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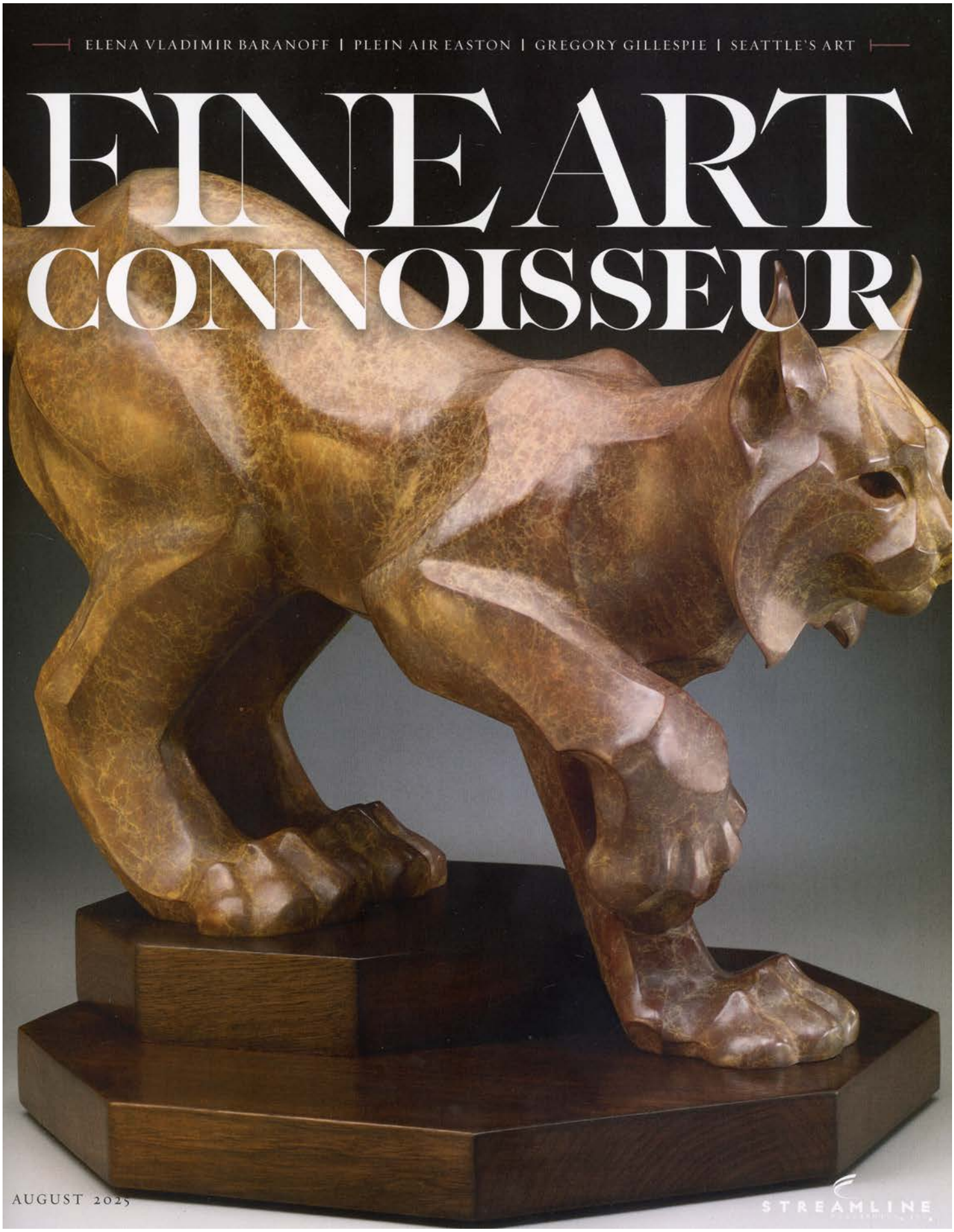

