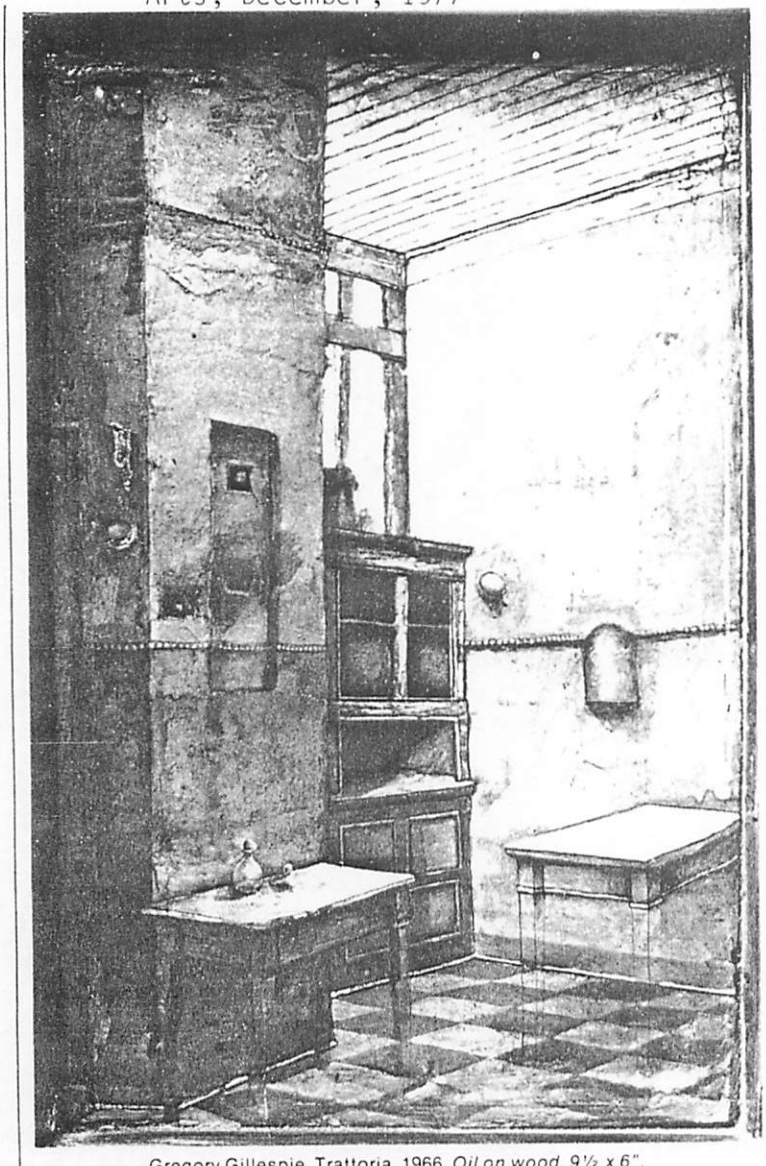
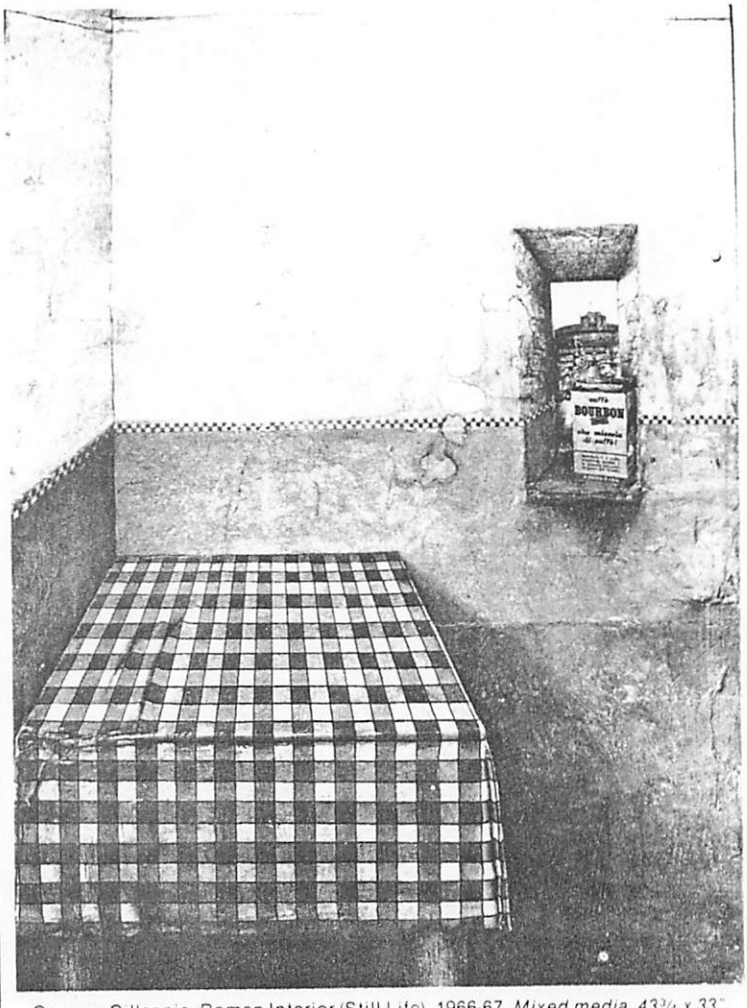


