

Why All the Fuss About Gregory Gillespie?

By Jo Ann Lewis

Gregory who?

Last night the work of a 41-year-old American painter named Gregory Gillespie went on view at the Hirshhorn Museum. To accompany the show, a 112-page catalog, fully illustrated, has been published, with an introductory essay by Hirshhorn director Abram Lerner, a verbatim interview with the artist, and, throughout, a tone of reverence one might expect to find in an enterprise having to do with the elder Titian.

Why such a fuss? "I just think he's a spectacular painter," says Abram Lerner, a former painter himself, "and he hasn't been shown. That's what any modern museum worth its salt is supposed to do on occasion—

show artists they're excited about. I think Gillespie may be the greatest of the young realists." Critic John Canaday has gone even further, to suggest that Gillespie "just might emerge as the most important painter at work today."

Despite a devoted underground following, Gregory Gillespie's work is not widely known, no doubt in part because his brand of realism—which at first glance has a distinctly old-world, old master look about it—has not been in fashion during the 15 years in which he has been at work.

In addition, after three years at Cooper Union and two more at the San Francisco Art Institute (where he studied with Richard Diebenkorn, among others) Gillespie went to Italy

See GILLESPIE, C14, Col. 1



GILLESPIE, From C1

on a Fulbright-Hays Grant, and with the help of three Chester Dale Fellowships at the American Academy in Rome, remained in Italy for 8 years, until 1970.

There his work became even more Europeanized, in subject matter, technique and form, incorporating elements of Flemish realism with a touch of surrealism, an Italianate religiosity and a Germanic melancholia. As American art was becoming larger, brighter, more cool and abstract, Gillespie was working on smaller, darker, more introverted paintings. Had he set out, to buck the tides of fashion (which he had not) he could not have done a better job.

But now, with the realist resurgence a seemingly permanent late 20th-century phenomenon, the art world may be ready, once again, for realist art with content—something beyond the mere virtuosity of the photo- and hyper-realists.

Gillespie's art is loaded with content, provocative but elusive, which Lerner compares to the films of De Sica and Fellini. "Gillespie's subjects reflect the traumas and anxieties of our time," says Lerner. "Each painting is a kind of theater in which objects or characters act out ambiguous dramas, their roles reversed, redefined or shifted. Gillespie is not an easy artist, for these are not happy pictures. They must be looked at closely, and people have become accustomed to looking at art from across the room."

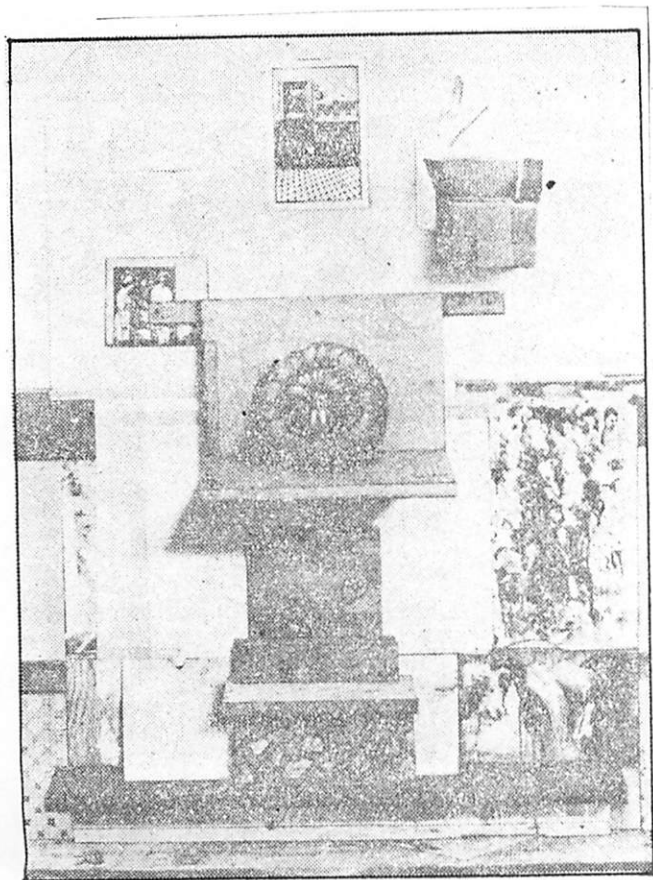
Many of Gillespie's paintings are irresistible however, even from across the room, luring the viewer into closer inspection and ultimate involvement with the mysteries and ambiguities therein.

