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THE OUTSIZERS: SAM GILLIAM'S CONSTRUCTIVIST QUILTING

According to a monograph on the history of frames, a frame provides "an area of transition between the real world and that of the picture." In the Modern era, artists associated with several movements sought to create artworks that were more "real" than the illusionistic painting they rebelled against. To achieve this, artists have inserted real objects in exhibition spaces, after Duchamp, or addressed the multiple dimensions of the frame and the shape of the canvas. Sam Gilliam's work of the 1980s is the focus of this essay, as it is not only a kind of a pictorial digest of various attempts to create a shape that would penetrate "reality," but also a comment on its foundations and qualities. Comparing several paintings by Gilliam to historical examples of shaped canvases, I trace the history of Modern art's leap towards the "real" and situate Gilliam's attempts at a post-modernist answer to that aspiration.

APPROACHING THE "ERRATIC SHAPE"

To situate Gilliam's work in the wider context of the shaped canvas, or "erratic shape," as he once called it,² we need a more expansive look at the practice and its architectonic and political implications. I will concentrate on abstract painting, as the instances of shaped canvases in figurative art usually have more to do with architectures of commerce and retail than the questions that concern us here. In abstract art of the twentieth century, the shape of the canvas was connected to the question of the frame as a border between the work and "reality," as individual understandings of what constitutes the latter were changing with movements and eras. A shaped canvas is frequently thought to be directed outside the frame, though just as often we see painterly manipulations of frames that either attempt to extend pictorial space or suggest novel relationships with the architectural space and conventions of gallery or museum display.

Since at least the Baroque era, the shape of the support has been frequently enhanced by elaborate framing that has served as a threshold between the painting and the architecture, which functioned in relation to the painting by focusing natural light on the surface of the work. During the Romantic period, artists started to experiment with the geometry of framing. A well-known example is Caspar David Friedrich's arch-shaped *Cross in the Mountains (Tetschen*

Altar) (1808), painted and framed specifically for a chapel of the Tetschen castle in what was then Prussia. Although its frame was designed to fit together with the architecture of the chapel, the painting was never installed in the intended location, thus becoming "homeless," with the frame functioning as "shelter."

Beyond the apt comparison of a painting that has lost its promised place with an unhoused vagabond lies a strong connection between elaborate supports and frames with architecture, exemplified by the work found in some of the first Modernist movements. Among the Futurists, Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero were the painters who came up with most of the possibilities provided for a canvas by a shaped frame. Both artists designed living spaces that mirrored their artistic pursuit to conceive of a painting that could extend indefinitely beyond its physical constraints. In Casa Balla, according to a witness, "the painting ran on forever, a full-flowing river, invading the walls, the furniture, and all the accessories of the house, even the clothes and hangers in the wardrobes."4 Another Modernist approach was to dispense with the frame altogether. For artists who adopted this approach, the frame was increasingly seen as a signifier of the museum, that is, bourgeois. Shortly before going to Weimar for a teaching job at the Bauhaus, painter and stage designer Oscar Schlemmer mused in his diary on the qualities of his paintings; according to him, they were not canvases which "were destined to live out their peculiar existence ... between four pieces of golden frame," but rather "tablets which burst out of their frames and ally themselves with the wall, thus becoming part of ... a larger space."5 This was written the same year Schlemmer started working on a textbook devoted to his shaped works, Ornamental Sculpture on Divided Frames (1919-1923) (fig. 2).

In Constructivism, the examples of shaped supports were provided mainly by Vladimir Tatlin. His *Composition (The Month of May)* (1917) (fig. 1) is a painting on a wooden board, possibly a table-top, with a triangle cut from its top right side and two rectangles excised from the bottom left and right. In Neo-Plasticism, Piet Mondrian's objective was to create a structure that could be mentally extended by the viewer beyond the edges of the canvas to infinity. "So far as I know," he wrote in a 1943 letter, "I was the first to bring the painting forward from the frame, rather than set it within the frame," bringing it to "a more real existence." While the meaning of "real" in Mondrian's thinking is often attached to the notion of a higher plane of existence, in three-dimensional coordinates it means an extension to the interior architecture through the conceptual effort of the observer and not, as in Giacomo Balla's case, to the actual surface of walls and objects.

