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Oral history interview with Sam Gilliam, 1984
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Sam Gilliam on September 18, 1984. The interview took place in Washington, D.C., and was conducted by Kenneth Young for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

KENNETH YOUNG: Mr. Gilliam, where were you born?

SAM GILLIAM: I was born in Tupelo, Mississippi.

KENNETH YOUNG: How long a time did you spend in Tupelo, Mississippi?

SAM GILLIAM: I was about seven years old when I left. The family moved to Louisville, Kentucky, about 1942.

KENNETH YOUNG: After being in Louisville, when you did discover that you were interested in art?

SAM GILLIAM: Well, actually, I became an artist in Mississippi. (he laughs) I was born in November, and then in Mississippi laws, if you were born after a certain date in September, you had to wait a year to go to school. So since my mother had eight children, it was necessary for her to be busy doing things. She kept me on cardboard and paper, drawing, so I wouldn't get in the way. It was observed by her friends but it really kept me quiet. So Mom simply bought more paper.

KENNETH YOUNG: What did these drawings look like at that time? What were you interested in drawing?

SAM GILLIAM: Horses. Horses were my favorite thing to do. I liked to draw horses running, and standing still, and in some cases when I got to thinking I could draw horses doing some rational things that I used to observe them do apparently in profile. I guess that the other thing was drawing all of the many characters in "Dick Tracy."

KENNETH YOUNG: Were you interested in horses in any other way, other than just drawing them? Did you see horses? Were you around horses?

SAM GILLIAM: That was those times when perhaps one of the major forms of industrial transportation in the city was horses. The milkman, the iceman, the junkman and everyone had horse-drawn wagons. Being in Mississippi, whenever a junkman and a ragman came through, he attracted first of all attention to his horse by the songs that he chanted. And often some of the kids would try to hop on the back of wagons and various things like this. They become a rather fascinating creature when you're a small boy, at about five to six and seven. I think that most of my kind of, actually, fantasies was to ride one of those horses. Of course I can remember that trips to the country where my mother's mother lived, and that of course they had horses, and I liked really getting up on a big horse and being rode around the yard. I think it was very much a kind of, a very kind of live and active fantasy for a kid. One way of actually enjoying this more was that whenever I had a sheet of paper, I drew horses. Of course, I always went around in a cowboy suit, too!

KENNETH YOUNG: After being in Louisville, say, in elementary school, were you one of those kids that were gifted in drawing and always went to the board at Christmas time, that kind of thing?

SAM GILLIAM: That was a special favor: when you mention going to the board at Christmas time, because everyone realizes that if you could draw and could decorate the board at Christmas time for the holiday season, you got out of class, and that with beautiful pastel crayons, etc., sometimes you would decorate from one side of the room to the other, on the board, Santa and his sleigh, or various other kinds of things with construction paper and various things, you were actually able to do bulletin boards easily. From the third grade, myself and a friend named Leonard Pulliam were literally out of class all the time. I guess that one of the things that was very interesting in the schools of Louisville at that time was that teachers were made in many ways to incorporate art and other creative activities along with the other sort of lessons, such as geography or science or even reading. It's kind of interesting, in a way, that where one really follows these kinds of activities, some of them that took place in art as being the kind of thing that caused a person to behave, but literally is that when the rest of the class were being taught geography, if you had finished your lessons earlier, you could go into an area and take out a paintbrush and a little Devol watercolor set and on manila paper could paint yourself a picture. And sometimes the kind of fantasy escape that you had, not even the school walls could hold you in. I think that one of the things is that at that time I always had an extra tablet called a "big nickel" and I would just fill it with cartoons and creations from the imagination. And sit on the school yard and would look at the Black Bee lighting man, gas man (laughing) and we had kind of a wonderful time.

KENNETH YOUNG: What elementary school did you attend in Louisville?

SAM GILLIAM: Virginia Avenue.

KENNETH YOUNG: Did Virginia Avenue have any kind of art program? Or - I remember, myself, in elementary school - art was just an hour's activity. Was that true?

SAM GILLIAM: It was true on Friday or on rainy days, when not very many persons came to school. But what was true of my fifth grade teacher most of all was that she would dig into her smock on a Friday afternoon and say, "This is going to be a quarter for the best sort of painting or drawing of this subject." And she'd give you a subject, something like the Safety Patrol, which she managed. And that if you filled the whole page, you made a shiny quarter. And God, I was working hard to collect that quarter every Friday. Racing with Leonard, that is, because he was considered the best artist in class. There were so many activities like that, I think, that even Mrs. Brown, my sixth grade teacher, was really sort of eager about using salt and flour to make a map of Greece and various things to put up. And of course I think that the kind of coordination of the activities of the hand with those of the mind sort of put together a sort of total educational package for you.

KENNETH YOUNG: After elementary school, on to high school, and being in high school did you think of yourself as becoming a serious artist at that time?