Gregory Gillespie, Trattoria, 1966. *Oil on wood, 9½ x 6".*
Collection Bella and Sol Fishko, New York. Courtesy Forum Gallery.



Gregory Gillespie, Roman Interior (Still Life), 1966-67. *Mixed media, 43¾ x 33".*
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Kaplan, New York. Courtesy Forum Gallery.

GREGORY GILLESPIE: THE TIMELESS MYSTERY OF ART

HUGH M. DAVIES • SALLY E. YARD

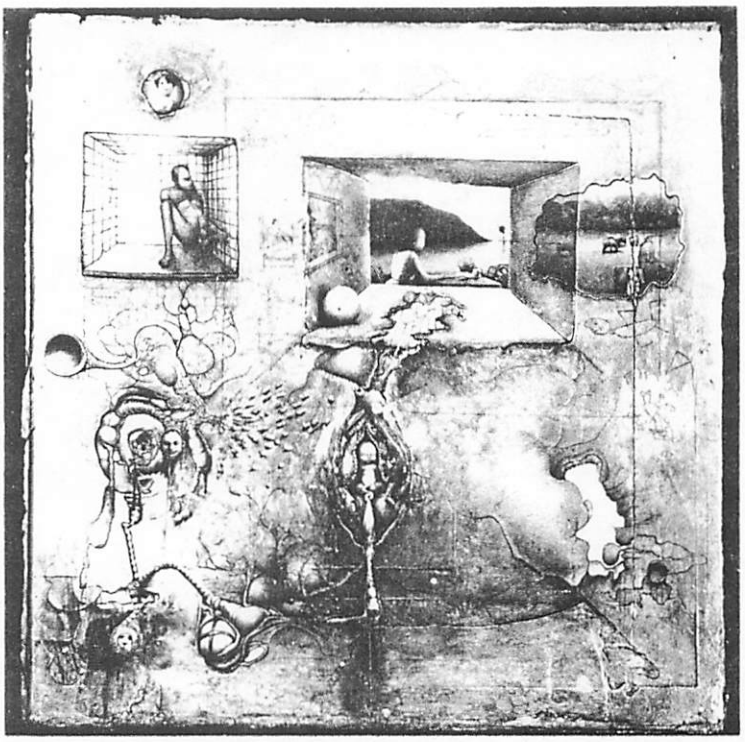
The history of twentieth-century art is the history of abstraction; yet, despite the conviction of leading artists, historians, and critics, realism has tenaciously resurfaced between each wave of avant-garde abstract art. Perhaps such a long tradition dies hard, or perhaps it is merely temporarily in eclipse. Whatever the case, the work of Philip Pearlstein, Chuck Close, Duane Hanson, the Photo Realists and others attests to the fact that realism is more alive now than at any other period in our century. It is timely, therefore, that the Hirshhorn Museum should hold a retrospective (opening December 22) of the work of Gregory Gillespie, who is now emerging as one of America's most important painters.

