

## Melvin Edwards, Sam Gilliam and William T. Williams: Abstract Artists and Old Friends

The trio first had their work exhibited together at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1969. Now, Pace Gallery is showing some of the pieces they've made since.

By Adam Bradley  
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“Do one thing for me,” the sculptor Melvin Edwards says, “don’t use a musical metaphor.” A chastened journalist revokes his offending word, “riff,” used to describe Edwards’s back and forth with the painters Sam Gilliam and William T. Williams, friends for more than fifty years, during an interview done in anticipation of “Epistrophy,” the trio’s joint exhibition of recent and historic works opening this week at Pace Gallery in New York.

Edwards’s linguistic exactitude is certainly not born of an aversion to music; all three artists are jazz aficionados who claim performers like Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, Ron Carter and Sonny Rollins as inspirations — and, in some cases, as friends. Perhaps Edwards’s note of caution signals his exasperation with how lazily the metaphor is often applied, especially when it comes to Black artists.



From left: Melvin Edwards, William T. Williams and Sam Gilliam, photographed in Gilliam’s studio in Washington, D.C., on March 10, 2022. Jared Soares

Hear these men speak about their decades-long bond and their individual artistic practices, however, and certain rigorous and revelatory connections to jazz are bound to emerge: tradition as a foundation for innovation, improvisation within material and chosen constraints, competition in the context of collaboration, private labor that enables public virtuosity.



Edwards's "Untitled" (1974). © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

“We’re all modernists and we all relate to the history of art as such,” Gilliam says. This kinship does not always announce itself on the surface of their art. Gilliam, 88, the most senior of the group, has made groundbreaking innovations, including draped canvases that play with color, space and scale. For his part, Edwards, 84, works in a range of sculptural media, from the industrial metalwork of his signature “Lynch Fragments” series to his bold experiments in barbed wire. Williams, 79, is a master of multiple idioms, having early on cultivated a fusion of color-field painting and Abstract Expressionism attentive to the potentialities of geometric form. Uniting these artists’ disparate practices, however, is a shared understanding of abstraction as a core principle of Black expressive culture with roots in Africa; an ambitious sense of scale; and what Gilliam describes as a penchant for “theatricality.”

The three artists met in the late 1960s and showed together for the first time in 1969, in a landmark exhibition at the newly opened Studio Museum in Harlem. In the decades that followed, they exhibited together everywhere from Hartford, Conn., to Chicago to Baltimore and beyond, pushing each other to excel. Their bond, born of kindred aesthetics and shared habits, united them through lean and bountiful times. “At that point, the art world was much, much smaller, with fewer opportunities. And as such, a lot of artists were overlooked,” Williams explains.

Gilliam, Edwards and Williams persevered — both individually and together. “They have traversed their own terrain in the history of art and made very distinct contributions,” says Oliver Shultz, the curatorial director at Pace Gallery New York. Now, their journeys are bringing them together again, 53 years after their first joint show, in an exhibition that pays tribute to their many crosscurrents of creativity and kinship. The week before the opening, T gathered the artists together, via telephone and Zoom, to reflect on the past, present and future of their art. Their wide-ranging conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.



Edwards's "Untitled" (1974). © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

### **What accounts for the length and the depth of your friendship?**

**Melvin Edwards:** Well, you know, I'm a take things for granted kind of person. They were just easy to be friends with, and that was it. Every time we got together, we enjoyed each other, talked to each other. You know, we argued, discussed, we had differences.

**Sam Gilliam:** Let's say that they're my creative partners. I really like both Mel's and Bill's work, and anytime we work together, it makes us competitive, and hence not to be outdone by the other. I always get excited whenever I get a chance to exhibit with them because I'm gonna come up with something special. It's because I know that if I don't ... as Mel would say, you would have to wear red shoes to keep up with us!

**M.E.:** There are so many ways it can go because you're talking about a set of relationships that started in the '60s. And that's 60 years ago. That's encyclopedic, frankly. And we've all gone so many ways with it. You know, when you hand off the ball to Willie, you don't know where he's going. You look up and say, 'Well, wait a minute. He just scored.' You know? And that's just the way it is: to have confidence in each other, that our abilities and intentions are going to work out.