SAM GILLIAM: Oh yes. The thing that was very interesting in high school is that particularly through junior high school, there was a special arts program. I remember that you could take two hours of art. I was an art major from the seventh, eighth and ninth grades. But in the tenth grade, I went to a high school that didn't have an art program. Nonetheless I wanted to be an artist and I was brave enough to join even what was the sewing club, because at least the teacher of that club encouraged one to actually draw and paint. One instance, that I remember is that when I went to the guidance counselor and she asked me what I wanted to be, I said, "I want to be an artist." She said, "Oh God, I wish I'd known that, I'd have given you mechanical drawing." In this sense, because I was always in the library borrowing books on art, the librarian particularly would buy particular books for me and for other students, I mean who really wanted to do things. I think that as members of the library club we did the same kinds of things of decorating and building various things. I don't regret not having art classes in the high school because for the same thing is that being an artist was not only my own desire; it was also at least my own kind of secret. And in that regard is that because I started quite young, I continued to paint, to draw, and to find almost every book on art that I could. There were books on how to draw trees, or how to paint landscapes and things like this, and I've literally gone through every one of them. I had quite a library on how to do things, how to shade, etc. I'd even bought my own watercolors and my own oil paint set. I was painting. In fact, in a room at home I even had my own studio and was quite serious about the kind of hobby and the kind of fantasy and the things that I enjoyed. I knew at that time that perhaps painting is that I consider myself a good portraitist and that I had drawings of every teacher that I had taken classes with (laughing) from the tenth grade on is the fact that while everyone else was busy resting their head on the desk and things like this, I was sneaking a drawing of the teacher. It's kind of an interesting thing, because I find that it's not something that even in 1984 students do not fail to do. The sense is that by my earliest drawing of horses, I had established a kind of visual way of looking at things from memory. And that if I just had a teacher names Miss Kuykendal [pron. "Ky-ken-dal"], who wore pince-nez glasses, and that if I worked on Miss Kuykendal every day, and that before long is that when I opened my notebook on Lesson One, "Who is this?" and someone says, "That's ol' Kuykie!" I knew at the same time that I'd been successful. It was the kind of thing, I think, that even when I think back and I see the fellow students from that period, they always remember me, the pleasure that I would bring drawing Miss Kuykie, or Mr. Harper, or Mr. White, and actually capturing the kinds of things that were their peculiarities or the things that were actually recognizable.

KENNETH YOUNG: Miss Kuykendal: she was an English teacher, is that correct?

SAM GILLIAM: That's right.

KENNETH YOUNG: I understand that you were not only a good student in art but you were a good student in all of your subjects.

SAM GILLIAM: Yes. That's one of the things that being number seven in a family of eight - we studied around a big dining room table - is that by the time my sisters had recited their lessons aloud, the older sister to my mother, and then the middle sister, and then another sister had recited her lessons, and there was someone was doing fractions and things like this, you were the youngest and you learned all the lessons ahead of time. Consequently when you got to class, it was just like having - particularly in high school - had those lessons before. Another thing is that we realize that teachers at Central High School were like no teachers that you really could imagine. They were more like friends, I mean, real kind of companions. I remember one teacher particularly, Professor Tisdale, who, persons said, could easily have taught at any college in the United States in a sense. Your favorite name was "Little Gilliam" because he had taught practically every one of your sisters and

brothers. And that he says, "You're going to be our [unintelligible]." And that he would also spend kind of particular time working with you and also giving you at least a kind of support through a certain feeling of freedom and givenness - more than givenness - he made you feel good every time that he saw you. Consequently it became interesting to sort of stock up and ask for those kind of relationships, so that you had a very good feeling almost all day long through many of your teachers. Some of them would tease you, some would pat you on the back, some would hug you, things like this, and truly kind of goad you on. Of course, there's one thing that was really quite true that because Central was a segregated school, in a very segregated world, persons felt extra responsible to build you through your dreams and to literally send you where you really wanted to go. I mean, there were so many days that you spent where they would tell you about - Mr. Harper particularly, who had taught in Mississippi when he was a young teacher, so that the place "Mississippi" was not a place of actually ridicule and things like this but, rather, a real sort of glorious place. No one knew the sort of lynchings and various things at that time, you were very much sheltered from that. But your studies were like your wings in this regard, and that if you were sort of self-motivated, and in the courses you received the kind of extra encouragement to do things. There were - everything, I think, was very pleasant in the sense that we were "Centralites." We could cheer for you when you played basketball for good old Central High; or we could actually rally behind Foxy John and get a job done. The strangest thing in all of this is that one would think that I was probably a very good, upright, clean kid, but everyone knows that one of the real reasons for popularity was because I knew how to cut classes, go to the movies, before the fifth period, just like everybody else; or would smoke cigarettes that you'd get one for a penny; and would do all the things that every normal boy would do, except that one of the things that you really were taught from at home was, "Don't come in here, boy, if you have bad grades." (he laughs)

KENNETH YOUNG: How did your mother and father feel about your interest in art? I know you had a brother who was a scientist. Did this influence you in any way?

SAM GILLIAM: Well, the matter of actually becoming an artist was something that, in terms of the liberality, was really all right in a certain sense with my mother, because I had another brother who drew quite well - his major activity was drawing cars. In fact, we both used to draw for the Sunday school. When he got married and left us, I took over. Mom personally felt that this was something that made me very happy. My dad's idea was that it would be better for you to be a baseball player than to be an artist - simply because that's what he wanted to be when he was much younger. And of course he didn't know how awful I was at baseball; nor the fact that the stimulation of Jackie Robinson playing with the Dodgers could not actually accelerate over his son. And plus that is that I knew that I could really draw and was really going to paint, and that the real thing was that I wanted to be that very much. And that an older sister suggested that I should become an architect. I fought, at least, the urge to become a doctor or a preacher or things like this: I simply isolated myself as an artist. So much so that I graduated from high school quite early to take a job, hopefully in the Post Office, but then I was too young to do that. So I got a job and decided to go to art school. The only place that I could have gone at that point was Tennessee State. I was very disappointed because I could never save the money to do that. And then, at the University of Louisville was set free, which means it was integrated, and that Dad disliked the fact so much that of all the kids, I was the one who was not going to go to college that he convinced me that he didn't care what I majored in as long as I could go to school. So that actually we went up to Time Finance and borrowed the first tuition and I enrolled in the University as an art student.