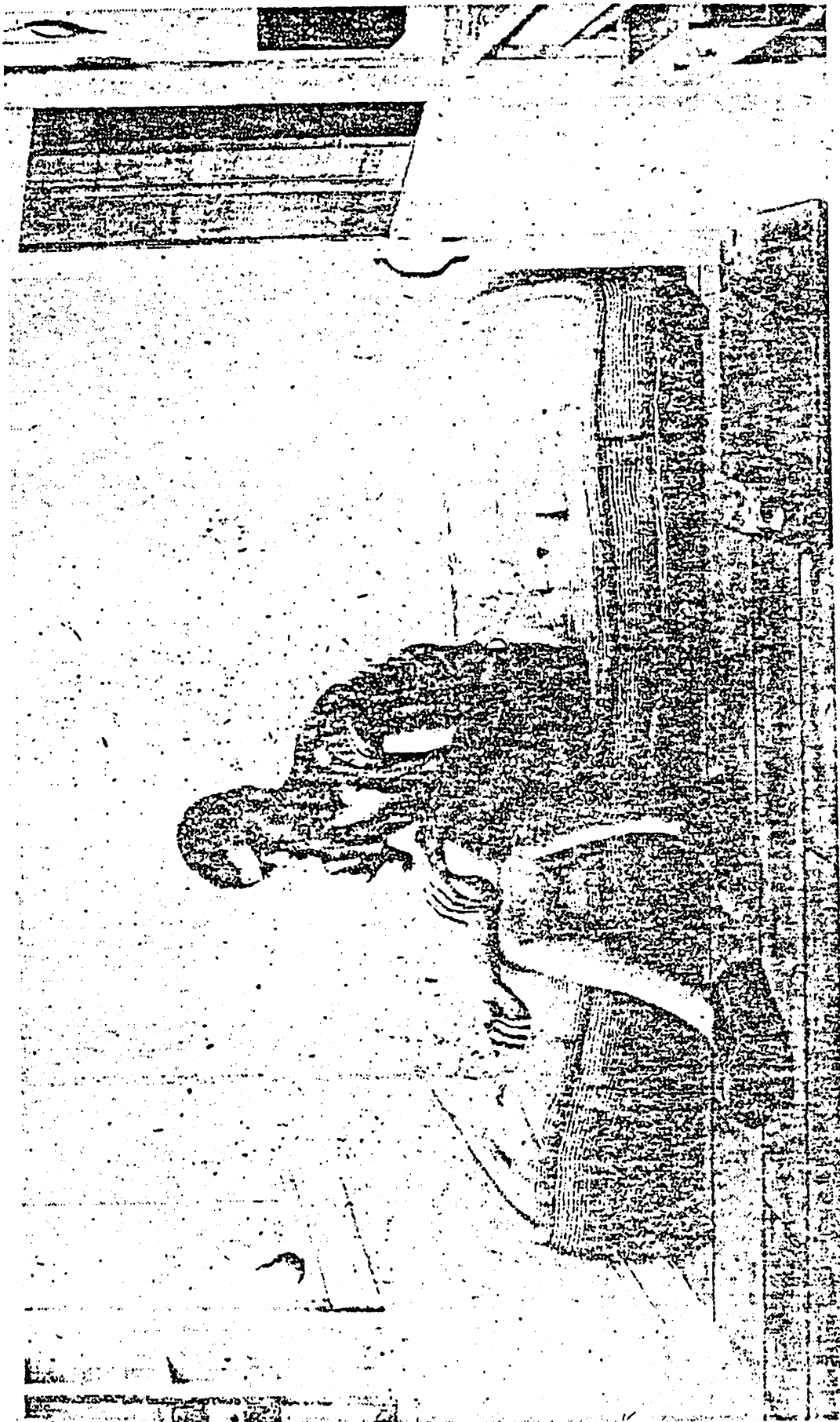
In some of the Italian pictures, for example, one realizes that within this seemingly traditional look and format — Gillespie paints only in oil on wood — there is a distinctly modern artist at work. In a painting of a trattoria interior in Rome for example, there is a window actually cut into the panel, with a picture postcard behind the glass, and a bulb illuminating the scene. It is a construction, and what seemed to be two-dimensional has three dimensions, and just as often, the opposite is true. "My art is based on contradiction: there's nothing simple in it. It's always multiple," says the artist.

In his early works, Gillespie always started with photographic images. "I'd take a photograph from a newspaper or magazine and glue it to a panel," he says. "Then I would 'Rorschach' into the scene. Certain figures would be painted out, others left in so it would be composed. Then I would address some of them. Or I would add things. Some are sexually very explicit. It was a kind of improvisation that came out of adolescent and repressed sexuality."

Gillespie's art is autobiographical and self-analytical in this way, revealing a troubled man whose art describes his intense struggle to deal with his inner feelings, whether of repression, confinement, isolation or frustration.

Many of his paintings have come out of repression or a reaction to it, says Gillespie, who had a strict Catholic upbringing. One picture, "Two Women," from the Whitney Museum, was admittedly made out of "the impulse to do sacrilege." In the original photograph, which was collaged onto the panel, both women were dressed. Now one is nude, not sensuously but very matter-of-factly nude. The picture was defaced when it was





Detail from Gregory Gillespie's "Self-Portrait on Bed," 1973-74.

shown in Italy. The message had gotten through.

Since Gillespie returned to the United States and settled in Amherst, Mass., there has been a gradual opening up of the compositions into larger formats, and a brightening of the palette, though there is no lessening in

the intensity of the work. In the most recent work the intensity is more visual than emotional, however; there is more hard looking and more fresh air. One has the feeling that the artist has come to terms with himself.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the self-portraits which Gillespie

has made over the years, from the angry and aggressively hostile portraits of the '60s to the most recent, full length seated figure in which the artist has been able to look at himself objectively for the first time.

In one large recent painting of his studio wall he has even treated his

environment with a touch of tenderness.

Whether Gillespie turns out to be the most important painter at work today, as Canaday suggests, remains to be seen. He is, however, a splendid painter and there seems little doubt that his influence could be profound.