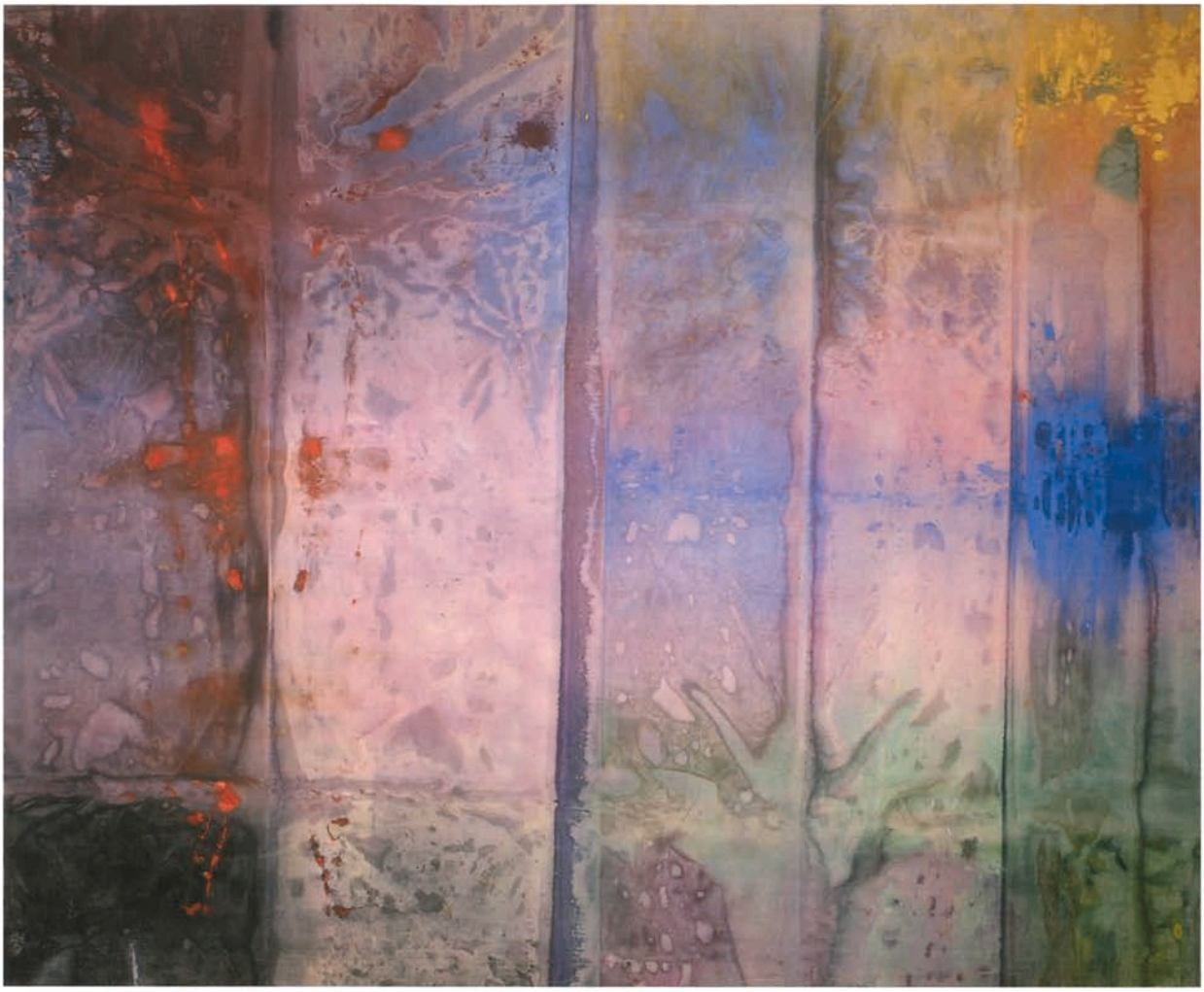

**SAM GILLIAM**
*In Seconds*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 107 × 131 in. Collection of Suzanne and Ted Fields. Photo: Gregory R. Staley.