KENNETH YOUNG: Then you say that your family was very supportive of you. In starting at the University and being newly integrated, how did you feel about that?

SAM GILLIAM: At that time, social consciousness wasn't one of my strong sticks. And one of the things that we had been taught at Central was a certain kind of pride and keeping one's head high, and that learning to deal with certain adversities, I think, by certain teachers as Lyman Johnson, who had majored in, literally, going into places as a black man that he wasn't allowed and really getting into trouble and actually would spend time in teaching us in social science classes exactly what that ordeal and various things were. There is something about being the first to do anything, in that we joined the ROTC with pride, and the drill team, and marched. We sat in English class and became unafraid to raise our hands. One of the most marvelous things was that there were kids also who were white who learned to look on your paper for the answers! So that in a certain sense, in many ways, there were people who didn't like you and there were people who were just as excited to have you there because they had never gone to school with black kids; nor had I gone to school with whites, but we had, literally, sneaked and played softball together younger and growing up in Parkland. There was something in a very strange way that was not really very odd about it, I mean, I think that we cheered just as loud at football games for the black players and for Johnny Unitis and things like this and really became a part of that.

Of teachers, I think that you'll recall Mrs. Imberger [phon. sp.] in freshman English who although she had at certain points some rules, where that when she looked at a black student she immediately felt he should be in remedial English and didn't realize that you'd made all A's in English and had majored in English in high school, at least she should have known it, but still she insisted that you went. In that way she could mother you into the University. As long as you took that in a sort of sense, it was pretty good. I think that one of the things about the

University is that many teachers were highly educated and highly open to the educational process; and in a very splendid way it became actually one of the first universities of the South actually to open its doors to blacks. In that sense they were willing to do a lot of things. It was extremely interesting. I think that Mrs. Ney [phon. sp.], our freshman design teacher, looked at us almost as warmly as Mr. Tisdale did and sort of held his kind of trust and kept us together; not only did they show partiality to us but actually very constructively helping us to be good students, artists and people as well as something else. I think that we both remember Mr. Leek, our painting teacher, who, when one day someone said, "Sam, the problem with you is that you're colorblind." God! I worried, because I really felt if there was something wrong with my eyes that I could not see colors to make paintings, I was in trouble. I asked him, "Mr. Leek, am I colorblind? Is it possible (he laughs) that I can't distinguish between red and green?" He said, "Sam, you're a beautiful young man but never be sensitive." And just laughed. (laughing) From that sort of day - and I taught for him for about five years, later, up to 1967, he said, "I'll never forget that day, that strange way that you reacted to the most insincere remark that was made toward you as a black student." I think that that was the warmth and sense of reception that we met from people there.

One person which I remember now [unintelligible] is that a student in my freshman English class said to me, "You're so-o-o-o lucky, being black. I notice in the South that you guys are able to talk to all of the pretty girls - those that are dressed good, and those that are not dressed so good. You see over there? Her father's a banker and my father works for the railroad. I can't possibly go over and ask her for a date." So being black, in this sense is not so bad after all. (he laughs heartily)

KENNETH YOUNG: I remember studying with Mr. Leek, too, a little bit later than you, and he was very influential on my thinking. Do you think he was one of the influential people for you at the University? Or - let's phrase this another way - what teacher at the University do you feel was the most influential for you at that time?

SAM GILLIAM: Well, it's kind of hierarchical in the sense that I think it's true that Leek, perhaps, was very influential because he had a way of referring in his criticisms to very formal processes and a way of breaking the ice by drawing or painting directly on your sheet of paper or painting on your canvas the kind of structure that you should actually look for, and the fact that he was both a classicist and a Cezannist impressed us so that we also wore khaki pants like he, with strollers, and also sports jackets with arm patches on them, imagining we were blood-linked as much as we possibly could. But at the same time, I think that [Ulfert] Wilke, the senior professor, was equally important, because one of the things was that where Leek [sic] was an abstract painter and it sort of matched, at least later, that sort of yen to at least try one of those, even if you don't like it in that regard. And it sort of matched at least a mutual interest we had in new music, you know - the Ornette Colemans, and our sense of Miles Davis and actually being rather progressive. But of course the real darling teacher, I think, near the end, was of course Charles Cordell [phon.sp.], who was always seeing centaurs, and who just, very specially as we recognized, seemed to always have been hanging and spending more time around the black students' easels than he would, say, against the white students. And you would say, "Something's wrong with that man, because he likes us better." And then he told a story.

