

Gregory Gillespie, 64, an Unflinching Painter

By ROBERTA SMITH

Gregory Gillespie, an artist whose probing, urgent, often bizarre paintings occupied a singular place in the history of late-20th-century representation, died on Wednesday at his home in Belchertown, Mass., an apparent suicide. He was 64.

Mr. Gillespie's wife, Peggy, found him hanging in his studio late that night, said Robert Fishko of the Forum Gallery, where he often exhibited his work.

His art was known for an obsessive attention to realistic detail, but the term realist fit only a narrow swath of his sensibility. He once told an interviewer that he was seeking a reality "beyond our sense," and he pursued it with a variety of artistic styles, techniques and references. He mixed his realism with Expressionist distortion and Surrealistic juxtaposition, just as he supplemented his meticulously applied oil paint with roiling brushwork, photomontage, collage, assemblage, thickly built-up surfaces and, recently, photocopied images.

He also found inspiration in several centuries of European painters, including Balthus, Bacon, Beckmann, Bosch, Breugel, Van Eyck, Masaccio and Crivelli. He also drew from and frequently depicted motifs from Indian sculpture, Tibetan mandalas and Chinese and Mayan art.

Mr. Gillespie painted landscapes, street scenes, interiors, portraits, and sexual and religious allegories in a shifting range of styles. Continuity was provided by a sense of unflinching scrutiny that often gave his work a disturbing edge. He regularly turned this scrutiny on himself; some of his strongest works are psychologically charged self-portraits. They recorded his changing appearance and shifting moods and always pivoted on his intense blue eyes, which suggested that a profound secret might be revealed if one stared hard enough.

Mr. Gillespie was born in 1936 in Roselle Park, N.J., and raised in a strict Roman Catholic household. He said that the repressive nature of his upbringing set the stage for his often transgressive images as well as for



Jon Crispin for The New York Times

Gregory Gillespie in his studio last fall in Belchertown, Mass. He mixed his realism with Expressionist distortion and Surrealistic juxtaposition.

the moral tenor of his art. He was not exposed to art as a child but showed a affinity for drawing from an early age and became known in high school for making cartoons and pornographic drawings.

In 1954 he was accepted into the Cooper Union in Manhattan, which had rigorous entrance requirements but was also tuition-free. He intended to become a commercial artist but was attracted to painting, first by books in the school library and then by visits to the Frick Collection and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Abstract Expressionism was in its heyday, and although he developed a deep admiration for the work of artists like Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, he never doubted that his own future was representational. "I wanted to tell a story," he said.

After earning a master's degree at the San Francisco Art Institute, Mr. Gillespie received a Fulbright-Hayes grant to live and work in Florence, Italy. Making the rounds of New York galleries, he met with Bella Fishko, director of the Forum Gallery (and Mr. Fishko's mother), who immediately agreed to represent him and quickly sold several paint-

ings to Joseph Hirshhorn. Two years in Florence were followed by several more at the American Academy in Rome. He stayed in Italy until 1970.

Mr. Gillespie had his first solo show in 1966 at the Forum Gallery and was included in several Whitney Biennials in the 1960's and 70's, but he remained an art world outsider, respected by many but enthusiastically embraced by few. His first retrospective was at the Hirshhorn Museum in 1977; his second opened at the Georgia Museum of Art at the University of Georgia in Athens last April and completed a tour in March.

His most recent show at the Forum Gallery — his 16th — was in December. His work is represented in the collections of museums including the Metropolitan, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Mr. Gillespie's first marriage, to Fran Cohen, ended in divorce. In addition to his wife, he is survived by a son and daughter from his first marriage, Vincent Gillespie, of North Hollywood, Calif., and Lydia Chiu-mento, of Buffalo, N.Y.; a daughter from his second marriage, Julianna, of Belchertown, and a sister, Alice Bonavita, of Roselle Park, N.J.