In Seconds
Not in seconds
Not in
But through
Through expanses
collidings
knowings
forgettings
findings
knowings

SAM GILLIAM, 1968

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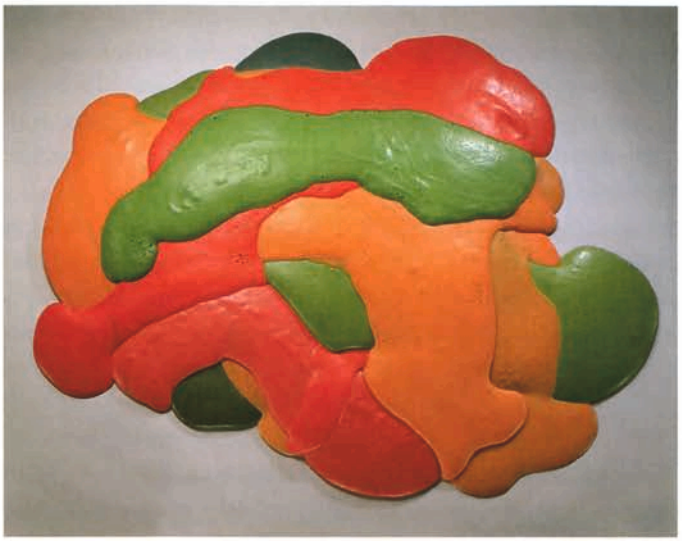

**LYNDA BENGLIS**
*Night Sherbet A*, 1968, pigmented polyurethane foam, 6 1/16 × 54 5/16 × 34 5/8 in. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Christopher Burke.

the nature of the paint. Consider the way Louis's viscous rivulets of paint ran down the canvas owing to the effects of gravity. The process endowed almost all of his great paintings with a fluidity of form. Gilliam's paint may have behaved similarly, flowing across the canvas surface and soaking into the fabric, but it looks the way it does because of the canvas and the way *it* behaves. Gilliam's supports not only absorbed Magna but also provided the impressions that generated the images.

The distinction is more than academic because it explains the tactile, elemental appeal of Gilliam's elegant images and surfaces at this point and because it highlights the prominent role that the concept of materials and processes was beginning to play in his art. Gilliam's talent for exploiting the inherent and unique physical properties of his chosen media—indeed, his talent for parlaying those properties across media, from support to painted image—separates him from his Washington forebears and links him to other contemporary artists who were similarly involved with their materials. Alan Saret, Eva Hesse, minimalist Robert Morris, and Lynda Benglis are just a few of the artists who sought to preserve the look and feel of their raw materials in their finished works. Benglis's floor paintings, for example, manifest themselves as sculpture owing to the nature of the thick, pigmented polyurethane of which they are made.

Folding also introduced a degree of chance that further distinguished Gilliam from his Washington contemporaries. Dripping or pouring, as Pollock, Louis, and Gilliam did prior to the Slice paintings, has much in common with drawing. Each maneuver leaves an obvious trace that can be immediately evaluated. As a result the artist may choose to change colors, change direction, or repour a particular section to achieve his or her desired effect. Folding, on the other hand, is less a matter of perception than of discipline and experience. Even after deciding when to stop pouring and start folding, Gilliam had to wait for the paint to dry to see what he had made. Waiting was a crucial part of

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the process, during which the image was hidden from him in its totality. By the time the process was completed, it was too late to alter his technique or change the course of a picture's development. In the end, he either liked what he made or set it aside, sometimes to review later and other times to discard entirely. Whatever the decision, it was the consequence of having incorporated long expanses of downtime into the painting process that ultimately tempered the intuitive factor and added critical distance between the artist and the objects of his creation.

