

SAM GILLIAM *Lilly* OBJECT ESSAY

As American artist Sam Gilliam (1933-2022) was nearing the end of his life, he both explored alternative mediums and returned to materials and methods that defined his earlier career. Gilliam's *Lilly* hearkens back to his earlier canvases stretched on beveled-edge stretchers while furthering his exploration of the tactility and materiality of his work. Sam Gilliam first stretched his canvases on beveled-edged stretchers in the 1960s. These early iterations of the beveled-edge canvas works were both influenced by and parted from the art of the Washington Color School with which Gilliam was associated. This group of artists was specifically interested in abstract and pure color and its application to canvas.¹

Gilliam delved into hard-edge paintings akin to the strictly geometric art of the Color School (fig. 1). His early beveled-edge paintings expanded on the well-trodden technique of pouring thinned acrylic paint onto unprimed canvas.² These paintings exercised and exhibited much less control; Gilliam would often apply the paint to the canvas unstretched on his studio floor and fold the canvas while wet.³ After the canvas was stained and dried, it would be stretched on a beveled-edge stretcher (fig. 2). These works were Gilliam's first movement into three-dimensional space and illustrated what artist Melvin Edwards would refer to as Gilliam's "sensitivity to three dimensions."⁴

Sam Gilliam returned to the beveled edge canvas in the late 2010s and early 2020s, the final years of his life. These later works, including *Lilly*, were shown in the exhibits *Sam Gilliam: Late Paintings* at Pace Gallery, London, and *Sam Gilliam: The Last Five Years at Pace Gallery*, New York. Gilliam's *Lilly* is 72 inches by 72 inches, 6 feet square, with a depth of 6 inches from the beveled-edge stretcher under the canvas (fig. 3). The medium is a composite of acrylic paint with additions of sawdust, wax, and polypropylene plastic. Splatters of yellow, purple, red, royal blue, teal, and dark gray highlight the white canvas with small patches of light green and brown throughout. Wax, in small spherical shapes, covers the work. The pigment is mixed with the additional materials and applied spontaneously to the canvas. Before the work had finished drying, Gilliam would manipulate and dig into the wet surface, breaking through the color and texture and exposing lines and patches of the white canvas. Oftentimes, as gallerist and art dealer Arne Glimcher points out, the materials used for the works would come from the remnants of Gilliam's other sculptural projects: "he retrieved the detritus from the construction

¹ Anne Evenhaugen, "Hard-Edged, Bright Color: The Washington Color School.," Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, October 28, 2016, <https://blog.library.si.edu/blog/2016/10/28/washcolorschool1/>.

² Brown, Jackson. "Sam Gilliam." *Callaloo* 40, no. 5 (2017): 62. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2017.0155>.

³ Gilliam, Sam, Jonathan P Binstock, and Josef Helfenstein. *The Music of Color: Sam Gilliam 1967-1973*. Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2018, 137.

⁴ Gilliam, Sam. *Sam Gilliam: The Last Five Years*. New York: Pace, 2023, 12.

of the sculptures—the sawdust and wood chips from the carpenter’s floor—and mixed it with pigment, erupting in lavish surfaces that Sam clawed and raked to reveal bubbling color below.”⁵

Lilly refers back to his 1960s practice of using beveled-edge stretchers while introducing new materials and forms of manipulating the canvas. These facets of the work foreground its tactility and improvisational quality, which Gilliam valued in his artmaking: “One must let things go, be open to improvisation, spontaneity, what’s happening in a space while one works.”⁶ These later additions to Gilliam’s canon of beveled-edge works reflect his commitment to the sculptural qualities of his art, as seen in his “Drape paintings,” his D metal works, and the sculptures he made late in his career (fig. 4).

Gilliam was consistent in his trailblazing art practices and mediums, as Tom McGlynn illustrates in the exhibition catalog for *Sam Gilliam: The Last Five Years*: “[Gilliam] has always done one thing throughout his career: be perpetually subversive by constantly erupting the delineating line that divides the visual world of painting from the world outside.”⁷ Gilliam, in the final few months of his life, returned to the first artistic practice of his career that would solidify his place as an artistic inventor. By calling back to his early beveled-edge canvases, he shows the creative inspiration he gained from his own innovation. *Lilly* acts as a representation of Gilliam’s early practices imbued with his lifelong reflections on texture, media, and opticality as well as his constant allegiance to textural and spontaneous processes of making art.

⁵ Arne Glimcher, “Sam Gilliam: In Process,” Pace Gallery, November 6, 2020, <https://www.pacegallery.com/journal/sam-gilliam-process-arne-glimcher/>.

⁶ Gilliam, Sam. *Sam Gilliam: The Last Five Years*. New York: Pace, 2023, 11.

⁷ Gilliam, Sam. *Sam Gilliam: The Last Five Years*. New York: Pace, 2023, 15.



Figure 1. Sam Gilliam. *Helles*. 1965. acrylic on canvas. 71 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 71 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, California.



Figure 2. Sam Gilliam. *Yellow Edge*, 1972. acrylic on canvas. 55 x 45 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington.



Figure 3. Sam Gilliam. *Lilly*. 2022. Acrylic with sawdust, encaustic, and polypropylene on canvas with beveled-edge stretcher. 72 x 72 x 6 in. Art Bridges.



Figure 4. Sam Gilliam, installation view of *Existed Existing* at Pace Gallery, November 2020.