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Radiant Canvases Unbound

Sam Gilliam revels in fabric and the abstract at Dia:Beacon.

By DEBORAH SOLOMON

BEACON, N.Y. — Sam Gilliam, an abstract painter of 85, proves that optical prettiness can have depth. A longtime resident of Washington, he is loosely associated with color-field painting, which once turned our nation's capital into a capital of contemporary art. There is no easy way to explain how a city whose architecture and statuary can seem consistently colorless became, in the '60s, the locus of an art "ism" that spewed bright color in every direction.

This was the movement that, following the lead of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, endowed painting with the casual radiance of watercolor. Mr. Gilliam, too, soaked and stained unprimed canvas with



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pools of thinned-down acrylic pigment. It mattered at the time, at least to theory-inclined critics, that the paint merged with the weave of the canvas rather than sitting in clumps on top of it. A soaked canvas is likely to be at least half-an-inch flatter than a brushstroke-laden one, a distinction that helped spawn the now-historic Cult of Flatness. It was led by the critic Clement Greenberg, who believed that modern art lived its best life when it proclaimed the inherent limitations of its medium.

Color-field painting, which produced some bona fide masterworks and more than its share of decorative fluff, fell into eclipse in the last quarter of the 20th century. But Mr. Gilliam's early efforts have sprung into view again, and one hopes they remain vividly present. It's heartening to report that art-world fashion is now beginning to favor

CONTINUED ON PAGE C13



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Top, an installation view of Sam Gilliam's "Double Merge," 1968-2019. The canvases are each called "Carousel II" (1968), each unfurling about 75 feet. Above, "Spread" (1973), part of Mr. Gilliam's "Beveled-Edged" series.



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once-overlooked abstract paintings by major African-American artists, who include, besides Mr. Gilliam, Ed Clark (whose first show at Hauser & Wirth opens this week); William T. Williams (whose recent paintings are on view at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery); and Alma Thomas (whose work is at Mnuchin).

As to Mr. Gilliam, the Dia Art Foundation is devoting two of its industrially-scaled galleries to a long-term installation of his work. The exhibition consists of just two pieces — the terrific, room-filling "Double Merge" (1968-2019), along with a radiant painting, "Spread" (1973) — but allows you to understand Mr. Gilliam's innovations afresh. At a time when crafts inform the shape of so much contemporary artwork, it seems clear that Mr. Gilliam's achievement has been to celebrate the under-acknowledged overlap between the history of fabric and the history of abstract painting.

Born in Tupelo, Miss., the seventh of eight children, Mr. Gilliam grew up in the shadow of the Great Depression. He was still in grade school when his family moved to Louisville, Ky., where his father worked for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. His mother, Estery, was a seamstress who belonged to a sewing group, and the artist later credited her for encouraging his boyhood love of art. In 1962, after graduating from the University of Louisville with both a bachelor's degree and a master's in fine art, Mr. Gilliam settled in Washington, where he developed his signature style.

The artist is best known for his so-called Drape paintings, which he began in 1968, when he did away with the tradition of the rectangular canvas by ditching stretcher bars, the wooden strips used to lend a painting its drum-taut surface. Instead, he hung up his canvases as if they were full-length curtains, creating droopy, sometimes swoopy objects that could be described, in mathematical terms, as a series of catenary

curves. They could sway gently, or subtly change their shape. They remind you that the history of art, wherever it roams, is inseparable from the history of humble cotton cloth.

"Double Merge" is a rousing sight. It conjoins two of the artist's early Drape paintings into an exuberant, site-specific configuration that occupies a gallery of its own. At first, it appears to be floating or levitating in midair. It is monumental and carnivalesque, and can put you in mind of American architecture at its most vernacular, especially old-fashioned circus tents, with their bold stripes and peaked, cascading tops. But its heavy folds of cotton duck also convey a sense of gracefulness. Some observers have likened the Drape pieces to cathedrals. At the very least, they hint at a form of shelter, a cheerful one festooned with a startling rainbow of trippy, hippie, tie-dye colors and patterns.

The two canvases that were tapped for the installation are both titled "Carousel II" (1968), and each one unfurls at a length of about 75 feet. Which is not to say that they're twins. The one on the left hews closer to the wall, and has soft-edged bars of color melting into each other with the unapologetic allure of a pink-streaked sunset. The second painting, which stands to the right, is comparatively chaotic and crossed with long lines that were apparently created by folding and creasing a still-wet canvas, a technique that resembles the Japanese craft of shibori, or hand-dyeing. The painting protrudes aggressively into the viewer's space, and raises a favorite art-historical conundrum: Is it a painting or is it a sculpture?

Another work in the exhibition — the only other one, in fact — might seem to pose a similar question. "Spread," a large, horizontal, cherry-red abstraction crackling with citrusy oranges and yellows, has poles that tilt across its surface as if to offer a dyed-

fabric version of Pollock's "Blue Poles." Although "Spread" is not a Drape painting — it stays in place on the wall much the way paintings are supposed to do — it, too, comes with a novel twist. It belongs to Mr. Gilliam's "Beveled-Edged" series, in which he slants his stretcher bars at a 45-degree angle, making them instantly visible to the viewer and adding an element of bulk or boxiness to the painting.

Is this detail important? An accompanying handout that is intended for the general public can feel a bit academic, emphasizing how Mr. Gilliam's methods "transition his two-dimensional paintings away from the flatness traditionally associated with the medium and toward three-dimensional space." He's presented as a kind of post-Minimalist whose concerns happen to jibe with those of the sculptors collected in depth by Dia. They include Robert Morris, the master of draped industrial felt, and Anne Truitt, who is also from Washington, and whose spare, platonic, monochromatic objects occupy a teasingly ambiguous realm where painting leaves off and sculpture begins.

But Mr. Gilliam himself has not characterized his work in Minimalist or post-Minimalist terms. If anything, he has said that his work derives from more earthy and accidental inspirations. His Drape paintings, he said last month, "might have been inspired by seeing laundry hanging on a clothesline." He made the comment in an interview with the art historian Barbara Rose, and added, intriguingly, that he could not discount the possible influence of a coterie of artists he had met in Paris in the early '60s who branded their efforts "sans chassiss" — which is French for "off the stretcher."

At any rate, one wouldn't want to pin the Drape paintings to a single source. They are richly and dreamily allusive. "Double Merge" has many layers of meaning, and its spirit, however festive at first glance, can

also feel mournful. As it hangs down from the ceiling, or rather from wooden slats that attach to points along the top of the canvas that are bunched and tied with brown leather straps, the piece can evoke an unsettling sense of hanging bodies, of lynchings, and the incalculable sorrows of the American past.

"When artists leave the South," Mr. Gilliam once said to the historian William Ferris, "their Southernness takes on guises."

Mr. Gilliam's work deserves a deeper look and broader interpretations. In truth, abstract art was never as pure or self-contained as its champions liked to claim, and formalists who insist on seeing it as the polar opposite of representational painting do it an injustice. Mr. Gilliam's abstract images tap into many kinds of experience, including the unpretentious pleasures of tie-dye fabrics and spin paintings and glowing summer sunsets. He allows you to see how abstract art has been shaped less by the lofty theories of yesteryear's critics than by the teeming circus of everyday life.

While Sam Gilliam's "Double Merge" can evoke circus tents at first glance, its spirit can also feel mournful. Its sweeps of fabric remind viewers that the history of art is inseparable from the history of cotton cloth.

Sam Gilliam

A long-term installation at Dia:Beacon, Beacon, N.Y. 845-440-0100, diaart.org.