Having grown up in New Jersey, Gillespie spent three years at Cooper Union and two years at the San Francisco Art Institute, studying with several leading abstract artists.[1] After attending major art schools during the years that followed the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, he moved to Italy in 1962, as Pop art was exploding on the New York art scene. Unsatisfied with prevalent abstract art, Gillepie was, at age 24, in search of a more time-tested tradition and foundation for his painting. He and his wife Frances, herself a painter, and their two children spent the next eight years in Italy, first outside Florence and later in Rome where he was a Fellow at the American Academy.

For Gillespie an important goal of painting has come to be the creation of a convincing, three-dimensional image on a two-dimensional surface; therein for him lies the compelling attraction and timeless mystery of art. This conclusion derives in part from a technical respect for such Renaissance artists as Masaccio and Carlo Crivelli, as well as from an intellectual consideration of contemporary artists such as Rauschenberg and Johns. Illusion is the starting point of Gillespie's art, and even the most casual perusal of the paintings of the last fifteen years reveals that he has become increasingly proficient at creating convincing three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface. Gillespie is the first to admit that such technical mastery is only the necessary means to an expressive end, which is for him intensely personal. The prevalent theme of his Italian work is the confrontation of his strong sexual fantasy life with a Catholic upbringing and the pervasive Catholicism of Italy and its art. After eight years of surreal portrayal of this conflict, the cathartic process appears to have been spent, and has been in the Seventies superseded by a more pantheistic sensibility of intensely scrutinized self-portraits, still lifes, and landscapes.

Gillespie reveled in the exposure to Italian and Northern painting, and throughout his work allusions to past art occur in an apparently incidental, daydream manner. His subject matter was influenced by the details of everyday Italian life—peeling walls that have been restuccoed for centuries, the intricate geometric patterns of tile floors, sacred relics deeply imbedded in obscure niches of small churches, the illusionistic absurdity of a wooden window frame painted to simulate wood grain. He was fascinated by the tendency to decorate the environment in strange and intricate ways. Gillepie is related to the Italian and Northern Renaissance painters in sensibility and technique. He paints only on wood panels and builds his paintings in thin layers of oil and magna. While he likes the tough surface of wood, its use more importantly lends him a great flexibility of composition, as he often literally saws off or adds on pieces of wood as the dimensions and elements of a composition are expanded or diminished. His paintings are sometimes quite

Gregory Gillespie, Three Sisters, 1967. *Mixed media, 10¾ x 9¼".*
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Peter B. Ornstein, New York. Courtesy Forum Gallery.



Gregory Gillespie, Interior Panel (with Embryo), 1967. *Oil, 22 x 22".*
Collection Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Courtesy Forum Gallery.

