



Gregory Gillespie, *Self-Portrait (at Fifty-Four)*, 1991, Oil on panel, 96" x 84". Courtesy Forum Gallery.

Stunningly crafted, Gregory Gillespie's work adheres to the severity of hard-edged realism spawned in the wake, and partly in the spirit, of Pop Art. From there, it separates from the herd of existing isms. Abstruse, haunted, and full of visual gymnastics, it derives from scruples and obsessions uniquely its own. *Sui generis*, Gillespie has set his own standards, maintaining a manner of working and motions of mind that transcend the norm.

His recent exhibition concentrated on self-portraits done between 1969-1991. Not quite as comprehensive as it claimed, it still provided an impressive record of Gillespie's mastery and flow of invention. Full- and half-figure compositions were set off by smaller heads that, in the main, do not command the same attention. (Two prominent exceptions: the brooding *Self-Portrait (Bald)*, 1972, that fixes a tilted head against a traumatic green; the spirited tactility of *Self-Portrait with Beret*, 1988.) It is the larger compositions that exhilarate and move me and, so, are of concern here.

The history of art is jammed with testaments to the cult of personality that emerged from the matrix of Renaissance life. Art itself has conspired to raise boundless egocentricity to a life philosophy. Gillespie is the dissenter in our long march from the 16th-century *Tractenbuch* to Peer Gynt's neurotic pride in "being himself." His likenesses baffle cultural assumptions that lay huge stress on self-exposure. In his art, the bared breast supplies pictorial anecdote for the workings of a penitential imagination rooted in restraints—silences—beyond the ken of psychologized sensibilities. Gillespie returns, with humility, playfulness, and a certain chagrin to something larger and, yes, more interesting than the writhing Self.

Indeed, the Self, prized for the splendor

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of its wounds, is remarkably absent. The figure in these portraits is a *persona* created for the painting's occasion, like the impersonal "I" that previously dominated American poetry. None of these paintings hinges on the theatrics of personal confession. Not one is dependent for its value on biography. Votaries of Frida Kahlo, dedicated to extravagant unbosoming, might take instruction here. These works achieve an autonomous life that finds its counterpart far from the therapist's couch, away in Gillespie's undulating landscapes: lapsed, disordered regions bearing the seeds of their own ruin.

If the figure is not a case history for Gillespie, neither is it the *lingua universalis* of traditional representation. It is a highly specific personal symbol of a disquieting presence incarnate in corporeal fact. Egosubmits to myth; and intuitions of Original Sin insinuate themselves everywhere. The figure, however accurately rendered, is never straightforward. Its precision and limpity are hedged with uneasiness, lending it a strange sense of distortion. This is mortified flesh, carnal paraphernalia analogous to the battered studio clutter offered as emblems of the artist's occupation and his mortal state. The sting of the flesh is in mortality itself.

Look at *Self-Portrait (at Fifty-four)* (1991). Between the succulent intensity of youth and the pathos of old age lies that soft-bellied interregnum wherein mortality reveals its ultimate intentions. A fleshy, smiling Gillespie stands barechested, centered against the white wall of a narrow sepulchral space. His hands are folded in the attitude of medieval tomb sculpture. The usual studio hubbub is kept to a quiet minimum, leaving the eye to focus on the underpants that show above his trouser belt. Asserting the ridiculous, the mocking band of white makes credible Gillespie's disquieting smile. At the same time, it cinches the composition, linking the figure to the inert space around it. The subject is clear: we are the fools of gravity and time. What else to do but grin? That the joke is not entirely funny is indicated by a sledgehammer standing ominously in the corner.

In *Self-Portrait* (1985), a crestfallen body sits at the easel completely subdued, a dull

retainer quickened only for the labors of art. Past the worktable are the tantric illustrations that, together with Gillespie's characteristic use of Gothic *pulpi*, talismanic art, or scraps of graffiti, recall the marginalia of medieval manuscripts or Gnostic texts. As every *dabbara* understands, the divine and the diabolical keep company in the ordinary world. Gillespie's demons are as ancient and, in their zany way, as decorative as art itself.

The single painting that suggests a social setting, *Self-Portrait on Bed* (1974), stops short of its own implied narrative. The bare mattress on the floor, the outstretched arm, palm up and veins distended, are full of innuendo. But the tawdry litter of addiction—vials, syringes—is noticeably missing. Self-revelation, too, can be a pose. And so the viewed is cleared of anything morbid or sensational. In futile search of maudlin detail, the eye shifts to a single pear, ripe and sound, on a windowsill. The promise of redemption is a gracious myth, more moral than the facile didacticism of lesser artists.

A word is needed about the unfortunate catalogue essay by Donald Kuspit. Gossiping like a fishwife ("Gillespie is afraid of becoming a psychotic"), the professor invokes the specter of psychic disintegration to account for Gillespie's numerous self-portrayals. Gillespie himself explains them with lovely simplicity: "I'm always there and available and willing." But the Professor knows better. Besides, the dark hint of pathology lends a dicey *frisson* to works that are among the most lucid we have. No matter the clinical details of Gillespie's family history, he comes as close as a secular intelligence can to exploring not the fringes of psychosis but the humane vestiges of religious culture. That he manages this within the confines of such spare means—the walls of his studio and the jumble of its contents—is infinitely more to his credit than the psychiatric fustian unfurled by Professor Kuspit.

The fun of Gillespie's work is in the marvelous surfaces and offbeat trompe-l'oeil surprises. But the tact, temper, and discernment of it are his stronger claims on our admiration. (*Forum*, January 9-March 21)

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