



# Black Abstract Artists Are Finally Being Recognized by the Art Market

By Daria Harper | February 15, 2021



Portrait of Sam Gilliam in his studio, Washington, DC, 1980. Photo by Anthony Barboza. Image via Getty Images.

The story of abstraction in America has long featured an overwhelmingly white cast of characters, but in recent decades, that has finally started to change. In 1991, the Kenkeleba Gallery in New York presented the landmark exhibition “The Search for Freedom: African American Abstract Painting 1945–1975,” which featured 35 artists. Fifteen years later, art historian Kellie Jones curated “Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980” at the Studio Museum in Harlem. And in 2014, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery mounted “Beyond the Spectrum: Abstraction in African American Art, 1950–1975.” These exhibitions, among others, served as important interrogations of art historical narratives surrounding Abstract Expressionism, which had long excluded Black artists.

Dominated by leading figures including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko, Abstract Expressionism marked an exciting new moment for artistic expression in America in the late 1940s and ’50s. Recent years have seen swelling recognition for important Black Abstract Expressionists like Norman Lewis, Alma Thomas, Beauford Delaney, and subsequent generations of artists including Edward Clark, [Sam Gilliam](#), Howardena Pindell, Stanley Whitney, and Jack Whitten. It is past due that these artists, and countless others, figure into the narrative of abstract painting in the United States.



Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 2020. David Kordansky Gallery

Several prominent Black abstract painters have seen monumental auction results and sales prices in recent years, suggesting an increase in demand for their work following growing recognition from museums and representation by leading galleries. Whitten, who joined mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth two years before he passed away in 2018 at age 78, had his auction record posthumously smashed in 2019, when his painting *Special Checking* (1974) sold for \$2.6 million at a Sotheby's "Contemporary Curated" sale in New York—more than five times its high estimate of \$500,000. *Special Checking* is part of a body of slab paintings that are among Whitten's most well-known works. This particular slab canvas features brown-hued brushstrokes that nearly resemble desert mountains, and a prominent splash of yellow near the bottom.

During the 1970s, Whitten made many of his canvases with a tool he called the "developer"—a T-shaped rake that he would drag through an acrylic mixture on a contrasting ground—which moved the paint in a way that had not yet been done. According to Charlotte Van Dercook, who heads Sotheby's "Contemporary Curated" sales in New York, "These works carry the conceptual threads which undergird his entire practice, as well as the pursuit of the new, and also presage Gerhard Richter's abstract canvases, which as a body of work make up some of the most celebrated—and expensive—bodies of work in contemporary art."

Whitten, like so many of the aforementioned artists, developed his own distinctive vocabulary "which appeals to an art market hungry for novelty and singular artistic visions," Van Dercook said. "While the slab paintings are widely regarded as the artist's most desirable," she added, "their extreme rarity—the vast majority are promised to institutions or already in institutional collections—means that they are unlikely to come to market."

There is growing art market interest in artists from the earlier generation of Black abstractionists, as well. This includes Lewis, who began his career painting in a figurative style rooted in Social Realism, but transitioned to a more abstract style of art in the mid-1940s; and Thomas, who is typically associated with the Washington Color School, though her work varied in several stylistic ways. Lewis took part in a major symposium of Abstract Expressionists organized in 1950 by Robert



Adam Pendleton, *Untitled (OKDADAOKD)*, 2019. Brand X Editions

Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt in New York, during which the artists in attendance debated what they'd call the new art movement. Thomas was the first graduate of Howard University's art department in 1924, and after a 35-year career as a teacher in Washington, D.C., she ultimately pursued art full time. In 1972, Thomas became the first Black woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum. Despite having been excluded from important narratives surrounding Abstract Expressionism for decades, recent art market demand suggests that both artists' undeniable contributions are finally being recognized.

The record prices for both Lewis's and Thomas's works at auction were broken on consecutive nights in November 2019: Thomas on the 13th, when her radiant composition *A Fantastic Sunset* (1970) sold for \$2.6 million at a Christie's evening sale; Lewis on the 14th, when his 1962 painting *Ritual* nearly quadrupled its low estimate, selling for \$2.7 million at a Sotheby's evening sale. But prices paid for both artists' works in private sales are significantly higher, according to Michael Rosenfeld, founder of the eponymous New York gallery, which represents the estates of both artists.

Rosenfeld has represented Thomas's estate for some 30 years, and he acknowledged that there have been significant shifts in her market demand, as well as which of her works are the most sought after. He described Thomas's work *Azaleas* (1969), which features bands of red, blue, and yellow against a white background and served as the cover of the catalogue for her retrospective at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art in Indiana in 1998. He noted that this artwork, which exemplifies Thomas's unique use of color and contrast, was regarded as the ideal painting from the artist for decades, though now there is more interest in works created later in her career (Thomas died in 1978). "As interest has grown in Alma Thomas, we've seen a shift in interest to the paintings from the 1970s, which are the last years of her career as a painter," Rosenfeld added.



Alma Thomas, *Red Rambling Rose Spring Song*, 1976. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

Thomas experienced a large increase in recognition and acclaim following the 2014 acquisition of her painting *Resurrection* (1966) by the White House Historical Association under the Obama administration, for \$290,000. In 2016, she received a major retrospective organized by the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Rosenfeld said that institutional support for artists like Whitten, Lewis, Thomas, and others is immensely important to driving market demand. "Sometimes, scholarship and exhibitions have a way of educating, advocating, and changing people's perceptions," he noted. "That helps educate a new generation of people who weren't so familiar with Thomas."

A new cohort of Black painters working in abstraction—artists like Tomashi Jackson, Torkwase Dyson, and Adam Pendleton, to name a few—continues to draw inspiration from and build on the forms and techniques from previous generations. Contemporary artist Glenn Ligon's work builds on the legacy of various Abstract Expressionist painters, including Delaney, who was included in "Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions," a 2015 exhibition organized with Nottingham Contemporary and Tate Liverpool in which Ligon brought together works by artists who influenced him.

Rosenfeld similarly noted the deep reverence that artist Julie Mehretu has for Lewis's work, adding that he's observed "a very conscious continuum" over the past several decades between contemporary Black abstract artists and previous generations. This continuum is incredibly important and crucial to reckoning with erasure throughout art history. Black artists' contributions to the development of contemporary figuration have been acknowledged by an increasingly broad public over the past decade. Now Black artists' vital work pushing at the boundaries of abstraction are beginning to be recognized for their brilliance.