

David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles and Pace Gallery in New York are pleased to present Sam Gilliam: The Last Five Years, a two-part exhibition of paintings created by Gilliam between 2018 and 2022. David Kordansky Gallery's presentation, on view in all three spaces at its Los Angeles location from January 13 through March 3, 2024, features works from Gilliam's Drape series, as well as a selection of watercolors. Pace's presentation, which was on view in New York through October 28, 2023, focused on the artist's beveled-edge canvases. Both presentations also include Gilliam's tondo paintings, a format that he explored in depth in the final chapter of his career. Across both venues, the exhibition is comprised chiefly of artworks that have never been exhibited publicly. It is accompanied by a catalogue produced jointly by Pace Publishing and David Kordansky Gallery, featuring a new critical essay by curator and art historian Lowery Stokes Sims.

Sam Gilliam: The Last Five Years is infused with the sense of discovery that accompanied every phase of Gilliam's long career, and that only seemed to increase at the end of his life as he found new possibilities in some of his most enduring formal vocabularies. It also documents the comprehensive way in which Gilliam surveyed his own artmaking, so that each addition to his total body of work not only added to his range, but served as a reassessment and reconsideration of everything that came before.

"It has been instructive and inspiring to think about the generous works Sam made in the last five years of his life, when he was as restless and innovative as at any other point in his career," said David Kordansky. "For Sam, there was always more to do, in art and in life, and he had no qualms about his faith in art as a human endeavor that changes the world. The Drape paintings in this exhibition, for instance, symbolize radical, inclusive, and challenging ways of being together. They are among the most moving and electric paintings he ever made."

“Sam was a unique talent; like Rothko, he could express complex emotions using color and shape as his vehicle,” said Arne Glimcher, founder of Pace Gallery. “Employing abstraction, he created a deep narrative of his life. The specific ecstasy that is the province of music flows through his paintings and drapes, always overcoming the tragedy of repression and denial.”

Gilliam is one of the most important innovators in postwar painting. By the mid-1960s, he was already a recognized contributor to the Washington Color School, producing hard-edge abstractions that foreshadowed genre-disrupting developments. As he began to experiment with techniques and formats that openly contradicted many of the accepted tenets of Color Field painting, he worked on numerous fronts at once, creating his first beveled-edge and Drape paintings. Gilliam seemed to take on modern art in its entirety, celebrating its penchant for transformation even as he questioned its foundational narratives about linear progress. With the Drapes, the removal of the stretcher meant that he could create structure out of color and space and employ the human body and its relationship to architecture as the frames in which painting materializes.

While immediacy was prized in the abstract expressionist milieu from which he first emerged, Gilliam interacted with his materials on the kind of improvisational, moment-to-moment basis that also informs the thinking of jazz musicians. In so doing, he posited a radically flexible and generative relationship between support, color, and movement. If the Drapes are notable for the sense of freedom that the artist was able to channel and communicate, they are equally important for the rigor with which he planned, executed, and installed them. This freedom he cultivated was defined by the spaces around the paintings as much as what was in and on the paintings’ surfaces.

The majority of the Drapes on view in this exhibition are hung from a single point on either the ceiling or the wall. Together, they constitute an immersive environment in

which Gilliam's layered, chromatically rich compositions enter into dialogues with one another. Each work is a contained statement about depth and luminosity, as well as a radiant fragment of the greater whole to which the other works, as well as the viewer's shifting perceptions and positions, also belong. The physicality that suffuses the exhibition mirrors the embodied process by which the artist produced the work, as lengths of Cerex nylon were folded, bunched, dipped in acrylic pigments, and arranged for installation.

In the watercolors on view, Gilliam achieved both monumentality and intimacy, allowing water-based pigments to saturate folds in the paper supports and generating effects that recall the prismatic depths of the Drape paintings. Though the creation of these works does not involve the use of a brush, they are remarkable for their sense of touch. Like all of Gilliam's works, they are records of interactions between the artist and his materials, but also between the materials themselves when they are allowed to pursue their own courses within delimited boundaries. For this reason, the watercolors evoke the unpredictable, but somehow familiar, expanses and intricacies of nature, as well as the potential for growth that animates the human spirit.

In the last several years of his life, Gilliam began producing tondos that also exemplify this tendency. He experimented with several sizes and formats, and featured a selection in a 2022 solo exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. Here, a group of tondos shown for the first time are distinguished by the saturated fields of color, each based on a specific range of hues. Like the Drapes, they foreground Gilliam's interest in the sculptural dimension of painting, and their making involved the use not only of paint, but sawdust, metal, encaustic, and wood scraps, some of which were the by-products of studio processes involved in the making of other bodies of work. Gilliam employed scraping tools—including metal rakes—to mark fields of color, augmenting their rich surface textures and revealing multiple layers of pigment.

The tondo works synthesize several different threads of Gilliam's practice, marrying a form that is often associated with Renaissance painting to the aesthetics of both Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. They also demonstrate his nuanced understanding of geometry and line, with each circular support made up of four panels. Because active lineation appears in the raked marks that are among the tondos' distinguishing formal elements, the paintings establish productive tension between hard-edged and expressive approaches to composition. With one of his last bodies of work, Gilliam was able to address questions that prompted his first breakthroughs as a young artist, and to weave divergent strands of modernist and contemporary artmaking into a unified and emotionally resonant whole.

Sam Gilliam has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions at institutions worldwide including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (2022); 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 from 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.