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ON THE COVER

ROSETTA (b. 1945), *Lynx* (artist's proof), 1993, bronze (edition of 18), 16 x 21 x 15 in.
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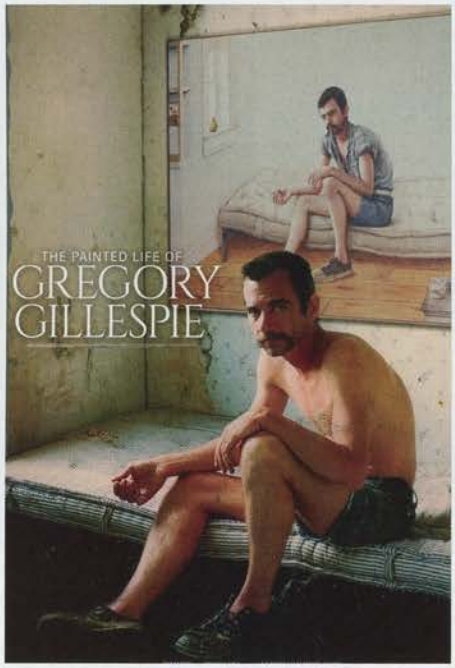
BY DANIEL GRANT

GREGORY GILLESPIE'S PAINTED LIFE

Some artists fit a certain moment (for instance, John Singer Sargent and the Belle Epoque), or maybe they *define* a certain moment (Andy Warhol and Pop Art). Gregory Gillespie (1936–2000) was noteworthy for not fitting into any trend, which perhaps explains why his work was admired during his life and then largely forgotten.

Gillespie painted almost exclusively on wood, sometimes sawing parts off one painting to adhere to another. His most iconic images were self-portraits that more or less resemble him, glaring at the viewer, often bare-chested and slouched, frequently surrounded by the accouterments of an artist's studio. As he grew older, Gillespie portrayed the folds in his belly. If you want your artists to be heroes and your heroes to have idealized forms, Gillespie ain't your man.

How to characterize his painting? Realism? It is representational, yet more dreamlike than real. Surrealism doesn't apply because the unconscious doesn't appear to rule. The term "magic realism" (a mix of real and unreal) has been used. OK. That puts Gillespie in a grab bag of 20th-century artists (such as Ivan Albright, Leonora Carrington, and Giorgio di Chirico) who are also "magic realists" and not easily characterized.



The new film's promotional image

Robert Fishko, owner of New York City's Forum Gallery, which represented Gillespie during his life, says, "He was his own kind of visionary anarchist, more like a highly trained outsider artist than anything else." Gillespie was a friend of the realist painter William Beckman (b. 1942), and sometimes their works have been exhibited together, but Fishko notes that "It's really difficult to say what other artists to associate with Gregory Gillespie. Lucian Freud? Wayne Thiebaud? Tom Wesselmann? These are artists whose work doesn't look like any other's, but there are visual and psychic elements that unite them."

A FRESH LOOK

Now seems the right time to look more closely at this artist as examined in the recently released 90-minute documentary film directed by Evan Goodchild, *The Painted Life of Gregory Gillespie*. At its beginning, we are introduced to the barn-like studio in Belchertown, Massachusetts, built in the 1980s, where the artist made many paintings and where he eventually committed suicide by hanging. After his death, the studio was modified into a living space by Gillespie's widow, Peggy, and then was rented to Goodchild as his home and film editing studio from 2016 to 2019. The splatters of paint on the walls and floors suggested to Goodchild that an artist had worked there, yet he knew nothing of Gillespie, and it was only a few years after he moved to his current home in Canton, Connecticut, that he was recommended by Larry Hott of Florentine Films to make this documentary. Small world? Coincidence? It's a strange circumstance that Gillespie himself might have painted.

This is a film that could only have been made posthumously. Others had sought to film Gillespie while he was still alive. Documentary filmmaker David Sunderland had "wanted to follow Greg pretty closely day in, day out, and Greg had turned down the opportunity," Goodchild explains. A neighbor and friend of Gillespie, Kevin Weyl, who worked primarily as a cameraman, did make a series of videos of Gillespie working and discussing his art in his final years, yet nothing was done with them. "The footage was never really assembled into any sort of narrative," Goodchild notes. Those videos were just part of an archive — including notebooks and letters — that was lying around, so Goodchild made use of them all in telling his story of the painter.

