

Sam Gilliam: The Last Five Years

Pace Gallery

September 15 – October 28, 2023

510 West 25th Street, New York

David Kordansky Gallery

January 2024

5130 West Edgewood Place, Los Angeles



Left to right: Sam Gilliam, *Lucky*, 2021 © Sam Gilliam / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Sam Gilliam, *Lilly*, 2022 © Sam Gilliam / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 2018 © Sam Gilliam / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Jeff McLane, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

New York and Los Angeles – Pace Gallery in New York and David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles are pleased to present *Sam Gilliam: The Last Five Years*, a two-part exhibition of paintings created by Gilliam between 2018 and 2022. Pace’s presentation, on view at its 510 West 25th Street gallery from September 15 to October 28, 2023, will focus on the artist’s beveled-edge canvases, while the presentation at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, opening in January 2024, will spotlight works from Gilliam’s Drape series. Both exhibitions will also feature Gilliam’s tondo paintings, a format that he explored in depth in the final chapter of his career. Across both venues, the exhibition will be comprised chiefly of artworks that have never been exhibited publicly.

The works included in this collaborative and bicoastal exhibition, organized in close collaboration with Gilliam’s family and studio, center on the different modes of painting that the artist pioneered in the 1960s and returned to during the final years of his life. Offering a sweeping view of his expansive, ceaselessly innovative, and boundary-pushing approach to the medium, the works in the show attest to Gilliam’s monumental contributions to Modernism and, more broadly, the history of art. In the intensely creative period that this two-part exhibition chronicles, Gilliam made new advances in both his Drapes and beveled-edge paintings—formats that he developed simultaneously in the late 1960s. In his later years, the artist revolutionized his processes for these works, adding new dimensions to the formal breakthroughs that had first brought him acclaim six decades earlier.

Unfolding in two stages across two different locations, these separate presentations comprise a single exhibition that will be 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, the publication will be released in fall 2023.

Sam Gilliam: The Last Five Years is organized and presented collaboratively by two close friends of the artist: David Kordansky of David Kordansky Gallery and Arne Glimcher, Founder and Chairman of Pace Gallery. Glimcher first met Gilliam in 1972, the year that Gilliam became the first Black artist to represent the United States at the Venice



Biennale. Having been an admirer of Gilliam's practice for decades, Glimcher began working closely with the artist more recently, thanks to a reintroduction facilitated by Kordansky, who has been exhibiting Gilliam's work since 2013, when his gallery presented a show focused on his hard-edge abstractions of the mid-1960s. Up until the artist's death in June 2022, both Kordansky and Glimcher regularly traveled to Gilliam's Washington, D.C. studio, witnessing the alchemical transformations that marked the artist's process of creation, which was as experimental as it was influential.

"We were from the same generation and shared the same fundamental understanding of the power and possibilities of abstraction," Glimcher wrote in remembrance of Gilliam. "In recent years, I've cherished the experience of visiting Sam in his studio, often experiencing goosebumps when I walked in and encountered a fresh group of paintings. I've rarely had such an experience in an artist's studio ... I think Sam's recent works may be some of the greatest abstract paintings ever made."

"Every group of work from Sam is suffused with the new. He met any occasion—personal, political, psychological, art historical—with a response that contained the whole of his being as it manifested at that moment," Kordansky recalls. "In the decade I had the privilege to work with him, one of the great lessons he taught me is that the best way to honor your influences and your ancestors is to orient yourself toward what's coming next, even if you don't fully understand it yet. Sam's last paintings are elegant, expansive provocations that challenge us to look toward the future and inspire us to devote ourselves to fresh challenges rather than rest comfortably in what is already known."

Widely recognized as one of the boldest innovators of postwar American painting, Gilliam produced hard-edge abstractions that energized the Washington, D.C. scene in the mid-1960s, expanding the possibilities of color field painting during the apex of the movement. Gilliam's radical shift from geometric abstraction to his Drapes and beveled-edge paintings—which rejected flatness and pictorialism in favor of the real presence of color as material in space—coincided with a moment of great social change, as the civil rights movement swept across the United States.

