

## Gregory Gillespie

### *Unspeakable Mysteries*

The present exhibition of paintings and sculptures by Gregory Gillespie is so varied that one might mistake it for a group show, instead of the work of a single individual. The exhibition includes detailed portraits, landscapes, abstract mandalas, shrine-like sculptures, and depictions of fantastic monsters. Some works are instantly recognizable and obey the laws of the so-called real world, while others present a realm where fantasy reigns supreme, and the natural laws of perspective and proportion do not seem to apply. Further attention shows a hallucinatory degree of detail in the so-called realist works that lift them out of ordinary experience and by contrast, such specificity and tangibility in the fantasy monsters that they seem real.

In Gillespie's own words, he likes to "mix it up." For him there is no fixed line between reality and imagination. His overall goal is to allow intuitive and subconscious images to emerge in his work. Through his wide range of techniques and varied content, Gillespie attempts to express his feelings about a world that he finds "unspeakably strange." His art is filled with dreams, perceptions, memories, and desires—all of which revolve around the single most enigmatic force, the human mind.

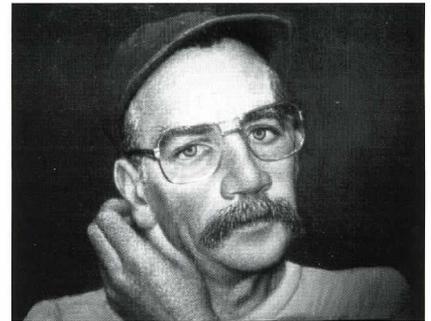
As an artist, Gillespie is largely self-taught. Born in New Jersey, he came from a broken family. His mother was manic-depressive and his father severely alcoholic. Among his earliest memories are visits to asylums and the horrifying appearances of the patients. There is a feeling in Gillespie's paintings of potential madness and chaos lingering just beneath the surface. His art may ultimately result from a driving need to control and order such instability. Gillespie was also raised in "old-style Catholicism" and fears of hell, sin, and evil remain preoccupations in his art.

Between 1954 and 1960, Gillespie attended the Cooper Union for Advancement of Art and Science in New York. These years were marked by the popularity of Abstract Expressionist painting, but Gillespie spent his time in The Metropolitan Museum of Art and at The Frick Collection studying the old masters. In contrast to contemporary taste, he loved the art of the Northern Renaissance. His passion for the hyper-clarity of Jan van Eyck's paintings is seen in Gillespie's *Self Portrait in Purple Hat* (1999) and his *Portrait of Peggy (Red Ground)* (1999). In these works, the highly detailed paint application, which seems to bring alive every pore in the skin, belies the casualness of the modern poses and points to intensely felt presences. At the other end of the spectrum in Northern Renaissance painting, Gillespie's fascination with Hieronymous Bosch can be seen in such works as *Alchemy* (1998). As is the case for Bosch, Gillespie's monsters signal the release of artistic imagination as much as provide warnings about evil in the world.

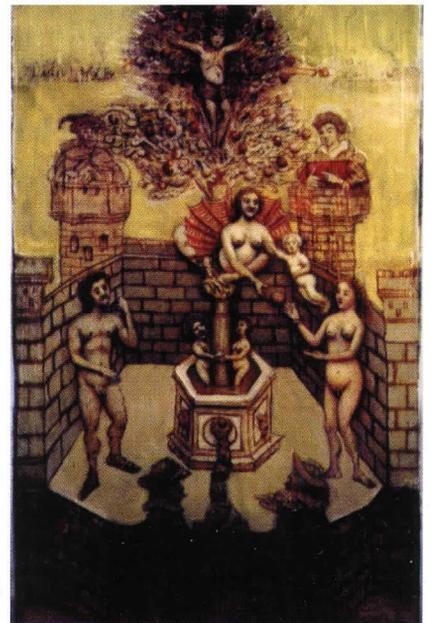
Gillespie spent the years between 1962 and 1970 in Italy, first in Florence on a Fulbright Fellowship, then in Rome at the American



