

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sam Gilliam

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Gilliam, Sam, 1933-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sam Gilliam,
Dates:	July 28, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:57:20).
Abstract:	Painter Sam Gilliam (1933 - 2022) emerged from the Washington Color School to work in various painting styles and influence numerous schools of art. He created works for the San Francisco and Philadelphia Museums of Art, and won two National Endowment of the Arts Awards and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Gilliam was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 28, 2008, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_099
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

The career of painter Sam Gilliam spanned decades and mediums, using paint, draped canvas and plastics to help influence numerous schools of art. Sam Gilliam, Jr., was born on November 30, 1933, in Tupelo, Mississippi, to Sam, a railroad worker, and Estery, a maternal engineer. The seventh of eight children, Gilliam and his family moved to Louisville, Kentucky shortly after he was born. As a child, Gilliam always enjoyed painting and was actively encouraged by his teachers.

In 1951, Gilliam graduated from Central High School and attended the University of Louisville. In 1955, he received his B.A. degree in fine art and also held his first solo art exhibition. Gilliam entered the U.S. Army in 1956 and served for two years. Following his discharge, he returned to the University of Louisville. After three years of graduate school, Gilliam received his M.A. degree in painting in 1961. On September 1, 1962, Gilliam married *Washington Post* reporter Dorothy Butler in Louisville and shortly thereafter moved to Washington, D.C.

In 1963, artist Thomas Downing introduced Gilliam to the Washington Color School, which was defined by bold colors. Two years later, Gilliam contributed his own innovation to the school by displaying unframed painted canvases, which allowed the work to flow naturally with the architecture of the display space. In 1971, Gilliam boycotted a show at the Whitney Art Museum in New York City in solidarity with the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, in criticism that the museum did not consult black art experts in the selection of artists.

In 1973, Gilliam created for the San Francisco Museum of Art the freestanding piece *Autumn Surf*, which consisted of acrylic sheeting hung over wooden support beams to give the impression of waves. By 1975, he had moved away from draped canvases to geometric collages, most notably the *Black Paintings* and the *White Collage Paintings*. Also, in 1975, Gilliam created *Seahorses*, his first outdoor piece, for the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1983, Gilliam was featured in his first major retrospective at the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D.C. In the

new millennium, Gilliam continued to work with birch plywood and metal forms as structural elements. Though his work has been featured in galleries throughout the world and he was a self-sustaining artist, Gilliam was committed to teaching youth the foundations of art and worked in numerous facilities including Washington, D.C., public schools, Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Maryland.

Gilliam received honorary degrees from Northwestern University and the University of Louisville; a Norman W. Harris Prize from the Art Institute of Chicago; two National Endowment of the Arts Awards; and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Gilliam's studio was located in the historic Shaw neighborhood in Washington, D.C. He and his ex-wife had three daughters (Stephanie, Melissa and Leah) and three grandchildren.

Sam Gilliam was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 28, 2008.

Gilliam passed away on June 25, 2022 at the age of 88.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sam Gilliam was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 28, 2008, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Painter Sam Gilliam (1933 - 2022) emerged from the Washington Color School to work in various painting styles and influence numerous schools of art. He created works for the San Francisco and Philadelphia Museums of Art, and won two National Endowment of the Arts Awards and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Gilliam, Sam, 1933-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Gilliam, Sam, 1933- --Interviews

African American painters--Interviews

African American artists as teachers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Painter

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sam Gilliam, July 28, 2008. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Sam Gilliam, Section A2008_099_001_001, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Sam Gilliam was born on November 30, 1933 in Tupelo, Mississippi to Estery Cousin Gilliam and Sam Gilliam, Sr. His mother was born in 1897 in Buena Vista, Mississippi, where her parents, former slave Isabella Baskin Cousin and minister Isaac Cousin, owned one hundred acres of land. After graduating from Mary Holmes College, Gilliam's mother became a teacher, and married Gilliam's father, who was born in 1887 in Sparta, Mississippi. The couple then moved to Tupelo, Mississippi, where Gilliam's mother raised eight children, including Gilliam; and his father worked as a truck driver for the King Grocery Company, and served as a deacon at the Rising Star Baptist Church. In 1942, Gilliam's family moved to Louisville, Kentucky in search of better employment opportunities. His father built the family home in Louisville's Parkland neighborhood, where Gilliam was homeschooled by his mother until the age of seven years old, when he enrolled at the Virginia Avenue School.