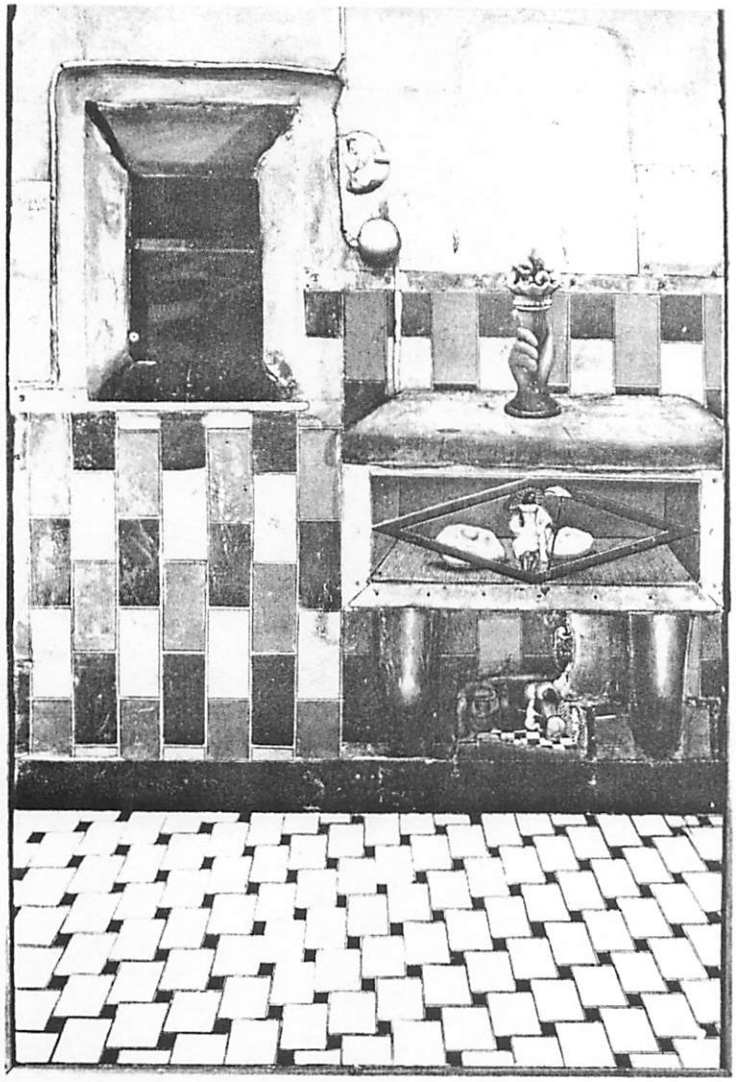
The prevalent theme of Gregory Gillespie's Italian work is the confrontation of his strong sexual fantasy life with a Catholic upbringing and the pervasive Catholicism of Italy and its art. After eight years of surreal portrayal of this conflict, the cathartic process appears to have been spent and has been superseded by a pantheistic sensibility of intensely scrutinized self-portraits, still lifes, and landscapes.

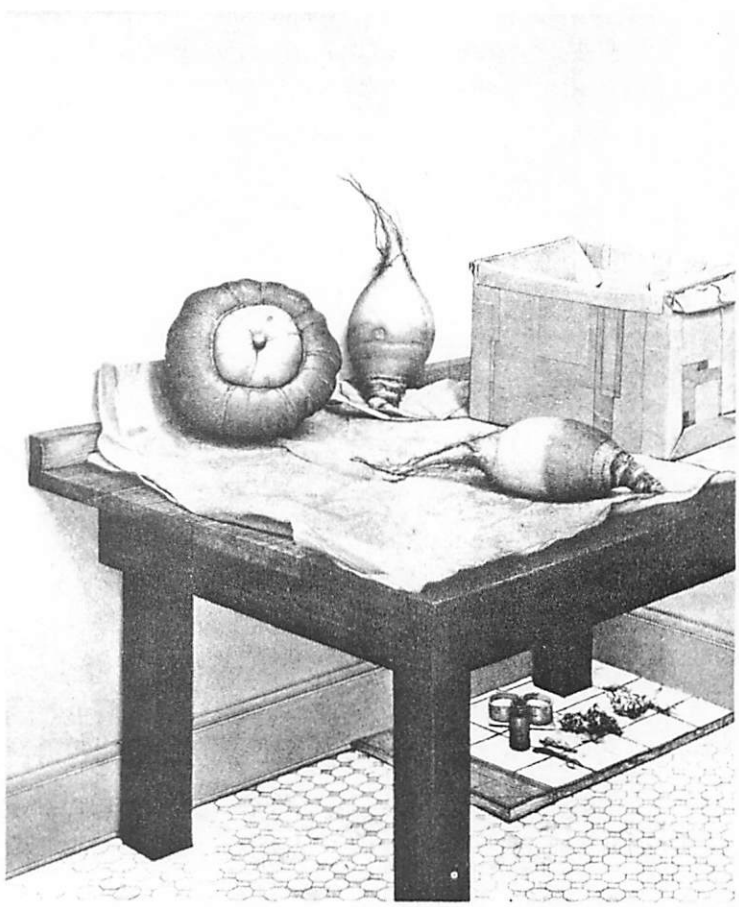
small (many paintings are no larger than 7 by 9 inches), and range in subject matter from landscape, still life, and genre or allegory to interior scenes, self-portraiture, "shrine" and "wall" paintings, and anthropomorphic fantasies, miniature in scale.