While Europe was embroiled in the fight against Hitler, the implications of the shaped support were thoroughly investigated across the Atlantic in Latin America. Following Bauhaus and De Stijl in their erasure of the frame, Uruguayan artist Rhod Rothfuss presented new arguments against it in his 1946 article *The Frame: A Problem of Contemporary Art* (fig. 3). Unlike Schlemmer or Mondrian, however, Rothfuss concentrated on the question of continuity in a given work, arguing that a symmetrically proportional frame of any shape, including a circle, oval, or polygon, reduced it to a "fragment." Quoting Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, Rothfuss aligned himself with Huidobro's program of making art "to act like nature itself, imitating it



FIG. 1 Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953). Composition. 1916. Mixed technique on wood, 52 x 39 cm. Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

Photo: Jens Ziehe.

FIG. 2
Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943).
Ornamental Sculpture on Divided
Frame (Ornamentale Plastik auf
geteiltem Rahmen). 1919/1923.
Limewood, paint, oil on wax crayon,
90 x 68 x 4,2 cm. Kunstsammlung
Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf.

Photo: Walter Klein.





in all the depths of its constructivist laws." Through this imitation, a painting could escape "continuity" and "begin and end with itself."8 In Argentina, Tomas Maldonado and other artists of the Inventionist movement declared that same year that "Man [sic] is becoming less and less sensitive to illusory images," and therefore has become "progressively more integrated in the world."9 For a painting to become coextensive with "reality" it did not have to "ally itself with the wall" or go "forward from the frame."10 Its existence could rely on integration within the laws that govern the formation of natural phenomena. In this way, Latin American artists dispensed with the binary of earlier European abstraction, where "[t]he crystal is the symbol of geometrical abstract art, the pebble the symbol of organic abstract art."11 Inventionists and several other groups that pursued geometric abstraction also connected the shaped canvas with revolution and social change, even as the information on the Soviet avantgarde's excursions into the shaped support had been lacking.¹² Geometric abstraction and manifestoes from Latin America, however, were rarely exhibited or read in the US until the late 1980s. One wonders if that was a consequence of US foreign policy's goal of suppressing all cultural dialogue that potentially included alignment with Marxist and Leninist ideas. To sum up, geometric art in Europe and Latin America has recognized the frame as "a false problem, to be thought of only as an imagined, invisible partition," and therefore the goal was to design a painting that would be able to extend indefinitely along "the following progression: painting, frame, wall, room, building, city, territory, earth, universe."13

"PROLETARIAN AMBITION" IN NORTH AMERICAN ABSTRACTION

All the while, the language of Constructivism, Suprematism, Neo-Plasticism and other adjacent movements was widely referenced by the US painters and sculptors of the 1960s. Still, they later spoke that language with different inflections, foregrounding and obscuring the political emphasis of the historical work relative to their own social standing in the context of their uneven representation along economic and cultural lines. Notable differences existed in whether artists believed that a work could "progress into the universe." In the US and the wider expanse of NATO and the Marshall Plan, the shaped canvas was approached as a formal inquiry in the 1960s, though individual instances are seen before that. An early example includes Lawrence Alloway's 1964 exhibition at the Guggenheim, *The Shaped Canvas*, followed

FIG. 3
Rhod Rothfuss (1920–1969). Madí
Composition (Composición Madí).
1948. Enamel on wood, 103.5 × 89.5
cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
Museum purchase funded by the
Caroline Wiess Law Accessions
Endowment Fund.

a year later by a similar exhibition at Tibor de Nagy gallery. White artists were preoccupied with Mondrian, Tatlin, and Malevich as bottomless wells of formal ideas, a stance exemplified, for example, in Frank Stella's remarks on the influence that Malevich's 1915 painting Black Square, Blue Triangle had on his practice. Explaining his mid-1960s experiments with the shape of the canvas, Stella notes that a "Z-shape could expel the triangle, like it was springloaded."14 Two shapes were "forced together, which was a very different idea from dividing a surface," and "became more active." 15 Stella underlines the relation of angle to plane to arrive at yet another instance of a "picture with its own unique drama," in the words of art historian Kenworth Moffett.¹⁶ From the start, it seems that North American artists unconsciously adopted their respective state's strategy of containment but in regards to the shaped canvas. It was to be described apophatically, through reduction: "not sculpture," a "specific object." In Donald Judd's widely cited article, "Specific Objects," he describes a number of works that include shaped canvases as "particular forms circumscribed after all, producing fairly definite qualities."18 The strategy of containment sometimes directly contradicted the artists' known statements. Thus, according to Moffett, Mondrian's pieces were all "woven together, and [sic] picture's wholeness as a single unit was forced upon the viewer in a new way,"19 an observation that is the opposite of Mondrian's goal of extending the painting indefinitely.

