

His harrowingly detailed vision is motivated out of an inexplicable fear of losing touch with the world he lives in. 'When that terrified thing starts happening in the work, then I know it's good.'

The fabric of human anxiety is such that it can produce energies as creative as they can be destructive. In the case of Gregory Gillespie—an artist of singular sensibility—the terrors of anxiety have yielded paintings that transform reality into intense dramas of perception—acute, often obsessive responses to a world that is seen more as a threat than an arena of open-ended discovery. Gillespie's world is a private, dangerous prison from which there is no escape. Dense, confining, claustrophobic, it is a universe in which figures, objects, landscapes, streets or rooms seem paralyzed and transfixed within the trauma of their very existence—a world seen and rendered with the sort of microscopic precision that makes of clarity an assault, and of reality a sinister truth.

Working totally outside the stylistic trends of the day, Gillespie has frequently been called a latter-day Bosch or Brueghel. He is, in fact, a contemporary artist who has absorbed the Renaissance vocabulary of technical mastery, without presuming its genius, nor consciously emulating its outlook or tradition. While the Renaissance influence is evident, the stylistic choice is more one of personal and psychological need than of any deliberate preference. Indeed, Gillespie's harrowingly detailed vision is motivated out of an inexplicable fear of losing touch with the world he lives in, and thus, almost in desperation, must nail down the seen by force. Whatever he paints is given an identity that absolutely assures its existence. Everything Gillespie's eye fixes on seems locked in place, as if weighted down by an unbearable pressure—one that might give out at any moment, rendering the artist himself disoriented and lost.

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In his recent exhibition at the Forum Gallery (where he has shown since 1967), Gillespie offered a series of still lifes, landscapes, interiors and self-portraits that continued to make clear this obsessive and trenchant need for giving hypnotic identity to subject matter. Not surprisingly, an aura of tension inhabited the gallery space, as painting after painting mysteriously emitted its peculiar and disturbing power. In a series of still lifes one was instantly struck by their awkward logic. These were not charming, homey kitchen setups of rustic tables strewn with decorative vegetables. Giant squash, and gnarled turnips and rutabagas looked positively fierce. Skins were flawed, roots were moist and hairy, and every surrounding object seemed menacing.

As always, with Gillespie, it is a question of an intense absorption in the most minute detail. Looking at his work, one is besieged

by an electrifying clarity that both masks and exposes his subject matter. We are placed in touch with essence, even as it is shrouded in surface familiarity. What exists within is palpably laid bare without. Even the inanimate in a Gillespie painting seems possessed of living pressures about to burst forth.

These qualities—not to be mistaken for a surrealistic approach—are evidence of an entirely personal attitude toward existence itself. The self-portraits lay claim to a vision that is ruthlessly self-probing, and devoid of the trappings of surrealism. In facing himself, Gillespie encounters the ultimate demon—the physical human mass that contains the complex structure of his emotional makeup. The *Self-Portrait* of 1975 is a devastating and anxiety-provoking study in self-assessment. The image reveals a man possessed, and in the throes of some appar-

## Gregory Gillespie's dense



Gregory Gillespie, *Still Life with Rutabagas*, 1975; Gillespie says, "When I paint a turnip, I sit in front of it for a very long time. The only idea in my mind is to paint what I see."



ent disequilibrium. The very circumference of stillness that surrounds the naked torso and head, is charged with an atmosphere suggesting the catatonic. The brilliant blue eyes convey some unimaginable terror. It is a painting not easily forgotten.

The *Self-Portrait* of 1973-74, shows Gillespie sitting hunched and depressed on a mattress in a bare room. The expression on his face, the fall of his hands, the desolate thrust of his bare legs, convey an attitude of deep melancholia. Again, the immaculate detail exposes an inner turbulence that is never less than shocking and hypnotic.

