

## Investigating with the Creative Questions Game and *Relative* by Sam Gilliam

**Art: Abstraction, Materials and Innovation**

**Adapted from Meghan Lally, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC**

**Target Thinking Dispositions:** Questioning and Investigating

**Thinking Routine:** The Creative Questions Game

**Work of Art:** Sam Gilliam, *Relative*, 1968

**Disciplines:** Art, English Language Arts

**Curricular Topics:** Abstraction, Materials and Innovation

**Grade Level/Age:** Grade 5 or Ages 10-11 (adaptable for older or younger students)

**Total Time:** ~40 minutes (adaptable for shorter timeframes or two sessions)

**Learning Objectives:** Students will be able to brainstorm creative questions using question-starters.

### **Materials Needed:**

- Art reproduction of *Relative* by Sam Gilliam (poster, digital image, or individual prints)
- The Creative Questions written on small piece of papers (1 question per paper, 1 paper per student)
- Yellow pad paper
- Jar for questions
- Bag of materials for small groups: (each bag contains 1 loose canvas piece, 1 stretched canvas piece, 1 paint can, 1 paint brush, 1 piece of string)
- Pencils (1 per student)
- Photo of Sam Gilliam

### **The Creative Questions Game**

#### **1. Observing (standing):**

**~10-12 minutes**

Introduce the work of art, the thinking goals, and connecting curricular topics. Then, ask the students to silently look carefully at the painting while standing up. As a whole group, have them trace the outer shape of it in the air to help guide their eyes. They can use their finger to start at one corner of the art piece and trace it entirely. Next, invite them to use their whole bodies to trace the piece, stretching up and curving their bodies as necessary.

Next, have the students sit and look at what is inside the area they just traced, such as shadows or colors for example. Ask them to each write down 3 things they notice about the work of art. As a whole group, write down 5 things noticed by the class by calling on 5 different students to share 1 thing each. Be sure to document these 5 things by creating a list.

#### **2. Brainstorming questions:**

**~20 minutes**

Explain to the students that you will be playing a game called Creative Questions. You can explain that artists like Sam Gilliam often ask questions to spark their creativity, and they will similarly be coming up with questions about the art. Select one of the 12 question start paper strips from the jar, and model developing a creative question, such as “How would it be different if ... it were on the floor?”. Then brainstorm 1 question as a whole group. Next, invite students to pick out a question-start from the jar, independently brainstorm a question using it and write it on the paper.

Once they have finished, invite students to read out their questions to the whole group. Summarize the questions by identifying different categories of questions that you notice (for example questions about how it’s made, questions concerning the artist knowing other notable people, etc).

Hand out a bag of materials for small groups to investigate. The materials can include a paint brush, a piece of loose canvas, a piece of canvas on a wooden board, a paint can, and a piece of string. Ask the groups to think about how Sam Gilliam may have used the materials, and other ways the materials can be used. Invite the groups to share out their thoughts.

### **Extending the Creative Questions Game**

#### **Provide Background on the Artist and Artwork:**

**~5 minutes**

Using the art story on *Relative* in unit 4, share a brief story about the artist and painting, in connection with any pertinent curriculum topic. For example:

After a stint in the Army, Sam Gilliam moved to Washington, DC, in 1962, where he found a thriving artistic community in the predominantly African-American neighborhood of Shaw, where he still lives today. He began to explore new ways of painting by pouring thinned paint directly onto unprimed canvas. Gilliam’s experimentation led to a major breakthrough when he decided to eliminate the stretcher bars from the canvas, and instead, drape massive billowing fabric on the wall. Gilliam believes, “Making, building, thinking—it’s just important. It’s what the world is about.”

Ask the students if the information makes them wonder anything else, and if they have any new creative questions.

#### **Wrap-Up:**

**~5 minutes**

Summarize the activity for students, highlighting linkages between the thinking routine (The Creative Questions Game), key dispositions (questioning and investigating), and any relevant educational content. Encourage students to continue to ask questions about what they see outside of this experience.

**Other Suggested Works of Art:**

This lesson can be applied to other works of art, such as:

- Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1949
- Romare Bearden, *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1967
- John Chamberlain, *Untitled*, 1962

For more works of art related to the subject of abstraction, materials and innovation, please refer to the Uncovering America resource on the National Gallery of Art website:

[www.nga.gov/uncoveringamerica](http://www.nga.gov/uncoveringamerica)