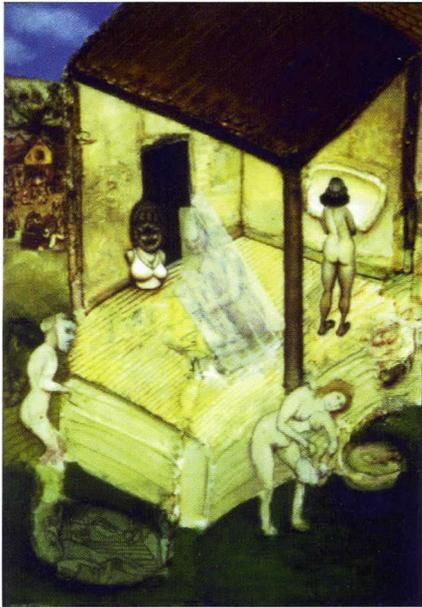
*Portrait of Peggy (Red Ground), 1999*



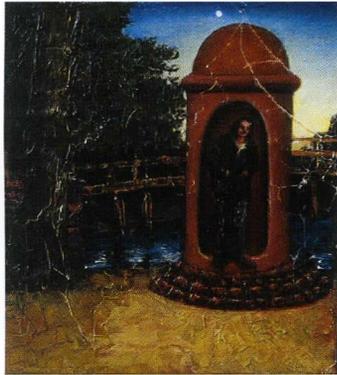
*Self Portrait in Purple Hat, 1999*



*Alchemy, 1998*



*Large Manger Scene, 1998*



*Police Booth, 1998*



*Blue Stump, 1998*

Academy. The Italian experience was profoundly important for him. It confirmed his interest in gold-ground Trecento paintings and in the works of the Early Italian Renaissance. Gillespie's Italian works utilize skewed versions of one-point linear perspective, which was invented during the Early Renaissance, to create his own enigmatic spaces. Scenes of everyday life in Italy are combined with religious rituals and overt sexual associations. Gillespie's painting *Large Manger Scene* (1998) simultaneously suggests the birthplace of Christ, an Italian bathhouse, and the location of some strange, erotic, pagan ritual. In another painting, *Police Booth* (1998), a self-portrait standing in an Italian police booth, also looks like a priest in a Renaissance chapel. In *Blue Stump* (1998), a painted *tondo* mounted on a log and displayed like a devotional object features a Trecento city scene in which the authority of the male residents is equated with a large phallus. Gillespie shares his perception of Italian culture with such artists as Giorgio de Chirico and Balthus. In Italy, Gillespie discovered a strange amalgam of sacred restraint and sexual abandon, encompassing both logical order and mystery, that he has carried into all of his later art.

For thirty years, Gillespie has studied Buddhism, and Buddhist and Hindu references are found throughout his art. He is less interested in Buddhism as a religious doctrine than as a way of thinking about the mind and of gaining self-knowledge. Gillespie is particularly concerned with the notion of meditation leading to ever more profound questions rather than to simple solutions, and he equates this idea with the types of multilevel associations he evokes in his art. Gillespie's painting *Basic Mantra* (1999) is an arched two-sided panel that merges Eastern and Western religious influences all in the context of Gillespie's personal interpretation. The shape of the panel connects it with Christian portable altarpieces, while the multiple paint glazes are reminiscent of Rembrandt's painting technique. In fact, Rembrandt used this arched shape and similar colors in his famous *Supper at Emmaus* (1648, Musée du Louvre, Paris). But the abstract shape at the center of *Basic Mantra* is a mandala, a visual device used for meditation in Tantric Buddhism. Further, in Tantric Buddhism, red connotes female energy and white, male potency. At the core of the mandala where a deity is commonly found, Gillespie gives an explosion of rich white pigment. For Gillespie, revelation is only possible through the continued energetic painting.

For twenty-five years, Gillespie has lived and painted in relative isolation in the countryside of southwestern Massachusetts. Recently, he feels that his work is marked by the freedom to try anything. In the last few years, he has even painted symbolic, imaginary landscapes reminiscent of Albert Pinkham Ryder and Ralph Blakelock as well as hometown baseball games (*Hard Ball*, 1999), often featuring a strangely isolated figure standing to one side. (His father was a semiprofessional baseball player, and Gregory once fantasized about professionally playing baseball.)

Gillespie's large paintings have become increasingly complex and varied in their references. Sometimes over a period of years, objects and other art works around the studio will be



*Basic Mantra, 1999*



*Hard Ball, 1999*

collected and incorporated in new paintings. Occasionally, the actual things will be attached to the surface; more often, they will be replaced by painstakingly rendered illusions in oil paint. Through their changing relationship, these images, in the words of the artist,

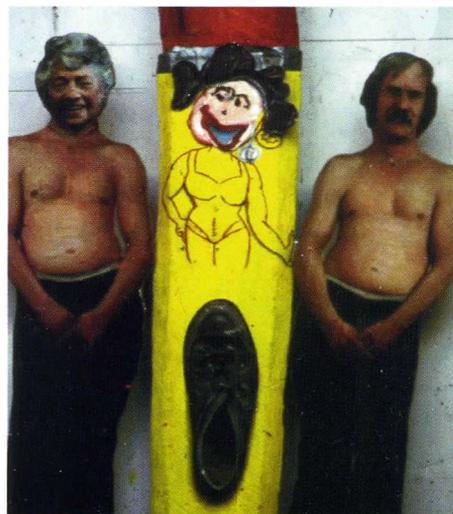
“struggle toward meaning.” Gillespie’s large works are meditations on the passage of time, memory, and the state of the artist’s mind. As such, they remind us of the collections of personal objects found in Joseph Cornell’s boxes and even more directly of the enigmatic images in Jasper Johns’s paintings since the mid-1980s.

Gillespie’s *Totem* (1998) is an example of this accumulative process. The mandala, the gourd, and the shoe are all things that Gillespie has painted repeatedly. At the top of *Totem*, there are two self-portraits cut out from earlier paintings. Naked to the waist with their hands covering the genital areas, they are vulnerable figures. In one of the portraits, Gillespie has removed the head and replaced it with that of his aunt—the one who raised him and thus provided a measure of security in the absence of his parents. Between the two portraits of the artist, as himself and as his aunt, is a cartoon drawing that appears to be made by a child. It shows a female who is simultaneously desirable and crazy. Is it the mother that the artist both wishes for and fears? In his art, Gillespie often wrestles with such psychologically charged representations.

