

PRESS RELEASE

from

FORUM GALLERY • 1018 Madison Avenue • N. Y. 21 • LE 5-6080

John Canaday on art

THE NEW REPUBLIC

February 4, 1978

Gregory Gillespie, and Why the Whitney Should be Kicking Itself

I like to think that a few years from now—five? 10?—we are going to see the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art kicking themselves because they lacked the courage or the perception to stage the Gregory Gillespie retrospective currently at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington (until Feb. 12). The Whitney, in fact, may start kicking itself immediately. The Modern's field is worldwide and, of late, patently historical rather than exploratory, but the Whitney's field is limited to the United States and its avowed function includes the encouragement of contemporary production. But when it comes to living Americans the Whitney prefers to play safe with artists already well publicized as extremists with backing among the critics, or firmly established as historical figures, like Jasper Johns. The Whitney Museum's sop to its exploratory function is the grab-bag Whitney Annual.

The Hirshhorn's Gillespie retrospective demanded a more adventurous approach than the Modern's recently adopted one, and a more imaginative approach than the Whitney has demonstrated under any of its directors.

Gregory Gillespie is an American realist of a prophetic kind. Unlike the photorealists and hyperrealists, who have established themselves as leaders in the pendulum-swing away from abstraction, Gillespie puts a similar acutely detailed reproduction of visual reality into the service of profound and often disturbing introspection. Nothing in his work so much as suggests the deadpan objectivity that masks whatever the photo- and hyperrealists have to say—and what they have to say is, at most, social comment rather than intimate soliloquy.



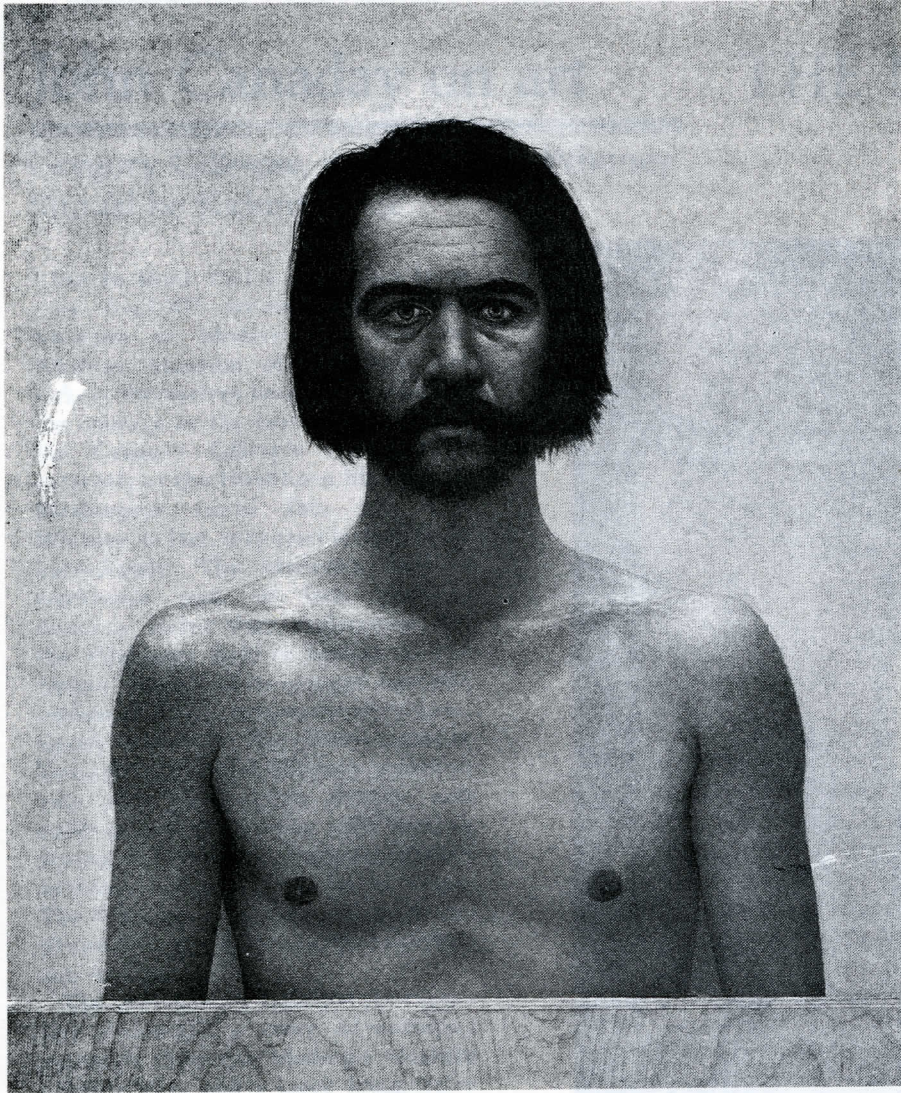
Trattoria (1966) Mixed media; 9½" x 6".

