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TODAY'S WEATHER Sun and clouds, milder. High 54° DETAILS ON P.2



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ARTS & LETTERS

GALLERY-GOING

By JOHN GOODRICH

Not many contemporary artists came as close as Gregory Gillespie (1936-2000) to the virtuosic rendering of early Renaissance painting, and none took his talents in as unsettling a direction. The 30-odd paintings at Forum Gallery span Gillespie's career, highlighting the frantic variety of his work and its unique blend of delicate fantasy and raw provocation.

GREGORY GILLESPIE

CHAIM GROSS: REINVENTING FORM

Forum Gallery

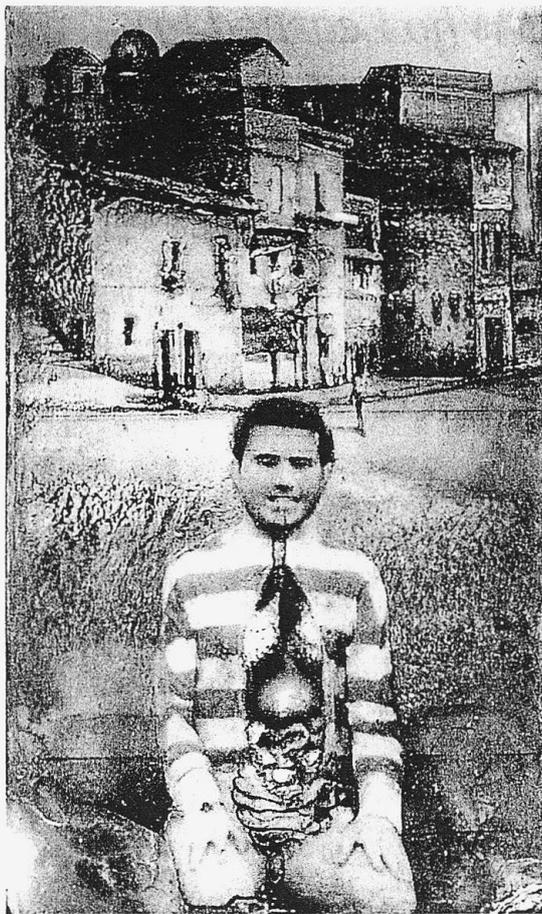
WILLIAM KENTRIDGE: THE MAGIC FLUTE: DRAWINGS AND PROJECTIONS

Marian Goodman Gallery

Gillespie exploited a bewildering variety of subjects and techniques. His early works have the jewel-like precision of van Eyck, though not quite the same gravity of color and space — and certainly not the same uplifting tone. Several small, meticulous panels from the 1960s depict raunchy sex scenes, while "Soccer Star" (1968) pictures an athlete who smiles obligingly as his abdomen splits open to reveal his entrails. Celtic manuscript ornamentation, ceremonial Japanese costumes, and Hindu tantric symbols appear in his later works, often in fantastical landscapes or eerie interiors. Many pieces are built up with thick applications of paint, sometimes sanded or scraped to reveal underlying layers; in others, real bits of wood and metal are combined with obsessively painted images of tiled walls and floors.

A rare tenderness prevails in the warmly smiling portrait "My Aunt" (1988). More often, though, the artist seems determined to provoke. In "Bread Shrine" (1969), several tiny figures engage in obscure sex acts beneath a kind of industrial bread box, on which the figure of Christ has been affixed like a decal. Was the artist hoping to expunge his strict Catholic upbringing? The passages of radiant, dainty modeling suggest something else: He's intent on reclaiming the sacred for himself by means of these luminous but mordantly disjointed images.

Presiding over the exhibition is the nearly 8-foot-tall "Self-Portrait With Bread and Chakras" (1987-88). From an altar-like studio, the artist stares out dully, naked from the waist up and covered with emblems of mandalas and female genitalia. Behind him an ethereal Buddha competes with the carefully modeled forms of a telephone, hammer, and visor. A darkly, closely worked panel attached below depicts what seems to be a disemboweled woman. Another panel, pure white, features a clock-like circle with knotted masses of paint for hands. Atop this sits a tiny,



Gregory Gillespie, "Soccer Star" (1968).

beautifully rendered female nude, exquisite in its detail and coloration, apparently cut out from another work — or another world.

What does it all mean? Gillespie's images are riveting, but they refuse to edify the way van Eyck's do. Clarification may be too much to ask of these memorable paintings — or from the artist's feverish pointed view, too little.

One floor above, the exhibition in Forum Gallery's fifth floor space could hardly differ more in spirit. Here the lifework of Chaim Gross (1904-91) unfolds as an act of affirmation, his pleasure evident in nearly 20 scul-

In several stone pieces, broad, Mayan-like faces emerge evocatively from masses of onyx and alabaster. Gross's inventions are less inspired in some of the bronze pieces; the 6-foot-tall "Three Acrobats on a Unicycle" (1957) depicts another column of athletic figures, but its even, chunky pacing feels less buoyant, as if the first fanciful conception bogged down in its incarnation.

Even if Gross's bronzes don't have the rhythmic heft of Lipchitz's, their humor is infectious. They hum with what the former director of the Smithsonian, Joshua Taylor, aptly called an "unqualified, exuberant enjoyment of life."

♦ ♦ ♦

Many famous painters have designed theater sets, but artist William Kentridge has gone a step further: He's also directing the production of Mozart's "The Magic Flute" that premiered last year in Brussels and is now touring internationally.

A white South African, Mr. Kentridge worked for many years in theater and as a printmaker before gaining wide acclaim for his animation art in the 1990s. The 50 pastel and charcoal drawings now at Marian Goodman served as the basis for the sets and animations of "The Magic Flute."

Except for stray red marks, the drawings are executed completely in black pastel and charcoal. Rich tones, however, give a panoramic depth to backdrops of classical landscapes, some of them elaborated with Egyptian temples and astronomical diagrams. In smaller drawings of birds and cages, erasures demonstrate how these single sheets became the working arenas for animations.

A model theater about 5 feet wide handily shows the drawings at work. Illuminated by projections from the front and rear, the set comes alive with animations of dancing guardsmen, frolicking animals, and orbiting planets, all synchronized with portions of the opera's soundtrack. Comets spiral and stream during the Queen of the Night's climactic Act II aria.

Even without the benefit of color, this intimate mini-production charms. How does the full-size production look and sound? Opera-goers can see for themselves in April 2007, when "The Magic Flute" comes to the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Gillespie and Gross until February 25 (745 Fifth Avenue, between 57th and 58th Streets, 212-355-4545). Prices for Gillespie: \$6,500-\$145,000. Prices for Gross: \$16,000-\$350,000.

Kentridge until February 25 (24 W. 57th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, 212-977-7160). Prices by request only.