Although Gillespie has been affiliated with the Forum Gallery for some 11 years, he has only held four exhibitions to date. A slow and painstaking worker, his output has been relatively small. Still, with each succeeding show, he has been the object of important public and critical attention. In

## reality

1962, he received a Fulbright Fellowship, which took him to Italy. This was followed by an award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and Chester Dale Grants for three years to the American Academy in Rome. In 1966 and 1968, his work was shown at the Whitney Museum Annuals, and, in 1967, he was awarded a Tiffany Grant. He has exhibited in Rome, where he won the Medaglia d'Oro in 1967. There were shows in Spoleto, as well as in galleries in Oakland and Los Angeles. A major honor will come to Gillespie in late December of this year, when the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, in Washington, D.C., will mount a 20-year retrospective of his work.

Gillespie in person is a man of extreme nervousness and shyness—an artist deeply reluctant to talk about his work and person. In a monograph on Gillespie, published in Italy in 1970, no written essay appeared. The only text was written by the artist himself and consisted of two sentences: "Too many words have been written about art and artists. I have decided that this book should consist of the reproductions alone."

The monograph, containing 60 full-page reproductions showing work done between 1962 and 1970, exposes a nightmare world, in which a feverish imagination depicts sexual dramas in the Balthus mold. Yet, these scenes contain a violence that Balthus never envisioned—mysterious, sinister allegories that unfold in dank Italian rooms, dark Italian streets, and damp Italian landscapes. Figures of men and women, some horrifyingly mutilated, are seen engaged in erotic

play. Bizarre in every way, many of these paintings seem almost too self-consciously shocking, and, indeed, the artist now considers them as youthful exercises in the grotesque. Still, the terrifying impulses that unlocked them seem real enough, and if Gillespie's current work seems less melodramatic, its tensions and psychological impact have hardly abated.

Gregory Gillespie shuns interviews. Nevertheless, he agreed to talk on the occasion of his recent exhibition. A slight man with piercing blue eyes, black hair and moustache, he clearly felt distressed and uncomfortable. "I don't know why talking about my work should be of interest to anyone," he said. "My paintings may not be boring, but my life is very boring." Speaking rapidly and with undercurrents of considerable anxiety, Gillespie charted his beginnings.

"I'm from New Jersey [born in Roselle Park in 1936], and you know what New Jersey is like. There's no culture at all. I didn't know what art was, until I came to New York in the '50s and started going to Cooper

