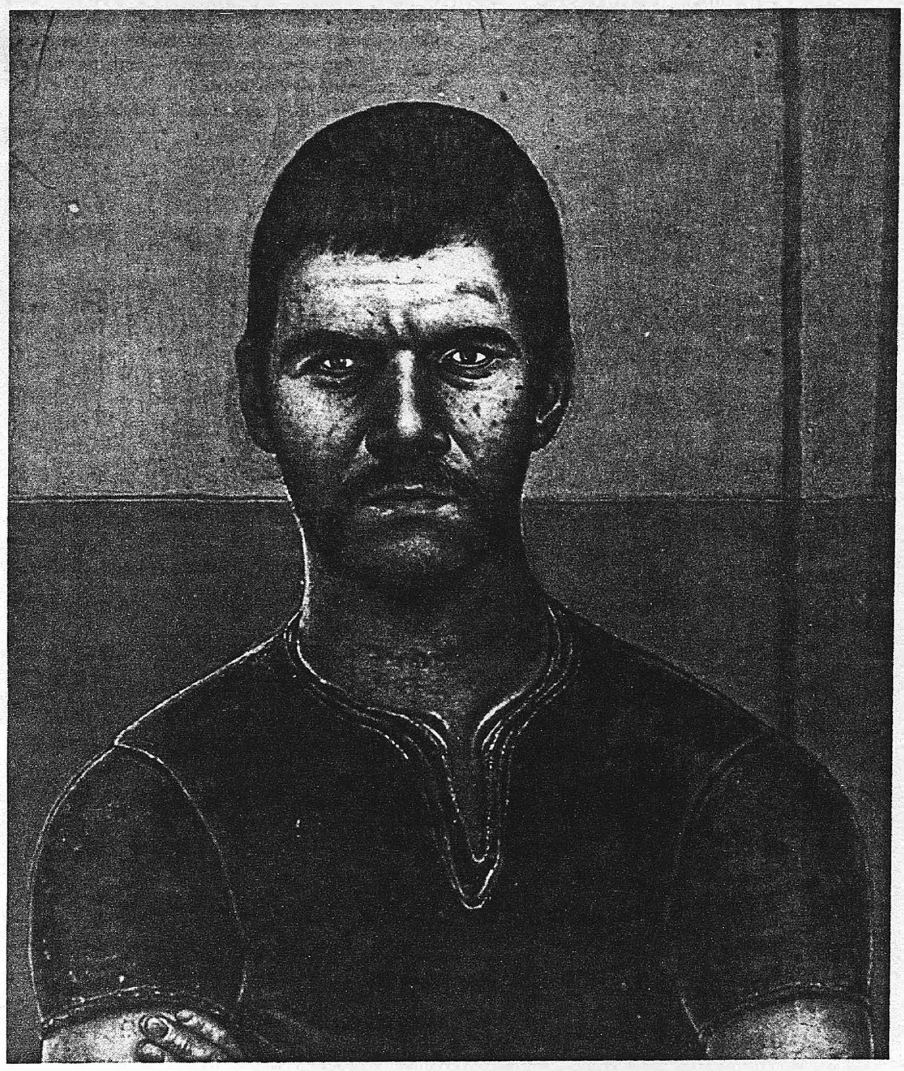

Gregory Gillespie

Take a Match and Put it Under Your Finger

BY ALEXI WORTH

FOR ANYONE WHO KNOWS HIS PAINTINGS, talking to Gregory Gillespie is disconcerting. The hostile young artist of his early *Self-Portrait in Black Shirt,* who glared at viewers with the fatal determination of a thug in a lineup, has relaxed into a genial, distracted sixty-something. He walks visitors around his cluttered garagelike studio near Northampton, Massachusetts, pointing to various half-finished paintings on the walls and floor. Sentences typically trail off into gestures, with flailing, mysterious pronouns. Only occasionally does the feverish intensity of his best-known paintings show up in conversation. When I ask him about his Catholic childhood, for instance, Gillespie suddenly snaps into sharper focus.

