



475 Park Avenue at 57th Street, New York, New York 10022

Tel: (212) 355-4545 Fax: (212) 355-4547 www.forumgallery.com

Robert Fishko, *Director*

GREGORY GILLESPIE

(1936 - 2000)

Fragment (Vietnam Shrine), 1966

mixed media

25 x 19 x 4 ½ inches

signed verso "GG"

inscribed verso "*Collection Katz*"



Provenance

The Artist

Myrna and Norman Katz, Sharon, Massachusetts

Private Collection, Australia

Exhibited

Gregory Gillespie, Alpha Gallery, Boston, MA, April 10 - May 1, 1971

Hunter College Art Gallery Exhibition, March 1988

Literature

Gregory Gillespie: Paintings (Italy 1962-1970), Forum Gallery, New York, 1970, p. 31, Illustrated and p. 59 Listed.

Note

Gregory Gillespie was born in New Jersey, studied at New York's Cooper Union (1954-60), then at the San Francisco Art Institute where he earned his MFA in 1963. It was soon apparent he would not follow in the footsteps of New York's Abstract Expressionists nor in those of the Bay Area Figurative painters, but that his art would always remain fully individualist, highly personal, and outside the parameters of the critical mainstream. Some saw his artistry as the contrivance of an art world contrarian; others recognized that Gregory was painstakingly progressing through his own personal demons and, in so doing, flabbergasting an attentive audience with the painterly results. Estrangement, entrapment, isolation, anxiety, repression, guilt, violence, and a heightened, even pornographic sexuality, consumed his Italian period work and divulged his psychic pain.

As the United States intensified its involvement in the war in Vietnam, Gregory Gillespie landed in Rome as the recipient of a Chester Dale Fellowship and a Fulbright Grant. His grant project was to study the work of the early Renaissance master Masaccio, however it is fitting that he was most captivated by that of Carlo Crivelli. A mid-to-late 15th century painter with an intense, haunting neo-Gothic sensibility, Gillespie commented of Crivelli that he was one of the few artists skillful enough to seamlessly incorporate sculptural elements with those of painting, and to do so deftly enough to mask what one perceives as reality versus illusion. Such was the schizophrenic sphere of contradictions which Gregory Gillespie sought and succeeded in occupying.

No painters of the decade came close to Gillespie's graphic nature and explicit scenes. A small coterie of 1960s Italian filmmakers, however, shared his capacity to transform life observed into the hallucinatory. Like Gregory, these independent, outsider artists were interfacing with reality and sanity.

Although it is doubtful that Gregory knew them personally, he may well have seen the controversial work they produced, precisely concurrent with his own: Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Theorem* (1968) in which an enigmatic male visitor has consensual sex with every member of a bourgeois Italian family before disappearing; Liliana Cavani's *Year of the Cannibals* (1969) where the streets of Milan are laden with the corpses of ill-defined state enemies while indifferent pedestrians walk past; and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966), an existential mystery thriller whose bizarre, unrelated events terminate in a mimed tennis match with imaginary rackets and ball, the protagonist dematerializing just as the sound of the ball becomes audible. Although Gillespie did bring his phantasmagoric universe back with him to the United States (to rural Massachusetts), never was it so potent as in his Roman days of the mid to late 1960s.

During these formative years, Gillespie painted a series of interiors of Italian kitchens and trattorias. His so-called "shrine" paintings carried the emotional weight of religious or sacred spaces. Although he had left the Catholic Church of his youth, Gillespie described how he "rejected all religious doctrines and became free of them" intellectually, but how "emotionally there's still a twenty-year impact on your feelings and on the way your mind works unconsciously – repression, and fears, and guilt." ¹

¹ Gregory Gillespie interviewed by Abram Lerner, First Director of the Hirshhorn Museum, as published in *Gregory Gillespie*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, by Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977, p. 25.

Watching the Vietnam war unfold from abroad, Gillespie must have been deeply affected by the shocking reports of the violent conflict and civil unrest that resulted. His response in 1966 was to create *Fragment (Vietnam Shrine)*, in which the pinnacle of human suffering presented goes far beyond the contemplative nature of the isolated spaces of Gillespie's interiors. That it is an African American man broadens the context of the work further to become a commentary on the disproportionate effect of wartime upon underprivileged and poor communities. The violence of *Fragment (Vietnam Shrine)* is transformed by Gillespie into a reliquary for modern times, a relic of life and against war to be revered and honored.

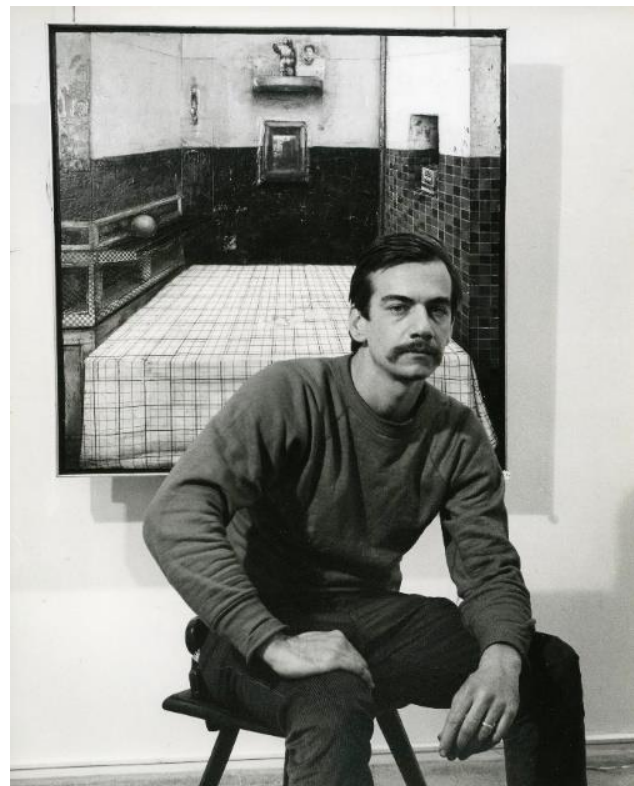
Unlike any artwork done previously or since, the rawness and brilliance of Gillespie's work remains a mystery to the mentally sound. Ultimately, Gregory was overpowered by his demons and took his own life on April 26, 2000.



Carlo Crivelli, Saint Peter of Verona (Peter Martyr), circa 1475 (coll. National Gallery, London)



Pier Paolo Pasolini, film-clip from his *Teorema (Theorem)*, 1968



Gregory Gillespie in 1968