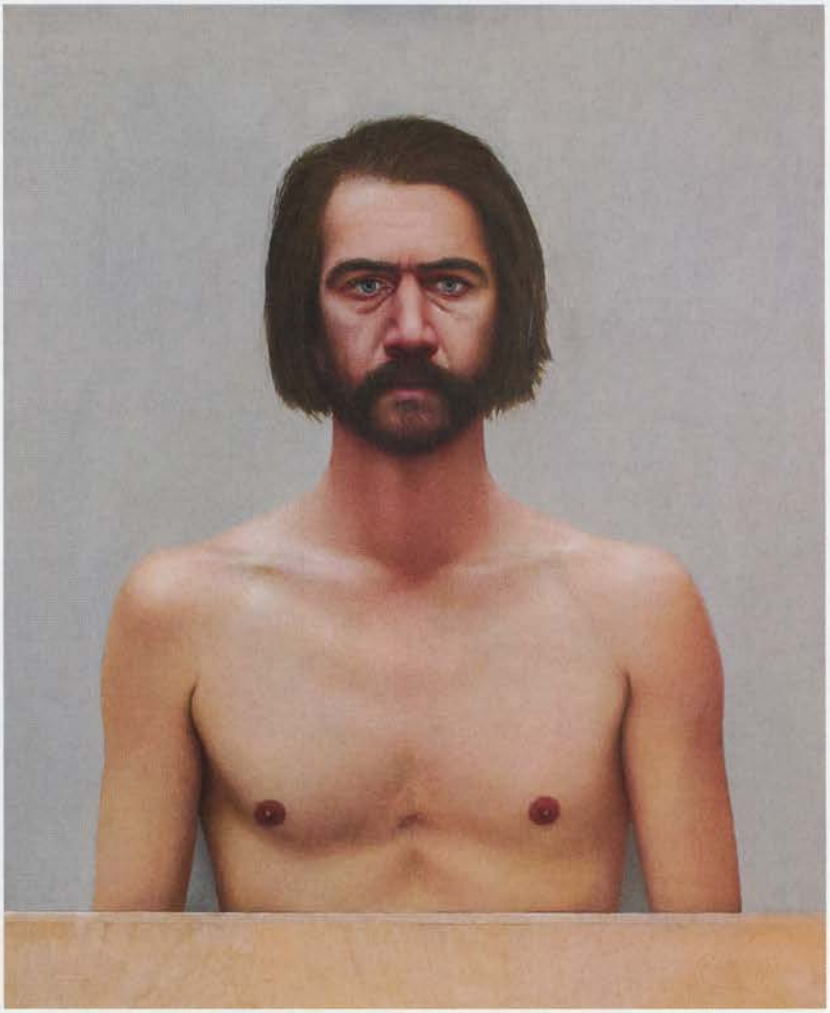
By 2021, when Goodchild was asked to direct the documentary, it seemed a matter of now or never. "A lot of his contemporaries were dying during the course of our filming," he recalls, noting that he visited Gillespie's sister shortly before she passed away in 2022. "These stories would have been lost to time, so it was important to get in there and speak to people who knew him firsthand before it was too late." Among the

Gillespie between two self-portraits at his Hirshhorn Museum retrospective in 1977; photo: Kris Cox