African American painters--Interviews.

African American artists as teachers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Sam Gilliam, Section A2008_099_001_002, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Sam Gilliam grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, where he began his education at the Virginia Avenue School. He then enrolled at Madison Street Junior High School, where he was taught by his brother's wife, Frances Gilliam. He went on to attend Louisville's Central High School, where he joined the art club. He was also mentored by his music teacher; and, in his spare time, listened to jazz musicians like Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie. Gilliam's family belonged to the New Zion Baptist Church, and he attended Vacation Bible School at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was encouraged by his family and neighbors to become a minister from an early age, but aspired to become a comic strip illustrator instead. However, while working as a waiter on the Great Northern Railway, Gilliam met arts editor Melvin Tapley, who dissuaded him from a career as a cartoonist. Upon earning his diploma in 1951, Gilliam matriculated at the University of Louisville, and pledged to the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity.

Video Oral History Interview with Sam Gilliam, Section A2008_099_001_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Sam Gilliam attended the recently integrated University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky, where he studied under Charles H. Parrish, Jr., the school's first African American professor. His peers included football player Leonard Lyles and basketball player Wes Unseld. Gilliam majored in art and education, and enrolled in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps. He was drafted into the U.S. Army after his graduation in 1955, and was stationed in Japan. There, he was assigned to the ordnance unit as a company clerk. He also developed an appreciation for Japanese art, and attended gallery shows in

Yokohama, Japan. In 1958, Gilliam was discharged from the U.S. Army, and returned to the University of Louisville, where he pursued a master's degree in fine arts. During this time, he focused on figurative painting, and became acquainted with fellow painter Bob Thompson. Gilliam also remembers boxer Muhammad Ali and his younger brother, Rahman Ali, whom Gilliam taught at the Virginia Avenue School in Louisville.

Video Oral History Interview with Sam Gilliam, Section A2008_099_001_004, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Sam Gilliam pursued an M.F.A. degree in painting at the University of Louisville in Kentucky, where he was mentored by German painter Charles Crodel. He studied artists like Henri Matisse, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Karl Hofer, and learned to incorporate volume in his paintings. During this time, Gilliam admired the works of Michelangelo and Auguste Rodin, as well as cartoonists Burne Hogarth and Ernie Bushmiller. Following his graduation, he taught art at a junior high school in Louisville, and encountered opposition when he tried to teach outside the strict curriculum. At this point in the interview, Gilliam shares his critique of African American artists like Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff, Archibald Motley, William T. Williams and Richard Hunt. He also talks about the classic figurative art of Titian, as well as modern art by sculptor Augusta Savage and painter Charles Wilbert White. He reflects upon the value of black art, and the representational paintings of Romare Bearden and Andy Warhol.

Video Oral History Interview with Sam Gilliam, Section A2008_099_001_005, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Sam Gilliam married Dorothy B. Gilliam following his graduation from the M.F.A. program at University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky. He went on to teach art in Louisville's junior high schools and high schools, until moving to Washington, D.C. in 1962. There, he continued to teach; and, in 1963, presented his first major art exhibition at the Pan American Union Building. During the 1960s, Gilliam was introduced to the Washington Color School, an art movement in Washington, D.C.; and began creating draped paintings using materials like acrylic paint, gel medium and acrysol. Over his career, Gilliam's artwork was featured at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and in Paris, France, where he met black modernist painter Beauford Delaney. He also recalls living briefly in Chicago, Illinois, where his wife worked for Ebony magazine; and shares his admiration for the landscape art of Claude Monet, Henri Matisse and Aaron Douglas.

Video Oral History Interview with Sam Gilliam, Section A2008_099_001_006, TRT: 0:27:00 ?

Sam Gilliam reflects upon his experiences as a teacher, including the exclusion of black history from primary school curricula. He describes his three daughters, Stephanie Gilliam, Melissa Gilliam and Leah Gilliam; and talks about the achievements of curator Lowery Stokes Sims and museum director Mary Schmidt Campbell at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Gilliam concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.