The small size of some of Gillespie's work of the Sixties was determinined by his use of photographs. He sometimes incorporated individual figures of elements from magazine photos, or painted over actual photographs, inventing his images quite freely from this starting point. The use of collage enabled him to make compositional decisions by trying cut-out figures and still-life elements in various positions and combinations before laboriously painting their final configuration. More importantly, the collaged images intensified the surrealism of the paintings. *Woman Walking in a Room* (1965), for example, developed from a magazine photo of an Italian barber shop. Gillespie painted out most of the picture, leaving only the adapted space of the shop and the objects in the corner, and then introduced the painted nude woman. She moves across the vacant space toward the corner, as though compelled by some irresistible attraction, her somnambulant or hypnotized quality intensified by the incompletion of her feet.

Gillespie spent many hours eating, drinking, and socializing in trattorias. Being a foreigner afforded him a certain distance and served to intensify the impact of visual details and to heighten the powerfully evocative atmosphere. Painted over a photograph Gillespie had taken, *Trattoria* (1966) is a peaceful, unpeopled space bathed in a warm, Vermeer-like light. This small painting conveys, like so many of Gillespie's paintings, an intuition of some presence that is not immediately visible. Indeed, for Gillespie, even the most spare wall has a quality of aliveness and reality revealed in timeworn layers of plaster and paint. The niches and protrusions may house only a meter box, or may remind Gillespie, as does the archlike shape on the right-hand wall of this trattoria, of a Church's tabernacle. Like the woman's feet in *Woman Walking in a Room,* the legs of the altarlike tables are sketchily indicated, but were never finally painted, creating a mysterious play of the solid and the illusory. Similar ghosts or sketches of painterly ideas are found in such recent paintings as *Still Life: Studio* (1973) and *Studio Wall* (1976).

Many of the interiors of the Sixties contain tables, but neither chairs nor space to sit down; these omissions intensify their rigid and sacramental character. They are often claustrophobic—defined as box spaces, the checkerboard tablecloths and tile floors spelling out their own perspective. *Roman Interior (Still Life)* (1966-67), *Roman Interior—Kitchen* (1967-69, repainted 1976), and *Trattoria della Piazza di Spagna* (1967) are all unpeopled and, though visually engaging, are physically impractical spaces. Occasional elements or visual details provide relief from the intensity of confinement. In *Roman Interior (Still Life)* the architectural anonymity is enlivened by the presence of the child's sketch on the wall, the cheery tablecloth, and the "caffé Bourbon" box set on the window sill. Gillespie debated for some time over the selection of an object to place on the table of this *Roman Interior,* but concluded that the wrinkles of the checkered tablecloth were object enough, and elected to introduce a second focal point in the form of the small deep window on the right. Creating a play of indoor/outdoor space, the window overlooks a view of the Castello St. Angelo, incorporated by means of a postcard. While working on the painting Gillespie changed the postcard image frequently, enjoying this variable element. The checkered line horizontally dividing the wall was painted after, and its position determined by experimentation with decorative tape bought from a bicycle shop.





