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Gregory Gillespie's Manic Masterpieces

The naturalistic and the bizarre, religion and pornography, whimsy and madness: Gillespie fuses chaotic contradictions in his exploration of the human psyche

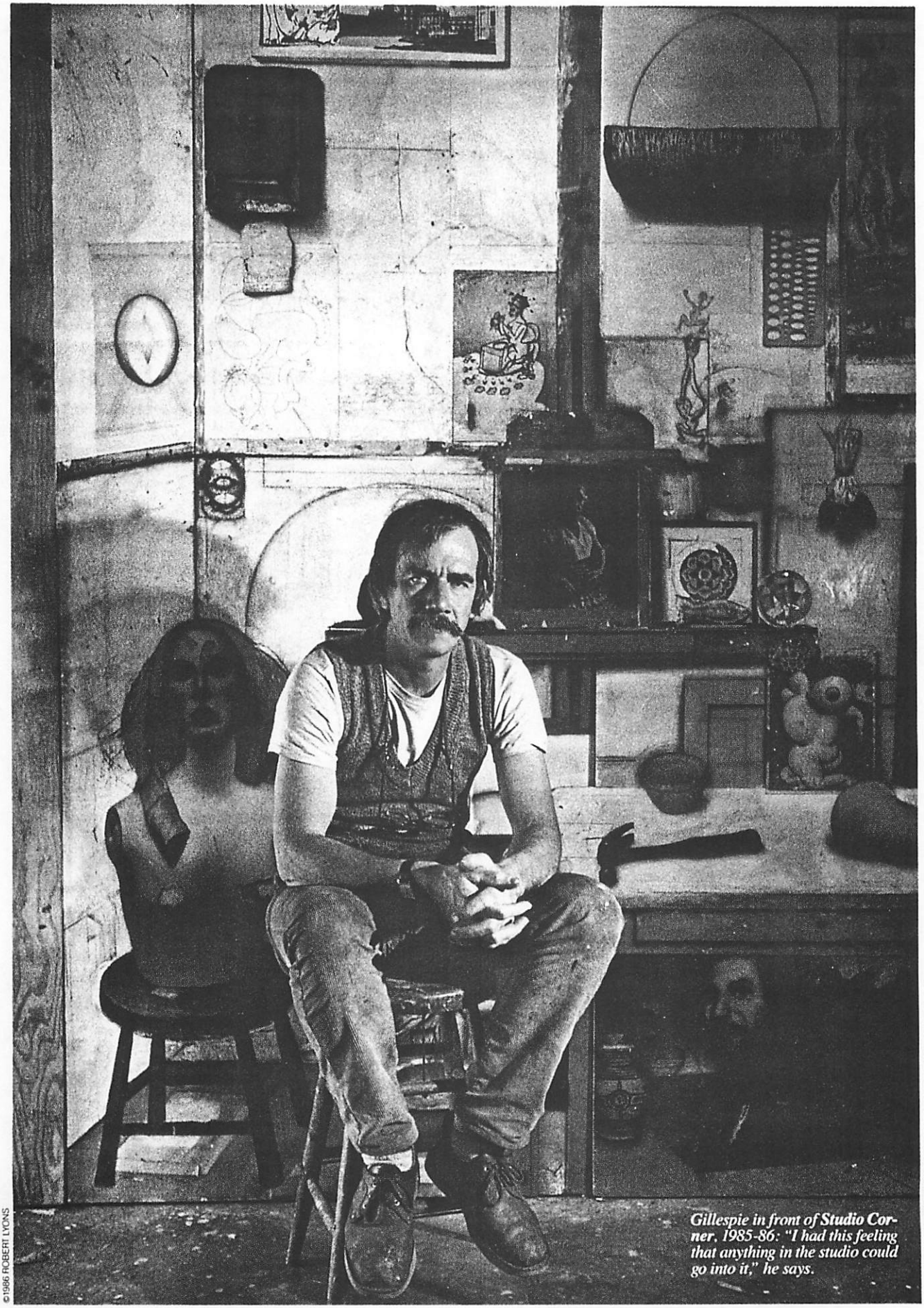
THE COZY KITCHEN OF GREGORY GILLESPIE'S 200-year-old farmhouse in Belchertown, Massachusetts, a few miles from Amherst, seems worlds away from the pitilessly cold winter night outside. The room is aglow with heat and light from a wood-burning stove, and the artist and his wife, Peggy Roggenbuck Gillespie, a poet, are almost equally radiant. He, with unfashionably long hair, bristling moustache and candid blue eyes, looks 15 years younger than a man approaching 50. She has Streisandesque good looks and a warm, acutely intelligent manner. They don't get many visitors here in Belchertown, and they are happy to talk about Gregory's work, which is also his passion.