From the collection of Bella and Sol Fishko, courtesy of the Hirshhorn Museum.

PRESS RELEASE

from

FORUM GALLERY • 1018 Madison Avenue • N. Y. 21 • LE 5-6080



Self-Portrait (Torso) (1975) Oil and magna on wood; 30 1/4" x 24 3/4"

From the collection of Sidney and Frances Lewis.

Gillespie is one of the most personal artists who ever painted—and therein lies his prophetic quality. For if 20th-century American realism is to become more than the glut of expertly reproduced images and tricky illusionism that we can already see just around the corner, it must become again the expressive medium that it was for such revolutionaries or great individualists as Van Eyck, Masaccio, Mantegna, Dürer, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Courbet, Degas and, in our own country and time, Thomas Eakins—a partial list sufficiently varied to hint at the limitless range of realistic painting's traditional but inex-

haustible function, which is to reveal the psychological and spiritual worlds that animate the visible world around us.

If Gillespie must be allied to a specific branch of the realistic tradition, it must be to the Flemish-Germanic one of Van Eyck and Dürer. But let that go for the moment. In the first rooms of the chronologically hung retrospective, anyone unfamiliar with Gillespie's development might be puzzled to find himself in the presence of a fantasist rather than a realist, a painter of scatological morbidities, abnormal and mutilated bodies, visionary landscapes, and sinister deformations of bedraggled

city streets and the interiors of their decaying houses, the tenements of the soul. (Even here, though, there are Flemish connotations in Gillespie's echoes of Hieronymus Bosch's proto-Freudian hell on earth.) In the earlier pictures, too, there are multiple violations of the picture surface—punctures through which we see smaller pictures, and rough three-dimensional overlays as if the early Gillespie feared the impeccable Flemish paint surface that he has adopted in his latest work.

Let us say right here that in terms of sheer painterliness—that is, the technique of applying paint to a surface—Gregory Gillespie in his most recent paintings has few peers in the 20th century and can command favorable comparison with his ancestors in the 15th and 16th. The Hirshhorn retrospective and Gillespie's development so far culminate in four self-portraits dated 1973/74, 1975, 1976/77, and a slightly later one of the same split year. The earliest of the four (reproduced in *The New Republic*, issue of Oct. 1, 1977) shows the artist seated on a sagging mattress in a bare room, his arms and hands in positions that suggest the exposure of the right arm for a hypodermic injection by the left hand—but there is no needle. The reference, I suspected (a suspicion later verified), is personal, to Gillespie's rejection of drugs taken for a while as an experiment in intensifying levels of perception.

The next two portraits are of a long-haired young man with the tortured face of a desert saint, his nude torso shown to a point just a few inches below the nipples (the most meticulously rendered male nipples in the history of painting, surely). The fourth shows Gillespie seated in his studio, wearing slacks and a handsome sweater, freshly crew-cut and self-assured but still questioning. In all four he stares intently at us; we take the place of the mirror. In sequence, the portraits are the record so far of a personality in struggle for fulfillment.