On the day that he was liberated from a concentration camp, a soldier came up to him and saw his wife falling onto the ground, picked her up, immediately whisked out a chocolate bar. The soldier was black and was what he called his "chocolate soldier." In a very weakened condition, he said, "I will repay this debt," and every time he saw one of us black students he said, "You are my chocolate soldier." And that sense of kind of embracing is that he would share with you his philosophy that art is an ornament, you must learn to decipher the ornament in order to become an ornament as an artist. That kind of philosophy is very, very simple, it's almost for the kind. He'd take you by the hand, and much like Mr. Leek or much like Mrs. Ney or much like Wilke would get you to understand at least what you were doing in painting. And I think that it's very interesting that of all the teachers that you had met in the six years at the University, his biggest pleasure was being invited home to meet your parents. You can imagine my mother's surprise when I said, "I am going to bring a teacher home who comes from Munich, Germany." And he sat there with my mother and my father and told them almost the same kind of thing that high school teachers had said. "You have a marvelous son." And then he mentioned that he had a surprise - that he wanted to offer me a scholarship to study in Munich. Imagine, at least, the way that my head became actually swelled, he said that "he is going to be a great artist." He not only told it to my mother, he went to the head of the department and said, "You have [he thumps his hand on the table a few times] a great student here." And someone said, "Who is it?" Why, he says, "Sam Gilliam!" And he insisted on becoming - while this was actually out of line - we were trying to at least raise money to go to Munich when he returned, he felt so sincere about this indebtedness to a "chocolate soldier," in the year when I could not go to Munich, he decided to come back and to assist another year in teaching you, myself and other people. It was a kind of an apocalyptic experience. When Mohammed cannot go to the mountain, the mountain comes to Mohammed. I think that the kind of sense of a real experience in the environment that in many ways was charged not only with excitement and encouragement; and that if we would use the word "favorite" student, it would really be a lie, because you really realize that here were teachers who made everybody feel that they literally were their favorite. And I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that there was also Dr. Bier [phon.sp.] as head of the department, and that Dr. Bier and Wilke and many of these persons were Jewish who had been either put onto

boats or - who had literally escaped to America during the '40s and had fought to become professors within the university, and who had not lost their consciousness because of the Diaspora. And in that regard they were very warm - Dr. Bier particularly, who forced many of the black students to take education courses. Because he knew that in the art world, there were neither museums nor art galleries nor anything that would afford an opportunity for you to literally "just paint," as most of us wanted to do, or just to make sculpture. He even called many of the principals in the school system to make certain that when we came out, a job would be waiting for us just as he was doing for many of the other students.

KENNETH YOUNG: I was speaking to a friend of ours, Ted Hewitt and he made some comments similar to what you just stated - that we had had a classical German Jewish education at the University of Louisville. Not only from the art department but in the music department and in the humanities department. Do you feel that that is in fact true?

SAM GILLIAM: Yes, I've come to understand that. But at the same time, what I've come to understand is that a classical black education in this country is perhaps no different, mutually, than a classical Jewish education, since the dumbest of the family, with Wilke, for instance, who taught in a very strict way, is that it personified at least the way that he had been educated, and that if we were confused by it and that if we adjusted to it, we realized that we were the better, because that at least the - as we used to call it - the sense of our guts were being developed, rather than, at least, rather than using the sense of the embrace. I think that was quite true. I think that one thing that happened is the fact that the structure of the curriculum that most of the art students were brought together in the humanities, and we discussed philosophy, or we discussed the aspect of culture and esthetics with English majors, music majors, and things like this, and actually developed. Also, the fact that many of our friends, our real friends, tended not to have been our painting students early on, is that that they were friends in the English department, like Tom Grayson or Don Feeney, who were brought together simply because at least we were aggressive students, we were students who were doing the most mysterious in that also as black students. You remember the sense that when Ray Barnhart, the chairman at the University of Kentucky, (laughing) saw us studying in the corner and told Wilke how lucky he was to have us, he said, "God! If they can make art like they can make music, I wish I had me two!" (both laugh) "I would put them in a room, and I'd supply them with paint, and I'd just let them do their thing. Because that Charley Parker, and that Miles Davis, are saying something. God, I wish I had me two." (laughs again) It was funny, and stupid at the same time, to look at people like that. But even as a Kentuckian, he was paying you a compliment in the only way that he knew how to. And I think the fact that there were almost as many hours in art history and outside departments in hours that you had to have for degrees as you had studio time, meant that in a very real sense even the sense of the facilities compared to what universities have today were very, very small. I think that the little chapel that all the students painted together in was very small, and that they literally taught you to form ideas in your head. And you stored things that later you could, when you rebelled even against the insight of teachers, you... [hiatus in sound on the tape, dialogue breaks, then resumes]...in the sense that of the kind of classical and formal structure that the process of, the analytical process at least that came through the kind of research that was going into art history, and the fact that many of the professors were young and highly touted over the country, they taught you to work literally out of your head and entertained even a certain sense of rebellion, you know, on your part. Even a certain sense of competitiveness to the fact is that when anything actually entered that kind of environment, such as you remember the show, the traveling show that came to the Speed(?) of the California figurative painters, and that for a number of years we had been quasi-torn between the teachings of Leek and those of Wilke, and that almost everybody in our group chose at least a different person as hero to actually paint and would retire to our basements where we would call ourselves "the moles," and would [unintelligible] and the sense is that literally kind of being able to, having at least the ability to receive the kind of shock and then immediately to latch onto it, you know, emotionally, I think was sort of the hallmark. And that's particularly true of Ted Hewitt who later, in a conversation in graduate school, when I told him how as a freshman I looked up to him, he said, "Well, you looked in the wrong direction." "What do you mean? "I used to look up to you," he said. (he laughs) "You were the guy that was [unintelligible]." And that couldn't believe the kind of thing when literally is that he showed both of us what he was doing. And we looked at each other and said, "Ummm-hmmh, he's doing the sa-a-a-me thing that we are, he's trying to find the guts in the figure." I think that was kind of good, because whatever in that sense even if class let out at three o'clock, sometimes we spent time slipping back onto campus at 12 o'clock at night, just to paint from twelve until dawn, with a kind of a persistence and a kind of necessity. One of the things that nobody wanted to see in those groups was one of us outpaint the other. And I think that that kind of silent rivalry was very much a part of a certain sort of a classical identification, although there was a lot of the Baroque and a lot of sort of early Modern influences.