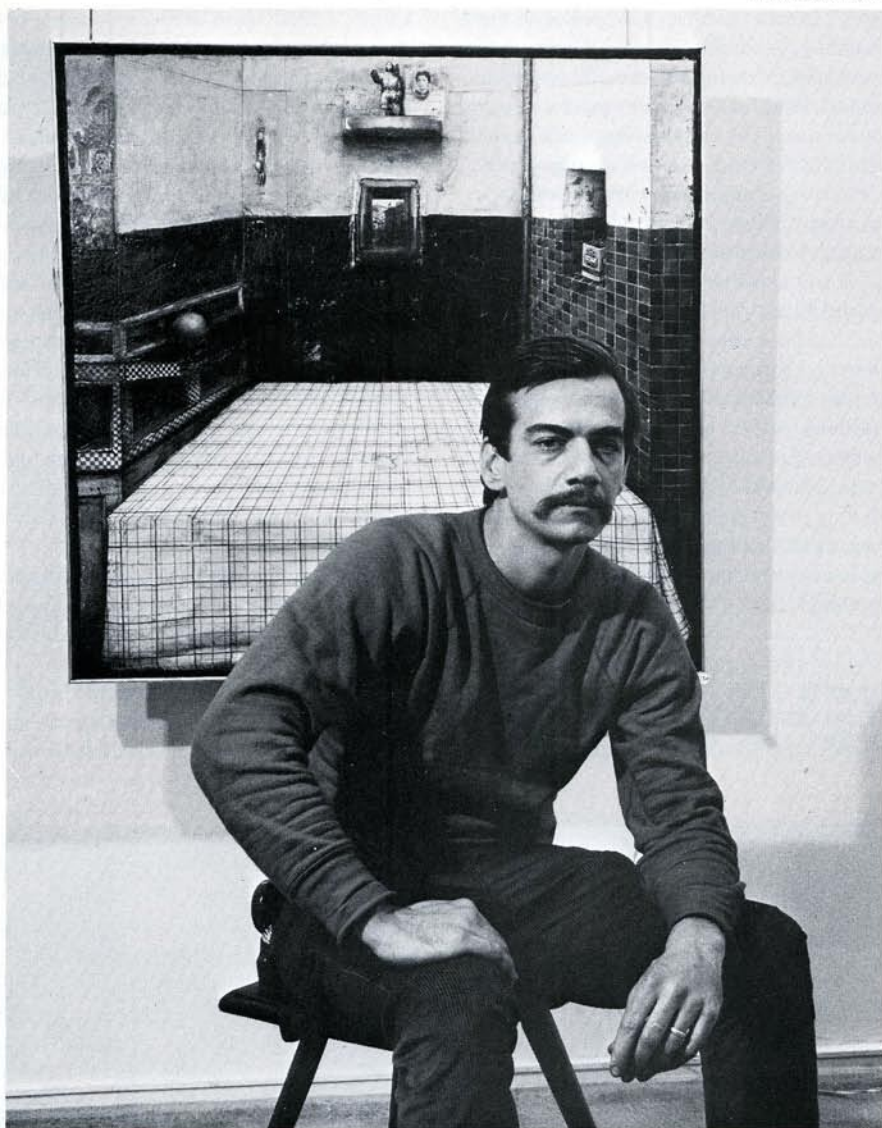
Union. I took some drawing courses, because I thought of becoming a commercial artist. But when I started at Cooper Union, it was like an explosion. I mean, it wasn't just about painting. It was about literature, music—all the arts. Of course, when I got to New York, Abstract Expressionism was all over the place. Well, that didn't really interest me much. I wanted to draw, and I would set up a grid in front of a still life, and draw it sort of mechanically. I think the old masters used those guides too—the camera obscura, and all kinds of mechanical devices. I still do that. Anyway, I studied at Cooper Union on and off for about four years. Finally, I decided not to go into commercial art. I wanted to become a painter, and I was very single-minded about that."

During his course of study at Cooper Union, Gillespie worked with painter Nicholas Marsicano, one of the few artists the young student responded to. "At Cooper Union, I tried some of the Expressionist stuff—I liked Max Beckmann—big brush stuff. But, finally, I preferred to do



Gregory Gillespie, *Landscape with Birch Trees*, 1976. The dense vegetable matter, though less outwardly grotesque than in earlier works, still grows in harrowing detail.





Gregory Gillespie in 1968 before his painting, *Trattoria della Piazza di Spagna*, done in 1967 during his stay in Rome.

very detailed things. Well, I was going against the grain, and people didn't like it. My work was very tight, and people thought it was really uptight. But I wasn't upset. In fact, I kind of liked what I was doing. And that's what I appreciated about Marsicano. He was one of the few teachers who saw my tendencies, and didn't push me into anything else. He wasn't insistent about any particular style. He'd come into class with a book of Italian Renaissance painting, and he'd talk about painting in a more abstract way. The point is, he let me do what I was doing."

Upon completing his studies at Cooper Union, Gillespie moved to the West Coast, where, for the next two years, he studied at the San Francisco Art Institute.

"The reason I went to the West Coast was that Cooper Union didn't give a degree. Actually, some of us went to Yale, so we could get a degree, but I personally didn't like Yale. Albers was there, and I'd hear things like, 'After Cooper Union, you're

going to have to forget about all that free expression business. Here, you'll have to concentrate on the fundamentals.' Well, that seemed a very repugnant attitude. It was a dictatorial approach, which put me off. So, I decided on the San Francisco Art Institute, and that's where I went. I got there just at the time when the West Coast painters were sort of riding high. They're no longer a group, but at the time, there was Diebenkorn and Bischoff and all the rest, who were known as the California Painters. Anyway, I had them as teachers, and I liked the Institute. It was a very open place. Anybody could do what they wanted to do. At the time, I was very into Francis Bacon. Somehow, I never liked figurative painting that was structured . . . you know, that complied with the elements of 'picture-making'—composition, color, design—all that stuff.