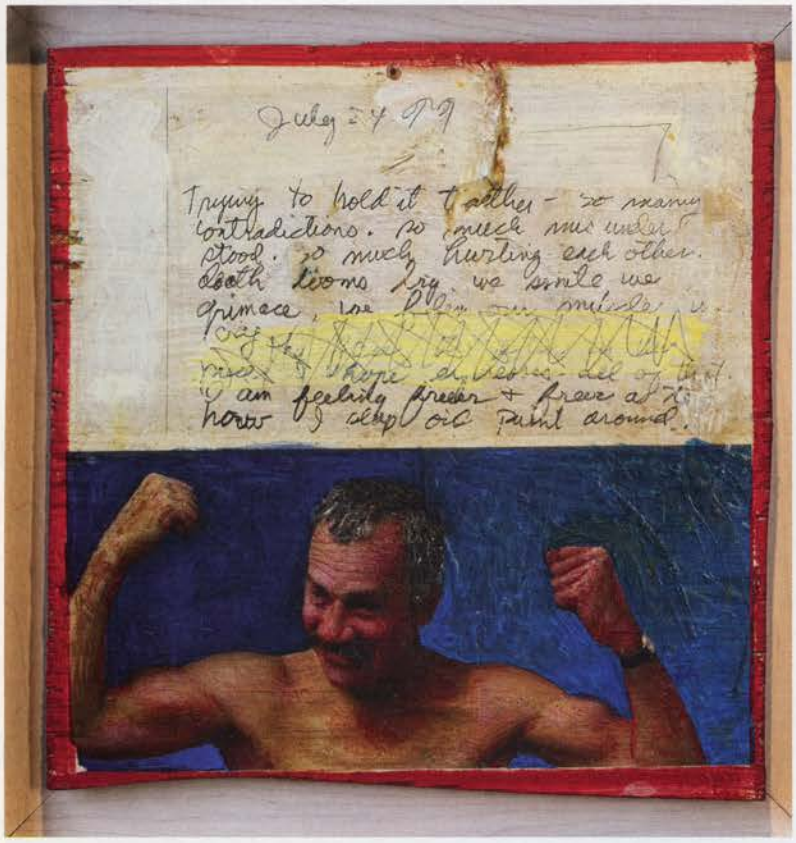
more than 40 people speaking on camera are artists, critics, curators, and a dealer, as well as Peggy Gillespie.

Goodchild explains, "I felt uniquely well-suited for the job — I had lived with Greg's ghost for three years. I soon discovered that the work itself was haunted... with uncanny and compelling gravitas. I was delighted to find a playfulness and resourcefulness in Greg's approach, too. As a filmmaker, I decided early on to pursue both these conflicting values during the production of the film — a nod to the complex character of this new old master."

"The suicide shouldn't color how one looks at his life and art," Peggy Gillespie declares, but a fair amount of the documentary reveals the large and small traumas that plagued the artist's life. He was born in Roselle Park, New Jersey. His mother, who suffered from bipolar disorder, was



(RIGHT) *Self-Portrait (Torso)*, 1975, oil and acrylic on wood panel, 30 1/4 x 24 3/4 in., Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond ■ (ABOVE) Detail of Gillespie's eyes in *Self-Portrait (Torso)*



Self-Portrait with Journals, July 24, 1999, oil, ink, and paper on panel, 11 1/8 x 11 1/4 in., collection of Peggy Gillespie. The handwritten opening lines read "Trying to hold it together — so many contradictions. So much mis understood [sic]. So much hurting each other."

Director Evan Goodchild, photographed while living in Gillespie's Belchertown studio, 2017

institutionalized when Gregory was in the second grade, and his father, a functioning alcoholic, was unable to care for him and the other two children, so they were raised by an aunt and uncle with whom Gregory had an uneasy relationship. He attended Catholic schools, becoming ever more rebellious as his spiritual doubts grew. He enrolled in Manhattan's progressive Cooper Union, a tuition-free art school that did not even grant degrees at the time, later earning a degree in studio art at the now-defunct San Francisco Art Institute.

Peggy notes that Gillespie painted on canvas while he was a student, but later made wood his preferred substrate. The film doesn't explore how or why this shift occurred, but Goodchild suggests that the use of wood made Gillespie's creations "more than paintings. They were like objects. I think he liked the flexibility of wood, being able to cut it out, sand it down easily, and bend it to his will. He is described in the documentary as a funky carpenter, and so I think wood was something that gave him creative flexibility."

The film also demonstrates that Gillespie liked cutting into his painted surfaces. He declared, "Razor-blading, for me, is a way to open the painting up so I can get into it. It destroys the surface, yesterday's marks, yesterday's assumptions. Things pop up from the distant past, things get rubbed off and slowly disappear, while new images, new questions emerge."