I might say this, and this is the thing that actually happened upon moving to Washington; we realized in the transition that in being exposed to the National Gallery or the Phillips or the early Smithsonian, and seeing the shock and meeting kind of the intellect of persons like Tom Downing, who had worked with both Louis and Noland and other people, we felt that we read what was going on, in the sense that our experiences were such - someone finally said, "Where is this Louisville?" which really was to mean, "Where was this kind of incubator that

you became what was suggested as such kind of advanced persons?" But I think that really the sense was that wherever it was, of course, the school that may have been the catalyst, the real sort of grading and the [unintelligible] device, of course, were really the streets of Louisville. In persons like Ted Jones, or Joe's Palm Room where we would on a Friday evening pull all the tables together in the back room and hold the Arts Club meeting, where we would really begin to discuss with the verbosity that we had discussed earlier who's better, Clifford Brown or Miles Davis? And a sense of who's on first, in that regard; and would challenge someone with a chairman into an argument as to who is really the greatest. Someone would suddenly walk all the way back to the West End thinking, if they felt they lost the argument, "I will not lose the argument, I will take the proof to the canvas." And the favorite statement was, "Don't talk that talk about your [unintelligible], do your bit and let me see it." I think that it's a very interesting thing that we knew that on the New Orleans railroad game is that someone would challenge someone to "lay more steel than I lay." And I think that in a sense that the spirit of Mississippi meant the spirit of Louisville; and of course then later on that the spirit of Louisville in consolidation somehow met at least a certain sort of spirit and a challenge in Washington.

END OF SIDE ONE
SIDE TWO

KENNETH YOUNG: Sam, back in Louisville I remember your painting figures, and this was, I think after the California show. Some of those artists that had influenced us were David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Diebenkorn and the like. And you came out of this with some very strong - kind of - very dark, moody kinds of figures. I was wondering what your philosophy of art was at this time. This was before coming to Washington.

SAM GILLIAM: What had happened that when we refer to the sense of ornament that Cordell referred to that the sense of the vision of the artist is actually looking at life as an ornament. The presence of the painting as a form of that kind of ornamentation was reduced to a sense of structure, of volumes, very much like Cezanne reduced at least the sense of art to regard of volume. Except that Cordell also taught that not only was this sense of ornament volume but that in many ways it was visually graphic, which meant that he sensed and of course played with the idea of the planar presence as being the control of the painting; and particularly in someone like Giotto, the plane was behind as well as in many of the paintings of Michelangelo particularly on the Sistine ceiling was that the plane was behind rather than in front, the volumes were in front, and that the ornament was at least a sort of reduction of a kind of those two things. The thing that was interesting in those theories is that until we saw the California figure painting show, we had never literally experienced a concept of space as being almost other than classical, or that had a space of stage presence, or had a space of deep perspective, in that regard we came into a kind of Modernist space that was almost the same sort of space as Abstract Expressionist space; and that it was also controlled by drawing as such. And of course that control not only by drawing but control by drawing as in gestalt, and that literally we faced at least the same kind of thing that Pollock faced by many of us working on the floor; a sense of feeling that the control of the painting came from actually scratching it out, so that you painted before you actually had little kind of content that was controlled as much by a sort of violent things like this. It was a very interesting kind of experience because that recall that the word "presence" - the sense of actually merging of the middle plane and the frontal plane of the painting became very important. And it became a very important thing to realize that when I had come to Washington and had more time to see New York and to see the true painting of the '50s in a sense, I began to feel, and quite rightly so, that the David Parks, the Oliveras, and the Diebenkorns were one and the same kind of space and painting that was being advanced by Rothko, by Newman, by Marca-Relli, by Tomlin; and literally, in a way, in terms of even the 19th-century Hudson River school, the sense of the painting - the scale of it - was literally a very frontal, very kind of sensing that that you really had the confidence to feel that you had experienced. And thus, almost within a year after I'd come to Washington, I was no longer painting figures. I was doing what I felt was necessary to do - facing the presence. It was almost as if, I think, that one had come almost 500 years or more in painting from at least Giotto to, literally, Pollock and Louis, without having really felt that you had lost the presence and also having gained the fact that you could appreciate each equally and mutually. I think that one of the things that really was important in this is that for some reason a lot, I mean artists were controlled almost everywhere by the same motivations, is that whatever was spinning on that disc in the early '60s by way of music gave us all something to talk about and something actually literally to share. It [unintelligible] became an oddity (laughing) when some of us, in the early '60s, used to hang out in Georgetown more than we hung out on 14th Street; and if we hung out on 14th Street, we hung out with some white artists who wanted to come to 14th Street or who wanted to come to 11th Street to hear Monk or Mal or Chico, in that sense, and who would sit there with his eyes closed and say, "I lo-o-o-ve the space that he's painting in." And before you knew it, there were paintings that were being titled after Thelonius or Mal much in the same sort of rhythm that you really felt you were doing the same sort of thing. In many ways, by the music we were being challenged to see and challenged for the proof that Dizzy asked for; and that you were going beyond in many ways the sort of the verbal into what was that real kind of control that is at least the wholeness that comes from at least a certain kind of combination of whole-body expression.

