

The Jewish Museum

***After "The Wild": Contemporary Art from the Barnett and Annalee Newman
Foundation Collection***

Verbal Descriptions

STOP LIST

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600. Sam Gilliam, *Column Series*, 1963

NARRATOR: This artwork, titled *Column Series*, is a painting by artist Sam Gilliam. It was made in 1963. The medium is oil on canvas. The painting is 82 ½ inches high and 16 ½ inches wide. It is roughly the height of a standard door; however, it is just about half as wide. The word “column,” which appears in the work’s title, suggests its overall proportions as well as its architectural quality. It is presented floating within a thin white frame and is displayed on a wall by itself.

This geometric painting is composed of two vertical, rectangular bands of bright green that run almost from the bottom to the top of the painting. These shapes are outlined in a thin white stripe and nested within a thicker darker green border. The tall rectangular block on the left is a bright and slightly acid green, similar to green grass or an electric green streetlight. The block on the right is a cooler blue-green similar to aquamarine. Separating these two bands of green from each other and the border is an unpainted white strip of exposed canvas, approximately an inch wide. The two interior green bands almost appear illuminated, like bright lights jumping out of the darker green void. This darker green around the edge is British racing green, a color similar to hunter green or forest green, and it extends several inches all the way to the edge of the canvas.

All of the colors in the painting are solid and matte. Their intensity and saturation suggest street signage or the bands of color in a flag. The segmented geometry of this painting also recalls a tennis court or soccer field seen from above, with clearly delineated symmetrical zones.

Yet a closer look at the work reveals that its “hard edge” geometric forms have scruffy edges. Gilliam used masking tape to create straight lines of unpainted canvas. Small gaps between the tape and the surface of the canvas allowed traces of paint to get underneath, compromising the strict edges of the lines. Gilliam adapted this technique from Barnett Newman, who used tape to create his “zips,” vertical lines traversing the canvas across flat fields of color. One such work, *The Wild*, is represented in a projection nearby. It features a thin, vertical red line on a white background.

Here, Sam Gilliam shares more of what drew him to abstract painting.

SAM GILLIAM: And it became a very important thing to realize that when I had come to Washington and had more time to see New York and to see the true painting of the '50s in a sense, I began to feel, and quite rightly so, that the David Parks, the Oliveras, and the Diebenkorns were one and the same kind of space and painting that was being advanced by Rothko, by Newman, by Marca-Relli, by Tomlin; and literally, in a way, in terms of even the 19th-century Hudson River school, the sense of the painting – the scale of it – was literally a very frontal, very kind of thin thing that that you really had the confidence to feel that you had experienced. And thus, almost within a year after I'd come to Washington, I was no longer painting figures. I was doing what I felt was necessary to do –facing the presence.

[Oral history interview with Sam Gilliam, 1984 Sept. 18. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.]

601. Lynda Benglis, *Figure 6*, 2012

NARRATOR: This artwork is a wall sculpture by the artist Lynda Benglis. It is titled *Figure 6* and was made in 2012. It is formed entirely of aluminum. The work is 44 inches high, 103 inches wide, and 30 inches deep. It is hung above a raised platform, sitting approximately five feet off the floor.

Its overall outline is irregular, with numerous outcroppings, bulges, and folds, all formed by a tangled cluster of what looks like extruded silver metal. Because of the rough texture of the aluminum, it shines but is less reflective than aluminum foil. In contrast to its material, this piece resembles the clumped forms of clouds in the sky, or billows of smoke from a chimney drifting horizontally through the atmosphere.

The bunched forms of the metal are heaped together like a tangled ball of string or a knotted mass of spaghetti. While the surface of the work is clearly hard, the roiling composition makes the sculpture appear as if it might continue to morph. There are several gaps in the aluminum cluster, creating holes through which one can see to the back of the wall.

Lynda Benglis made this work by drawing with a polymer spray foam on a wire mesh frame, and then casting it in aluminum. This abstract mass has a definite weight, but it suggests less solid, more liquid entities like flowing rivers, lighter more delicate materials like cobwebs, and vine-like growing vegetation.

Here, artist Lynda Benglis offers her perspective on this piece.

