In *The Awning Set* (1992–93), Gilliam creates depth by applying paints, stains, and glazes. The cutting and layering of the canvas generates a sensorial effect. At once fluid and rigid, Gilliam’s marks flow with ease, veils of color surface, and layered substrates create walls. The artwork blurs the line between sculptural object and painting.

In this lesson, students will respond to music through painting. Students will experiment with improvisational painting techniques using non-traditional painting tools. We recommend starting by listening to Miles Davis and John Coltrane, two jazz musicians who deeply influenced Gilliam’s artwork.

**Sam Gilliam’s (b. 1933) paintings experiment with color and improvisation. Gilliam is known for his cut and layered canvases that draw from the long tradition of Black quilt making. Inspired by hanging laundry on clotheslines, Gilliam broke his canvases free from their rigid rectangular shape, often draping and suspending them from walls and ceilings.**
Objective
Students will learn about the work of Sam Gilliam and explore their own methods of mark making using unusual materials and musical guidance.

Essential Question
How can music inform the marks we make?

Vocabulary
Abstract art
Imagery that's not easily identifiable and can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on the viewer's perspective.

Composition
The decisions an artist makes about how to combine distinct parts or elements to form a whole artwork.

Experiment
A process that involves discovery without being sure of an outcome.

Transparent
A material's property that allows light to pass through so that one can easily see the objects behind it.

Mark making
The process of creating marks, lines, or shapes on a surface.

Improvisation
Something that is created without preparation, spontaneously, or in the moment, sometimes in response to the environment around you.

Materials
Canvas paper or watercolor paper
Palette paper or paper plates
Sketching paper
Acrylic paint
Wide tooth comb
Hair pick
Cotton swabs
Fork or other kitchen tools
Palette knife
Toothbrush
Chopsticks
Audio equipment to play jazz arrangement

Preparation
1. Introduce Sam Gilliam’s work using visual inquiry. Ask: What colors do we notice? Draw the lines that you see with your finger. How was the journey for your finger? Smooth, bumpy, something else?

2. Invite students to explore line drawing on a piece of sketching paper. Ask them to imagine what the following lines might look like: fast, slow, lethargic, confused, confident.

3. Ask students: How might Gilliam’s painting reflect his statement that his work evokes “the drama of music and the drama of colors coming together”?

4. Explain to students that they will be creating improvisational works using the various paint application tools while listening to jazz.

Methods
1. Organize supplies and allow students to set up their workstations.

2. Play a preferred jazz arrangement with audio equipment. Using a few of the non-traditional tools, demonstrate some possible ways to create different lines, gestures, and patterns. Challenge students to use the paint to experiment with layering and mixing colors.

3. Provide students with a sheet of canvas paper. Tape the corners of the paper down to the table.

4. Play another jazz arrangement. Allow students to experiment freely by using tools of their choosing while listening to the musical score. Encourage students to stand as they paint.

5. Encourage students to think about their motions and application techniques and how they might relate to the sound.

Reflection
1. Display artworks and look at them as a group.

2. Ask students: How did it feel to paint in this way? What was your favorite tool, and why? What kind of music do you think Gilliam listened to while creating The Awning Set? How do you think a musician might respond to your painting? A dancer?
Sam Gilliam
The Awning Set, 1992–93
Mixed media on canvas
50 1/2 × 49 in.
The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of the artist
1993.8