AN INTERVIEW WITH SAM GILLIAM
BY JACK RASMUSSEN

JR: My great regret when I arrived in Washington in 1973 was that I was too late to see the exhibition Walter Hopps curated in 1969 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Gilliam, Krebs, McGowin. I knew about that show before I got here, and it seemed like one of the most important events to ever happen in Washington, with the possible exception of Alice Denney’s Now Festival.

SG: When Walter Hopps made that show with Rockne, Ed, and me, he had two things in mind: teaching us how to survive by following our own instincts and to see things broadly. We had been around a very full tradition with the Washington Color painters, but why necessarily follow it? You can’t see it if you keep doing it… you must take a chance and work differently. When you look at the artists Walter worked with — Stella, Flavin, Rosenquist, Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, and so on — you begin to figure out that if the purpose wasn’t survival, it was certainly to be able to play a nice gig. It was exciting.

JR: It is pretty interesting that Walter came from the West Coast and picked out you three to work with, maybe seeing some kind of resonance or sympathetic iconoclasm.

SG: Well, it was very interesting because when you thought that Walter picked you out to push you all the way to fame, he then chose another artist, whether it was John Gossage, Bill Christenberry, or someone else.

JR: With Gilliam, Krebs, McGowin, it seems like he gave three young artists a lot of rope, that part of his process seemed to be to find people he wanted to work with, and then to let them loose.

SG: I would still say that Ed McGowin is a person to keep up with. He was dynamic and he still is. Rockne was just excellent, both as a person and everything. In a sense, there was a feeling that we were never going to be like the guys that had gone before. Walter helped us connect with Nesta Dorrance and the Jefferson Place Gallery, which was started by American University art faculty, and they gave us a place to show. Walter also tried to make the Jefferson Place Gallery a place for photography.

JR: That’s way ahead of its time.

SG: Walter was just in the community and he wanted to support it. He worked in a way that was different from the way that the Washington Color School had been organized, where you did things and only one artist survived. I think we all grew up in a kind of reality that is not a part of what you think about in school. Walter had at least a connection to the Tokyo Biennial, the Minneapolis Museum of Art, the Chicago Art Institute, and then I got a gallery in Paris. It’s just a way of actually putting things together, and suffering together.

JR: It seems what you are doing at the Katzen Arts Center right now is very much related to your original and radical impulse to take over the space and not confine painting to the picture plane. How is what you’re doing at the Katzen now different from what you’ve been doing lately? Is it a continuation, a jump backward, or a jump forward?

SG: When I came here, I was painting like Bob Gwathmey. I was floored by Bob, and I used to listen to Joe Summerford a lot. I mean, art is art, and that’s the thing. This was essential to me beginning to like Ellsworth Kelly. This way, that way, Bob was a lot like Blaine Larson or Andrew Hudson, and this was something that one found even with Lowell Nesbitt. Lowell had great connections and gave great parties. You really learned how to feel things fully.

JR: How do you relate this to the body of work that most people know you for?

SG: For some reason, even though I’m 77, I’m as scared when I work now as when I was young. It’s about ideas. I don’t want the feeling that I know what to do. This first Corcoran show everyone talked about, it was a piece in the atrium that was done on pipes, and it was about 270 feet, that Walter pointed out looked exactly like a ring around the bathtub of the third floor. It did. We took this frame and hung curtains on it and things like that. It was moving from something that was natural to something that was there. What it is, is that you’re confident that, once you stand in the ring, you can make it.

JR: Who else was doing site-specific work, which was what you were doing when you first took your canvases off the stretcher? What was going on then? Were there precedents that you were responding to or was this just something that came upon you?

SG: You know, one of the things Walter insisted that Rockne and I do was to help him hang shows. We did David Smith, we did the Stella show, and in some instances, with David Smith, we’d go to New York and look at paintings. You’d see the whole process, the practices, and the final things. There was Anne Truitt and there was Linda Benglis. Linda Benglis particularly — I had several shows with her, and with Bob Stackhouse. I visited Bob last year and I was surprised how natural and right on the money he was.

I don’t believe in installation, I believe in making the work. I believe in the experience of making the work. Maybe every morning about three o’clock I wake up and place Painting A someplace else. I gotta give it a try. Let’s do the first one, and if the first one don’t work, call me in a month and we’ll do the second.

You don’t remove the artwork from its environment, so that the painting is not the painting, it can be the wind. That sort of reversal works well. It’s one of the reasons for using cloth, and it’s one of the reasons for working outside the specific materials of art — and getting closer to those trees.

Pollock said something very interesting, “When I work, I’m in the work.” Or he says, “When I paint, I’m in the painting.” I discovered that I felt recently, in looking through an old book on Cezanne, there’s a painting about trees and stones, and the trees form the stones. I said “Damn, that’s the same number of trees that Pollock had!” So that you don’t lose that sense of being inside, or with, or reading a certain work. In fact, it’s a challenge to do that. Like the Lone Ranger, you’ve gotta go for the money.

SELECTED PUBLIC COMMISSIONS
Washington Metro, Takoma Park station, Washington, DC
American Embassy, Bamako, Mali
“The Three Museums,” University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH
“Construction Aviation Potomac,” Reagan National Airport, Arlington, VA
“untitled,” U.S. Customs House, New Orleans, LA
“CAAM Hues,” California Afro-American Museum, Los Angeles, CA
“Solar Canopy,” York College, Jamaica Queens, NY

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS
American University Museum, Washington, DC
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
Museum Boymans - van Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
Cincinnati Museum of Art, Cincinnati, OH
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, MI
Greenville Museum of Art, Greenville, SC
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN
The Kreuger Museum, Washington, DC
Louisiana Museum, Humlebæk, Denmark
Menil Collection, Houston, TX
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI
Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MI
Musee d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France
Museum of African Art, Washington, DC
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA
The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC
Rockefeller Collection, New York, NY
J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY
Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
Szepmuveszeti Museum, Budapest, Hungary
Tate Gallery, London, England
Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, VA
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
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