I guess that really what did go on was that fundamentally the kind of attention that was paid to color in Washington was enlightening not only as a script to a deeper reading of history but also at least of future

possibilities, and that one came to look at the painting in a sense not only in terms of its frontality and in terms of its edge and in terms of relationships of pieces - big piece to small piece, as in relating to Hoffman or at one time the strong illusionistic aspects of stain painting or that color was not only a sense of reduced tactile kind of pigment but it was like a screen and a very illusionistic and discerning void that was activated at least by certain kinds of movements there. This feeling of cohesion around a mode of simplicity and openness, I think, became at least a way of arriving at the crux not only of that present painting but a feeling that could actually be looked at in terms of all painting; and that this held Monet, and particularly Manet, together: that resolution of simplicity and openness. And is something that in this regard made it very good coming to Washington only after having been in Louisville, because the shock of Washington and New York was very reciprocal in terms of the studio, that one began to paint almost unconsciously things that one did not know, as in [unintelligible] or in any gestalt, you painted the things that actually came from yourself as a whole, or yourself as at least a person who establishes necessary modes.

KENNETH YOUNG: Let's talk a little about technique. From the Louisville paintings, I know you were using oil. What were your considerations in using that medium and how did that medium differ to using acrylic when you came to Washington?

SAM GILLIAM: Well, one of the principal things about using oils to remember is that even in the Louisville paintings we had come through a long phase of making paintings, the real experience first of using turps, linseed oils, and damar varnishes and various things like this to get a certain kind of gloss to the surface, and realized that that kind of gloss and the sense of flatness and marking that we really wanted, particularly with the experience of [unintelligible] and Ted Hewitt, is that the light actually passed through the surface and actually developed all sorts of space and we could not get things to stay on the surface and we started using paint thinner and getting at least a matte - the kind of thing at least that we had what were a post-frontal surface, a post-planar activity, where we would simply make the marks stay up and put them in front of the plane. One of the things that was interesting about the switch to acrylic is that before the switch to acrylics and I saw the acrylic colors, is that by using things like marble dust, or even today I would have used, say, talcum powder, or even spackling if you didn't have marble dust, and putting it in the paint, is that you could get the real sort of brave flatness in all paint that you could in acrylic, and that later with some of the devices that...why size at all - just to sort of brush the painting with a light application of Elmer's Glue, you got at least a kind of flatness and a sense of what way that light bounces off at least the opaqueness of the color rather than passing through as in a sort of gloss or varnished effect of the other mediums. And then, once that I had come to really looking, really thinking about acrylics, the sense of the drawing, and really wanting to get to at least the chrona of Noland or Frankenthaler and things like this, really seeing the sense of, not tactility, but the illusion of Pollock. When I started acrylics, I realized that in the same way as in painting with watercolors, you work the surface of the paper, the whiteness of the paper through transparency. It wasn't so much having a work that was hand-controlled, you simply let it go, you didn't say "Whoa!" (he laughs)

KENNETH YOUNG: In a way that acrylics presented a sense of immediacy that was similar to playing music, wouldn't you say?

SAM GILLIAM: Yeah, but playing music in a certain sense that - we used to talk about Coltrane - that Coltrane worked at the whole sheet, he didn't bother to stop at bars and notes and clefs and various things, he just played the whole sheet at once. I think that's very important, because the spatial and the total attitude of the picture depends upon at least the feeling of planarity that is determined at least by the edge as a whole. Therefore, in a painter such as Gottlieb, the sense of the sheet of color operating with the canvas as the panel plane, and then the kind of markings or the addition of other sorts of color information opened up that plane, so there's a kind of instantaneous action of many factors acting as a whole but they were all very, very simply defined. One of the things that really was important with acrylics is that this sense of the control at the level of the whole stretched canvas was very difficult the more you had in a sense had to manipulate the brush, draw in extra things to make it work. It seemed that as a function it worked much better when in a very mass way things came together. Remember that many of the Abstract Expressionists experimented with big brushes, big brooms, mops. I've even heard of someone trying to paint in New York with a buffing machine. (both laugh heartily) If you heard this, you understood it. Literally I think that one of the things I first started to do was beginning to fold rice paper and open it up and letting the sort of striations and the folds actually develop and radiate and give the focus of the painting. And very interesting is that the crumpling turned color over, putting some color on top and there was color on the bottom, just like a sediment formed on top and that you could go through it and it was just like all at once; and then suddenly the desire was to try this with canvas, using roller tubes, and pouring paint out and rolling it together, and pressing it, and then unfolding it in a sense, you have all at once the myriad experiences of several surfaces coming, being focused in thin layers behind at least the white of the canvas, just waiting to be revealed by the light of the gallery. Even more fantastic is one of the things I heard a young man say, "I started to paint when I learned to kill my hands." (both laugh)

KENNETH YOUNG: Let's go back just for a minute and talk about your first show, in Louisville. How did you feel your work was getting along at that point? If I remember, this was at the Frame House Gallery, is that right?