In 1967 a dadaistic impulse entered into Gilliam's aesthetic, forever to remain there, courtesy, at least in part, of Walter Hopps. Hopps had introduced Los Angeles-based artists to a similar impulse when, as director of the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum), he organized retrospectives of Joseph Cornell, Jasper Johns, and Marcel Duchamp, the last being the first solo museum exhibition in the United States for the grand master of dada. And in 1962 he presented what has been called the first museum overview of American pop art, *New Paintings of Common Objects*.[77] Hopps is renowned for the Duchampian conceptual play that underpins his thinking, and he surely conveyed his enthusiasm for dada to Gilliam and the other Washington artists he came to know. With Hopps's encouragement, Gilliam had come a long way from the overdetermined precision of his first Color School paintings and the brushless techniques of Louis and artists of the previous generation such as Jackson Pollock. Indeed, even the drips of Pollock seem controlled when compared to Gilliam's guessing about when to stop painting and folding and when to start waiting.

However committed Gilliam was to chance and experimental processes, a given painting was either declared finished or relegated to the compost heap based on the merits of its final image. In this regard he has always been a discerning, if somewhat traditional and formal, judge of his own art. And it was this kind of thinking and evaluation that Washingtonians most appreciated, given the formalist bent of the city's art scene. It was mainly on these terms that Gilliam's exhibition at the Phillips was deemed a stunning critical success.

The Phillips exhibition featured one painting from 1966, *Red Petals;* seven from 1967, with beveled edges facing the wall so that their canvas surfaces appeared, from a frontal perspective, to be thin sculptural planes hovering away from the wall and parallel to it; and four watercolors, also of 1967, two of which are reproduced here. It displayed Gilliam's first mature body of work, and its success was an enormous achievement, especially for an artist who was only thirty-three years old. Looking back on it in late 1969, the Washington critic Benjamin Forgey called the exhibition Gilliam's "biggest single break."[78]

The Phillips Collection usually reserved such exclusive, in-depth attention for more famous artists or at least those in midcareer with longer exhibition histories. The museum had established its reputation for bringing classic modernism to the capital through its shows of tried-and-true international stars, Americans such as Arthur Dove and Europeans such as Pierre Bonnard and Alberto Giacometti. The three solo exhibitions that preceded Gilliam's were devoted to Oscar Kokoschka, Alexander Calder, and John Marin. Only rarely did it organize solo and group exhibitions for local artists.[79]

The magnitude of Gilliam's accomplishment at the Phillips is perhaps best measured in comparison to that of Morris Louis or Kenneth Noland, the two most celebrated Washington artists to date, neither of whom could boast of a solo museum exhibition at such a young age, whether in their hometown or not. Louis's first was his memorial showcase at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1963; he would have been fifty years old.[80] Noland had his first solo museum exhibition in 1965,

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only two years before Gilliam's, at the Jewish Museum in New York. Noland was virtually a veteran at the time: forty-one years old, with sixteen years of exhibiting to his name, he was considered by many critics and curators to be one of the most gifted abstract painters of his generation. Gilliam certainly did not command the same widespread support as Louis or Noland. Yet when he "burst forth at the Phillips," as Forgey described his meteoric rise in the *Washington Sunday Star,* it seemed as if he were close behind his Washington colleagues and perhaps, considering his youth, had even surpassed them in terms of promise for the future.[81] And the promise was not just for himself but for the capital as well. Whereas Washington artists previously had to show first in New York before gaining recognition at home, Gilliam had done the opposite. The Color School had brought recognition to Washington, and Gilliam was now the city's best new hope for continued prominence on the international scene.

