

David Ebony's Top 10: Autumn 2025

By David Ebony

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Gregory Gillespie at Forum Gallery, Sept. 12-Nov. 8.

This museum-quality exhibition, *Gregory Gillespie: 1936–2000*, is a rare opportunity to experience in person some of the best works by an artist whose towering talent and tragic life story have become the stuff of legend, if only to a rarefied circle of artists, writers, collectors and admirers. Gillespie possessed a technical proficiency arguably unmatched by any of his peers. A work such as the monumental *Studio: Still Life* (1978) serves as a compendium of

the painterly skills he had at his command. Against a luminous golden-yellow background, a table covered with a red-and-white checkerboard cloth holds an array of organic forms, such as two gourds and a tree stump set beside a mannequin's armless bust that has unusually expressive—uncanny—lifelike facial features. At the top of the composition, what appears to be an antique Japanese mask, resting on a narrow shelf, presides over the scene flanked by two meticulously rendered portraits, while another mask, emanating six pointy leaflike shapes, hangs on the wall. The composition suggests an allegory of personal significance, especially since one of the faces on the wall is a self-portrait.

Several other self-portraits appear in the show, and the theme of self-examination is a current that runs through the exhibition, and indeed, throughout this artist's unique oeuvre. It is tempting to view some Gillespie paintings as Surrealist, but his work seems to be an exploration of empirical reality and his relationship to it, rather than of the unconscious. Works like *Self-Portrait, Foro Romano* (1969), however, definitely have a hallucinatory, dreamlike quality. This compact composition of oil, tempera, and collaged elements, features sinuous abstract organic shapes, and includes a postcard of the Roman Forum, which held a great fascination for the artist. References to antiquity and to non-western cultures, especially Buddhist and Hindu religious iconography, abound in the works, and are treated with a great deal of sensitivity, intensity and reverence. After spending time with this exhibition, one wonders if this artist, who took his own life at the height of his creative powers, was just too sensitive, too caring about the world and the plight of humanity to find solace in the transcendental state that his art proffers.

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