

Lesson Plan: **Color Field Paintings** **Inspired by the Work of Sam Gilliam**



Sam Gilliam, *Carousel*, 1970, acrylic on unstretched canvas, 9'10" x 67'1". Purchase through funds from the Brittingham Foundation and an anonymous donor

Sam Gilliam (1993-2022) created a series of work called “Drape Paintings” where he took unstretched canvas and painted them in unconventional ways such as soaking, dying, pouring a mix of paint and water over them, and washing the painted canvas with paint thinner. These works were then displayed by being loosely hung in a space. Gilliam’s drape paintings were meant to be rearranged and hung in different ways each time they were displayed.

Color Field Painting was a style within the Abstract Expressionism movement in the 1950s & 60s where artists would use large fields of colors to envelop viewers in color. These works were non-objective and had no

suggestion of figuration. Examples of other Color Field painters include Mark Rothko, Helen Frankenthaler, and Clyfford Still.

In this lesson, students will learn about the artist Sam Gilliam, his drape paintings, and color field painting. Students will then create their own artwork inspired by Sam Gilliam's drape paintings and the color field painting style. Teachers will encourage students to create their work in a meditative and spontaneous way and they will encourage students to consider composition when later hanging up their artwork.

Objective

Students will learn to take risks and experiment with color using unconventional painting techniques. Students will also learn about the importance of composition and how a work is arranged can change the effectiveness of art.

Vocabulary

Color field painting: a style of abstract painting that uses large fields of flat color.

Abstract art: artwork that is not easily recognizable and can be interpreted in various ways

Composition: the way that an artist decides to organize an artwork's distinct parts in order to make a cohesive whole

Experimentation: in art, this is a process that involves testing and discovering without knowing what the outcome will be

Unconventional: not based on or not conforming to what is traditionally done

Harmony: a principle of art that refers to how well all of the visual elements work together

Materials

- Cut pieces of unprimed canvas or white fabric
- Acrylic or tempera paint
- Paint brushes (students may use these but they will be encouraged to use other painting methods)
- Water & water cups
- Containers for dipping and pouring
- Water droppers or other tools for unconventional painting
- Newspaper, table covers, or plastic "lunch" trays
- Rubber bands or clothespins

- Paper towels or rags
- String

Preparation

1. Introduce Sam Gilliam's drape paintings using visual inquiry. Ask students questions about what they see / think such as:
 - a. What do you first notice about these paintings?
 - b. What do these paintings remind you of?
 - c. What emotion(s) do you associate with these paintings?
2. Teach students about what color field painting is and how Sam Gilliam's drape paintings are an example of color field paintings. Inform them about the unconventional techniques that Sam Gilliam used to create these works of art.
3. Explain to the students that they will be creating their own paintings using canvas and paints and that they should experiment with unconventional ways of painting similar to that of Sam Gilliam's self-invented techniques.

Methods

1. Organize supplies and have students set up their work areas. Make sure to cover tables and provide plenty of paper towels/rags for spilled or splattered paint.
2. Provide each student with a piece of cut canvas and set up the painting materials for each table to share.
3. Encourage students to experiment with the paint and water (Sam Gilliam said that many color field artists used as much water as they did paint) and try unconventional painting methods.

Note: once students have finished their paintings, you can help speed up the drying process by blow drying their artworks so that they can move on to the next step. Alternatively, the next step can be done in a later point in time after their work has had time to dry.
4. Hand out rubber bands and clothespins and show students how to bunch up their work in preparation for hanging. Have the students consider composition, how they want their artwork to be viewed, and how different arrangements can change how their piece would be viewed.
5. Have the students hang up their works in the hallway along a wall.

Reflection

1. Display the artworks and look at them as a group. Students participate in a "gallery walk" to look at their peers' works. The students are

welcome to ask each other questions about their composition choices or make comments on the strengths of their peers' choices.

2. Ask the students: How did it feel to experiment with different painting techniques? How did it feel to change the way your artwork looked by using rubber bands/clothespins to bunch up the artwork? What do you feel about this artistic process?

Variations

- If you do not have access to canvas, try using Japanese paper or coffee filters. Check out “Coffee Filter Paintings” under Activities for Kids on our website.
- If this lesson is too messy, have students use alternative materials such as tempera paint sticks (though there would be less of an emphasis on unconventional painting techniques in this lesson with this variation).

Citations

Tate. “Colour Field Painting – Art Term | Tate.” Tate, 2017, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/colour-field-painting.