"It's a very violent religion, the kind that I got. The philosophy is to take a little kid and scare the living shit out of them.... To fill their mind with the worst kind of painful consequences: *an eternity... burning...in Hell.* And they'd make it as graphic as possible. Y'know...." And here Gillespie leans forward and lowers his voice, momentarily becoming a crazed, charismatic priest: "Take a match and put it under your finger: imagine how *hot* that is, how much it *hurts.* Well your whole body is gonna be burning like that and there's gonna be no relief—*if you don't do what we say.*"

By the time he gets to the final threat, Gillespie is looking positively demonic, wild-eyed, having a great time. He's lit up. And this sudden matchlike transformation, from a welter of half-formed thoughts to a single vivid image, turns out to be typical Gillespie. It's also typical of his art. Gillespie's pictures have always veered between diffusion and concentration, between zany phantasmagoria, and a kind of obsessive trompe l'oeil realism. One minute he's painting sexualized homunculi, like a truant school kid carving pornographic fantasies into his desk. The next minute he's transforming something real and ordinary—a summer squash, a broom, a hammer—into a hypnotically vivid, sacramental object. Gillespie is half R. Crumb, half Andrew Wyeth; or, to put it another way, he's a cross between the deranged Victorian fairy painter Richard Dadd and the scavenger modernist Robert Rauschenberg. This combination of conflicting impulses has helped to make Gillespie one of the oddest and finest painters alive today. It has also, however, made him one of the most uneven, and eclipsed his career in an art world that values stylistic coherence above any other virtue. Only now, with a four-city traveling retrospective that is coming to MIT's List Visual Arts Center this fall, does Gillespie stand a chance of receiving the full degree of recognition he deserves.

This isn't Gillespie's first retrospective. Back in 1977, the Hirshhorn Museum organized a substantial survey, with more than seventy images. By then, Gillespie, barely in his forties, had already been recognized as a maverick's maverick, and one of the brightest hopes among the band of figurative artists struggling for recognition within an art world still dominated by the legacy of Minimalism and Pop. Unlike many of his figurative peers, however, Gillespie had never really been tempted by the orthodoxies of the mainstream art world. In the early sixties, while Chuck Close was painting like de Kooning, and Rackstraw Downes like Al Held, Gillespie was interested in early Italian painters like Mantegna and Crivelli. After finishing art school, where he resolutely ignored his professors instructions to "loosen up," Gillespie moved to Italy. There, during an eight-year exile (1962–1970), he honed his meticulous fantastical style in a group of landscapes and "Trattoria" paintings.

Sadly, very few of these early works were made available for the current retrospective. That's not entirely the owners' fault. At the time, Gillespie usually began paintings by gluing photographs down, and then slowly transforming them with layer after layer of overpainting. He also carved into his fragile paint surfaces, "distressing" them with nicks, welts, and creeping faux-finish stains. For the present owners of these paintings, no doubt their scarred, seething surfaces induce conservation panic. If I had one, I would be just as nervous about loaning it.

It was these works, though, that first attracted public attention, and led to his first New York shows at the Forum Gallery. Partly, what attracted notice was the sheer perversity of Gillespie's enterprise. In the era of simple, bold visual effects (think Ellsworth Kelly, Donald Judd, or Alex Katz), Gillespie's works were crowded with pictures within pictures—nearly all of them psychedelic, sexual, tacky, and grotesque. In the Trattoria paintings, for example, a corner of a cheap restaurant would become a sort of unkempt chapel. Checked tablecloths were rendered with manic, wrinkled verisimilitude. Walls often began to resemble festering vegetative skins. Objects and framed photographs took on the look of cemetery relics. In other paintings, strange figures appeared, often with demented smiles, injuries, and amputations. Some of these images looked adolescent, some drug-induced, but all were executed with an unignorable intensity. Every contour, every square millimeter of painted surface bristled with painterly hyperactivity. Imaginatively, the spaces of Gillespie's paintings were inhabited in a way that American audiences, trained by the relatively cursory visual habits of Modernism, hadn't seen for decades.