"Sometimes," he says, "I get very ambitious in terms of my career. Sometimes I feel like I'm really being ignored, and that bothers me....But I'm totally split about this whole business of recognition and applause. I've chosen to live in a place where I don't see artists all the time. I live in Belchertown—I don't live in the New York art world. The people that I deal with here, the electrician and the grocery man and the car mechanic, don't even know I'm a painter."

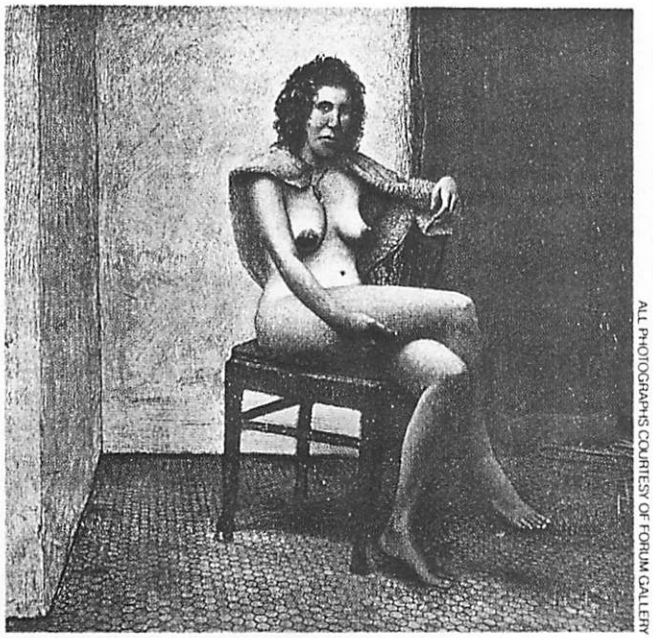
He may be far from the hub of the art world, but Gillespie is also far from unknown. He's been painting professionally for 25 years, and his first one-man show, in 1966 at Forum Gallery, was a success. "It sold out!" says Gillespie, and he got "a great review in *The Times*, with a photograph." He's been making the art world sit up and take notice ever since, and in 1977 he had a retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. Gillespie is an exceptional painter, and if his works provoke smiles, gasps, shock or disgust, they don't produce apathy.

Earlier that evening, Gillespie and I crunched through an inch-thick crust of snow against a winter sun setting peach and crimson to his big, barnlike studio a few hundred feet behind the house. The place is cluttered with lengths of wood, jars of paintbrushes, rolls of canvas, bits of cardboard, a saw and a hammer, jars of nails, a T-square. There's also the torso of a female mannequin that Gillespie has used in his paintings. He has been considering the mannequin for a while in his whimsical, con-

BY GERRIT HENRY



Gillespie in front of ***Studio Corner****, 1985-86: "I had this feeling that anything in the studio could go into it," he says.*



templative way, and it will eventually show up again in another work.

Then there are the self-portraits. One is an oil-on-panel picture of the artist with short hair, wearing a crew-neck sweater, every inch the rake. "I am my own greatest model," says Gillespie. "I'm always available, I do exactly what I need to do—it's just perfect." Few artists have so finely romanced themselves on canvas. The self-portraits go back to the 1960s, to the beginning of his career, and every one seems to reveal a different Gillespie—diffident, dandyish, fearful.

