

IMMA
THE HOUSE GALLERIES
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Sam Gilliam: Sewing Fields



'Sam Gilliam: Sewing Fields' offers an in-depth exploration of the evolution of Gilliam's sewn and collaged works in the later stages of his career, bringing his groundbreaking practice to new audiences in Ireland. This exhibition also highlights his lesser known yet profound connection to the country, rooted in his transformative residency at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation in County Mayo in the 1990s. It was during this time, in the remote coastal village of Ballycastle, that Gilliam, far from his usual studio, embraced new materials and techniques that would shape his later work.

Biography

Gilliam was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1933 and grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. He earned a degree in Creative Arts University of Louisville in 1955. After two years in the army, he returned for an MFA in 1961. In 1962, he moved to Washington, D.C., where he entered into a dynamic and racially complex art scene. He became associated with the Washington Color School—artists like Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Howard Mehring, and Paul Reed—who were building on the stain techniques developed by Helen Frankenthaler. This group, which came to be defined by their colour field painting, worked in a style rooted in formalism, emphasising flatness, clarity, and chromatic intensity. Gilliam was initially aligned with their experiments but quickly began to diverge. Gilliam introduced gestural, textural, and architectural elements. His early works from the 1960s feature poured and stained acrylic on unprimed canvas, manipulated through folding and crumpling while still wet, and stretched over bevelled-edge supports. These supports, chamfered so the painting appeared to float off the wall, blurred the line between object and image. He used unconventional tools—brooms, mops, rakes—to apply paint, embracing the accidental and the performative.

Importantly, he was absorbing influences beyond Washington. Jackson Pollock's action painting offered a precedent for the canvas as a site of activity. Robert Morris and Eva Hesse showed how materials could behave, sag, twist, and resist. Gilliam combined these with a sculptor's sense of volume and a painter's sensitivity to surface. The result was a hybrid aesthetic, at once structured and chaotic, intimate and architectural.

The pivotal moment came in 1968, when Gilliam began making his first Drape paintings. These were vast canvases, unstretched and suspended from walls or ceilings. They were not hung in a flat plane but allowed to billow, loop, and cascade. These works challenged every convention of painting: there was no

stretcher, no frame, no clear orientation. Works like *Light Depth* (1969), *Rondo* (1971), and *A and the Carpenter I* (1973) redefined the medium. Installed in spaces like the Corcoran Gallery, the Studio Museum in Harlem (*X to the Fourth Power*, 1969), MoMA (*Projects*, 1971), and in the U.S. Pavilion at the 1972 Venice Biennale, these works had an enormous impact. They invited viewers to move around them, to see painting as environment.

Gilliam understood these works as alive to their setting. They were not fixed compositions but mutable, performative gestures. The installations at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Artpark in Lewiston, New York, placed the drapes outdoors, where they reacted to wind and light. They were site-responsive and radically open-ended. Critics at the time struggled to categorise them. Some linked them to minimalism and post-minimalism; others saw them as a reanimation of Abstract Expressionism. For Gilliam, they were simply a continuation of his belief in colour, improvisation, and space.

In the mid-1970s, he changed direction again. Dissatisfied with the looseness of the drapes, he returned to the canvas but introduced a new level of density and materiality. He began producing heavily collaged, cut, and stitched paintings. He layered stained fabric, built impasto surfaces, and used shaped stretchers that echoed the painting's internal geometries. Works like *Robbin' Peter* and *Toward a Red* show this synthesis of staining, structure, and sculptural form. These works invoke Constructivism and African American quilting traditions but are resolutely modernist in ambition. Gilliam was resistant to being framed in craft-based terms, even as he acknowledged their formal influence.

This was a period of deep experimentation. Gilliam treated each painting as a proposition. He often reinstalled them in different ways, treating them not as static compositions but as modular systems. He began to use metal, wood, and plastic. His printmaking, especially in collaboration with William Weege, brought new processes into his practice: stitching, layering, overprinting. He was relentless in his refusal to settle. As John Beardsley noted in the IMMA publication, 'he seemed to be several artists at once'.