For many Black abstract artists, the "drama" of painting was inseparable from their circumstances, while their choice of non-figurative methods was sometimes seen as apolitical posturing by their peers. To reinstate abstraction as a worthy pursuit, Black artists had to relate it to a wider struggle for their rights. As painter Frank Bowling put it, "Blacks are, with few exceptions, equivalent to the Masses," therefore, the avant-garde project of class-conscious abstraction could unfold in the Black community, too. In another article, Bowling describes William T. Williams's "jazzy, jagged 1968–69 works" as "a near equivalent of that circle-and-square tyranny dominating the intentful works of the Russians," asserting that Williams and other Black abstract painters display "the inconsistencies of proletarian ambition." It is worth noting here that not only the ambition, but also some of the tools Black artists used were programmatically or unconsciously working-class. Ed Clark employed a broom to apply paint to his canvases, and later Jack Whitten used an afro-comb to create the texture of his homage to Malcolm X. Poet and philosopher Fred Moten's recent interpretation of Sam Gilliam's unstretched canvases of the 1970s places them in direct connection to the slave and domestic labor of Black women who washed and dried bed linens for their masters and employers.

For many, however, geometric or expressive abstraction did not provide a satisfactory answer to the questions of class and form. After viewing the Whitney Museum's 1971 exhibition Abstract Design in American Quilts, Black painter Al Loving developed "a violent hatred of hard-edged painting," sensing that "geometric art conflicted with civil rights." His transformative experience at the Whitney made Loving dispense with the stretcher, and he set out to cut and sew his canvases of the previous era into compositions that shared the quilt's "traditional American approach to design, vigorous, simple, reductive, 'flat,' and a bold use of color." Three years before the Whitney show, Gilliam showed his first unstretched canvases. Since

the beginning of the 1970s, Joe Overstreet and Ellsworth Ausby had also started to leave their canvases unstretched. Overstreet's paintings were also noted for their lack of perspectival cohesion, present in most hard-edge and Minimalist work of the time, and lauded for "a new mobility toward greater freedom."²⁷ For Overstreet, the point of doing away with the stretcher was to stress the nomadic quality of the form liberated from its reliance on the static architecture of the museum, and he often likened his floating canvases to tents—easy to mount and mobile. Unstretched canvases allow for a free flow of colors, which connects this painting to the proletarian traditions of textile recycling, on one hand, and to the non-Western identities and rituals of (forced) nomadism, explored in music by "Saturn-born" jazz musician Sun Ra.

A MARRIAGE OF QUILT AND PLANE ON AN ARCHITECTURAL DRAWING BOARD

Initially, Gilliam also "looked at quilts rather than Constructivism,"²⁸ but his interest in the Russian avant-garde—and specifically the work of Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953)— was significantly increased by the exhibition *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910–1930: New Perspectives* at the Hirschhorn Museum in his hometown of Washington, DC,²⁹ which opened in December 1980. Gilliam's interviews of the time and reviews of his exhibitions provide context for his re-orientation. Quoted in a negative review of the first exhibition of his work in this new direction, Gilliam mentions the Russian avant-garde and Futurism as "movements about hope, change, revolution, rebellion against set ways of thinking. They come on very new. There is a dialectic we can use now."³⁰ He also mentions that since 1982 both Tatlin and Malevich had become important influences on his work.³¹ In an undated course curriculum that he prepared in the mid–1980s, Gilliam sorts artistic movements into their relationships to "systems of thinking," presenting art history as a series of binary oppositions where Cubism and Futurism align with "ordered/disordered," respectively, and Constructivism and Minimalism represent "personal icon" and "base."³²