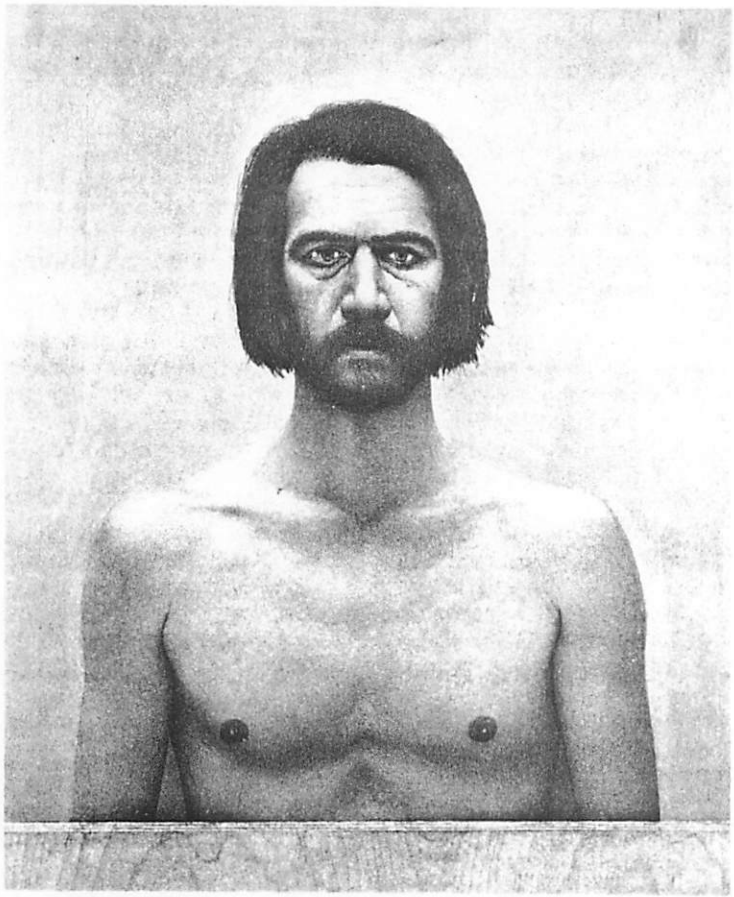
Gregory Gillespie, Still Life with Squash and Rutabagas, 1975. *Mixed media, 50 x 41". Private Collection. Courtesy Forum Gallery.*

Gregory Gillespie, Bread Shrine, 1969 (repainted 1977). *Mixed media, 47 x 31". Collection Dr. and Mrs. Sidney Fierst, Brooklyn. Courtesy Forum Gallery.*

A quality of isolation pervades many of Gillepies's Roman interiors and Florentine landscapes—groups of figures strangely lacking in connection. In *Three Sisters* (1967) two partially nude women engage in an unclear activity involving lingerie, while a young boy in short trousers and third woman shield or avert their eyes. The boy and woman, both of whom are largely unreworked figures from a black and white photograph, are pallid and insubstantial in comparison with their robust companions. This is one of a group of images in which Gillespie, working from magazine photos, undressed the models. The voyeurism of such an approach is probably a response to the subliminal sexuality of advertising, as well as the veiled sexuality of many social encounters. The title belies the subject of the painting, which is the young boy's reaction. We witness the clash of two powerful, but as yet unfamiliar forces: the physical drive and curiosity of latent sexuality, matched by an equally natural fear, the whole confusion exacerbated by a Catholic education which repudiates the flesh. It is a universal dilemma rendered in a specifically anecdotal form of sexual fantasy genre which is alien to most of Gillespie's work. *Two Women* (1965) is probably a better painting because, like many of Francis Bacon's figure studies, it withholds information and thereby achieves a mystery which transcends illustration.

The unresolved sexual fantasy of *Three Sisters* is compounded in *Interior Panel (With Embryo)* of the same year. Separate, boxed images of man and woman are connected by a schematic, medical book-like diagram or cross section of their respective sexual anatomies, which link at a centrally placed fetus. In fact, the cross section is a stream-of-consciousness, fantasy concoction deriving more from Bosch than from the *Scientific American* illustrations Gillespie has incorporated in other paintings. Across the earth-colored field of the wall, a bizarre array of striped tubes, peeking faces, and organlike, swelling forms portray the ritual of fertility and birth. This schematic union diagrams the resolution of the male sexual frustration and female romantic anticipation portrayed archetypally in the two vignettes above. On the left, the naked man is trapped with his erection in the windowless, tile grid of an infernal, brightly lit niche. On the right, through the window, equally trapped in romantic anticipation, a woman in a low-backed evening dress sits alone at a table on a balcony overlooking a bay as the sun sets. Wrapping around the corner into the receding space of the window frame, like a wistful thought bubble, is a pastoral, golden, sun-drenched scene of cattle grazing. Above the man's niche is an attractive magazine model's face, but she, like the woman on the balcony, is inaccessible in this scenario of frustration.