By the time of the Hirshhorn retrospective, Gillespie had moved back to the United States, and his work was being seen as part of a "realist revival." Then and now, Gillespie disparaged the term realism (see accompanying interview). At the time, though, he was partly swept up by the resurgence of representational art, and by the "skyrocketing" prices of his own paintings. In response, his work became more strictly observational, and he embarked on a group of unusually straightforward self-portraits, several of which were finished just in time to be included in the Hirshhorn show. By any standard they are amazing paintings.

In *Self-Portrait (Torso)* from 1975, Gillespie painted himself in the format of a Bellini "Man of Sorrows." It's a purely frontal, severe image, framed along the bottom edge by a narrow strip of plywood.

Against the sheer blond plane of the wood, Gillespie's skin appears as a blanket of dazzling, cross-hatched luminosity. Working by now with a magnifying glass and triple-zero brushes, Gillespie achieved what he called "a molecular feeling, a suggestion of underlying movement." One's eye seems to move through layers of skin to the pulsing of the tiny blood vessels below. And something similar is true of the great still lifes of this period, notably *Still Life with Squash and Rutabagas*, which includes what is very likely the finest cardboard box in all of art history. Concluding with images like these, the Hirshhorn show gave the impression that Gillespie's work was moving toward an ever more focused empiricism.

In fact, though, Gillespie rapidly reasserted his wandering, whimsical eye. In the '80s and '90s, he has devoted himself mainly to "Shrine" paintings and still lifes. Both feature corners of his studio, cluttered with prosaic and exotic bric-a-brac. There are buckets, shovels, brooms, and art supplies, along with grimacing Tibetan masks, and Gillespie's own weird, cartoony drawings, which often look like funhouse mirror versions of a guide to Tantric sex. In a sense, these odd assemblages are self-portraits too: they are portraits of Gillespie's own disjointed imagination.

In a distracting world, most artists succeed by focusing, concentrating. Gillespie has done the opposite: he has succeeded by tracking the diaspora of his own preoccupations, by making distraction his subject. When he doesn't, as in a few recent pictures where he has dipped back into purely photorealist portraiture, or purely surrealist fantasy, the results have been disappointing. Lately, Gillespie seems to thrive only on visual miseegenation, on the friction generated when the separate facets of his temperament cohabit. His strongest paintings of the last twenty years—*Still Life with Watermelon* (1986) or *Self-Portrait with Mother and Son* (1991–1992), for example—are full of bizarre, ungainly juxtapositions. Emphatic forms meet whimsical ones, and both draw energy from their differentness. Gillespie's work has always been marked by echoes of Catholic iconography, but these pictures are also, more importantly, catholic with a small "c." They have a catholic inclusiveness, an eagerness to incorporate unreconciled opposites (gravity and whimsy; discipline and self-indulgence; the banal and the surreal) as parts of a single complicated continuum. They make complexity beautiful. ■

(A Unique American Vision: Paintings by Gregory Gillespie *is on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, October 8 through December 19, 1999.)*

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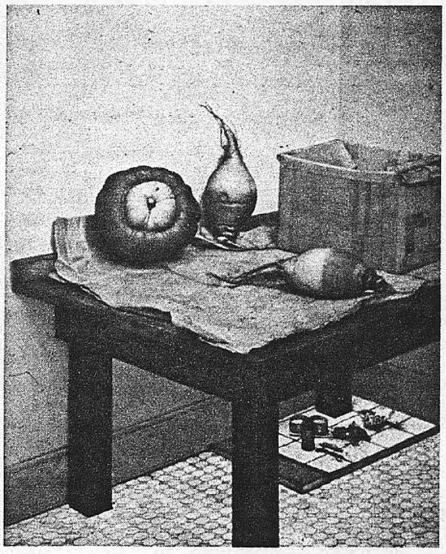
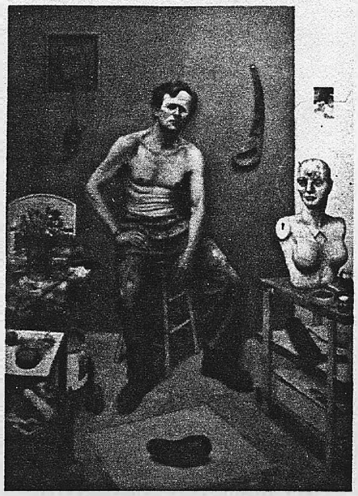