**William T. Williams:** I think part of our everlasting friendship has a great deal to do with common interests, and a feeling that there's a lot that can be done. Sam was in Washington. Mel and I were in New York. And over the years, there was constant dialogue, either by telephone or, sometimes literally, meeting halfway down. Sam would come up to Baltimore; we would go down to Baltimore, have lunch there and have a meeting about an exhibition or some ideas we had. It's a friendship that went past the art world, and an interconnection of three human beings that had a great deal to do with art, but had more to do with the three individuals as people. A sense of their aspirations, their commonality, and just having fun together.

**M.E.:** I was cheeing Sam the other day because I remember when he was playing tennis. He was practically a tennis socialite in Washington. I've never played. I love to run five yards and knock the hell out of somebody. That means I was a football player. I know that Willie was involved in track and was a broad jumper. So those are things we found out about each other through the years. Teasing and talking is natural. That visual art was our arena — well, we worked out our own variations. And then, when we encountered each other, we found ways that those could work [together].

### **Besides showing together, how does your friendship manifest itself in your work?**

**S.G.:** The work became very conversational. I mean, that is, in the description of what we were doing and why we were doing it. I realized that what the work was actually doing was answering a question that I asked when I came out of school: Why I wasn't as successful compared, say, to particular white artists. And I found that [my answer] had to be in terms of work, not in terms of race or anything. When a friend of mine suggested, "Why don't you make a painting as long as the wall?" — I did: 300 feet, using material and constructing things in space. That's what Mel was doing. Bill, too.

**W.T.W.:** I was, I should say, fortunate enough to go to high school in Manhattan, three blocks from the Museum of Modern Art. So I became really very familiar with the works that were in the museum, and very familiar with the scale change from earlier paintings to later paintings to 20th-century paintings. That always stuck in my head, this idea of scale shift. And I'm not equating ambition with scale, just with the idea that here was a repository of all of these works that I got to look at from a very early age. When I met Sam and Mel, I sensed that same kind of grounding in the history of the medium, in the history of art making.

**S.G.:** I think that one of the things that happened is that we began to explore the many facets of working in a visual or sculptural or painterly manner. And I guess it's easiest to say that we are very theatrical. And not only theatrical but theatrical in a very successful way in which we use the space. So that, even though I was a painter and I use color, the painting was never the same as we moved from space to space. The shows were different.

### **When did you first conceive of art as your calling or your career?**

**M.E.:** Well, the word 'career' I didn't hear till I was 40. And that was by some students of mine. You don't know you're making art when you're growing up. You're not thinking about whether it's a career or not. You're not thinking about what somebody else thinks. Some adults might say, 'Boy, that's funny.' Or 'That's all right, boy. Keep on doing that.' To be an artist, well, that just came by circumstance. When I was in high school, this is in the early '50s, [I saw] the movie "Moulin Rouge" [1952, directed by John Huston], which focused on Toulouse-Lautrec and his life. And what being an artist meant was, you're going to live a life in the brothels, in the fast life in Paris — naked ladies kickin' high, drink your cognac out of a cane and keep on painting!

**W.T.W.:** Well, I started at an arts high school when I was 14. And I had to travel from Far Rockaway, which, if you know New York, is the last stop on the subway trains, into Manhattan every day. And I did that for four years. I think having to do that every morning, leaving Far Rockaway at 6 a.m. to get to high school by 8 o'clock, was the first real long-term commitment I made. Somewhere along the way is when I first started thinking of myself as an artist — a young artist, but an artist.

My first art teacher was my grandmother. And what I mean by that is the experience of her quilts, the experience of a work ethic. I grew up on a small sharecropping farm in the South, a tobacco farm. And after the 'bacco was cured, my grandmother would grade it. You graded in terms of the texture of the surface and the coloration of the leaves after they'd been in the barn. There's a subtlety and nuance within that, which she taught me through trial and error — looking, feeling, touching. I always say it was my first art education: hands-on hard work.