This restless energy brings us to 1993 and his residency at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation in Ballycastle, County Mayo. Ballinglen had only recently opened, and Gilliam was among its earliest international residents. He stayed for three weeks in the rural, coastal setting. Unable to transport his usual paints, he developed an innovative process of pre-staining fabric in Washington, D.C., shipping it to Ireland, and then cutting and layering these pieces into richly

textured compositions. Gilliam's engagement with the local community, including a collaboration with a local dressmaker, led to the creation of some of his most iconic sewn and collaged works, a process that continued to evolve through the years. This marked a significant shift in his practice, integrating a sculptural element that would resonate throughout his career.

Gilliam was not simply an important painter; he was a radical innovator who fundamentally redefined the possibilities of painting. His revolutionary approach to colour, material, and space expanded the very language of abstraction, pushing the boundaries between painting and sculpture in ways that continue to shape contemporary art. This exhibition, in bringing his work to Ireland once again, situates him within a broader art-historical context, revealing how his practice intersected with Ireland's artistic history in unexpected ways.

Ireland has had a strong tradition of abstract painting since Mainie Jellett first exhibited a work of pure abstraction in Dublin in 1923. The Rosc exhibitions (1967–1988) introduced Irish audiences to major modernist painters, including Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis, and Frank Stella. It was within this evolving artistic climate that Gilliam first exhibited in Dublin. In 1977, the Oliver Dowling Gallery, a key platform for Irish and international contemporary art, hosted a solo exhibition of his work. This was a significant moment, demonstrating Dublin's growing engagement with the most experimental developments in abstraction. Among those who attended was Gordon Lambert, a pioneering collector and one of IMMA's founding patrons. He acquired a work on paper from the exhibition, a 1970 painting that now resides in IMMA's Gordon Lambert Collection. This acquisition establishes a direct historical link between Gilliam's early presence in Ireland and his first major retrospective here today.

Gilliam was not alone in forming connections with Ireland's contemporary art scene. Howardena Pindell exhibited in Trinity College Dublin as part of 'New York Avant-Garde/Works and Projects of the Seventies', originally devised by Alanna Heiss at PS1 Contemporary Art Center (now MoMA PS1). Pindell, like Gilliam, challenged the limitations of traditional painting through her approach to materiality and process. More than 40 years later, IMMA presented a major retrospective of her work in 2023, reaffirming the museum's commitment to pioneering abstract artists, whose work continues to shape the field. While these moments may have seemed peripheral at the time, they reveal how Ireland was actively participating in transatlantic artistic dialogues.

In his essay, included in this volume, John Beardsley maps in detail how these initial experiments in Ireland produced a formative working method that Gilliam would continue to refine over the next 30 years. The influence of Ballinglen endured. Even in the final years of his life, this Irish experience remained significant. Among the last paintings he completed in 2022, just before his death, are *Irish, County Mayo*, and *Downpatrick Head*—titles that directly reference his time in Ireland. His work absorbed the rhythms and materiality of his surroundings, demonstrating how abstraction continually evolves in response to place and time.

Through ‘Sewing Fields’, Gilliam’s connection to Ireland comes full circle. Nearly 50 years after his first exhibition in Dublin, his work returns to the city, now framed within the full breadth of his long career. This exhibition provides Irish audiences with a rare opportunity to engage with his visionary legacy, while also highlighting the deeper and ongoing relationship between Irish and American abstraction, shaped by moments of artistic exchange, exhibition-making, and a shared visual language.

Acknowledgements

Sam Gilliam: Sewing Fields

This exhibition is curated by Mary Cremin and Seán Kissane.

Organised by IMMA in cooperation with Annie Gawlak, President of the Sam Gilliam Foundation.

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A fully illustrated catalogue, edited by Sara Muthi and designed by Alex Synge – *The First 47*, with a foreword by Annie Fletcher, an essay by John Beardsley, and an interview with Thelma Golden, available in the IMMA Shop, special exhibition price €20.00.

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