

Gregory Gillespie at Forum

As a painter, Gregory Gillespie is something of a magician. For some 20-odd years, Gillespie has been painting in the same surrealist realist style, rejecting other roles dear to the hearts of mid-20th century artists—those of hero (Abstract Expressionism), ironist (Pop Art), esthete (Minimalism), and pedagogue (Conceptualism). Instead, Gillespie has, for one reason or another, largely chosen the role of magus—the sorcerer, who baffles even as he enchants.

This illusionistic sleight-of-hand is especially apparent in several paintings from his recent show. In *Dog and Doll in Room*, two rectangular borders, the outside one a good deal broader than the other, frame a modest view of a room with tile floor—fuzzy black dog to the left, doll in broken carriage to the other side—at the far end of which is an open door that gives onto a second, plank-floored room looking out on a cityscape beyond. Above all this, lodged in the inner border, is a kind of embryonic child rendered in relief. The scene is cryptic, somehow unrealized: presences haunt it—those of the absent owners of the dog and doll, but more especially that of the fetus. *Thin White Trees* is even more haunted: against a background of gnarled, ancient oaks sprout, yes, two "thin white trees," thinner than birches, thicker than bushes. This scene is the enchanted forest brought up to date, fairies and demons intangibly present in this picture-puzzle of brooding boughs and darkly verdant grass.

Another of the ways Gillespie makes magic is to conjure up spirits from the artistic past. Sometimes it's the recent past: one mixed-medium drawing, *Seated Male Figure*, depicts a satyr-like nude whose pointed ears and protruding, uncircumcised penis owe more than a little to the work of Egon Schiele. But it is the distant past that seems to attract Gillespie most strongly—the better, it may be, to haunt you with—and a long stay in Italy left him feeling that his favorite painters were Mantegna and Carlo Crivelli. Still, he is indebted to Northern artists. An oil on board (note the medium), *Portrait of Peg* stares at the viewer in the van Eyck manner, while Gillespie's landscapes resemble, at their most dedicatedly surreal, Bosch and Breughel—or, at their least, a kind of tripped-out van Ruisdael.

But, in the long run, Gillespie has more than sorcery up his sleeve. The self-portraits have some of the humanistic import of Rembrandt's in their warm tonalities and sketchy, self-questioning brushwork. Most interesting of all are those works that at first defy



Gregory Gillespie: *Self-Portrait*, 1979.
oil on paper, 36 by 30 inches, at Forum.

classification. *Manikin Piece* offers two female mannequin torsos, one wearing a fearsome Kabuki mask. *Still Life* depicts an arrangement of fruits and vegetables on a checkered yellow cloth, above which on one side of a tiled wall is a scene from a Japanese print; on the other side is depicted a modern interior complete with proffered birthday cake, woman slung low on a couch, and male nude standing against wooden double doors. In both paintings, meaning is suggested, but in no way supplied.

And how can these two works be classified? Not, like so many of the others, as apparitions, but as dreams made conscious—as metaphysical, rather than magical, entities. Here, sorcery has been replaced by symbolization, hallucination by rationally elucidated visions: the viewer is in the tortured yet serene realm of de Chirico, the realm of the eternally suprasensible, and, despite Gillespie's unremitting iconoclasm, the realm of the modern. No matter that, in his metaphysics, Gillespie plunges underground to the unconscious rather than above to the deific: the artist who passes from the magical to the religious is, in the 20th century, bound to be more depth psychologist than theologian. And Gillespie has, amidst all the conjuring, delivered up for our delectation some lovely, frightening depths.

—Gerrit Henry