**M.E.:** The first place I was exposed to art was in Dayton, Ohio. They would take students — third grade, fourth grade — to the Dayton Art Institute, and we would look at these 16th-century paintings and stuff like that. And when the guards were in the other room, we would bang on the harpsichord and run. But what that means is, I knew later on what a harpsichord was. In other words, you pay attention to the world you're in.

I remember the first drawing pencil I saw. A lady was doing a demonstration for some students and she had — I remember to this day — what we call a Venus brand drawing pencil. She did shadings and the foliage of a tree, and it didn't look like a leaf, but the overall thing looked like a tree with leaves. So I understood that creating impressions didn't necessarily mean copying or illustrating. I wouldn't have been able to put it in that language, but that was my understanding.

**Mr. Gilliam, what was your art education like during your early years in Tupelo, Miss.?**

**S.G.:** Mississippi has a beat. I mean, whether it's the rural guitars or in church where people get happy. In particular, it was my sister. I'll always remember certain people in our church that would get happy. Sister Katie. And of course, I think that this was a way of actually relieving at least some of the misery that people were going through. [Art] is bringing something that's not trapped into a real form. And as you grow, if you're a painter, a sculptor, it becomes very expressive. I think the most critical part is that what you do in art becomes singular: become a Gilliam or Edwards or Williams.

I could always draw. You learn first to express yourself in certain parts of the body. And whether it was actually playing in dirt, making marks, circles, playing marbles — the aesthetic category became certain physical things. And in school, art was a reward. If you finished your work, you could go to the table, draw, make papier-mâché. As I grew, my mother would say, 'Leave him alone. He has talent!' It became multiforms: I could sing, could dance, did not play a musical instrument but could draw. Your actions are about the transformation of the whole of the human experience. It's a visual communication, and it's also emotional and ritual. It's a form of being alive.

**What role does music, especially jazz, play in your work?**

**W.T.W.:** That's a hard question. Certainly, I play it constantly when I'm working. They're like having companions in the studio. It's abstract, meaning that it's there and it's not there. It's not tangible. I can't hold it. The impact it's having on me, I can't explain it. I can't grab it.

What I like about the music, and why I play it in studio, is, there are unlimited variations in terms of the number of artists who have made the music. The experience of the music is something I grew up with. And what I mean by that, it was very much part of what I heard, both in terms of recordings and love of music but also in terms of just speech patterns, ways of being, it all kind of resonated with me as a body of information that was part and parcel of my experiences.

**S.G.:** I started with Dizzy Gillespie — certainly Miles Davis. There's a particular album I like by Miles Davis, "Sketches of Spain" (1960). I just took it for a piece of music when I was young in college, but over the years it's been a piece that I've collected. I mean, I collected it every time I saw it because earlier it was only a \$1.79! I started with the 45s and I have an entire shelf just of "Sketches of Spain." This was a sacred ritual. [I've come to understand that] ritual means how you can be interpreted by an audience; it may come in a form that is rhythmic or moving. For me, it's always been the idea of close-eyed seeing, which means that it's emotional.



Williams (far left) and Edwards (far right), with Guy Ciarcia and Billy Rose, members of the Harlem-based collective, Smokehouse Associates, circa 1968–70. © Melvin Edwards and Alexander Gray Associates, New York. Photo: Robert Colton

**Mr. Edwards, do you play music in the studio?**

**W.T.W.:** Charlie Parker!

**M.E.:** Of course, Charlie Parker. But I'll try to say it this way. It will be long-winded, too!

**W.T.W.:** All right, now! It's on now!

**M.E.:** I know that! Musicians practice a kind of breathing so it sounds like they don't stop to take a breath when they play.

**Circular breathing.**

**M.E.:** See, you call it circular. If it's circular, that's a visual metaphor. Circulation is what they're talking about when they say that. The circulation of oxygen getting to the wind instruments. I've never heard of a pianist who needed to worry about circular breathing. You see what I'm saying? Or I hope you're getting it. We have all of this language, and we're spending all this time talking about processes, plural, which are visual and material. There's a lot of sound or noise in my studio. I always had a little speaker. Sometimes there were convenient music stations, often disc jockeys with bad taste. But every now and then you hear something.