Then there's another of his favorite subjects—Peggy. In a work titled *Peg with Hand on Thigh*, she is shown sitting in a slightly ratty old chair on an old-fashioned hexagonal-tiled bathroom floor, nude but for the uncomfortable-looking shawl tied around her shoulders. Both the self-portraits and the nude are executed in the style that has become Gillespie's trademark—more naturalist than realist, every detail of figure and surroundings right, but done as if by a Renaissance painter, with rich tonalities that somehow go back to the beginnings of perspective and the smooth strokes and color of the Flemish and Italian masters. It's been described by one critic as Gillespie's "funky Renaissance maestro mode." He was exposed to such real "Renaissance maestros" as da Messina and Bosch and Brueghel when he spent some years in Florence and Rome on grants. Even the rooms of his recent interiors seem more European than American, with chipping plaster and paint and a certain Old World mustiness. It's a setting he experienced to the fullest in Italy, and it has never left his work.

There is no ignoring the huge—eight-foot-square—studio interior that dominates the room. But as the artist hovers around it a little anxiously, my attention is distracted by a painting in another trademark mode, the "Renaissance" landscape. This one will later be titled *Landscape with New England Farmhouse*. The farmhouse is there all right, on the left, but it's nestled cozily and anachronistically in a setting that looks like Hieronymus Bosch on a bender, so densely green are the trees and hills and valleys, rich and overripe under a luminous white sky. It's a collage and alkyd and oil on board, Gillespie's preferred painting surface. Like many of his other works, the landscape is imaginary and seems almost hallucinatory, with the intricate detail and grotesque lushness of a dream.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF FORUM GALLERY

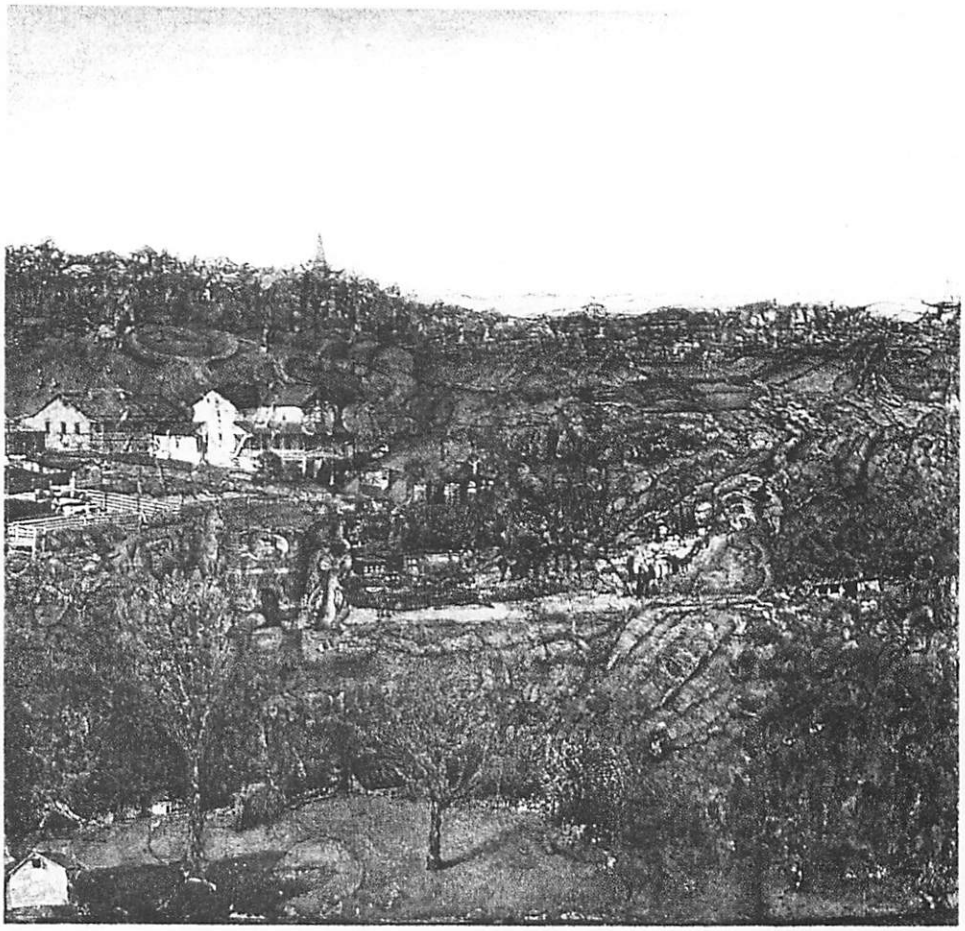
Many of Gillespie's works are characterized by a style that combines naturalist detail with aspects of Renaissance technique. TOP ***Peg with Hand on Thigh****, 1985, a portrait of Gillespie's wife. ABOVE* ***Doll Child****, 1968, one of what the artist calls his "weird" paintings.*

Farther along is an example of Gillespie's Orientalism—he studies Buddhism and meditates "now and then"—called *The Meditator and the Dog*, a cartoonish Oriental man with a gnarled body and a near-invisible pet. Is he having a tough time meditating because of the dog—or is the dog part of the meditation? The picture is a Westernized Zen koan.

Now we approach the mammoth *Studio Corner*. It's a two-dimensional carnival of images. The centerpiece is an easel holding a painting-within-a-painting, of Peg's grandmother, Rita. To the left of the old woman are a gourd and a green apple, to the right an Oriental-looking fish, a mandala and a circular portrait of a man. Under the easel, artworks are stacked; in the foreground is a white table with a hammer, a candle, a small bowl and a gourd, while underneath the table we see Rita again and a self-

portrait. To the far lower left is the mannequin, her breasts seemingly chipped away; on the wall are a red box with a man's face and the words "Sweet God," an erotic Oriental cartoon, a hanging birch log, more Oriental pornography, a saw, dried corn, a shirt and visor on a hook and, finally, a partially painted-over photograph of Peg and Gregory in the summer, in front of the house.

The painting as a whole is a manic masterpiece—a portrait of the artist as his own flotsam, an introspective, retrospective, prospective studio epic. "A lot of anxiety went into that painting," says Gillespie, "because I had this feeling that anything in the studio could go into it. I didn't know what was determining where things should go. Then, slowly, order was introduced. Things jelled, and the possibilities became less. But for a while, I felt desperate, not really knowing what I was doing." The quality of quiet, slightly exultant desperation remains in the painting, however "still" the still life may be.



*In **Landscape with New England Farmhouse**, 1985, oil and collage on board, an almost hallucinatory quality is created by the anachronistic placement of the farm buildings in a setting reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch.*

FROM WHENCE ALL THIS FRUCTIFIED CHAOS—"The chaotic contradictoriness of mind," as Gillespie eloquently puts it in a catalogue statement? The child is, as ever, father to the man, and Gillespie's childhood was chaotic. His mother was hospitalized with a manic-depressive illness when Gregory was a boy; his father was an alcoholic. "I'm still feeling those things in real, tangible ways," says Gillespie. "It's real hard for me to trust the world, trust people, trust love in relationships."

Gillespie said that he and Peg had once attended a workshop for the children of psychotic parents and found that a surprising number of such youngsters end up in creative professions—and that others don't make it at all. Gillespie was among the lucky ones. In high school in Roselle, New Jersey, he "passed for normal," he says. His abiding passion was baseball, and he meant to make a career of it. "But I wasn't that good," he says. "It was crushing to want to be something so badly and to realize you don't have it."

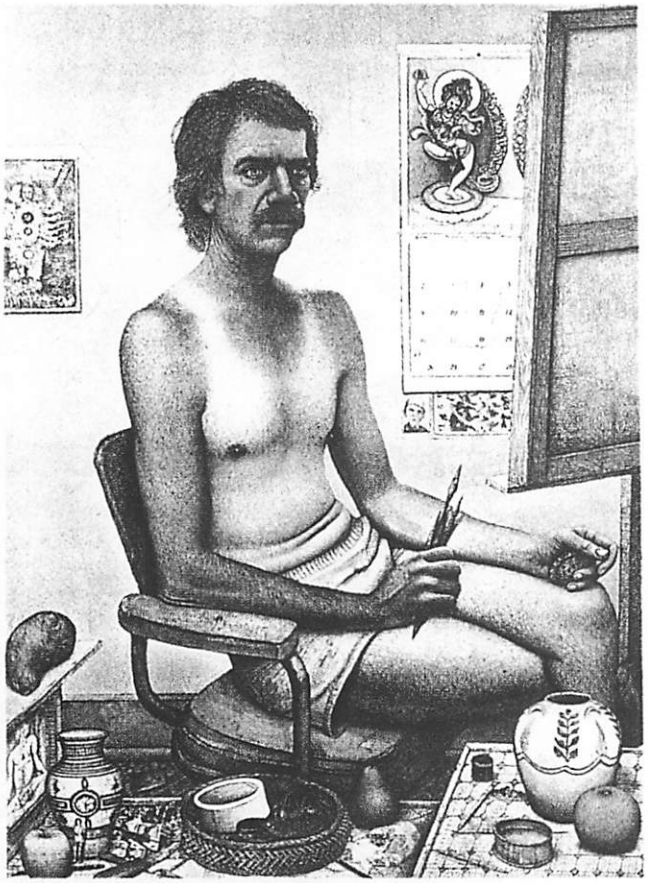
After this painful discovery, he happened on a catalogue from Cooper Union in the school guidance office. He decided to become a commercial artist—"I didn't even *know* you could be a painter." By day he was a paste-up boy at a commercial-art studio; at night he went to Cooper. But he soon became disenchanted with the job. "I remember being disgusted with the commercial-art world," he recalls, "just seeing what that life meant—guys who had been with an agency all their lives, burning out on whiskey ads and Coke come-ons. I made the decision to be a fine artist at 20. I wasn't worried about the financial insecurity."

He quit his job and went to Cooper Union full-time, studying with Nicholas Marsicano and Mercedes Matter, among others. "I went to the art library there and took out books. I started going to English courses and poetry courses—the humanities—hearing people discuss ideas. It was exhilarating. The way they had taught English in high school was to have us go home and memorize things."

In 1958 he married Frances Cohen, another painter, with whom he had two sons, now in their 20s. "It was much easier then to make a living. People didn't worry about security so much. You could always get a job." Gillespie was stuffing envelopes for 20 or so hours a week for $30 or $40, not bad when the rent was $30 a month on the then-Ukrainian Lower East Side.

After Cooper came a stint at the San Francisco Art Institute. "San Francisco was a great city to live in. I was there two years. The best people were teaching at the Institute—Diebenkorn and Bischoff and Oliveira and Lobdell. Things were different then—I used to support my family by delivering newspapers.

"I don't think I've ever been so happy as when I won a Fulbright," Gillespie continues. He used it to study in Florence in 1961-62, then won the Prix de Rome and moved to Rome for three years. "The museums had a big impact. That was the first time I'd seen great art. I liked it all. My standards were raised a lot. One particular portrait by Raphael. . . ." Gillespie grins. "I'm still trying to do some-



Self-Portrait, 1985, mixed media on panel. "I am my own greatest model," says Gillespie.

thing as good. It was something I'll never forget."

In Rome, Gillespie painted the streets, the restaurants, the shrines and those run-down, stucco-and-tile quarters that are the lot of Americans on the cheap in Europe. And it was in Italy that Gillespie resumed a type of art he'd been popular for in high school—"that's when the pornographic stuff came in. I was making these dirty paintings, and here was the pope living up the street from me. I was sure I was going to be punished," says Gillespie, who was raised a Roman Catholic. In *Reclining Nude* (1967), a leering, Italian-looking woman in stockings and garter belt sprawls on a bed. Another painting, based on a photograph, shows a nude woman on a bed, her legs nothing but obscene stumps, performing fellatio on a penis emerging from an opening in the wall.

