

Art Story: *Relative* by Sam Gilliam

Read by Meghan Lally Keaton

You are looking at a high resolution digital reproduction of a work of art by Sam Gilliam, titled *Relative*, made in 1968.

Who is Sam Gilliam?

Born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1933, Sam Gilliam was raised in Louisville, Kentucky, and studied art at the University of Louisville. After a stint in the Army, he settled in Washington, DC, in 1962, where he found a thriving artistic community in the predominantly African American neighborhood of Shaw, where he still lives today.

In DC, Gilliam was introduced to new ideas in abstract art that inspired him to move away from realistic imagery to adopt color as the main subject of his paintings. He soon became associated with the Washington Color School, a group of artists making abstract paintings of expansive color. 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. Partly inspired by the laundry on clotheslines he could see from his apartment window, this new art form—that bridged painting with sculpture—made Gilliam famous internationally.

Gilliam loves jazz music, and often listens to it in his studio. He wants to create a similar kind of mood with paint and canvas. He says his work evokes, "the drama of music and the drama of colors coming together."

After more than sixty years making art, Gilliam continues to explore new possibilities for abstraction, noting, "Even as an artist I discover new things every day, every time I go to a museum, and that's what the works are there for."