#### CRITICAL CONTEXT

Sam Gilliam's 1967 exhibition at the Phillips and his subsequent show at the Jefferson Place Gallery yielded a flurry of critical attention that demonstrated Washington's fondness for its latest rising artistic star. Smitten reviewers praised Gilliam in almost every article and noted the remarkable accomplishment of his solo museum debut. At the same time, they also revealed an acute awareness of the waning interest in Washington's Color School painting by the time Gilliam emerged. The accolades were often tinged by the writers' own understanding of the local tradition out of which Gilliam had sprung and how it appeared to be losing pace relative to other styles and formats of the late 1960s. Critics did not specify the stylistic competitors that threatened to supersede post-painterly and Color School abstraction, but looking back on 1967, it is clear that pop, minimalism, performance, conceptual, and earthworks had either already arisen or were about to rise. The pluralist decade of the 1970s was in the offing, and the art world at large was not conceding top avant-garde status to any one format or movement; there were many viable contenders.

In most of the reviews Gilliam is portrayed as having worked his way out from beneath the shadows cast by the towering figures of the Color School, thereby shedding the burden of the conventions they represented. The praise was two-pronged. On the one hand he was seen as a radical upstart whose talent undeniably distinguished him from the pack of painters in the city who were also working with raw canvas and soak-stain techniques. On the other hand he was indelibly linked with a tradition that was still vital in the District of Columbia and even expanding its scope yet was elsewhere seen to be fading. The articles intimate that something was not quite right within the broad category of color-field painting and with those who continued to practice it unyieldingly and with catholic devotion.

Most critics viewed the Slice paintings on backward slanting beveled-edge stretchers as "major breakthroughs," standard terminology among formalists of the day who thought about painting in evolutionary terms. Frank Getlein wrote about art for the *Washington Evening Star,* then a leading paper in the city, and in his review of a 1967 group show at the Jefferson Place Gallery he described Gilliam as a sort of Color School renegade: "A Washington artist long in thrall to the local Color Painting cult, Gilliam has struck off the chains and struck out on his own."[82] There is the sense in this and other articles that the tradition that inspired Gilliam had been a hindrance to his development prior to the most recent work. Endowing his emergence with intense dramatic effect, over and over again he was

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portrayed as having "broken free"—the implicit confinement having been the regional tradition through which he had established his preeminence.

Benjamin Forgey, also in the *Evening Star,* wrote: "for Gilliam, the geometric purism of the color school mode, designed to liberate color to its fullest, purest expressions, seem[s] to have been a constriction of technique and of soul."[83] According to Forgey, the Slice paintings embodied "the effervescence of an artist experiencing a new liberation." Andrew Hudson provided another example: "Suddenly and dramatically, a former follower of the Washington Color School emerged as having broken loose from the 'flat color areas' style, and as an original painter in his own right."[84]

These reviews were some of the first indications in the District that color-field painting was beginning to attract negative connotations. The Color School was no longer an unambiguous label that a critic could apply to express approval or that an artist could wear with unreserved pride. As an avant-garde movement, post-painterly abstraction was being eclipsed, and association with it became detrimental—critically, curatorially, and financially—for even the core members of the first generation.[85] Critics who championed Gilliam, and indirectly the idea that the local art scene was growing strong, must have thought it useful to cast him as a Washington painter who was reinventing the local tradition. Pamela Howard, Frank Getlein, Paul Richard, Benjamin Forgey, and Andrew Hudson all treaded a fine line between linking Gilliam to his roots in Washington and disassociating him from a style that was on the wane.[86]

A year later, in June of 1968, Gilliam had his first solo show in New York, at the Byron Gallery. Rockne Krebs, who had already exhibited there, secured the opportunity for his studio mate by proposing the idea to Charles Byron, the gallery's director. It was there that Gilliam introduced his beveled stretchers with chamfered edges facing forward. The most astonishing piece in the show, if only for its bombast, was the monumental *Sock-It-to-Me,* which measured more than 9 feet high by 30 feet wide. Scale had become Gilliam's new frontier following his successful 1967 exhibition at the Phillips. In this regard he was surely influenced by the history-making show at the Corcoran, *Scale as Content,* which was on view from October 1967 to January 1968, between Gilliam's exhibitions at the Phillips and the Byron. The Corcoran show featured three extremely large sculptures, one each by Ronald Bladen, Barnett Newman, and Tony Smith. According to the catalogue, this was the first time that "an American museum [had] requested three major artists to create an exhibition of works made especially for the museum's space."[87] Bladen's *The X* and Smith's *Smoke* were located on either side of the Corcoran's grand atrium, filling the interior space defined by the surrounding colonnades and rising as high as the second-floor overlook. This was installation art writ large, and Gilliam sensed its significance for his own work.