The painter's involvement with Futurism is harder to substantiate. The Italian movement's impact, then as now, was nowhere near as pervasive as the Russian's. In George Rickey's innovative account of Constructivism, which Gilliam included in a bibliography of his aforementioned curriculum, Futurism is but an "abortive attempt to add a time-dimension" to Cubism's geometry.³³ Gilliam might have been familiar with the 1973 Guggenheim exhibition *Futurism: A Modern Focus*, or at least its catalogue, where he could see a reproduction of Giacomo Balla's *The Injection of Futurism (Iniezione di Futurismo)* (1918),³⁴ a painting of the period of Balla's incessant experimentation with painted frames that either extended the principal painterly volumes beyond the canvas or provided rhythmic counterpoint to the dynamic tensions within it.

Apart from Constructivism, Futurism, and the work of his white peers, Gilliam's work of the 1980s was born of a practical possibility connected, fittingly, to architecture. About 1981, Gilliam sought an architectural student for a studio assistant. "My first reason was to get an architect who could build models, and through the model-building we could apply for

commissions," he explained in a 1989 interview. ³⁵ Gilliam did, in fact, win some commissions for public and commercial buildings in Washington, D.C. with the help of assistant Steve Frietch.

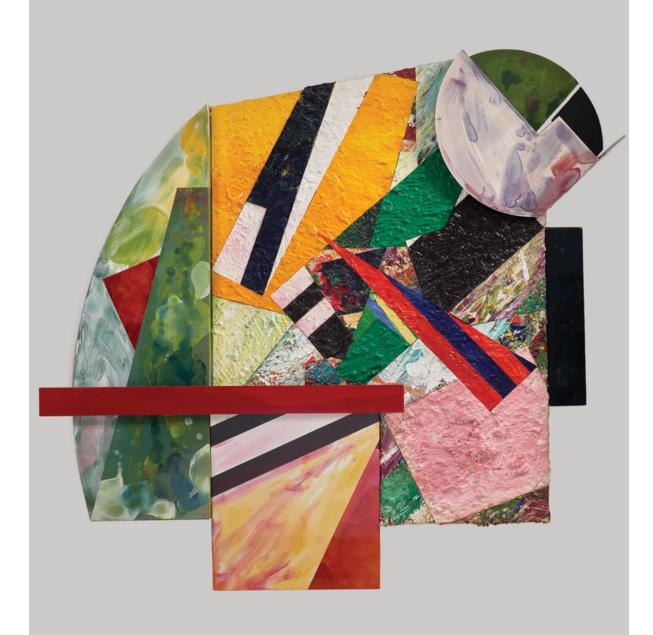
During this period, Gilliam created a series and some individual works by constructing metal structures and stretched canvases of various sizes made from fragments of his heavily impastoed paintings, stitched and glued together in various combinations. Here, we will focus on a series of works, the paintings The Saint of Moritz Outside Mondrian (1984) (fig. 4) and On the Back of the Wind (1985) (fig. 5), and a print, After Smoke (1985). In these paintings, there is clear movement from bottom left to top right. Inside the aluminum structure the triangles and trapezoids clash in different directions, coming to an unstable equilibrium. To facilitate angular conflict, Gilliam employed a variety of colors and contrasting hues that, in concert with his heavy use of impasto, reference late paintings by Claude Monet, rediscovered by North American curators and Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s.36 The relationship between the frame and the painting in Gilliam's works operates on several levels of historical reference, even if the initial inspiration came from the "newness" of Constructivism and Cubism. Tatlin's Composition (The Month of May) (fig. 1), it seems, had a definitive impact on Gilliam. In Tatlin's work, the overlapping planes feature a prominent red triangle, which floats diagonally from bottom left to top right, offering a selection of interacting forms; similar shapes are present in Gilliam's work from this period. Gilliam's repetition of structure and stitching of painting fragments followed the practice of guilt making, and the fact that he repeated select forms in differing colors and shapes in several paintings is related to the repetitive formats imposed on an artisan by the quilting frame.

