

Sam Gilliam

12/F, H Queen's
80 Queen's Road Central
Hong Kong

July 22 – September 2, 2021

Opening:
Thursday, July 22, 6 – 8PM



Pace is pleased to announce an exhibition of Sam Gilliam's paintings in Hong Kong. Following its launch at Pace's newly expanded space in Seoul, this presentation continues to mark the artist's debut in Asia. The Hong Kong exhibition, which opens at Pace's space in the H Queen's building on July 22, will feature new works by Gilliam.

Gilliam, who is now in his eighties, is widely considered 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 Field painting and expanded the frontiers of Abstract Expressionism. A noted activist and aficionado of American jazz music, Gilliam extended the possibilities of picture making in a society undergoing dramatic change.

All of the paintings in the exhibition were created by the artist in 2021. These pieces build on a body of beveled edge abstract paintings that Gilliam has been continuously developing since the 1960s. Gilliam's early approach to painting built upon the staining technique that was adopted by Washington School colorists in the late 1950s and early '60s, including Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland. At this time, Gilliam began experimenting with different techniques and materials, staining and pouring paint and other materials directly onto the canvas while folding and crumpling its wet surface to create variegated compositions with luminous color and depth.

In 1966 he began to work with acrylic on unprimed canvases, later stretched on specially made beveled edge frames. The beveled frame – often as deep as six inches – offered an illusion of flatness that disguised the physical depth of each work. The paintings appeared to float, or emerge from the wall itself, creating a three-dimensional relationship beyond the surface of the canvas. Gilliam's early beveled edge canvases explored the phenomenology of space through painterly means. During this same period of radical experimentation, Gilliam also began to work with draped or freely suspended canvases. Extending the dynamic presence of radiant polychromic color fields into the gallery, the Drape paintings marked a groundbreaking moment in the history of American abstract art and deepened Gilliam's exploration of dimensionality.

The new paintings on view in this exhibition reflect Gilliam's ongoing experimentation with beveled edge canvases. With acute attention to surface, alchemy and volume, these paintings offer a rich constellation of texture, materials, and sublime composition. Gilliam's approach to abstract expression is profound and energetic, often involving folding, soaking, and staining the canvas before applying thick layers of paint mixed with materials such as pure pigment, sawdust, tin shot and other detritus from the studio floor. Using rakes, steel brushes and other tools, Gilliam then exposes layers of color glowing below like fire coming through volcanic ash.

In his most recent work, Gilliam has made radical changes with the introduction of new materials and techniques. In his layering process, he builds up surfaces by draping thin pieces of fabric on top of the collage and debris. Like an archaeologist, he then digs into the surfaces to reveal layers of color glowing below like fire coming through volcanic ash. Always an alchemist, Gilliam's paintings take us to a new concept of space as form.

The dizzying magic of Gilliam's paintings is the result of chance and response, as much as design. Dexterously reacting to the movement of paint and the compositions that emerge at every stage in his process, Gilliam likens his approach to abstraction to the improvisational tenets of jazz music, a grounding presence in the artist's life and a strong influence on his creative output. He cites jazz saxophonist John Coltrane as an influence on his approach to painting: "It's time that matters: listening and realizing what happened with the music, my experience of sound established these references in painting."¹

¹ Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Sam Gilliam: Existed Existing*, 2020, page 47.

Sam Gilliam (b. 1933, Tupelo, Mississippi) is 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 African-American 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 has subsequently pursued a pioneering course in which experimentation has been the only constant. Inspired by the improvisatory ethos of jazz, his lyrical abstractions continue to take 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 has been 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. He lives and works in Washington, D.C.

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 President and 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. The gallery has also spearheaded exploration into the intersection of art and technology through new business models, exhibition interpretation tools, and representation of artists engaging with technology.

Today, Pace has nine locations worldwide including London, Geneva, a strong foothold in Palo Alto, and 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 was one of the first international galleries to establish outposts in Asia, where it operates permanent gallery spaces in Hong Kong and Seoul, as well as an office and viewing room in Beijing. In 2020, Pace opened temporary exhibition spaces in East Hampton and Palm Beach, with continued programming on a seasonal basis. In fall 2021, Pace will continue to expand its European presence with the opening of a larger gallery space in London.

Image: Sam Gilliam, *Moon Tide*, 2021 © Sam Gilliam / 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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