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Celebrating 175: Artist File, Gilliam, Sam, 1968

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to create the kind of optical space within which the painting of Louis and Noland addresses the observer. Instead color as matter - in mottled channels of opaque aluminum, splotches of maroon, or alluvial-like deposits of cobalt blue, viridian, and scarlet in a work like *Restore* (1968) - refers constantly to the physical location of the picture surface.

None of Gilliam's colors are ingratiating, and it is obvious that with his unpleasantly caked and smeared surfaces he aims to challenge the all-too-tasteful ends to which stain painting has been carried by some of its less inspired practitioners in recent years. In several small rice paper and acrylic paintings Gilliam defines the more delicate and lyrical aspect of his production. The absorbency of the ground in these works turns the pigment into soft, filmy phenomena, glowing swirls and pools which reminded me of Wilfred's *Lumia* screens. These, and a small vertical canvas, *Shift Again*, in which the pale lavenders, pinks, and speckled silver are less coarsely worked as pigment, are close in feeling to the influences from which Gilliam is usually able to disassociate himself more inventively. Although the immense wall-sized *Sock-It-To-Me* (110" x 360") is not, to my eye, a fully realized painting, I found it a more interesting venture for its ambition than for its failure to hold itself together on such a large scale. Despite the formal repetition of the folded patterns of red, yellow, green, and white, clotted like wet finger paint and layered over aluminum, the size itself seems to overreach the normally strong impact of the surface treatment - which is much more emphatic on a smaller field. Here the effects can look incidental rather than accidental. This in itself points to the problem I find with Gilliam's work - that the paintings can too easily look simply like the exercise of a particular method. But when he affronts the eye with his more boldly conceived and executed experiments, often immoderate in scale, he ends up pleasing less and risking more than he seems able to handle at this point.

[[image]]
Sam Gilliam, *Rouge*, acrylic, 1968. (Byron Gallery)



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