LYNDA BENGLIS: Well, first of all, it's a dragon. It was always a dragon for me. When I made it, I said, oh, that's my medieval dragon, and I look at it, and I just think of the word ziggurat, and I always liked that word, and I liked it for just the reasons of the sound basically and the time because I thought of my sense of Western and Eastern civilization coming together. And because I'm half Greek, I thought of my sensibilities. I used to make mounds of packed clay with water, pine needles, and it was mud, clay, dust packed down with water, and I would make these forms and think of them as my play-like home.

602. Serge Alain Nitegeka, *Colour and Form L*, 2018

NARRATOR: Serge Alain Nitegeka's *Colour & Form L* was made in 2018. It measures 96 5/8 inches high, 48 1/8 inches wide, and 1 1/2 inches deep, about the size of an uncut sheet of plywood. It is unframed.

This rectangular work is an abstract painting on wood. The palette is limited to a deep vibrant black, a lighter black, white, corn yellow, and a dusty lighter blue. The shapes and colors used within the painting are graphic and flat; there is a tension between hard, straight edges and curved lines. Nitegeka spoke of this painting as being inspired by building plans and blueprints.

NITEGEKA: You sort of can see yourself in, kind of navigating. It's a constructed... space that doesn't really exist. It's kind of like an illusion of space, of being in the space.

NARRATOR: And as we move through the description, think about picturing a geometric imagined space from above.

Let's start at the top of the canvas and work our way down. The top is filled with a large black shape that extends all the way across horizontally, curving inwards from left to right as it goes down. It meets the right edge of the painting about 2/3 of the way down the canvas, forming a shape like the right half of a bell curve. Two tones of black divide the top two-thirds of this shape, with a rich, velvety black at the top giving way to a flatter, greyer black that extends below. The bottom portion of the shape is filled with light blue, rounded at the bottom, and flat across on top, like water resting in a bowl. The divisions are crisp and sharp.

This swooping dark shape nestles against its counterpart on the left side of the painting, forming an upside-down version of the shape above. Nitegeka paints this ski-slope-shaped section in white, blue, and yellow. The two shapes give an impression of light and dark, positive and negative space, or two sides of a yin-yang symbol curving against each other. It has a thin blue segment at the top, and at the bottom are curved connected forms in the same blue and a golden yellow. The artist describes how "the curves contort themselves around solid forms," illuminating the interplay of these shapes and colors.

Painted atop what we've described so far are a few more connected shapes in the lighter black. Across the bottom of the piece is a long and slightly flattened black half-circle. From the top two corners of this shape, two bands extend diagonally upwards, meeting in the middle of that first dark curved space and forming a triangle. The longer one on the right has thin stripes of deep black along its side. Despite the repeated black tones, the differences in saturation cause the illusion of space as the band crosses over the painting's lighter colors.

On the white half of the painting, is another flat gray-black shape with its inner-side curving in steeply, like a deep section was scooped out of it. One more small grey-black band juts horizontally, connecting it to the curved shape on the right, bringing all of the confining dark areas together. These overall connected shapes form an image reminiscent of an abstracted toy sailboat with its sail at half-mast.

Nitegeka, whose family migrated across Africa as refugees when he was a child, has long been inspired by the mutability of spaces, for example, how you might arrange and rearrange the contents of a room, or how refugees might seek shelter in a school, thereby changing its meaning. The curved shapes in this work directly reference blueprints, where doors are often represented by half circles to show their range of movement.

603. Judy Pfaff, *Quartet 5*, 2018

NARRATOR: This work, titled *Quartet 5*, is by the artist Judy Pfaff. It was made in 2018. It hangs on the wall and has both two-dimensional and sculptural qualities. The materials are digital image on medium-density fiberboard (or MDF), wire, aluminum discs, acrylic, melted plastic, paper hats, and framed works including oil stick and encaustic on vintage Indian ledger paper. This large unframed work is 106 ½ inches in height by 124 ½ inches in width, approximately the size of a 9 by 12-foot area rug. It almost fills the entire wall.

This multi-media work could be described as an abstract assemblage. Although the work is installed on the wall like a traditional painting, it does not have the typical rectangular geometry of a canvas. Instead, the overall shape of this artwork is irregular, extending out from the wall in places.

