

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present Sam Gilliam: White and Black Paintings, 1975–1977, on view in Los Angeles at 5130 W. Edgewood Pl. from November 5 through December 17, 2022. An opening reception will be held on Friday, November 4 from 6 to 8 PM.

Sam Gilliam (1933–2022) is one of the great innovators in postwar American painting. Each stage of his six-decade career was characterized by a quest for reinvention, formal and material experimentation, and a desire to renew his audience’s—and his own—understanding of what painting could become. White and Black Paintings, 1975–1977 brings together important works from a period when Gilliam experimented with color, texture, scale, and materiality in wholly new ways.

Beginning with the White paintings, Gilliam built up sculptural, all-over surfaces dominated by layers of white paint made viscerally frenetic through the incorporation of hardening mediums that give them a palpable presence. Other colors that emerge from behind and around these encrusted white veils engage in a limitless play of dark and light, introducing complex, shifting moods in these decidedly non-monochromatic images. He also continued his use of beveled-edge stretchers; previous beveled-edge works foregrounded juxtapositions of prismatic color and dynamic sculptural form. In the White and Black paintings, the stretchers further emphasize the architectural solidity of Gilliam’s approach to pigment and medium, and firmly root the works in the spaces where they are installed.

Perhaps most unexpectedly, Gilliam also experimented with collage by applying strips of painted canvas to each work’s primary canvas substrate, creating instances of disruption and camouflage with graphic and physical resonance alike. In the monumental, fifteen-foot-wide Double River (1976), for instance, a vertically oriented strip of collaged canvas creates a barely-off-center zip that not only generates optical movement, but also provides an abstract stand-in for the viewer and a process of scanning the painting that takes place in the eye and the body. This is the kind of development that could only occur in the work of an artist who had engaged with radical experiments in three-dimensional space. Each of the processes Gilliam brought to Double River exemplifies his ongoing engagement with issues of dimensionality, flatness, and motion, and serves as a reminder that, in addition to reformulating the contexts in which paintings were seen, he was dedicated to reformulating how they were made.

In the White paintings—and the Black paintings that would immediately follow—this dedication meant trying out new materials as well as applying them in different ways. The works are characterized by marks made with everyday tools; among them are shag rug rakes that Gilliam first employed during this period and continued to use in subsequent bodies of work throughout the next five decades. The rake allowed him to introduce both energetic linearity and textural relief and, as seen especially in the Black paintings, highlight the geological feel of the paints he was mixing. Through these works, Gilliam continued to envision how painting could be a fully encompassing experience, transforming the relationship between the hand and the gestural mark into one between the painter’s entire body and the complete range of their materials.

Abacus Sliding (1977) is notable both for the varied ways in which Gilliam handled the black paint that defines its foreground and for the vivid, luminous array of tones that hover beneath its brooding surface. The work is characterized by its encyclopedic embrace of painterly technique and the variety of its improvisational responses to the relationships between pigment, medium, and support. At its center, though, is the result of another bold use of collage: a spiraling composition of rectangular forms provides a series of windows into alternate spaces, each of which evokes its own light and mood. Such interventions suggest that, even as Gilliam was creating pictures carefully delimited within the confines of individual stretchers, the source of his work was a place that was larger, wilder, and more alive than anything that could be contained in a single painting.

The White and Black paintings continued to provide Gilliam with inflection points throughout the remainder of his career. Many of his works from the early 2020s, for instance, found him directly expanding upon and transforming the themes that animate the paintings in this exhibition: the use of impasto; experimentation with an open array of additives; inclusion of fragments of canvas and fabric; and, perhaps most importantly, a constant commitment to the idea that, regardless of the ways in which paintings in a body of work resonate with each other, every picture presents unique challenges and opportunities for improvisation. As such, Gilliam demonstrated with these works that abstraction could not only inspire people to synthesize their thoughts and feelings about crucial issues—including race, democracy, creativity, the natural world—that are at the core of our shared experiences as human beings, but to do so in ways

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that were authentic to one's own experience at any given moment in time and in any given place.

David Kordansky Gallery and Pace are pleased to announce that research has commenced on a Sam Gilliam Catalogue Raisonné project, to be published by Cahiers d'Art Institute. Further details are forthcoming.

Sam Gilliam (1933–2022) emerged from the Washington, D.C. scene in the mid-1960s with works that elaborated on and disrupted the ethos of Color School painting. A series of formal breakthroughs would soon result in his canonical Drape paintings, which expanded upon the tenets of Abstract Expressionism in entirely new ways. Suspending stretcher-less lengths of painted canvas from the walls or ceilings of exhibition spaces, Gilliam transformed his medium and the contexts in which it was viewed. For an African American artist in the nation's capital at the height of the civil rights movement, this was not merely an aesthetic proposition; it was a way of defining art's role in a society undergoing dramatic change. Gilliam subsequently pursued a pioneering course in which experimentation has been the only constant. Inspired by the improvisatory ethos of jazz, his lyrical abstractions continue to take on an increasing variety of forms, moods, and materials.

A major exhibition, Sam Gilliam: Full Circle, was recently presented at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. In addition to a 2005 traveling retrospective organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gilliam has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland (2018); Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (2011); J.B. Speed Memorial Museum, Louisville, Kentucky (1996); Whitney Museum of American Art, Philip Morris Branch, New York (1993); The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (1982); and Museum of Modern Art, New York (1971), among many other institutions. In 2021, Dia Art Foundation, New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston made the historic joint acquisition of Gilliam's important early work, the monumental installation Double Merge (1968), which was on view 2019–2022 at Dia Beacon in New York. His work is included in over fifty permanent collections, including the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris; Tate Modern, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and Art Institute of Chicago.