Gregory Gillespie’s art is remote from the postmodern age in that it contains no irony. The objects portrayed by the artist, whether from high or popular culture, are painted with intensity and sincerity. The care with which the artist depicts them evinces his belief that they are important components in his search to understand the workings of the human mind. For Gillespie, the final test of these images is whether or not they coalesce into an interesting painting. In an age of skepticism, Gillespie still trusts in the potency of art. He believes that art can ask questions and reveal truths that would otherwise be inaccessible, and his paintings communicate this belief when we stand before them.

Robert Saltonstall Mattison  
April, 1999  
Easton, Pa.

Robert Saltonstall Mattison, professor of art, Lafayette College, has written *Robert Motherwell: The Formative Years* (1987), *Grace Hartigan: A Painter’s World* (1990), in addition to articles and exhibition catalogues on modern art. His most recent book is *Masterworks: Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella in the Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection* (1996). He is currently writing a book on Robert Rauschenberg.



*Totem, 1998, overall and detail*

**Richard A. and Rissa  
Grossman Visiting Artist**

Gregory Gillespie  
April 5 - April 30, 1999

The **Richard A. and Rissa Grossman Visiting Artist Residency and Exhibition Series** was established in 1992 by Richard A. Grossman, a 1964 graduate of Lafayette College, to provide opportunities for intensive interaction between students and major twentieth-century artists. The series also supports the presentation of significant exhibitions.

Grossman Artists:

*Dorothea Rockburne (1992)*

*Faith Ringgold (1993)*

*Robert Beauchamp (1994)*

*Richard Anuszkiewicz (1995)*

*Elizabeth Murray (1996)*

*Leon Golub (1997)*

*Gregory Gillespie (1999)*

*Ann Hamilton (forthcoming, 2000)*

Grossman Exhibition:

*In Search of Master Artists: Selections from the Moore Collection of African American Art (1998)*



Art Gallery  
Williams Center for the Arts  
Easton, Pennsylvania

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Gillespie's residency activities are sponsored by the Richard A. and Rissa Grossman Visiting Artist Residency Series. The Lafayette College exhibition series is presented under provisions of the Detwiller Endowment and is supported in part by a grant from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

Checklist of exhibition

*Alchemy*, 1998, Oil on metal etching plate, 16 x 10½

*Twins*, 1998, Oil on wood, 11½ x 10¼

*Blue Stump*, 1998, Oil on wood, 23 x 8 x 8

*Boston Dealers*, 1998, Oil on wood, 34 x 12½ x 2

*Catholic Mandala*, 1998, Oil on wood, 28¾ x 27½

*Dog Song*, 1998, Oil on wood, 20 x 20

*Lake*, 1998, Oil on wood, 12¾ x 21½

*Large Manger Scene*, 1998, Oil on wood, 40½ x 28¼

*Light Switch*, 1998, Oil and plexiglas, 49 x 24 7/8 x 3¼

*Moroccan Box*, 1998, Mixed media, 28 7/8 x 13 x 13

*Peggy's Back*, 1998, Oil on wood, 13 x 10

*Police Booth*, 1998, Oil on wood, 10 x 9

*Totem*, 1998, Oil on wood, 11 feet high x 36 x 2

*Twins*, 1998, Oil on wood, 11½ x 10¼

*Wide River, Yellow Sky*, 1998, Oil on wood, 21¼ x 56½

*Basic Mantra*, 1999, Oil on wood, 22¾ x 16

*Hard Ball*, 1999, Oil on wood, 16 x 21

*Landscape with Green Sky*, 1999, Oil on wood, 11 x 21½

*Portrait of Peggy (Red Ground)*, 1999, Oil on wood, 16¾ x 13

*Self Portrait in Purple Hat*, 1999, Oil on wood, 10½ x 14

*Severed Head*, 1999, Oil on wood, 54 x 47

*Untitled*, 1999, Oil on plexiglas and wood, 31½ x 37 5/8 x 1½

Gregory Gillespie is represented by Forum Gallery, New York. All works are courtesy of the artist. All dimensions are listed in inches, height x width x depth unless otherwise noted.

Acknowledgments

This exhibition was made possible by the efforts of many people. First and foremost is the artist Gregory Gillespie, who has been generous with his time and a pleasure to work with. Crucial too are Richard A. and Rissa Grossman whose support, through the residency series, enables the art department to bring major artists to the College. Robert Saltonstall Mattison has provided a concise and insightful introduction to Gillespie's work. His enthusiastic support of the gallery program is invaluable. During a visit to Gillespie's studio, Anna Mattison made valuable suggestions in the selection of work. I also thank Ed Kerns, professor and head of the department of art and the rest of the department; Stevie O. Daniels, Lafayette College editor; Robin Rinehart of the department of religion; and Carol Donnelly, Williams Center secretary.

Michiko Okaya  
Gallery Director