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The Art of Inspiration

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This spring, rising art star Rashid Johnson pays homage to the colorful, defiantly abstract paintings of 79-year-old Sam Gilliam by curating an exhibition devoted to Gilliam's early works.



STUDIO VISIT | Rashid Johnson, left, and Sam Gilliam at the elder artist's Washington, D.C., studio space

"**SOME OF THESE GESSOED?**" asks the artist Rashid Johnson, gesturing at several colorful canvases leaning against a wall in 79-year-old Sam Gilliam's airy Washington, D.C., studio. "No," Gilliam corrects, speaking more deliberately than Johnson's enthusiastic clip. "They're all raw." Johnson, 35, furrows his brow, bends over and peers at one of the paintings as though it contains code.

Last summer, Gilliam—known for his vibrant, often monumentally scaled paintings—received a call from Johnson, who wanted to curate an exhibition of the older artist's work. Gilliam first made his name in the 1960s as a member of the Washington Color School, a group of D.C. painters that used similar techniques: staining large unprimed canvases, embracing abstraction and energetic color. Unlike many black artists of his generation, he shied away from addressing race head-on, producing geometric paintings, and then, in the late '60s and '70s, the large, draped canvases for which he is best known. In 1976, three Gilliam canvases covered almost an entire external wall of the Philadelphia

Museum of Modern Art—like a giant's tie-dyed laundry hung up to dry. "I wanted to brighten things up," Gilliam says, "rather than just be concerned with the problem."

In recent decades—though still admired among contemporary art aficionados—Gilliam has slipped into semi-obscurity. A review of his 2006 retrospective at Washington's Corcoran Gallery in *The Wall Street Journal* was titled "A Master of Color Too Long in the Shadows." Johnson hopes to change all that.

A rising star of the art world, Johnson has had dozens of solo shows, including one at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 2012, the same year he was nominated for the prestigious Hugo Boss Prize. Around Gilliam, however, he is an eager and attentive pupil. Johnson first learned of Gilliam in the early 2000s while in his twenties and still an undergrad in his hometown of Chicago. It seemed to Johnson that Gilliam had been overlooked in favor of black artists who had engaged more directly with identity politics. This spring, Johnson will curate a show of some of Gilliam's early work at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles (March 28–May 11), where both artists are signed.

"Surprised the hell out of me," says Gilliam about the initial call from Johnson, an amused smile playing across his face.



Gilliam on Johnson

"The Washington Color School gave me a chance to fit into a future, rather than fit into what was domestic. In Washington, in the '60s, you could see where you wanted to go; you could see what you were thirsty for. you could feel the beckoning of the future—the ability to open up, to think about universals, spiritualism, all the things that a world contains.

Rashid is different. He's more of a documentary-type artist. He talks about history. He thinks about the questions that the man on the street wants to think about. That's been the tenet of the younger generation: to handle close problems rather than to be more objective. Rashid is more like a lot of artists today: writes well, speaks well and thinks well. I'm a picture artist; he's conceptual.

Young artists today walk into the art world on their own and do what they want to do. It's the making of the career that's hard. They can't find the shiny path that seems to be what successful artists have. The conflict between what happens in the studio and what happens on the outside is still there—the public wanting things to go a certain way and the artist wanting things to go another way in terms of a career. Figuring out what a career is, how to work, when to work and what to work on—that's the dilemma you talk about with younger artists.

I encourage young artists to know what's in books but to go beyond books, to see what is going on outside of school, because that's what you're actually training for. To see the variables. The fact is, I'm still the same, perhaps, as I was when I was younger. The idea of the work is still the same. You see something as an extension of a certain time or a certain date, rather than the observation that the optimism of the '50s and '60s still continues—quieter but still the same. I see a kind of optimism when I talk with Rashid."

Johnson on Gilliam

"[Gallerist] David Kordansky and I came down to Sam's studio for the first time about a year ago. It felt like a life-changing experience for both of us to see the breadth of the work. We saw a small early canvas and we were like, 'What are these?' And Sam said, 'I made more of them, I was making them in the '60s.' The show that I'm going to be curating focuses pretty heavily on some of those earlier works. It gave me an opportunity to wrap my hands thickly around a moment.

I think that Sam's work deals with bigger human concerns about art and life. You think about Sam making these abstract geometric paintings in 1965. And you think about all the things that are happening in 1965—it's very specific to avoid representation of those things. It's kind of like escape as a protest: I'm going to refuse to participate in this problem, and I'm going to continue to manufacture and make things that I think are part of this bigger conversation.

One of the things I specifically learned [from Sam and his generation] was that when racial discourse was brought to their work, there was a lot of opportunity for projection. What I really hoped to do with my work was to at least be able to define my relationship to race. My composition often goes toward the black middle class, or the black super-wealthy, or strong historical black figures. After starting my work thinking about those signifiers—having loaded my narrative with that stuff—it's given me the flexibility at this stage in my life to deal a lot more with art-making and material. I wanted my art to deal with very formal concerns and to deal with very material concerns, and to deal with antecedents and art history, which for me go very far beyond just the influence of African-American artists.

There's a tremendous amount of respect between us. In some ways I'm still very intimidated by Sam. It's been great to be able to talk to him, to talk a little about his influences. I don't want to bug him too much. I just want to pick up what I can. He's been really generous letting me follow him around, asking him questions for the exhibition. I thought maybe he'd say, 'OK, well, let the kid have a couple of pieces,' and maybe even dictate to me what he thought was the correct approach. But he's really given me a lot of flexibility. He's kind of like, 'Run, young fellow, you like this stuff.'"

—Edited from Chloe Schama's interview with Sam Gilliam and Rashid Johnson.