**What resources does abstraction provide, specifically for Black American artists?**

**M.E.:** It's already there in the community we come from. And it's not just literal. It never was just illustrative. African art was always what we divide as abstract and not. Most people don't know what abstraction is. How many people have ever looked it up in the dictionary? They just figure if they don't know what it is, it must be abstract. Well, why don't you just look up the words 'abstract,' 'abstraction'? And another word to play with that related enough from my point of view is 'extraction.' It starts to help you understand, conceptually, what abstraction is. Abstraction has nothing to do with whether something's figurative or not.

One of my pieces, the first kinetic piece I ever made, is called "Homage to Coco" (1970), to my grandmother Cora "Coco" Anderson. One New York art critic said that I titled that piece for the person from the fashion world, Coco Chanel, because he saw the piece at the Whitney Museum, and that's as far as he could move. At least you're asking questions. And we're responding, and we can tell you the truth or give you something from our imagination or just a stone cold lie and it'll all go in the paper. And ultimately it's all fine because it's visual art, and it's *what you see* that's important.

**W.T.W.:** It's just about getting people to look.

**M.E.:** Exactly. It's *visual* art. Although some of us use additional devices from time to time.

**W.T.W.:** I came to abstraction because I was not interested in representation. And the reason I wasn't interested in representation was depiction, and the depiction is irrelevant to the structure. There was no psychic place for me, because it was a fixed system. And what I mean by a fixed system, the rules of perspective, the rules of chiaroscuro, all of those things had been laid out. And that's the content of that work of art. It didn't allow me a psychic place to enter there if I was to do something that was absolutely personal.

## **What inspires you to keep creating?**

**W.T.W.:** I had very good advice from [Romare] Bearden. Bearden and I, we're both from North Carolina. I met him early on, almost two weeks after I came back to New York [from New Haven, Conn.] after graduate school. He said, 'Painting is an old man's game. Take your time.' And I have stuck to that advice. Just do the work, and everything else will work out.

Ultimately, you have to go into the threshold of the studio. And there are no friends there. Mel is not there. Sam is not there. My mom is not there. It's just you in that studio and that work, and you have to do it. It's that simple. It's not about the monetary things that could happen. It's about wanting to communicate something about being human. And you're really doing it for yourself. You're not doing it for an audience.

That being said, I do have all kinds of friends in the studio with me. There are musicians in the studio; I'm listening to their music, and their attempt to communicate with me. There are writers there. There are all these people that I certainly have internalized over the years. But the first step over that threshold is a lonely, singular moment that you have to take. And I think Sam and Mel have made that commitment: "This is what I want to do the rest of my life." You have to look at the body of work that's assembled. It's extraordinary. In the face of disappointments, in the face of a lack of sometimes critical success or financial success, they have continued. It's over a half a century for all of us.

**S.G.:** You get something out of your art that is personal, as well as making an art that is performative, which means it is to be seen and to be understood and shared by an audience. And this was so astounding in the beginning: at Hartford, when they would hear "Williams, Gilliam, Edwards," it was like, "Come to the circus!" "Come to the show!" We would draw a crowd. And we still do, in that sense.

**W.T.W.:** I like Ernie Banks and I like Hank Aaron. They were workmen. They came, they did their job, they excelled in what they did. They went home, they came back, they excelled again and again and again. You go to your studio, you put the work out, people look at it and, hopefully, there's a repetitive process. This idea of artists as folk heroes or as movie stars, that's a temperament that some people have and want to go that way. For me, it's walking across the threshold of the studio every day. And getting to make and involve myself in making another work of art. And that's what it's been about for 60 years. It's just that simple.



Edwards with his sculpture "Harlem Double Circles" (1970) in New York City on Aug. 30, 1978. Fred W. McDarrah/MUUS Collection via Getty Images