Gilliam's New York debut received mixed reviews. Emily Wasserman, writing in *Artforum,* was one of at least two critics who were impressed by the ambition of the project, but she had reservations concerning the show's centerpiece. Despite the formal repetition of the folded patterns in *Sock-It-to-Me,* she wrote that the painting failed to "hold itself together on such a large scale."[88] She much preferred the smaller works, like the magnificent and tough *Restore,* which demonstrate in their use of color Gilliam's ability to distance himself inventively from his Color School predecessors: "Color, then, is not used to situate an image within a particular exterior shape or field, nor to create the kind of optical space within which the painting of Louis and Noland addresses the observer. Instead color as *matter*—in mottled channels of opaque aluminum, splotches of maroon, or alluvial-like deposits of

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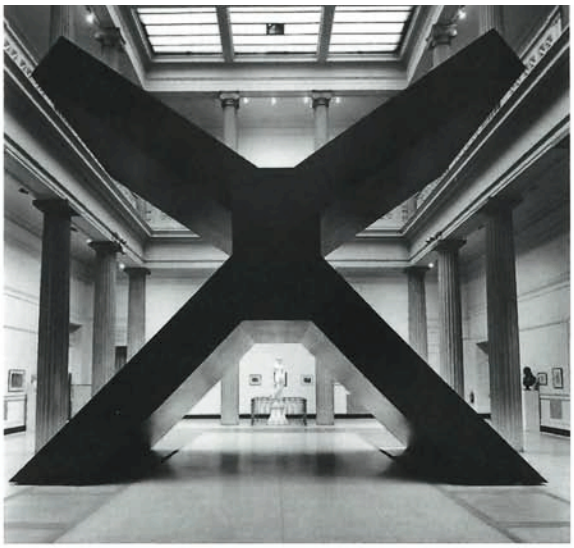

**RONALD BLADEN**
*The X*, installation view of *Scale as Content* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1967. Corcoran Gallery of Art Archives.

cobalt blue, viridian, and scarlet in a work like *Restore* (1968)—refers constantly to the physical location of the picture surface."[89]

In 1968, just prior to the invention of the Drapes, Gilliam was exploring the raw physicality of his materials mainly through scale and the rough and thick application of pigments. He was developing a confrontational aesthetic. "None of Gilliam's colors [is] ingratiating," wrote Wasserman, "and it is obvious that with his unpleasantly caked and smeared surfaces he aims to challenge the all-too-tasteful ends to which stain painting has been carried by some of its less inspired practitioners in recent years."[90] Wasserman's keen interpretation of *Restore*'s encrusted surface underscores how Gilliam's art continued to grow beyond the Color School aesthetic that had originally inspired him. *Restore* may retain a soak-stain foundation, but it is obscured by the gritty, clotted impasto of paint that coats its surface. This development was especially important for the artist, whose deepening investment in historical painterly styles—namely, abstract expressionism and the work of Jackson Pollock—increased his desire to make tough, antagonistic paintings.[91]

Even so, it is difficult in retrospect to see the Slice paintings as having completely transcended the Color School category. Their imagery may have represented a departure from the geometry and hard edges of most Color School painting, but the canvas surfaces were still soak-stained and even aided in their absorptive qualities by water-tension breaker, the so-called secret chemical solution of the Color School painters. Gilliam had found a promising way to work and, what is more, had created a stunning series of paintings, but they are, at least in concept and technique, directly related to those of the Color School.