"At any rate, I liked working with Richard Diebenkorn. He had a lot of intensity. Still, the trouble was, he wanted me to

paint with a bigger brush. He couldn't see being tight as having any possibility at all. He thought it couldn't gain you any freedom. All the teachers there felt that. They were all trying to get me to loosen up. They wanted me to paint big things. But, you see, I was going in a different direction. My paintings were small and tight and I worked with very small brushes, and I'd use photographs—treating them, and pasting them into my paintings. I went my own way."

In 1962, Gillespie took his B.A. and M.F.A. at the San Francisco Art Institute. That same year, he applied for, and received, a Fulbright Fellowship for study in Italy. By then, he had already been married to the painter Frances Cohen Gillespie, and there were two young sons. The Fulbright did not include fare for the entire family, and Gillespie, unwilling to be separated, sought to sell some of his work in order to raise money for the trip. Returning to New York, he went from gallery to gallery, hoping to interest dealers in acquiring some of his paintings. Few dealers looked at his work, and no one seemed interested. Undaunted, he continued his search for a sympathetic dealer. One day, he found himself at the Forum Gallery, on Madison Avenue. Its director, Bella Fishko, proved entirely receptive to the distressed young artist. She recalled her meeting with Gillespie.

"This very nervous young man came in off the streets, carrying two dirty shopping bags in which were several small paintings," said Fishko. "He was very disheveled and very tense. He told me he had gotten a Fulbright Fellowship to Italy, but that he needed fare for his wife and children. Well, I looked at the work, and just fell in love with it. They were strange and very moving little paintings, a bit reminiscent of Balthus, but I could tell they were totally unique. So, I told him I would see what I could do. He left the paintings with me, and I immediately contacted Joe Hirshhorn, who, upon seeing them, was extremely impressed. He bought them—for not very much money [in the low hundreds]—but enough to help Gregory take his family to Italy. And that's how he came into the gallery. I told Gregory that I'd like very much to give him a show, when he felt he was ready. Well, it took about five years before he had his first show with me. That was in 1967."

Gillespie's five-year stay in Italy proved seminal in the development of his work. He loved the landscape, and lost himself in the paintings of Giorgione, Carpaccio, Botticelli and Piero della Francesca.

"When I look back on it, I can hardly believe that it actually happened. I mean, my Fulbright was renewed, and then, I received the Prix de Rome for three successive years!



I was lucky, because those were the critical years—right after school. I mean, I didn't have to get a teaching job, like most painters. And through my contact with Bella Fishko, I began to sell. The fact is, unlike so many artists today, I earn my living from selling my paintings."

If Gillespie's Italian years gave him the freedom to work unhampered by economic stress, they did not, however, diminish the intense turmoil of an acutely sensitive personality. Struggling with private demons, Gillespie fell prey to obsessive habits which, while engendering remarkable paintings, played havoc with his personal life.

"I have a very neurotic personality. I have a lot of social hang-ups. And a lot of

I live . . . all of those hang-ups I live with . . . I've decided to focus them all into my work. And I've done that. I mean, I paint seven days a week, sometimes ten hours a day. You see, I resist change. I feel that change—therapy, or what have you—will upset and lessen the intensity of my work. So, I've made a pact with myself, that even if I'm unable to cope with life, it all gets put into my work. I'm astonished how well it works, because I'm not a strong person, really."