Gilliam's process of historical entanglement shares some important similarities with contemporary thinking on the structural foundations of abstract art in the longue durée. In Argentinian artist Cesar Paternosto's book *The Stone and the Thread*, the painter, who made a number of shaped geometric abstractions, shared his belief in "internal symmetries of tectonic procedural principles [that] exist between Andean sculptural production and that of the Constructivist movement during the first years of the Russian Revolution."³⁷ While Paternosto notes the "symmetries," Gilliam fleshes them out in a combination of Futurism, Constructivism, and quilting.

FIG. 4 Sam Gilliam (1933 – 2022). The Saint of Moritz Outside Mondrian. 1984. Acrylic on canvas and metal, 149.9 × 161.3 × 12.7 cm. The Menil Collection, Houston.

Photo: Caroline Philippone

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Society (ARS), New York.





He is also pondering "reality," as he feels that, "everyone is concerning themselves now, in 1989, in abstract art with meaning. "What does this mean?" "What is almost reality, in a sense?"38 Gilliam's answer to the question of the frame and the shape of the canvas and their mediating qualities is very different, however, from Mondrian's "real" or fellow Black artists' advancement beyond fixed geometries to ancient rituals. Sensing that the avantgarde antagonism between the picture and the frame has lost its emancipatory power, he states in the 1980s that he is looking at "very heavy Baroque work," where frames "function like architecture," wondering if the painting "can be a foil to the frame."39 Thus, the frame can initiate the "beginning of an advance into the theater of life,"40 functioning as "the proscenium arch to the actor."41 In true post-modernist fashion, Gilliam refrains from imposing a painting's structure and texture on the outside world, presenting instead both the works of art and "reality" as highly staged. By 1990, however, "the mystery is over," and Gilliam's paintings assume their final form of "a sculpted or faceted object in space,"42 bringing them closer to Judd's notion of "specific objects." Tying these works to the unstretched canvases of the 1970s, Gilliam relinquishes "rebellion against set ways of thinking" and ends his involvement in the shaped support.

FIG. 5
Sam Gilliam (1933 – 2022). On the
Back of the Wind. 1985. Acrylic on
canvas and metal, 149.9 × 161.3 ×
12.7 cm. Hungarian National Gallery,
Budapest. © Sam Gilliam / Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York.

- ¹Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts, A History of European Picture Frames (London: P. Mitchell Ltd, 1996), 8.
- ²Donald Miller, "Hanging Loose: An Interview with Sam Gilliam," *ARTnews*, January 1973: https://www.artnews.com/artnews/retrospective/archives-interview-sam-gilliam-1973-10735/.
- ³ Wolfgang Kemp, "A Shelter for Paintings" in *In Perfect Harmony: Picture Frame 1850—1920* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 1995), 15.
- ⁴["La pittura corre infinita, un fiume in piena, e invade i muri, i mobili e gli accessori di tutta la casa, perfino i vestiti e le stampelle dentro gli armadi."] Translation mine. Stefano Roffi, "Luigi Magnani e Giacomo Balla, Case come autoritratti," in: Giacomo Balla: astrattista futurista (Milano: Silvana editoriale, 2015), 17.
- ⁵Oscar Schlemmer, *The Letters and Diaries of Oscar Schlemmer* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), 73.
- Oscar Schlemmer, The Letters and Diaries of Oscar Schlemmer (Middletown, C1: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), 79 Quoted in Wolfgang Kemp, In Perfect Harmony, 242.
- ⁷Note, for example, a passage from Willy Rotzler's history of "constructive" art: "Both Mondrian and Malevich stated as much from the first and saw their works not as end products but as objects of contemplation, as stepping-stones to something beyond," in Willy Rotzler, Constructive Concepts: A History of Constructive Art from Cubism to the Present
- ⁸ Rhod Rothuss, "The Frame: A Problem of Contemporary Art," in *Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps De Cisneros Collection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001), 139–140.
- ⁹ Quoted in Dawn Ades, ed., *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820–1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 331.
- ¹⁰ Dawn Ades, ed., Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980, 331.
- ¹¹ A quote from Georg Schmidt's review of Jean Arp's 1938 exhibition in Basel. See Stephanie Poley, "Geometric-Ageometric," in Arp: 1886–1966 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 210.
- ¹² As Gabriel Perez-Barreiro notes in his essay on the topic, artists in Latin America were reading Marx, Engels, and Lenin, believing in abstraction's progressive reputation thanks to its "inherently universal language, its anti-individualism and
- quasi-industrial aesthetic." Gabriel Perez-Barreiro, "Cities of Abstract Art: Urban Journeys through South America," in *Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps De Cisneros Collection* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2014), 26.
- 13 Germano Celant, "Framed: Innocence or Gilt?," Artforum Vol. 20, No. 10 (1982): 55.
- ¹⁴ Susanne Hudson, "Interview with Frank Stella," in *The Shaped Canvas, Revisited* (New York: Luxembourg & Dayan, 2014), 19.
- 15 Susanne Hudson, "Interview with Frank Stella," 19.

