

Gillespie wants his paintings to tell stories

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BELCHERTOWN — When Gregory Gillespie starts a new painting, he jumps off a cliff into a sea of color and images. He doesn't know what he'll encounter. He doesn't know what will come up. He prefers to leave it to chance.

Gillespie, who has a retrospective of more than 30 years of work at MIT's List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, sits on the edge of a chair in the kitchen of his Pioneer Valley home. His daughter's guinea pig, in a cage beside the artist, startles as Gillespie reaches his long arm past. "Here's the palette where I mix my color," he declares, looking to his left.

"Here's the painting," he continues, nodding directly in front of him. His hand dances in the air. "I paint a form. Move back, look at it."

He squints at the imaginary painting. "Oh. Needs a little red. You make a decision: a little red under the shadow."

Gillespie turns back toward the guinea pig. "Go to the palette. Mix a little red, and white, and yellow. Get the red I think I need on the brush."

He regards his phantom canvas. "By the time I face the painting, I allow myself to forget the reason I went to the palette. I put the red somewhere else."

Gillespie, who a decade ago studied and practiced Buddhism, calls his approach "don't-know mind."

"It's realizing we don't know much," he explains. "We have presumptions and preconceptions about what reality is. But examine the mind, and see it's not so simple. I try to approach painting like that. I try to approach each situation fresh, and not make a lot of assumptions."

Four decades of work attest to his don't-know approach. Gillespie paints vividly real portraits and self-portraits. He paints intricate mandalas. He paints landscapes as squirming with brush strokes as a carcass squirms with maggots. He layers found images and paints over them, creating odd and ornery maps to his psyche. He traffics in sacred imagery, from Buddha to the Hindu god Shiva to altars inspired by a child-



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MARK WILSON

Gillespie in his studio: "I try to approach each situation fresh, and not make a lot of assumptions."

hood steeped in Roman Catholicism.

For all those outlets, Gillespie's art still has a central theme.

"For me, his work is about how do you draw the line between the visible and the invisible," says Carl Belz, who curated the retrospective and crossed paths with Gillespie over the years during his tenure as director of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis. "Or between the observable and the phantasmagoric."

The artist's studio, lodged in a barn behind his house, bursts with color and outrageous images. Self-portrait cutouts of the artist painted years ago lean over balconies and hang on walls, regarding the creative chaos below.

Gillespie, 62, started art school at Cooper Union in New York in the mid-'50s, when Abstract Expressionism was at its height.

"Everyone was doing it in the school," the artist recalls, his sad eyes reflective over a bushy white mustache. "I like abstract art, but I couldn't paint that way. I was the only kid in school doing these narrative paintings. I wanted to tell a story."

He made his name as a painter of intense realism — so intense, it moved beyond real to wild and freakish.

Today, you could say that the artist's landscapes, with their loose brushwork, verge on abstraction. But Gillespie wouldn't agree with you.

"All my paintings, no matter how

free the brush marks, are figurative," he declares. "They tell stories. It's an attempt at self-healing. I always use the content of my life in my paintings. It's how I work on what's going on."

There's a painting in his studio that, like much of his work, he started years ago: Two faces that began as a lithograph and got painted over. He recently covered the canvas in glass and started painting another layer: two apple-nosed fellows in intense reds and greens.

"I do a lot of double images," Gillespie says. "I went to a lecture once, where they said that children of manic-depressive parents draw double images. A good mom and a bad mom. I have some of that in my past."

Indeed, Gillespie's mother spent most of his youth in a mental hospital.

"That's why I think most of my work deals with chaos and disorder, trying to unify it, trying to give it order," he suggests.

The mandalas are exquisitely, even precisely ordered — in a chaotic kind of way.

"I take them from Tibetan mandalas. I start off with a formal arrangement and I improvise wildly," Gillespie says. "I'm not respectful to the traditions of different cultures. I just play with them."

A Buddha shines from the center of Tibetan mandalas.

"At the center of mine is something fleshy and sexual and cell-like,

or womblike," Gillespie explains. "It's an intuitive image I make that represents the origins of life. The spirit and the flesh. A mystery."

For all its phantasmagoric content, it's easy for Gillespie's art to distract you from its form.

"Step away from the wild subject matter, and they're beautiful pictures in terms of the way they orchestrate the color," says Belz. "If you get caught up in the subject matter, you miss the formal intelligence of his work, which is really savvy, really sophisticated."

Gillespie teaches painting to art students in Hartford.

"I talked to them last week about how insecure I feel about my retrospective," he admits. "It's an insecure business. It's so subjective. After all these years, some days I think I'm doing good work, and some days I think I'm delusional."

Painting is, after all, a lonely business.

"Art is not like theater or music, where there's an audience," Gillespie says. "People keep their response private. You make art in solitude, and you experience it in solitude."

"But it's a very social act. My spiritual teacher, Andrew Cohen, asked me — as if to prove in public I was not a pure artist — if I was living on an island, with no community, would I paint. I said, 'No, I don't think so.'

"I don't paint for myself," he concludes with a shrug. "My motivation is communication."



745 Fifth Avenue at 57th Street
New York, New York 10151