GREGORY GILLESPIE IN HIS OWN WORDS



ON LIFE AND ART

I'm really kind of a hermit type; I spend long hours in the studio. I've been doing that for forty years, and it made some kind of division. What's happened in the last ten years is that I'm trying to heal that rift, so that life is intermingling with the art in a much more fluid way. Life can actually literally become part of the paintings. Let's say right at this point, that sledgehammer over there is life, or that stuff in the corner [pointing] is life. I feel like I can pick up anything nowadays, and paint it, paint on it. There isn't any longer this feeling that life and art are two different things.

This [pointing to a work in progress] was actually our screen door on the front of our house, and I just started painting on it. [At first] it was more like hippie fooling around, a little splash of color on the front door. It broke and I took it to the studio to repair it and my daughter Jay said, "Please don't take it back." Her friends thought it was weird. Then I began really working on it, and I bought a new screen door for the house.

ON REALISM

Realism is a long, honorable tradition, from Eakins all the way back. I never felt comfortable with that. I never thought of myself as a realist. I always thought of my realism as very subjective, distorted. Even if I was studying a piece of fruit, a watermelon or something, for whatever reason, things always started getting out of whack. Pretty early on I start stylizing, simplifying, and enjoying that. Eakins wouldn't do it; but I do. And if I'm doing a head and it starts getting more weird than life, I don't say, "Oops, better fix it!" I say, "That's great, lets see what happens." I was always like that. I started as a fantasist, and then moved closer to realism in the seventies. That's when the realist movement was getting big, and I got hooked into it. You get a kind of a niche: Realist. But I just can't do paintings where that's the purpose. Trompe l'oeil painting bores me. This business of fooling the eye is never enough.

LOOSENING UP

As we get older, the eyesight changes. Look at the history of every single painter you can possibly imagine, except van Eyck. There's a kind of loosening up that organically goes on. Not just aging but the feeling that there's so many images I want to do.

SCHEDULE

Lately I get up really early, like 5:30 or so, and I come down, have a cup of coffee, and work for a couple of hours. I love that. I think it's my best time. I go up to the house around 7:30 or so and do breakfast; my wife and daughter leave, and then I'm here all day. I usually don't stop for lunch, but then I break around 3:00, 4:00 in the afternoon.... Then usually after dinner I come back down to the studio. And I go to bed early, 10:00.

ON WILLIAM BECKMAN

We've known each other for a long time, maybe thirty years. We talk on the phone, go to each other's studios, crit each other's work. If I'm doing a figurative piece, he'll be comfortable saying, "God, the arm's off, this has flattened out." He'll be somewhat diplomatic. But a lot of my work he doesn't like. We're really different, different temperaments. But we maintain a friendship. I think you need at least one person in your life who you're on an equal footing with as far as career. I mean we're competitive with each other, very competitive. If he tells me something wonderful has happened in his career, I'll say, "That's great, Bill," but I'll feel terrible, and it's the same for him. But we can joke about it. And we're competitive on another level. He's been one of the people where I've gone to his studio and seen a painting that made me really want to come home and paint better.

THE RETROSPECTIVE

It's a very strange experience, looking back at your work, and really liking it, thinking: This is the kind of show I would have wanted to have painted—if it weren't that I already did. But your reactions are so biased that you can't really tell. Looking at your own work, you never know.

MY TOMB

I'm starting to fantasize about building a chapel somewhere, like the Rothko chapel. I'm actually serious that I want my ashes there. The tomb is the continuation of the self-portraits, it's the last self-portrait. If a museum bought it and had my ashes in it, I'd be happy.

FROM LEFT:
***Self-Portrait in Black Shirt*, oil and Magna on panel, 11 3/4 x 9 1/4", 1968–1969, private collection.**

***Still Life with Squash and Rutabagas*, oil and Magna and graphite on plywood, 50 1/4 x 41⅛", 1975, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution.**

***Portrait of William Beckman*, mixed media on panel, 96 x 67", 1992, private collection.**

Photographs courtesy of the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts.