

## GREGORY GILLESPIE

### Forum

IN A MOVING preface to the exhibition catalogue, Gillespie describes his new paintings in a confessional style that combines candor and pretension, eloquence and naiveté. His frank disclosure of artistic intent constitutes a poignant, almost humble rebuttal to the historically conscious rhetoric and megalomaniacal outbursts of his more conspicuous contemporaries. Refreshingly absent from his brief discourse is the familiar unsavory whiff of a self precariously juggling the quest for artistic achievement with the pursuit of art-star status—the careerist strategy we've grown to tolerate, expect and even admire in our best, or at least our best-known, artists. Gillespie's statement reveals an ego totally consumed by the process of painting.

Gillespie speaks unabashedly of a desire to pray, to offer praise in spite of a schism with traditional religion. "Underneath these reverential feelings is a foundation of fear," he writes, that is "basic and so vast that I sometimes feel the futility of my ego's desperate and frenzied workaholic efforts to build any kind of identity or security. It is the fear of not mattering and of knowing that perhaps I will not have mattered." Thus Gillespie articulates the doubt and anxiety of the contemporary secular artist.

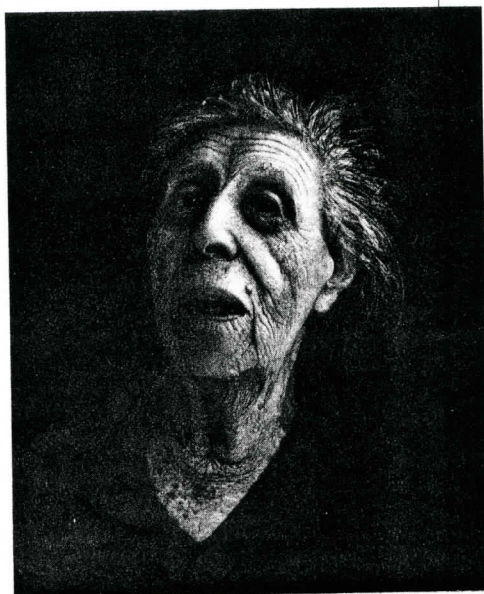
The works are meticulously crafted, realistically rendered (some to the point of repulsiveness) portraits, landscapes and studio interiors reminiscent of Northern Renaissance painting. Gillespie's obsession with detail, his predilection for flattening subtly modeled forms with precisely delineated contours and his unwillingness to subordinate individual parts of a composition to overall unity denote a fixation with the concreteness of substance that masks a profound awareness of its evanescence—a horror of temporality that climaxes in a sort of visual hysteria.

Included here was the expected studio self-portrait—Gillespie portraying himself as luminous-eyed visionary, his chalky

flesh unappetizingly aglow against a saturated cerulean-blue wall. By indiscriminately showing the textures and minutiae of studio flotsam—and his own body—the artist transforms realistic description into a hallucinatory meditation on the durability of matter, especially of flesh. His excessive accumulation of crystalline details undermines all sensation of naturalistic volume and space. Rather than dependable fact, Gillespie's reality is treacherous fiction.

Themes of fear, vulnerability and death come together in *Rita*, a portrait of the artist's grandmother, a curious mixture of Géricault's studies of the insane and Hugo van der Goes' pious portraits of the devout. The collar of Rita's monastic brown blouse exposes a tendony neck incised with an intricate mesh of wrinkles. Head slightly raised, Rita parts her lips as if to speak or painfully suck in air. Brittle filaments of opalescent hair fade into the black void of the background. Posed against this impenetrable darkness, old age looks toward the viewer. Its dulled gaze wistfully acknowledges the recording of its physical decay—a self-consciousness that betrays the apprehension of impending death.

—Nancy Grimes



Gregory Gillespie, *Rita*, 1985, oil on panel, 19½ by 15¼ inches. Forum.