If the Slice paintings were noticeably different from what had been seen previously in Washington, it was not only because of their encrusted, murky surfaces but also because of the way in which they were presented. Wrapped around deep beveled-edge stretchers, the paintings engaged the wall in new and compelling ways. Unlike the standard strip frames typically employed by the Color School painters, which conceal the tacks, finish the rough edges, and punctuate the boundaries of their work,

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**SAM GILLIAM**
*Restore*, 1968, Magna and acrylic on canvas with aluminum powder, 108¾ × 152¾ in. Collection of the Artist. Photo: Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver.

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Gilliam's beveled edges charge the gap between the work and the wall with a distinctive energy. Depending on how he oriented the beveled stretcher—by 1968 he had developed two options—he either exploited the gap and intensified our experience of it, making the paintings appear as if they were hovering away from the wall, as in *Member* (1967); or he bridged the gap, causing his paintings to wax heavy on the wall, at once integral to it and emerging from it, as in *April 4* (p. 69). In the latter instance, the stretcher, with chamfered edges facing forward, eases the transition from picture to wall and surrounding environment, much like the painted frames of the French post-impressionist Georges Seurat, which foster smooth movements for the eye into and out of the image. Inexplicably, Gilliam's critics, who tended to underscore each detail in the progression of his formalist aesthetic, remained silent on the subject of the beveled stretcher.[92]

At the suggestion of his friend Rockne Krebs, Gilliam took the idea of adopting chamfered stretchers from Ron Davis, a rising art star of the day. Davis had won accolades in the 1960s from many critics and curators—the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1972 featured Davis and Gilliam—but perhaps most important, from the influential Michael Fried, an acolyte of Clement Greenberg, who saw Davis's shaped canvases as among the key advances in painting according to Greenberg's formalist thinking. Talking about this formal development with critic Benjamin Forgey in 1989, Gilliam said: "I stole it. [he laughs] I stole it from Ron Davis. In fact, Rockne, who was always helping me steal things, was telling me things I ought to do. He pointed out for us how Ron Davis was using the Plexiglas and allowing it to float right in space by putting it on this beveled edge and was something that I ought to try. As I said, I lifted it in order to try it, and it worked."[93]

Using a beveled stretcher enabled Gilliam to heighten awareness of his paintings' relationship to the wall and how the space shared by viewer and picture figures into the experience of the art. Pictures like *Member* and *Snakebite* (1968), with back edges chamfered, appear to float and sometimes even to slip and slide, detached from the gallery wall. Those like *April 4,* with front edges chamfered, seem bound in place. Their canvas-wrapped frames extend beyond the surface of the picture, pushing that surface outward across the wall. In the end, Gilliam preferred the latter configuration, but either way, they are indications of how he embraced exteriority and thought about his paintings as objects.

Because of their soak-stain foundations and to some degree their design, the Slice paintings look like examples of Washington Color School art, but they also behave quite differently. Rather than enact a separation between work and wall, between a painting's interior life and all that lies outside it, the Slice paintings represent the beginning of Gilliam's effort to blur this distinction. They do not merely line a wall, they interact provocatively with it and, by extension, with the entire room that the wall defines. On the one hand Gilliam was connected to his adopted Washington roots; on the other hand he was embracing the space around his painting—exteriority—and aesthetic ideas that were associated with certain minimalists, such as Robert Morris, who were defining a position on modernism that was construed at the time as antithetical to Greenberg's and Fried's formalist position, which was the view that Gilliam had inherited.[94] In the either/or world of 1960s art criticism—either the minimal objects of Robert Morris and Donald Judd, or the pursuit of flatness, pictorial autonomy, and the elaboration of the modernist two-dimensional picture plane of the Washington Color School and post-painterly abstraction in general—Gilliam was upsetting the categories.

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(far left) **SAM GILLIAM**
*Member*, 1967, acrylic on canvas with aluminum powder, 90 × 44 in. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York.

**SAM GILLIAM**
*Snakebite*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 114 × 42¾ in. Collection of Don and Nancy Eiler, on extended loan to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Photo: Rick Echelmeyer.