Gillespie often confounds distinctions of real and illusionistic through the inclusion of collage and actual three-dimensionality. *Bread Shrine* (1969, repainted 1977) incorporates nails, screws, metal strips, wood, bas-relief, and a recessed window. A Bosch-like figure embedded in the wall tries to drill his way out of the entangled scene of masturbation and confessional at the base of the shrine. It is a methodical attempt to bore through the dense layers of illusion, both of the painting in which he is trapped and the religious myth which is its subject. Above, a triumphant Christ appears on the glass front of the tabernacle which houses the two loaves of bread of the sacrament. Gillespie explains the juxtaposition of the embedded figure and the Christ in terms of his early experiences with confession, in which he was instructed each time he confessed to "touching himself" that he must think of Christ.



Gregory Gillespie. Studio Wall. 1976. *Mixed media. 96 x 120". Courtesy Forum Gallery.*

Gregory Gillespie. Self-Portrait (Torso). 1975. *Mixed media. 30¼ x 24¾". Collection Sydney and Frances Lewis. Richmond, Virginia. Courtesy Forum Gallery.*

Gillespie and his family returned to the United States in 1970, in part because he and Frances felt their children should grow up in America. They first moved to Williamsburg, Massachusetts, and in 1974 moved to nearby Amherst. In Williamsburg, Gillespie based a number of paintings on clippings from the local paper, the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*. After an eight-year stay abroad, this presented a way to refamiliarize himself with the American scene. Since returning to the United States, Gillespie's work has become less surreal and more traditionally realistic. The Italian preoccupations of Catholicism and sexuality, and the fantasy mélanges involving drastic alternations of scale within a single picture, have been superseded by powerfully evocative, single-image, life-size realist paintings. As a source of imagery, Christianity has been supplanted by a pantheistic viewpoint. The sexual belligerence of earlier paintings has mellowed into the subtle eroticism of still-life vegetables in recent works. Discussing his work in an interview with Abram Lerner and Howard Fox of the Hirshhorn Museum, Gillespie reflected "Yes, the paintings are religious—like the erotic paintings are religious. Definitely. Because they come out of repression. They come out of a dramatic reaction to repression. They come out of the impulse to do sacrilege, which is a religious impulse . . . But that's the negative side of it, of the religious thing. But the paintings I'm doing now still seem to me very religious in another sense. I don't have to do the shocking paintings any more because I'm through with them. But now—and I hope people do see this—now the paintings are moving toward religiousness in a positive sense."[2]

Gillespie has grown increasingly interested in painting per se in the last few years, and the extraordinary technical breakthroughs he has achieved during this time have permitted an overall balance of form and subject matter to flourish in a way that was only frenetically suggested in select passages of earlier paintings. Both he and Frances have studios in their home, and constantly critique each other's work. Frances has encouraged Gillespie's realism, generally urging simplification in still-life subjects and self-portraits. In recent works, mundane subjects take on an incredible vitality and intensity, endowed by the artist's delicate but relentless scrutiny with an almost iconic presence. The magic which in earlier work derived from surreal juxtaposition now comes from a haunting intensity of observation. As Gillespie remarks, "Most of the time I'm thinking about how to create solid substance." The expression of pantheism and the accomplishment of extraordinary solidity have culminated in *Still Life with Squash and Rutabagas* (1975) and *Red Squash* (1975), the vegetables of which are a suitable homage to those of Crivelli's *The Annunciation* in the National Gallery in London.

In *Still Life with Squash and Rutabagas,* one of Gillespie's favorite as well as most masterful paintings, the vegetables are almost anthropomorphic, with nearly human, blue veins faintly visible beneath the cream and violet skins of the rutabagas. The quality of detail has an optical effect of virtually molecular movement. These vegetables become chunky personae, as do the fruits of Chardin or Cézanne. In *Red Squash* the vegetable is located centrally in a targetlike composition, surrounded by several passages of autobiographical import. A small copy of *Bread Shrine* alludes to Gillespie's involvement with his own past art. Behind a cardboard box is a drawing of a horse by one of his children. Swelling forms have occurred throughout Gillespie's work, but the shapes of the red squash have a distinctly vaginal or anal quality reminiscent of select work of