



Clockwise from left: "One On" (1970) by Sam Gilliam; Bridgehampton-based abstract artist Rashid Johnson sitting in front of Gilliam's "Helles" (1965); "Swing Sketch" (1968) by Gilliam.

Play It Again, Sam

A PIONEER OF POSTWAR PAINTING, SAM GILLIAM IS ENJOYING HIS FIRST EUROPEAN RETROSPECTIVE. BRIDGEHAMPTON ARTIST RASHID JOHNSON, WHO HAS CURATED FOR THE RENTAL GALLERY AND PARRISH ART MUSEUM RECENTLY, DISCUSSES WRITING AN ESSAY FOR HIS HERO'S EXHIBITION CATALOG.

BY ALLISON BERG

Tell us about your relationship with Sam. My relationship with Sam's work started in my early 20s. His paintings were in important museum collections but went under-recognized. Several years later, when David Kordansky and I were discussing the current state of abstraction and Sam's role in it, we reached out to him in D.C. I curated his show at David's [gallery] about a year later.

How did you perceive your writing responsibility?

I felt responsible for saying what I see and feel is powerful about Sam's work. I was honest, thoughtful and patient with how I discuss his oeuvre and its importance to art history and the history of blacks working through complicated narratives.

What makes Sam an important part of art history?

Sam is revolutionary in the way he treats the canvas. Removing the canvas from the stretchers is only one aspect. Sam's avant-garde thinking about color, abstraction and impulse explains a time's complexity as well as any representational process. Being

an artist who explores politics or ideas doesn't mean you have to sing for your supper. Sometimes, digging into the human condition through gesture and poetry can speak as gloriously as image and content.

Why is 1967 to 1973 foundational for Sam's career?

Those years are fantastic, but you could carve out any five- to seven-year period and my enthusiasm would be the same.

How does this retrospective contribute to Sam's legacy?

Any retrospective intends to provide opportunities for understanding the breadth of an artist's accomplishments. It has been rare for artists of color to have this level of attention, scholarship and financial commitment paid to their work. This show pushes Sam into the canon's reinvestigation. It is exciting to see him embraced in a larger exploration of what has been done and what is important in art history.

The Music of Color: Sam Gilliam, 1964-1973, *Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel, June 9-Sept. 30*