Drawing inspiration from the improvisatory ethos of jazz as much as the use of color, line, and movement in Renaissance painting—in addition to the long history of formalism in modernist art—the artist nurtured a radical vision for his work that transcended the traditional boundaries of painting and sculpture, gesturing toward a new mode of making that would come to be understood as installation. Through his tireless experimentations with technique, gesture, materiality, color, and space, he continually reinvented his practice, pursuing a lifelong inquiry into the expressive, aesthetic, and philosophical powers of abstraction.

Gilliam at times acknowledged the importance of the historical context of the civil rights movement—as well as the movement against the war in Vietnam—for the emergence of both his Drapes and beveled-edge paintings. In certain cases, as with his inclusion in the seminal exhibition *X to the Fourth Power* at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1969, his work proposed new ways of understanding the relationship between art making and identity.

In developing his early beveled-edge paintings, Gilliam applied layers of acrylic paint in stains and splashes on unprimed canvases, folded or suspended in the air, which were later stretched on specially made beveled frames to push the picture plane out from the wall and into the space of the viewer. He imbued his resulting works with a sculptural immediacy that brought new focus to the ecstatic and visceral potential of color. Expanding upon a presentation of Gilliam's late paintings in London in fall 2022—an exhibition conceived with the artist before his death—Pace will present a selection of beveled-edge canvases created by the artist between 2021 and 2022 at its New York gallery this fall. Many of these works are monumental in scale, representing the apotheosis of the artist's singular vocabulary.

With his late beveled-edge paintings, Gilliam reimagined and transformed his technical process. Drawing inspiration from the material nuances of the wood and metal sculptures that he first exhibited in the solo exhibition *Sam Gilliam: Existed Existing* at Pace's New York gallery in 2020, the artist manipulated the chemistry of paint itself, adding sawdust, wood, sand, aluminum, flocking, encaustic, fabric, and other materials to forge bold textural effects within his canvases. In these paintings, references to past bodies of work are integrated with a new kind of formal ingenuity. Suggesting effects akin to topological features of landscape, these works can be understood as culminations of Gilliam's decades-long investigations into entanglements of color, energy, and materiality.



With the advent of his Drape series, Gilliam redefined the possibilities of painting and the contexts in which the medium is experienced, freeing his canvases from the wall and suspending them in open space. “The year 1968 was one of revelation and determination,” Gilliam once said. “Something was in the air, and it was in that spirit that I did the Drape paintings.”

Employing distinctive soaking, staining, pouring, folding, and spattering techniques, the artist created totalizing, entrancing compositions with seemingly illimitable contours of color and shape. The Drape works included in David Kordansky Gallery’s forthcoming exhibition—created between 2018 and 2022—trace the artist’s late-career experimentations with texture, color, scale, and materiality through his use of Cerex nylon. These recent Drapes are each suspended from the ceiling with a single cord, allowing the viewer to experience them in the round, as active features in a transformed environment, emphasizing the newfound luminosity Gilliam achieved as he continued to discover new energy in this career-defining form.

The artist’s tondos, which he began producing in the last several years of his life—and which grew directly out of his sculptural experimentations featured in Pace’s *Existed Existing* exhibition—will figure in the upcoming presentations at both Pace in New York and David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. Further testing and developing his approach for the beveled-edge canvases, Gilliam created the initial body of these circular paintings using beveled wood panels that he layered with paint, sawdust, metal, encaustic, and wood scraps—materials sourced for painting and collected from his studio.

With his tondos, Gilliam stepped into bold colors and began integrating metallic frames and linear incisions characteristic of his sculptural works. He used various scraping tools—including metal rakes—to add marks and textural idiosyncrasies to the surfaces of these paintings, often exposing rich textural layers underneath. At Pace, a group of tondos, including a never-before-exhibited untitled work, will be on view, while David Kordansky Gallery will present six of Gilliam’s tondos alongside the Drapes.