Here, artist Judy Pfaff will start us off by describing her piece.

JUDY PFAFF: Imagine a kind of wallpaper with lots of flowers and it, at the background, is sort of, I think looks like 18th-century wallpaper. And on top of it, are these inserts. Drawings, a kind of, runaway linear piece with plastics that sort of are windblown kind of flowers in a way. And there are details on top of it. So, I think of it as kind of like if you had a decorator come to your house, and they opened up a storyboard of what your furniture would look like on top of that rug with that furniture... So, it's kind of a tableau.

NARRATOR: As Pfaff says, the overall background of the piece consists of horizontal bands of MDF printed with digital images, resembling floral wallpaper. Soft pastel colors and vivid blooms radiate outwards, overlapping into a floral collage.

Judy Pfaff, again.

JUDY PFAFF: The whole background is from a book of flowers from, I don't remember the name of it ...it's an encyclopedia of flowers. I'm stuck in the country, so things are growing, and I do have gardens everywhere.

NARRATOR: Other elements play and interact to make up the rest of this tableau. Stretching across the top of the work, a twisted vine of wire meanders and circles

back on itself. Tufts of lavender-colored melted plastic attach to the wire like cotton candy. Emerging on the upper right are four large plastic petals in teal, pale green, orange, and violet. They fan out next to one another like feathers in a bird wing. This mobile-like configuration seems to float and fly off the floral wallpaper behind it.

The bottom right corner of the work features an orb-like cluster of circular paper hats. Constructed of paper mesh, the hats fold like accordions: nested one inside the other, they resemble a flower in full bloom. Behind are large, colorful acrylic bands painted with concentric circles in bright colored stripes. They emanate outwards and pick up on the other round shapes, radiating forms throughout the work.

Four thin, long paintings, framed in wood, are installed horizontally, staggered across this patchwork floral background. They contain a mix of abstract patterns, most with spirals or forms with radial symmetry, and loose, brushy renderings of landscapes or plants. The colors of the paper are muted and weathered, while the paintings on top are relatively bright. The wooden frames are also painted, some with bands or blotches of color that mirror or complement the palettes of the paintings. On the bottom of some of these pieces, handwritten Sanskrit script can be glimpsed. One painting is made on paper with printed Chinese characters. The scale of these framed works is intimate, making you want to come closer to examine the details.

Like a circus, this artwork incorporates an exuberant constellation of materials, all united by playful pastels, circular forms, and copious, unruly energy.

604. Fred Tomaselli, *Study for June 2, 2018*, 2018

NARRATOR: Fred Tomaselli's *Study for June 2, 2018*, was made in 2018.

Let's begin by listening to the artist.

FRED TOMASELLI: This work is two feet by two feet square. And it's a collage that's composed of real leaves, photo collage, acrylic paint, and newsprint, or photocopied newsprint, onto a wooden board that's then has layers of resin that have been poured over the top, sanded down with subsequent coats of paint that are just above the surface, creating sort of shadow play and dimensionality. The surface is basically somewhat on the glossy side but matted down slightly with, um, by me sanding the surface. And if you were to run your hand across the top of it, you would feel the ripples of actual real paint and real collage on the surface of the work. But other than that, the surface of the work is entirely smooth.

NARRATOR: Tomaselli's *Study for June 2, 2018*, is a collaged and painted explosion, like a supernova, or a firework against the sky. Overlapping diamond and triangle shapes of different sizes, colors, and patterns create a huge star that is the center of the composition. The background color is a rich royal blue. Lines made of paint and collaged elements radiate from the center to the edges of the wood. Small white dots of differing sizes float in the space of a flat, blue sky. A multitude of colors create this explosion, including earthy tones of red, brown, and green, along with black, gray, white, blue, and yellow. Each of the diamond and triangle shapes are outlined by at least one contrasting color or pattern. This is a work full of dazzle and pop that reveals intricate details as we come closer and see the many different photos and materials that the artist has collaged to create the star. Images of human eyes cut from magazines are glued on narrow black painted strips and form outlines for some of the triangles. Small hands and arms cut from different sources dart in and out. Crinkly brown fall leaves and newsprint from the previous day's newspapers form some of the shapes. It's as if the everyday world has been caught in a celestial explosion.