(New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 254.

- 16 Kenworth Moffett, Kenneth Noland (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1977), 32.
- ¹⁷ Lawrence Alloway, The Shaped Canvas (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1964), 6.
- ¹⁸ Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" (1964), accessed 11/15/2023. https://juddfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Specific_Objects_1964.pdf.
- ¹⁹ Moffett, *Kenneth Noland*, 32. Moffett also calls the shaped canvas "a limited, even failed, idiom," (77) only to extol the achievements that his subject, Kenneth Noland, apparently made in the field.
- ²⁰ For an extensive account of political discussion among Black artists, see Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of*
- Color (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, eds., Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power (London: Tate Publishing, 2017).
- ²¹ Frank Bowling, "Notes from a Work in Progress," (1969) in *The Soul of a Nation Reader: Writings by and about Black*

American Artists, 1960-1980 (New York: Gregory Miller & Co., 2021), 46. ²² Frank Bowling, "It's not Enough to say 'Black is Beautiful," (1971) in The Soul of a Nation Reader: Writings by and about Black American Artists, 1960-1980 (New York: Gregory Miller & Co., 2021), 303.

²⁴ Fred Moten, "Circle with a Whole in the Middle," in Sam Gilliam: Existed Existing (New York: Pace Gallery, 2020), 92. ²⁵ Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, eds., Soul of a Nation, 148.

²⁶ Jonathan Holstein, Abstract Design in American Quilts (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971), 10.

²⁷ David Henderson, Joe Overstreet (Houston: Rice University, 1972), n.p.

²⁸ Sam Gilliam, undated statement, Sam Gilliam Papers, folder 232, Archives of American Art.

²⁹ Jonathan Binstock, Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 119.

³⁰ Kay Larson, "Skin-deep," New York, March 28 (1981): 58.

²³ Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, eds., Soul of a Nation, 172.

31 See, for example, Clark Poling, "Interview: Sam Gilliam," Art Papers Vol. 6, Issue 1 (1982): 7; Annie Gawlak, "Solids and

Veils," Art Journal 50, no. 1 (1991): 10.

199. Original edition in Spanish was published in 1989.

32 Sam Gilliam, "The Environmental Presence: Marks, Lines, Planes, Forms, Colors and Presences as Aspects of Survival

and Extension of Art," Sam Gilliam Papers, folder 238, Archives of American Art.

³³ George Rickey, Constructivism: Origins and Evolution (New York: George Braziller, 1967), 13.

³⁴ Dr. and Mrs. Barnett Malbin, eds., Futurism: A Modern Focus (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation,

1973), 60. 35 Oral history interview with Sam Gilliam, Nov. 4-11, 1989. Conducted by Ben Forgey for Archives of American Art, accessed 11/15/2023 https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sam-gilliam-11472.

36 See Michael Leia, "The Monet Revival and New York School Abstraction," Monet in the 20th Century (London: Royal

Academy of Arts, 1998), 103-108. ³⁷ César Paternosto, The Stone and the Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996),

38 Oral history interview with Sam Gilliam, 1989.

39 Sam Gilliam, undated statement, Sam Gilliam Papers, folder 232, Archives of American Art. 40 Annie Gawlak, "Solids and Veils," 10.

⁴¹ Jane Adams Allen, "Letting Go," Art in America Vol. 74, No. 1 (1986): 147.

⁴² Annie Gawlak, "Solids and Veils," 10.