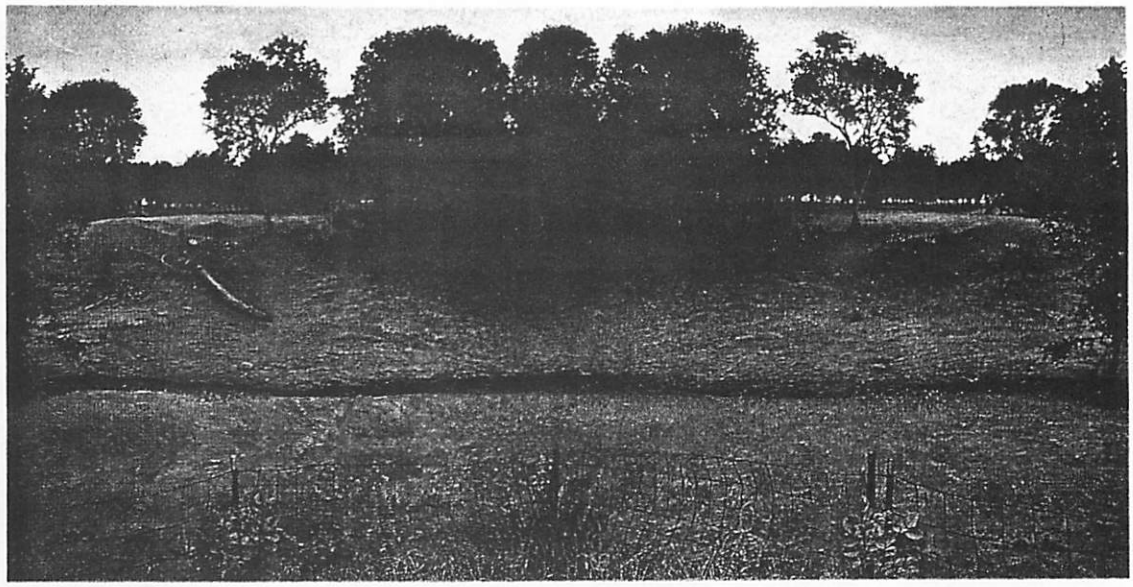

GREGORY GILLESPIE

Gregory Gillespie, Double Green Landscape, 1979-80. *Mixed media, 13¾ x 26½". Courtesy Forum Gallery.*

Gregory Gillespie's work is painstakingly executed; changes in his art, therefore, are slow in coming. This opportunity to see three years of his most recent paintings, then, sheds light on new strengths and subtleties. Especially exciting were those landscapes, portraits, and interior scenes that represent a new simplicity. The more crowded works, cluttered as they can be with tiny grotesque figures, entrails and excrescence, are beginning to lose the potency they once had. His collision of the religious and the sexual, the innocent and the beastly, the beautiful and the repulsive has become the rhetoric of a facile savagery. All the world is an insane asylum, he seems to say, and all the people merely patients. The best work contains fewer figures, resulting in far more succinct but pithy compositions. In the 1980-81 *Interior*, for example, he has fumigated the vermin that used to inhabit every corner. A delicate handling of interior space and window light leaves this two-figure composition suffused by an atmosphere that is almost tangibly dank.

These simpler, often more monumental works also allow Gillespie's masterful technique to fully shine. This is a careful, minute, polished control of paint and glazes reminiscent of nothing so much as 15th-century masters from northern Italy and the Netherlands. The application, close and highstrung, surely begins as a careful record of visual fact but winds up as something else entirely. In the interior scenes, objects occupying the same space have a disturbing incongruity; it is as if they were brought together from different worlds or stages of evolution to coexist in a whole which transcends (but never loses sight of) the sum of its parts. The frequent moments in which realism succumbs to pure fantasy, even abstraction, further bring to these mundane objects and environments a sinister, suspicious quality. This is true of *Interior*; it is also the case with *Dog and Doll in a Room* (1980-81).

The most satisfying surprise comes with the landscapes, a genre less readily associated with Gillespie. Here the effect of delicate incongruity cited in the interiors is now evoked through Gillespie's very subtle use of photography for ends that are distinctly unphotographic. Tiny figures and trees, which reveal sharp nuances of shadow that instantly suggest the visual record of a camera (often they are photographs applied directly to the surface and overpainted), have been assimilated into a painted environment like a foreigner whose accent, no matter how slight, always gives him away. The wide curving view of horizontal landscapes also indicates the use of wide-angle, even fish-eye lenses, but an artificial landscape symmetry simultaneously denies the photographic record of an actual locale.

This quiet conflation of photographic and purely painted observation is entirely subservient to Gillespie's poetic expression. *Landscape* is a vertical composition divided into three zones. A traversal from bottom to top, from foreground to vista, is also a journey from grim depths to an idyllic paradise. Two gems of the show are horizontal landscapes. In *Stroller Paradise Walk,* both a road containing a traveler and a river running parallel to the bottom of the picture engender a temporal reading from left to right. Again, progression through space reveals a shift in landscape mood: from the rolling hills of a sunny park to a hillock whose forest and shadows we cannot penetrate. In *Double Green Landscape*, a progression from distant left, to foreground, to distant right is facilitated by a large copse isolated in the center of an otherwise open lawn. Here, the spatial manipulation generates a visual Doppler effect in which a sense of danger gains urgency as space rushes towards us, climaxes in the perilous shadowed forest, and fades with projection back into the safety of distance.

Like the concave parabola of landscape stretching across his *Stroller Paradise Walk*, the slight fish-eye view of *Double Green Landscape* imbues a sense of whole earth. There is, in both paintings, no easy access for the viewer. Paths are parallel to the picture plane, the view of each is from above, and, in the latter work, we are kept out by a fence and a dark horizontal furrow that distances us from the activity of the swinging landscape space. This quality and a distinct bilateral symmetry work to transform the heightened realism. Rich, pearlescent light evokes an elegiac mood. It is Gillespie's hymn to nature as a religious experience: beautiful yet distant, tranquil yet fearful, accessible in part yet ultimately enigmatic.

Portraiture also affords Gillespie a monumental composition that does not rely on overworked fantasy for its subtle expression. He does little to alter the frontal, bust-length format or the trance-like sameness of facial gesture. But other changes manifest striking differences in mood. The addition of a visor to cast a shadow over the eyes of one self-portrait creates intense aggressivity. The hint of a smile and the element of nudity, even from the shoulders up, in his *Lady from Belchertown* infuse uneasy vulnerability when compared to another portrait of the same woman. In these examples, polished surfaces, careful observation, and even lighting make the depictions somewhat idealizing in the manner of a Flemish master. Yet, like the landscapes and the best interiors, we never lose a sense of latent dread. This is fundamental to Gillespie: a moment of utter calm underneath which lies a dark threat. It may not be the most pleasing world view, but in his strongest works it is remarkably expressed. (Forum, *January 9-February 6*)

Jeffrey Weiss