It was in Rome, too, that Gillespie got his taste for what he now calls his "weird" painting. In *Doll Child* (1968), an oil and tempera on wood, a boy—a doll insofar as his legs and arms are visibly jointed—squats in a dirty vestibule between two blue columns, the platform on which he sits and the floor beneath it filthy with paint. No wonder Gillespie cites as his influences Balthus, Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon.

Oddly, all the paintings show another influence that might seem the polar opposite of pornography—Catholicism. Gillespie turned away from religion in his youth, but the mysticism and the spirituality of the Church are as much a part of his work as the "contemporary" introspection. Gillespie will say only that he often paints out of a sense "of reverence, of awe." But it's not a topic he discusses much, perhaps because it is too close, too much at the heart of the matter.

In 1967, after his first New York show, the Gillespies decided to return to the United States—they didn't want to rear their children in Italy, and "you get to be an expatriate after six or seven years." They moved to a small farmhouse in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, then to the present house in Belchertown. They were divorced in 1982.

Gillespie met Peggy in Williamsburg, where they were next-door neighbors, and the couple lived together for six years before marrying last year. Gillespie is settled peacefully in his farmhouse with his family and pets, exercising daily on a stationary bicycle and enjoying his excellent reputation in the art world and the fruits of his labor (one painting recently sold for $75,000). He no longer feels the need to paint such bizarre pictures as those from his Italian days, although one would hardly call him a man at peace with himself. He's too "eternally young" for that.

NOWADAYS, GILLESPIE DOES NOTHING BUT paint. Bella Fishko, of Forum Gallery, his dealer for almost 20 years, gives the artist a monthly stipend and, Gillespie says, the mandate to "paint anything I want. Bella never says, 'You owe me some money—why don't you come up with a still life?' She says, 'Do whatever you want.' She's totally protective of me, and I really feel well taken care of. She fights the battles with the world and gives me the peace and security just to paint every day."

One thing upsets him: he resents being labeled a realist. "In the '50s and '60s, I had a ball thinking, nobody's doing this, nobody's doing that. But ever since Frank Goodyear put that show together ["Contemporary American Realism Since 1960," organized originally in 1981 for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts], I've had trouble being recognized as anything but a realist—'Aha, he's a realist!' I've always done realist stuff, but I don't like the identification. I've always done weird stuff too."

Indeed many of his works still shock and disturb, even in a virtually shock-proof art world. *The Dance of the Mad People*, a mixed-media board from his last New York show, shows cartoonlike figures disporting themselves around a vagina, with grisly encrustations of green at the bottom of the canvas, mannequin torsos faintly sketched in one corner and "find-me" creatures buried amid some quirky marbleizing at the lower right. A knowing viewer might even make out traces of the visionary side of florid schizophrenic episodes in some of Gillespie's work.

"It's like the pornographic stuff—I *had* to do it, to get over all those repressions from a Catholic childhood," Gillespie says. "As for the schizophrenia, it's a strange blend of whimsy with a dark, fantastic side to it. There's an urge to portray it—to transform it and make it socially acceptable. By the power of beauty, I want to make insanity okay." A noble undertaking and, some would say, a dangerous one. But before being a painter, Gillespie is an artist—the human psyche is his territory.

Still, if his work shows him to be marvelously adept at scouting out that territory, he has his reservations. "I feel I'm not stable," says Gillespie. "I don't have a strong sense of reality. I think I've developed a whole persona built on the fact that I make art: I go to the studio every day, that's my identity. And, really, I want to be a great painter—not just ambitious, but great. Without it, I would face the void—which I don't want to do." ■

Gerrit Henry, a poet and critic living in New York, is a contributing editor of ARTnews.