The transference of personality into art—that strange transmutation which is basically unknowable and confounding, finds extraordinary reality in Gillespie's work. Asked about this phenomenon, the artist said, "I think it's about a consciousness that is terrified, and that gets reflected

"I do experiment with self-hypnosis. I go into trances. Not for any supernatural reasons. Just a kind of meditation. Well, when I painted that head-and-torso self-portrait, I was in a quiet trance. I remember I had my eyes closed, and when I opened them, there, in front of me, was a mirror. I was looking at my reflection from a very quiet and deep space inside of myself . . . and it was like seeing someone else. I was really very close to the mirror, and things got very exciting when I started painting the flesh parts. Of course, I wasn't in a trance all the time, because the painting took a long time to finish. But that first feeling was very intense. I kept asking myself, 'What really is happening?' And I wasn't looking for any conventional answers, like, 'it's an eye' or 'it's wrinkles and pores,' but really wanting to know about the *unfamiliarity* of what I saw."

In addition to the experiments with meditation, Gillespie has an interest in Buddhist philosophy that has led him to read the works of such contemporary thinkers as the Tibetan Chogyam Trungpa and Ram Dass, and to go on retreats. He lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, removed from the chaos—and the art scene—of New York. He gets to see the gallery shows "every once in a while in Boston and New York," and his taste in contemporary art tends towards figurative painters from de Kooning to William Beckman—but he's not generally interested in Photo Realism.

"Basically, I like being by myself. My tendency is to live in the country—the real country, away from everything. But our children grew into adolescents, and so we bought a big house in Amherst, which is a university town. We're right in the middle of things, and live where all the professors live. Of course, I've developed a reputation for being a loner, and we don't get invited out much. The fact is, I can't do that social thing. What saves me is my family—and I'm crazy about my kids. They are my anchor—they stabilize me. If I didn't have them, I would have freaked-out a long time ago. It must have been an unconscious need to be stable in some way—having a wife and family. Of course, there's still a lot of conflict. For one thing, my wife is a painter too, but her character—her life-drama—is not my life-drama. I mean, she really wants relationships with other people. I, on the other hand, need to isolate myself. It's a protective thing. I guess it's a kind of Ivory Tower impulse in me.

"My obsessiveness has to do with not wanting to deal with life problems. I just can't deal with them. And so, instead of living, I paint. Instead of having a so-called full life, I work. So, it's like a transference. It's a kind of artist's neurosis, and I have no idea how typical or common it is. Anyway, I think I've talked enough."



Gregory Gillespie, *Street in Spain*, 1964. Gillespie's five-year hiatus in Italy, with travels elsewhere, produced paintings with a strangely Roman density and luminosity.

anxieties. Anxiety is something I live with every day. I'm a habitual kind of person. I get habituated on different things—like alcohol or marijuana, like nicotine or coffee. There was a time when I came to believe that my paintings were good because I was on marijuana. It was becoming a dependency. But I loved it! I never had a more intense painting experience than while I was stoned. It was close to ecstasy. But, it became absurd. I mean, I began smoking when I got up in the morning—and I have two teenage children! But I'd stay stoned all day long. I couldn't moderate it, like smoking every other day. I just went to extremes. Finally, I stopped completely.

"Or drinking. In Italy, I was going through a period of alcoholism, and I was trying to stop. At many different times in my life, I felt the need for therapy. But, it never worked. I tried to seek help in Italy, but there just weren't any good English-speaking analysts in Rome. Anyway, I've moderated the drinking as well. But the way

in the things I choose to paint. But, I don't have that idea in my mind when I start painting. It's not deliberate. Still, when that terrified thing starts happening in the work, then I know it's good. I mean, when the things I paint start to develop a sinister quality, then I feel *that's* real. People often look at my work on an erotic level. But that's not it at all. The *denseness* of reality is what I want to deal with in paint.

"Look, when I paint a turnip, I sit in front of it for a very long time. The only idea in my mind is to paint what I see, without any thought of interpretation. I go over the surfaces with the point of the brush. I do this a million times, until it develops a kind of denseness. Whatever sinister overtones come about, happens by itself. I don't push it."

Turning to the self-portraits, Gillespie again maintained that they were the result of intense observation, and were not consciously destined to reflect personal terror. Still, their hypnotic quality was achieved by more than technical means.