

Arts & Leisure



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Gregory Gillespie in his studio—When he paints, time seems to dissolve, a mark of the state called “flow” found in people performing at their peak.

Pondering the Riddle of Creativity

By DANIEL GOLEMAN

Continued From Page 1

THERE IS SOMETHING BEDAZZLING ABOUT the creative act: always a surprise, it shocks with its unimaginable perfection, its strange eloquence, its balance between the fresh and the familiar. Perhaps it's because we want to make such magic ourselves that we are so intrigued by how others do it. And so we turn to psychology to unravel the mysteries of creativity.

But despite a long fascination with the creative mind, psychology has been singularly uncreative in explaining it. There is, for example, the popular if romanticized view that takes van Gogh as its prototype of the creative

Psychologists are taking a new approach to the secrets of the imagination: studying the moment of inspiration.

genius: an emotional cripple who, if cured of his neurosis, would lose his talents. That theory, with roots as ancient as Aristotle, has gone out the window with findings that show creativity flourishing with emotional maturity (though a little manic depression in the family may not hurt, especially for writers).

Other theories try to reduce the creative act to elementary abilities. One such theory was "divergence," a knack measured by how many novel ideas one could come up with for using such items as a junked car. Such theories merely trivialize the topic.

In recent years these piecemeal approaches have been rejected by a new generation of psychologists who seek more satisfying understanding of the creative spirit, whether it is embodied in the young artist starting in the proverbial garret or a titan like Martha Graham, innovating into her 90's.

Three major new theories of creativity nest inside one another like Russian dolls. One focuses on the role of the sheer pleasures of creation during the inspired moment. A second tracks the forces at work in the lives of creative geniuses like Eliot and Picasso, Einstein and Gandhi, people who have risen beyond the top of their form to recreate the form itself. A third steps back to assess the social forces that give rise to a renaissance.

These theories signify a sweeping shift in the study of the imagination. Rather than seeing creative ability as something akin to intelligence, something like a creative I.Q., psychologists are examining the creative moment

Continued on Page 22

itself. Glimpses of the lives and work of three creative artists — the realistic painter Gregory Gillespie, the film maker George Lucas and the Polish playwright Janusz Glowacki — illuminate these theories.

Gregory Gillespie

The Thrill Of the Moment

Consider the artist Gregory Gillespie in his studio in a meadow near Amherst, Mass., pondering whether to add images of himself and his daughter, Juliana, to a life-size super-realistic nude portrait of his wife, Peggy, sitting on a kitchen stool. At times like this, when he contemplates the intricacies of composition or is rapt, putting brush to canvas, Mr. Gillespie says he feels "super-alert." Time dissolves, and a day passes like an hour.

That elastic sense of time — vanishing into a kind of hyperspeed or crystallizing into stop-frame slow motion — is a mark of what psychologists call the "flow" state, an altered awareness found in people performing at their peak. First discovered in studies in which people from rock climbers to chess masters described moments when they had outdone themselves, flow is now being charted

as the thrill that motivates artists to keep at it year after year.

Mr. Gillespie's paintings are now in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum and the Hirshhorn. But when he began he was willing to live in near-poverty rather than work a full-time job so he would have time to paint. "I loved it," says the artist, who is 55. "I felt painting was the greatest job I could have, even though I wasn't making a cent from it."

Such early disregard for financial reward is a hallmark of nascent artists who later have successful ca-

reers, according to Prof. Mike Csikszentmihalyi, a University of Chicago psychologist who has led the research on flow and creativity. He and his colleagues studied 200 artists, first in art school, and then 18 years later. Those who had most savored the joy of painting itself, valuing the process more than the product, stayed with it; from their ranks eventually emerged the most successful. But those who had been spurred by fantasies of fame and wealth had largely disappeared from the art world soon after graduation.

"Painters must want to paint above all else," says Professor Csikszentmihalyi. "If the artist in front of the canvas begins to wonder how much he will sell it for, or what the critics will think of it, he won't be able to pursue original avenues. Creative achievements depend on single-minded immersion."

Flow hooks artists on their medium in the first place, but it also drives them to push beyond their limits, to innovate and experiment. The Chicago researchers find that flow occurs when a person's skills are in exquisite balance with the challenges presented. If the challenge is too easy, there is boredom; if it's too taxing, anxiety results.



A novice musician feels "in flow" performing a well-rehearsed repertory; a master musician needs the most technically challenging pieces to get in flow; the world-class musician ups the ante by interpreting those most challenging pieces.

The signs of such an evolution are evident in the retrospective survey of Mr. Gillespie's self-portraits from 1969 to 1991, now at the Forum Gallery on 57th Street in Manhattan. The earliest work is technically primitive, using tight, restricted brushstrokes to depict the artist at 33. The portrait shows a man who seems to be glowering with intensity at the struggle to

master his medium. "I was just learning how to make it look realistic," Mr. Gillespie recalls.

By 1975 a self-portrait is so vividly realistic that at first glance it could be taken for a photograph. But soon after mastering that hyper-realistic technique, Mr. Gillespie moved on to a signature style, a visual equivalent to magical surrealism in which murky Rorschach-like subworlds lurk in the corners and shadows, populated by a mix of fetuses, torsos, genitalia and intestines: the tension between id and ego made visible.

Recently, Mr. Gillespie has moved on again. "I lost interest in being able to render microscopic detail," he said. "What challenges me now about painting a figure is using a looser technique — bigger brushes, broader strokes, painting more quickly."

He also uses life-size cutouts of painted objects, trying them out in several of the many paintings he works on at once. He welcomes visitors' suggestions about what elements to put where. Says Mr. Gillespie: "I'm always on the lookout for something new to try. It keeps it fresh for me."



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