SAM GILLIAM: Or it was in Gardner Hall, and then later the watercolors at the Frame House. One of the things that actually happened, you recall that in graduate school we learned to kill the at least, the hesitancy of painting, a painting as large as a four-by-eight sheet of Masonite and with big brushes and big marks. And what really happened with the space, and even though the rooms were small, is that whether a sheet of Masonite was placed vertically or placed on the side, you would make a painting, and make a painting that had only one figure in it, and it was scratched and was almost made in an hour. And you had the guts that whatever came up the first time was the painting. And that was very important, because in a lot of ways the rhythmic flatness of a Milton Avery or a Matisse was immediately in our hands and in many instances was there even more so because of the simple device that even if you paint large in scale, you don't have to become more complicated. The sense is that actually (he laughs) the heads on some of those figures were twice as big as life-size; the kind of thing that Olivera taught so carefully in his "Walking Man," that he would start a man in one series walking all the way back at the horizon, and before long he had walked all the way close to the bottom edge of the painting. And when he got there, he's sort of in a post-nuclear sense, his face was a mass of paint. To recall is that the one reaction to that feeling of painting, I would be scared to live with these. "Don't you ever paint anything pretty." The sense was that almost one began to, a person's sceneless paintings began to say, "Is that you, Sam? Is that how you really feel?" But somehow the solitary figure walking, at least in these landscapes, were really kind of a reading of a compositional presence and real freedom in working, rather than literally a pronouncement of a holocaust as such. The idea that that element, that recognition, became single figures of Dorothy (Mrs. Gilliam), just wonderfully done, just imitating at least the strokes as if you would write them out. I had come to Washington and at Howard University I saw an exhibition of James Weeks, who was also one of the painters, and his paintings were like writings. Immediately [you] began to collect Japanese brushes and just make your strokes. That was an interesting kind of experience which that later, in thinking back, the sense of presence or the more that one has gone to the Freer, one realized that Japanese screen-painting was as much dissolving marks and the presence of marks onto silk, just dissolving color and letting the ash or the chroma or the sense of wetness move in, was as much fact as it was visual reality. Of course, one thing that was very important, you remember that our dear friend Tom Marsh, who was becoming a ceramist after he had become a painter, was beginning to make us realize this, so that as a process of simultaneity, that many persons were beginning to get touched, or presence, or guts through actually absorption and papers before you actually had come to Washington in that regard.

In fact, one of the interesting things that occurred, and they are part of a friend of mine's favorite works of mine, were series of paintings in the first summer after a year in Washington, of painting trees in Rock Creek Park. They're not painted in terms of the visual terms of the presence of trees, but painted in terms of the page; and they're written much like Wilke paid attention to Mark Tobey. They're touches and marks as if they were a literal practice board. I think the presence in general of the kind of association of making the figure painters paintings and making those paintings as dissolves or stains or marks. When Ted used to say to you or to me, "Don't model, just mark." And I'd call you up and say, "What are you doing?" "I'm marking, brother, I'm marking." (both laugh)

KENNETH YOUNG: That's true. I remember that. When you came to Washington and you had your first show, where was that first show?

SAM GILLIAM: It was in Adams Morgan at the Adams Morgan Gallery. They were primarily a series of watercolors, and one large painting which we put in the window because the gallery was so small that there wasn't room on the walls for a painting that was at least four by six. In those days, there were so few galleries that perhaps all of the painters who were considered the best painters were actually shown there. A strange thing happened at that show. I met an artist standing in the corner. And as artists would want to do wherever there's wine, they come in for a free drink. They pretend to be interested in the work as long as they can get a glass of wine. And from Louisville, a very friendly city, the one thing that you would do is you would show up at your own opening in a tie, and a little pin collar, certainly a blue suit - if not a pair of new shoes. Because remember, you had to turn up sharp.

I approached this person, as a Southerner is prone to do, and said, "How do you like my show?" And he didn't say anything. He said, "Well, I'd really tell you. I didn't come in because of the one in the window. I came in for the little watercolors." I said, "Well, how do you feel about them?" He said, "Man, you're scared." And I said, "What do you mean, that I'm scared?" He said, "In those big paintings, you're real scared. In these little ones, you pretty hot." This was Tom. It was in this sense that I decided to take Tom's advice. He said, "If you really want to see some painting, why don't you come to my studio?" I recall that I'd seen Thomas Downing's name in an article in the paper. So I chose to go by this studio. And I walked into his studio and there was this huge painting of nothing but dots. And he said, "Now that's painting!" (laughing) And I can recall that my wife was with me. And we didn't say anything. But at the bottom of the steps, on the way out, I said, "If he calls that painting, he's crazy." And in that sense it was the beginning of one of many instant shocks for me and I relate to this experience as being that of shock because I learned to pay attention to that kind of experience and realized that the more I tried to do figurative painting - little watercolors and things like this - I began to wonder, "What is it that this person gets out of painting those dots?" And it worried me so that I called him and invited him out for a drink so we could discuss it. And he said, "You are an o-o-o-ld man to be so young." He said, "These dots are

the same thing that Monk is doing." (he laughs)

KENNETH YOUNG: In that time, you met a number of artists, Washington artists. And Tom, I know, was very influential. But there were some others. Did you meet Kenneth Noland?

SAM GILLIAM: At a much later time. I think it was only about 1966. I visited him at his studio, which was very rewarding in that regard. We spent a weekend there and just looked at paintings, and listened. He spoke...

[interruption: telephone ringing; then interview begins anew]

KENNETH YOUNG: Now to continue about your first meeting Noland.

