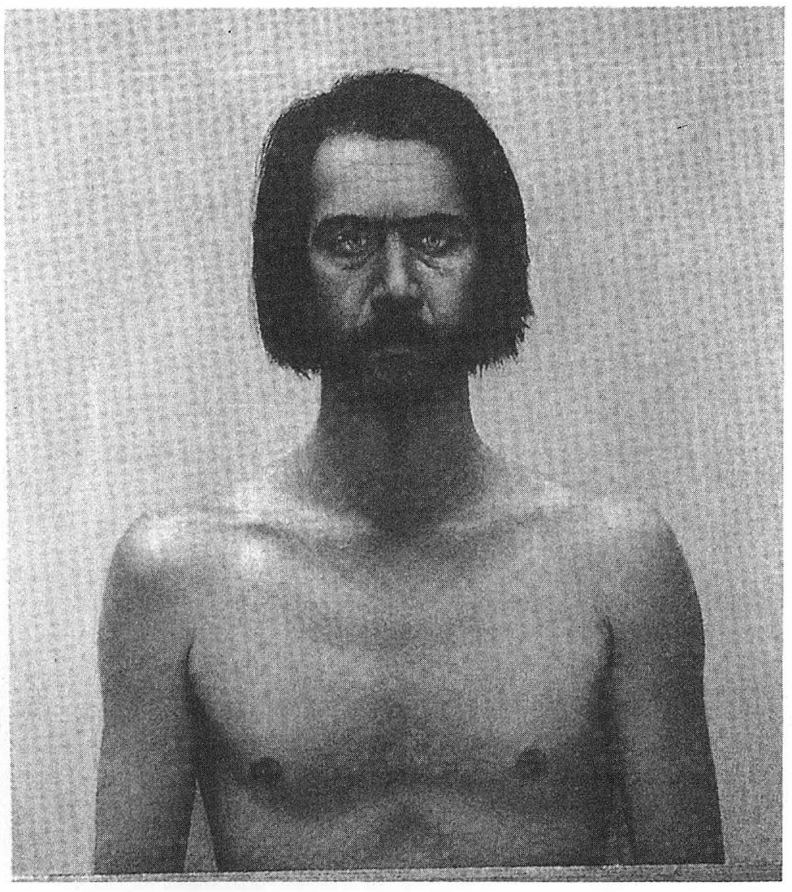
Gregory Gillespie offers degrees of reality

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

Among the earliest of Gregory Gillespie's paintings of himself in his show now at MIT is the 1975 "Self-Portrait (Torso)," an image as confrontational and stark as Piero della Francesca's "Resurrection," which was painted more than five centuries earlier. Like Piero's Christ, Gillespie here is a bearded man with nude torso and expression of somber resolve. Piero's figure is stepping out of a tomb that forms an architectural barrier between him and us. Gillespie gets the same effect from a strip of plywood he's painted at the bottom of the picture, so convincing it qualifies as trompe l'oeil. Piero's timeless simplification has made him the late 20th century's favorite 15th-century painter. The Gillespie is timeless, too, pinned to no period by either clothing or props. Even the background, a putty-colored blank until you notice its slightly pocked surface, is utterly neutral.

A Pioneer Valley painter and the subject of this 31-year, 39-work traveling retrospective, Gillespie spent the late 1960s studying in Florence and Rome. His work is certainly influenced by Italian art, but equally by Dutch and Flemish painting, 20th-century Surrealism, and Buddhist and Hindu imagery and thought. His is a busy mind. His paintings are busy, too, as if the contents of his head had spilled onto them. "Self-Portrait (Torso)" is atypical in its lack of clutter. More often, Gillespie paints himself surrounded by brushes, hammers, saws, masks, dolls, melons, pears, and other paraphernalia. He'll pack all the above into a studio corner or under a rounded niche that turns the composition into an altar, or load it onto a mandala that lends some structural discipline, possibly spiritual discipline, too. He's big on diagrams, to the point where he'll paint them over his own image, as if trying to decode himself.

Influenced by Buddhism, Gregory Gillespie calls his approach to art "don't-know mind." Page C6.



Gillespie's "Self-Portrait (Torso)," from 1975.

Rivaling masters

His technique is jaw-dropping. His ability to paint hair by hair, freckle by freckle, rivals that of the most accomplished Dutch masters. Although he paints on panel, he doesn't make a fetish out of Old Master-ish means or materials. Photography and Xerox are important tools to him, too. He's a whiz at color, whether combining kindergarten primaries or the subtlest, closest mix of greens in a landscape. He likes to paint still lifes huge – those squash sometimes look mighty enough to squash *you* – and landscapes little, with half-inch trees that are legible despite their diminutive scale.

An art student during Abstract Expressionism's heyday, Gillespie came of age as a painter in the late '60s, when shows with titles like "Realism Now" and "Aspects of a New Realism" were popping up on museum schedules. "Realist" is too tricky a term to apply to him. "Figurative painter" suits him better. Sometimes his figures seem straightforward. Paintings of his wife and friends have a lapel-grabbing presence, but they don't make you scratch your head. Other works, though, are like those movies that mix animated characters with real people, or ballets in which live dancers partner dolls.