When I showed these self-portraits recently during a lecture on American realism, one member of the audience fumed at the "intolerable conceit" of an

PRESS RELEASE

from

FORUM GALLERY • 1018 Madison Avenue • N. Y. 21 • LE 5-6080

artist who thus recorded himself. The objection, of course, is indefensible. In their intensity Gillespie's self-portraits are comparable to Vincent van Gogh's, although they rise above Vincent's in their analytical severity. Basically they are more comparable, although in total contrast stylistically, to Rembrandt's, which over a much longer period of time recorded the evolution of the painter from his youthful ebullient self to a tragic philosopher of the human condition in old age.

I find the closest historical parallel, however, between what I have already called Gillespie's desert-saint self-portraits and one of Dürer's in which he portrayed himself as Christ. This exercise was not quite as audacious as it sounds even though we know that Dürer as a young man was vain of his good looks. Dürer was one of the first painter-philosophers to reject the medieval concept of the painter as super-craftsman and to establish the Renaissance concept of the painter (of genius) as gifted by God to serve as an instrument of revelation. His self-portrait as Christ was not personal but symbolic. If Gillespie doesn't go quite that far, his self-portraits at least recognize the significance of artists as exceptional individuals who, in the course of acquiring self-knowledge, may help us to discover knowledge of ourselves.

I would like to make the point here, emphatically, that everything I have written in this article is based on my reactions to the paintings alone. I have been sufficiently interested in Gillespie's art to avoid reading anything written about it, including the introduction to the retrospective's handsome catalogue by Abram Lerner, director of the Hirshhorn Museum, and an extended interview with Gillespie, also in the catalogue, by Mr. Lerner and his colleague Howard Fox. For all I know, Gillespie's interview may refute everything I have said. But I believe that while an artist's ideas about his work may be interesting, nothing counts but the work itself. It must speak without a prompter, for the artist will not always be around to speak for it nor, thank God,

will the critics. My only contact with Mr. Gillespie, except for a brief and unrevealing conversation at the retrospective's opening reception, has been an abusive letter he wrote me after my review of one of his earliest exhibitions in which I somehow managed to offend him—just how, I forget.

Aside from the opportunity to see gathered together a large number of paintings that I had known piecemeal in exhibitions at the Forum Gallery in New York, I take pleasure in the Gillespie show as an unintended rebuke to the Whitney and, to a lesser degree, the Museum of Modern Art. Compare the Gillespie show with the Whitney's safe (and horribly expensive) Jasper Johns retrospective, which, although historically valid, was just about as stimulating and revealing as the average graduation-day valedictory address delivered by the brightest boy in the class, or with the Modern's choice of Sol LeWitt as a contemporary artist ripe for laureation in an exhibition that will run from February 3rd to April 4th. Mr. LeWitt has been a leading figure in the once *outré* but now weary pseudo-intellectual movement called conceptual art, and an exhibition of his ideas is, again, historically valid, but only if you are fascinated by footnotes.

Both the Johns and the LeWitt exhibitions are concerned with what art has been in the United States. The Gillespie exhibition is about what art is going to be, whether Gillespie or someone else brings the reinvigoration of the realistic tradition to its 20th-century fruition. The exhibition is as much a tribute to the alertness of Mr. Lerner at the Hirshhorn, and to the patience and foresight of Gillespie's patron-dealer, Bella Fishko, as it is to the artist himself. It is also gratifying to read the list of awards that sustained Gillespie before he became, as he now is, a saleable artist at good prices. These include a Fulbright-Hays Grant renewed for a second year, a Chester Dale Fellowship renewed for a second and then a third year, the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award "to a younger painter who has not yet been accorded due recognition," and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, among others.

The catalogue, as next-best to a visit to the retrospective, can be had through the Hirshhorn Museum for \$8.50.

HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND
SCULPTURE GARDEN
EXHIBITION ENDS
FEBRUARY 12, 1978.

EXHIBITION OPENS AT
GEORGIA MUSEUM OF ART,
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
IN ATHENS, EARLY APRIL
THROUGH MAY, 1978.