Even though Gillespie was pursuing representational art when the art world was still in the thrall of abstraction, his talent was quickly recognized, and he was awarded two Fulbright grants, three Chester Dale fellowships, and a

Studio Corner, 1983–86, oil, alkyd, acrylic, graphite, paper, wood, and collage elements on wood, 96 x 96 1/4 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

Louis Comfort Tiffany grant, enabling him to visit, and live in, Italy for six years. During a 1960s trip to New York City, he brought some paintings to Forum Gallery, where they appealed powerfully to its founder, Bella Fishko (Robert's mother). In 1966, Gillespie had his first solo exhibition there. His paintings were included in numerous Whitney Biennials and, in 1977, the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum (Washington, D.C.) organized a touring retrospective.

ON HIS OWN

Uncomfortable in the New York City art world, Gillespie settled in rural central Massachusetts in the 1970s, first in Williamsburg and later Belchertown. He became the unofficial mentor of a group of emerging painters in the area — including William Beckman, Randall Diehl, Jane Lund, and Scott Prior, as well as his first wife, Frances Cohen Gillespie. Several were ultimately represented by Forum, and together they became known as the "Valley Realists," a term Gillespie rejected because he did not identify as a realist, and because the moniker gave him one more thing to rebel against.

Gillespie "was a competitive person. Sometimes, he was very difficult," Prior remembers. "Sometimes he drank too much and said things. He didn't wear masks and he let you know what he was feeling. Other times, he was very kind and upbeat. You didn't always know what you would get when you saw him."

For a long time, Gillespie's career went very well, with major museums and collectors acquiring pieces. Yet as the 1980s shaded into the '90s, there was less excitement about his new paintings. Peggy notes, "He had been in around 14 Whitney Biennials, but interest in realism declined." Now his gallery shows did not sell out. To cover his expenses, he was paid a monthly stipend as an advance against sales, "which gave him a great deal of freedom," Peggy says, but ultimately the paintings needed to sell. When he died, Gillespie owed Forum $200,000, which was not an unusually high sum for him, but the stress about this situation did increase his anxiety.

The documentary suggests that Gillespie's later self-portraits seem sadder and that he thought his best years were behind him. William Beckman, a frenemy, told him these paintings were a "caricature" of his earlier ones. To relieve his situational anxiety, Gillespie was prescribed Prozac three weeks before his death. Peggy is a social worker and former assistant director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program at the Medical Center of the University of Massachusetts in Worcester, and she believes Prozac led to his suicide "100 percent." She notes that, days before, he had felt optimistic enough to order $2,000 in art supplies. "Even his therapist was in shock," as were friends and family members. "I saw him just the week before, and there were no intimations of him wanting to end his life," says Prior.

How significant is Gillespie's suicide to his overall story? Other artists have taken their own lives — Vincent van Gogh, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko, Diane Arbus, R.B. Kitaj — without substantially affecting how we look at their art. Part of van Gogh's story is his being hospitalized in a psychiatric institution and committing suicide, yet his aesthetic is very much in sync with the post-impressionist art being created by others at the same time.

By contrast, there is something in Gillespie's paintings that feels off-kilter. "You look at some of his earliest self-portraits and you think, 'I wouldn't want to be trapped in a room with this guy,'" Prior says, adding that Gillespie sometimes neglected to zip his pants and rarely combed his hair. "He just didn't care about appearances," which Prior considers a key element of Gillespie's art, too. "He didn't paint the surfaces of things, but rather the interior life of things." Perhaps that is, after all, the essence of "magic realism"? ●

Information: *gregorygillespiefilm.com. All artworks illustrated here were created by Gregory Gillespie, and all photos were provided courtesy of Goodchild Media. For available artworks, visit forumgallery.com and georgeadamsgallery.com.*

DANIEL GRANT is the author of *The Business of Being an Artist* and other artist career publications from Skyhorse Press. He is a contributing writer to *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

(TOP) ***Landscape with Birch Tree***, 1976, egg oil tempera and Magna (acrylic resin paint) on wood, 32 x 26 in., Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond ■ (ABOVE) ***Red Squash***, 1975, oil and Magna on wood, 56 1/2 x 45 in., photo: Estate of Gregory Gillespie