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Finding the Reality That Lies Just Beyond the Real

By MILES UNGER

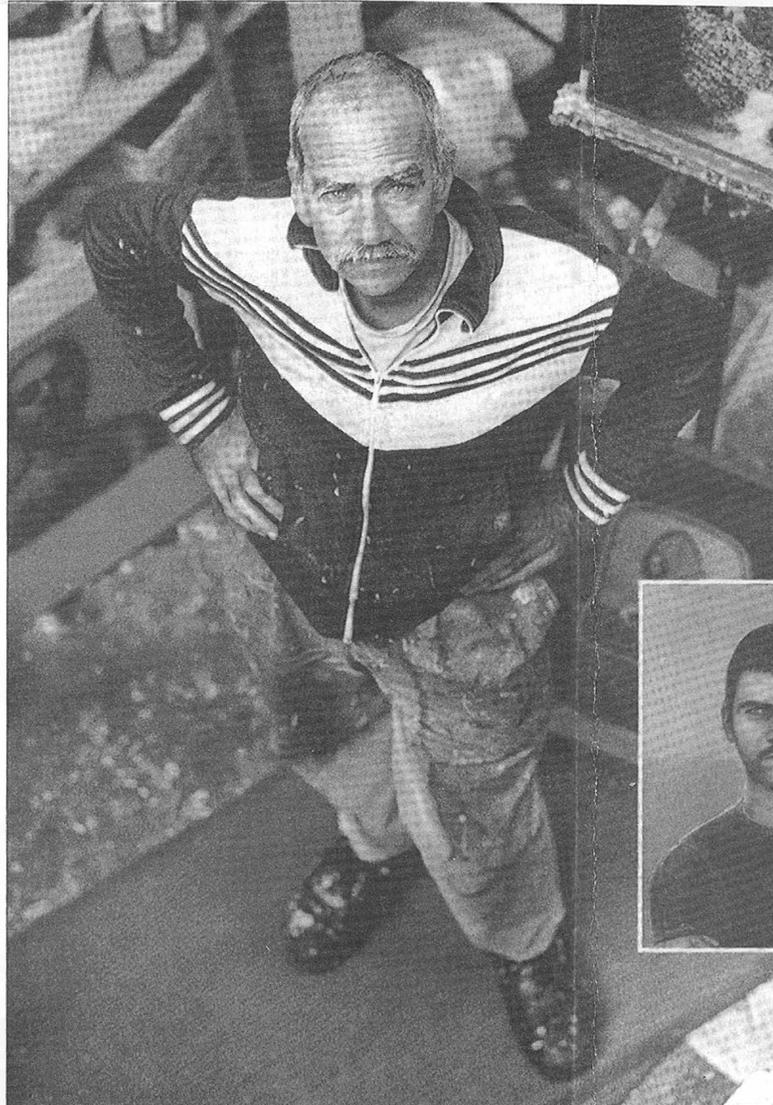
CAMBRIDGE, MASS. GREGORY GILLESPIE's "Self-Portrait in a Black Shirt" (1968-69) is one of those remarkable paintings that, if known only in reproduction, creates a startling effect when seen in person.

For one thing it is surprisingly small, less than one foot square. For another, even at this scale it packs a wallop. Its aggressive physical presence is due in part to the subject, which shows the young artist with a scowl that seems to say he wouldn't mind socking you one, but it is also conveyed by the obsessive technique in which every hair and fold of skin is rendered in tiny strokes of the brush, a technique learned by studying 15th-century tempera paintings. The intensity of the figure is perfectly matched by the obsessiveness of the technique; each is a sign of someone prepared to go to the mat, to take things to extremes.

When Mr. Gillespie made this painting, included in his traveling retrospective of 39 works on view through Jan. 2 at the List Visual Arts Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it offered a challenge to both prevailing abstract movements and to Pop irony. In fact, its assertiveness has more in common with the contemporaneous works of the Minimalists than it does with the emotionally distant portraits of Warhol or the chilly precision of the photorealists.

Mr. Gillespie, now 63 and exhibiting in the flesh none of the pugnaciousness of that early self-portrait, seems to have accepted his outsider status. Despite having works in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, he has never fit comfortably into any of the movements that have come and gone during his almost 40-year career. His works were tagged early on with the realist label, but it is a term that he has always rejected.

"I've never thought of myself as a realist," explains Mr. Gillespie, who still sports the droopy mustache and close-cropped hair, now gray, of that youthful essay in self-



Jon Crispin for The New York Times; Forum Gallery, New York (Inset)

Now and then: Gregory Gillespie and his "Self-Portrait in Black Shirt" from 1968-69.

**Gregory Gillespie's
Introspective and
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last 40 years.**

scrutiny. "For me, when I'm painting an object, if it starts getting distorted, just when a realist would stop it — a vase or a face that's getting lopsided or the nose is getting too big — I'll say: That's interesting. Let's go with it."

Such distortions apply as much to character as to form. If the belligerence of "Self-Portrait in a Black Shirt" seems in retrospect less a revelation of personality than a costume tried on for effect, the passion that Mr. Gillespie brings to everything he paints is genuine. His meticulous trompe-l'oeil technique, coupled with a willingness to pursue the subconscious twists of his mind, can take him into strange territory indeed. In "Still Life With Watermelon" (1986-87), a grotesque little putto of ambiguous but prominent sexuality peers at a watermelon with grave suspicion. And no wonder, for the fruit in question resembles, with its lobes and folds, nothing so much as a great glistening brain in shades of green.

The creature is one of the many hybrid forms that crop up in Mr. Gillespie's work, derived through a process of automatic drawing, a technique invented by the Surrealists in which the artist's meandering hand traces arabesques that presumably reveal the secret workings of the mind. All pink, fleshy protuberances, this implausible being, like everything else in his work, is realized with hallucinatory conviction.

The roots of Mr. Gillespie's style can perhaps be traced to the profound impression left by his Roman Catholic upbringing. "I've always thought that in some deep ways Catholicism has had a huge effect on my art, as it has on my soul," says Mr. Gillespie, remembering his childhood struggle with sin and redemption. Works like "Confirmation Shrine" (1990) deliberately mimic altarpieces and other religious furnishings where sacred objects are gathered together to heal the soul. Mr. Gillespie's art exhibits an emotional response to physical things that recalls the impulse behind the reliquary and the votive offering. For him, art's transformations and illusionistic enigmas are sacred stuff.

Mr. Gillespie has never lost his childhood obsession with sin, though his religious beliefs have evolved over the years, as the frequent Buddhist and Hindu symbols in his paintings attest. He explains, "Buddhism says there's a reason why you're suffering and that suffering can be understood through introspection and by understanding the way the mind works."

The importance of self-portraiture in Mr. Gillespie's oeuvre makes such introspection concrete. It is a process of self-examination made urgent by the specter of mental illness that has stalked his family. He is reluctant to talk about this painful history, though he confesses: "I walk around with the feeling that things could fall apart. I allow a lot of chaos in and try to work with it."

Rather than eliminating troubling elements, Mr. Gillespie holds them front and center, the better to tame them. His is an art of precarious balances: between chaos and order, carnality and transcendent spirituality, the quotidian and the bizarre. These tensions are perhaps best captured in "Myself Painting a Self-Portrait" (1980-81), which shows the artist in thrall to the leering twin he is limning, like one of those fabled ventriloquists possessed by their puppets.

With his haunted look, the "real" Gillespie, paint brush in hand, seems far less in control than his loosely sketched counterpart. But standing outside the frame is the invisible artist who, having conjured the scene, is master of all the chaos he has unleashed. □

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