Notably, an earlier body of Gilliam’s tondo paintings was the subject of a major 2022 exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. One work featured in the Hirshhorn’s show—*Lucky* (2021)—will be included in the upcoming presentations at Pace and David Kordansky.

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.

Sam Gilliam (b. 1933, Tupelo, Mississippi; d. 2022, Washington D.C.) was one of the great innovators in postwar American painting. He emerged from the Washington, D.C. scene in the mid 1960s with works that elaborated upon 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 stretcherless lengths of painted canvas from the walls or ceilings of exhibition spaces, Gilliam transformed his medium and the contexts in which it was viewed. As an 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 pursued a pioneering course in which experimentation was the only constant. Inspired by the improvisatory ethos of jazz, his lyrical abstractions took on an increasing variety of forms, moods, and materials.

In addition to a traveling retrospective organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. in 2005, Sam Gilliam was the subject of solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1971); The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (1982); Whitney Museum of American Art, Philip Morris Branch, New York (1993); J.B. Speed Memorial Museum, Louisville, Kentucky (1996); Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (2011); and Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland (2018), among many other institutions. A semi-permanent installation of Gilliam’s paintings opened at Dia:Beacon in August 2019. His work is included in over fifty public collections, including those of the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Tate Modern, London; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and the Art Institute of Chicago.



David Kordansky Gallery is one of the most dynamic venues for contemporary art, and is internationally regarded as a leading gallery of its generation.

Established in 2003 as part of a burgeoning artistic community in the city's Chinatown, the gallery began as a cutting-edge incubator for emerging talent. It quickly grew into a widely respected voice in the international conversation surrounding new and recent art, and moved to its second home, in Culver City, in 2008.

David Kordansky Gallery currently operates a 20,000-square-foot facility in Mid-City Los Angeles and a 5,000-square-foot space in New York. Our Los Angeles campus encompasses three exhibition spaces across two buildings with a landscaped courtyard between them, allowing for three separate shows to be mounted simultaneously and for diversity in programming, including performance, film, and outdoor sculpture. Our gallery space in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York welcomes visitors with an engaging experience while foregrounding the artwork on view.

Pace is a leading international art gallery representing some of the most influential contemporary artists and estates from the past century, holding decades-long relationships with Alexander Calder, Jean Dubuffet, Barbara Hepworth, Agnes Martin, Louise Nevelson, and Mark Rothko. Pace enjoys a unique U.S. heritage spanning East and West coasts through its early support of artists central to the Abstract Expressionist and Light and Space movements.

Since its founding by Arne Glimcher in 1960, Pace has developed a distinguished legacy as an artist-first gallery that mounts seminal historical and contemporary exhibitions. Under the current leadership of CEO Marc Glimcher, Pace continues to support its artists and share their visionary work with audiences worldwide by remaining at the forefront of innovation. Now in its seventh decade, the gallery advances its mission through a robust global program—comprising exhibitions, artist projects, public installations, institutional collaborations, performances, and interdisciplinary projects. Pace has a legacy in art bookmaking and has published over five hundred titles in close collaboration with artists, with a focus on original scholarship and on introducing new voices to the art historical canon.

Today, Pace has eight locations worldwide, including a European foothold in London and Geneva as well as Berlin, where the gallery established an office in 2023. Pace maintains two galleries in New York—its headquarters at 540 West 25th Street, which welcomed almost 120,000 visitors and programmed 20 shows in its first six months, and an adjacent 8,000 sq. ft. exhibition space at 510 West 25th Street. Pace's long and pioneering history in California includes a gallery in Palo Alto, which was open from 2016 to 2022. Pace's engagement with Silicon Valley's technology industry has had a lasting impact on the gallery at a global level, accelerating its initiatives connecting art and technology as well as its work with experiential artists. Pace consolidated its West Coast activity through its flagship in Los Angeles, which opened in 2022. Pace was one of the first international galleries to establish outposts in Asia, where it operates permanent gallery spaces in Hong Kong and Seoul, along with an office and viewing room in Beijing.

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