The puppet-to-human continuum

Gillespie offers degrees of reality – some, like Pinocchio, on a puppet-to-human continuum. The figure in the 1968 "Doll Child" has a bodye with the stiff, manufactured joints ofe a toy, and a delicate, quizzical faciale expression that's far fleshier. Thee "Doll Child" sits in a throwaway kinde of space, a ground-level setting ofe battered stone stoop above an expanse of white hexagonal tiles. Ae slightly 3-D buildup of the "mixede media" of the painting reinforces thee illusion of depth. Gillespie's relief refers both to art history and to modern assemblage. In an essay in thee show's catalog, Carl Belz quotes the artist on a favorite Italian painter,e Carlo Crivelli, who, in a single work,e combined a plaster relief hatchete with a flat painted hand, and madee *both* read as equally "real." Gillespiee does the equivalent, combining twoe dimensions with sly, 3-D swellings,e in paintings that are magical in theire reach-out-and-touch illusionism.e

The Quattrocento Venetian painter makes an interesting comparison with Gillespie in other ways. Renaissance scholar Frederick Hartt wrote that "Crivelli's was a strongly personal style of refinement and brilliance, hermetically sealed from the development of his Venetian contemporaries." Substitute "Gillespie" and "New York" for "Crivelli" and "Venice," and you have an apt summary of the fertile isolation of the Pioneer Valley painter.

Gillespie carries his 3-D effects further in paintings with real built-in windows and doors, works resembling shrines or reliquaries. Behind the wire mesh or glass that covers these openings are faces peering out at you, or maybe nothing at all. The econtents of the shrines are idiosyncratic, drawn together from all thee corners of Gillespie's heart and head.e Figures in black and white mix withe those in vivid color. There's no rulee on scale. And, like a director with ae favorite actress, Gillespie has favorite characters that recur in differente roles, including a particularly versatile butternut squash.

Sometimes his figures lurk almost unseen. In landscapes, peoplee have to struggle to separate themselves from the browns and greense that surround and threaten to swallow them. The landscapes are dense,e their tonalities close, the textures ofe stone and forest fantastic and fantastically painted. They allude to predecessors. The 1981 "Landscape (After De Hooch)" features the intricate brick and tile construction seen in that master's works. De Hooch's tiles are grids that regulate his composition; Gillespie uses grids in a similar way, and sometimes adds rulers and triangles to the mix, emphasizing his interest in geometry. He picks up on De Hooch's play between indoors and out and his courtyard spaces, along with the sheer number of events the earlier painter also crammed into a small area. You'd need a magnifying glass to sort out all that's going on in "Landscape (After De Hooch)," which is just 13½ inches high.

Portrait of a portrait

In the 1980-81 "Myself Painting a Self-Portrait," a chap sprawled on a shelf beside a paintbrush looks as if he's coming into being while you watch – fashioned of paint itself, soused from an overdose of paint thinner. The self-portrait that Gillespie is painting doesn't look like the finished self-portrait he presents in the same work: The droop of his mustache is comically inverted to create a grin in the in-progress piece. The twinning of "real" and "phantom" images continues in the same painting with a rounded purple eggplant hanging from a string, its stem-neck broken so you sense its weight. Drawn on a white wall nearby is a sketchy, weightless version of the same vegetable. On a table in the foreground are a couple of tiny mannequins that turn up in varying scales in other Gillespie paintings, one with a beatific expression, the other wearing an aggressive, snarling mask. Here they're bit players; in other cases, they're the protagonists.

"Myself Painting a Self-Portrait" is loaded with distractions. Gillespie directs your eye, though, with a strategy that dates at least to Van Dyck: the vividly colored cloth backdrop that sets off what's important. Here, it's a swath of bright green behind the artist himself.

Enigmas abound in Gillespie's painting. The 1993 "Self-Portrait with Pumpkin" would be easy to explain if the images were confined to those named in the title. Both painter and pumpkin are there, in the lower half of the work, but above them is a huge white arch, a sacred shape in which floats a vast, ragged chunk of a tree trunk that also looks like a pair of thighs, a fragment of a heroic Greek sculpture. Here is something that's obviously on Gillespie's mind, something we'll doubtless encounter in another context in his work.

Loosening up

He's loosened up of late. The expressions in the self-portraits from the 1960s through the '80s are calm, bemused, even hypnotic and Rasputin-like. His constant self-scrutiny, his record of his looks through several decades, has gotten him compared with Rembrandt. But Rembrandt never produced anything like Gillespie's 1995-96 "Four Responses," which looks as if he plunked himself down in one of those instant photo booths and started mugging. Gone are the muted background colors, too, replaced by a zingy Caribbean blue. He's having fun.

In the 1997-98 "Large Landscape" he continues to play fast and loose with his own past. The painting looks like a couple of inches of one of his tight early landscapes blown up so it's virtually abstract. The brushwork suggests a roller-coaster ride; the swirling textures, slices of semiprecious stones.

The culmination of the show is the 1998-99 "Greg's Tomb 2," which combines aspects of the shrines and self-portraits. A large, freestanding wooden structure, garishly colored, it is adorned with gaudy knobs, phallic protrusions, and pictures of the artist and his wife. It's reminiscent of the wacky wooden coffins in the shapes of lobsters or pink Cadillacs that people in West Africa are buried in. The coffins disappear into the ground; Gillespie envisions "Tomb 2" in a museum, with his ashes inside. At the moment, the glass reliquary near the top is filled with stalagmites of paint, as if the contents of Gillespie's palette were rising in a dance as darkly exuberant as a New Orleans funeral parade.

A UNIQUE AMERICAN VISION: THE PAINTINGS OF GREGORY GILLESPIE

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