SAM GILLIAM: Well, one of the things that actually I should first say is that Washington in the post-war years of 1945, is that Washington and New York had become connected. They were one and the same city, almost, in terms of a sphere of influence. The thing is that just because it was Washington it did not mean that there were not artists here who had their heads in New York; and there was Jacob Kainen in New York who had known Gorky, De Kooning, Greenberg, etc., who was accessible. There were various persons like Phoebe Renkin [phon.sp.] who probably spent much time between Washington and New York, who you had come to know. There was Bob Gates who was regarded even as far away as Louisville and also in New York as a very important painter. There was Joe Somerford who you knew. And of course there was a great deal of excitement about Noland. I must mention that Noland was ideally for that time for many of the younger artists the most important artist to have "made it" from Washington to New York. And of course even in Louisville we had had the ambition of "making it" in the city. I had traveled to New York because he was the only person from Washington being talked about, to see every show that he had. And also I had met Cornelia Noland here who had written an article on me, and once when I was invited to a party where Noland was going to appear, and he did show up, I hung out in the corner and tried to "out-cool" him. I mean, I wouldn't speak to him. So my wife said, "You know you like the man's work. You're always in New York in a phone booth crying and saying can't you stay here because you don't have enough money. Why don't you go up and meet him?" (affecting growling kind of voice) "I don't want to meet him!" I said. So Dorothy approached him and said, "My husband is one of your greatest fans. He's too shy to come over and say, 'Hello, Mr. Noland.' Will you come over (he breaks up, laughing) and say hello to him?" And he came over, and much in the sense of people who are people, he said, "I've heard about you." And he mentioned that Cornelia, his previous wife, had sent him a copy of the article, and that I should come up and visit him some time." Immediately I said, "When?" (he laughs) So we drove from here to South Shaftsbury and spent the weekend with him. My wife said, on the way back, "You are some kind of funny person. The only thing that you could do was to nod your head and say, 'Yes, yes, yes.' One would have thought that you were visiting a god." I said, "Dorothy, you don't understand." I drove as fast as I could back to Washington and could hardly wait to - even though I was very tired - start painting some new paintings. I think one of the most fortunate experiences that happened was that later that year, I met Rockne Krebs, with whom I've shared at least studio space since 1968, and that Rockne had also written a letter and had gone all the way to South Shaftsbury, Vermont, to meet Anthony Caro; and that Tom introduced Rockne and I. I was asking Krebs about his work and things like this. He said, "Well, a lot of things in my work I feel are literally unresolved right now. I've just taken a very important trip -to South Shaftsbury." I said, "Well, me too." We immediately exchanged points of view, because Noland and Caro had been sort of spending time there together. In that regard it was a very influential trip. Number one, I think, is that I realized that from the books, from seeing the pictures, I had not come to do my own work. I began in the ensuing months to make many other decisions about what I could paint and what I could not paint. I think that this was a time that you realize that the only way you could actually learn something was to make a painting even if it was one that you had seen. And then once you knew what was going on, you could discard it, destroy it, and then go on to make something else. I had heard an artist say this, that the only way a young artist can "make it" is by this sort of process of destroying someone else's work. Sort of as a ritual, he knew that in order to make someone else work, you were not ever going to be able to make yours. So I think that more than in tandem with Rockne, and also with Ed McGowin at that time, we set ourselves apart from Noland and Pollock, who were a different generation. And even from Tom. To give ourselves that feeling that we were our own generation. So we ran around together. We established those things that we could not do and arrived at certain things at least conceptually that we wanted to do, just by working hard, and almost by isolation, sometimes, either from ourselves. It was a very kind of important decision in that in less than some three years from 1966, Rockne, Ed and I were given a show at the Corcoran, called "The Third Wave." There are a lot of waves out there in the old ocean, but I found myself showing paintings that were ten by seventy-five feet wide, that hung from the ceiling without actual stretchers. It was a way that had come from simply a process of some six years of dealing with what was the "pregnancy" of Washington and New York, and also realizing that I could not literally follow in this regard, although I could at the same time pay attention.

One of the interesting things about the kind of thinking was that I had to separate at least the work of Noland, the semi-fluid artist of around 1966, and that of Morris Louis, the very fluid and very kind of almost Dionysian artist. And realizing almost that it was necessary to turn away from a sort of formalist dogma into a fluent doctrine that was more process oriented and that was equally intuitive. Not to say that those same kinds of

elements were not found, at least, in Tom's painting and in all of those paintings and was actually shared. What was really good at that point is that a lot of people of my age group, etc. were making those kinds of choices.

One thing that happened, though, I think very importantly, is that once the drape paintings were made, there had to be a very important decision to continue to paint, to continue literally to do two things at the same time that were at opposite poles. And to look at least for a later period to really bring things together. And I think that that objectively controlling at least the painting, because it had been the way that I had come to realize the significance of the drape paintings, led at least in later years to 1972 and '73 of doing the drape paintings and multi-forms of both works in a show at the Jefferson Place [Gallery], in which I framed paintings, put paintings in cases, put paintings over sawhorses, hung paintings free in space both in large scale and in small scale, used paintings with electric fans and various things, in a sort of sense that sometimes you have to "let it out." In that letting-out process, in a very open way, you find at least the kind of instances that you're looking for. And in many instances, after 1973, I literally discontinued making the suspended paintings altogether only to concentrate more on the paintings and to literally "let them go." A kind of interesting reversal of that fact is that also I realized that I had said what I wanted to say; I had made what I wanted to make. In the following years I would even see them better. Certainly it proved to be true, because three years ago, perhaps about 1981, I started to do permanent forms of the suspended paintings through commissions, and began to change from just painting on canvas to making large-scale metal pieces...

INTERVIEW ENDS

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