Richmond Burton

New Paintings

Cheim and Read through December 31

BY JOEL SILVERSTEIN

IT'S LIKE THIS: YOU'VE BEEN invited to a dinner party and you're seated near someone whom you've never met. He's finely dressed, reserved, aloof. He lets you know in different ways that he's from an affluent well-known family, attended the best schools. A short time passes. In the course of the conversation you think, "I've got him pegged. I find him rather stiff and boring". The evening wears on, and strangely enough the guest begins to grow on you. He drinks a little, then a lot, and he becomes slightly inebriated. A new personality emerges, one with cracks in it. A chink in his armor grows so you can see inside. There's a *joie de vivre*, a brittle beauty that issues from somewhere. There's also a corollary to this situation, the unraveling or unhinging of his persona. Strangely, you're intrigued rather than put off by it.

I've never met Richmond Burton, so, if you were wondering, this metaphor extends to his work alone. Burton was trained as an architect and worked with I. M. Pei on the Louvre pyramid project. His oeuvre is based on the order and regularity of the grid. Architects construct buildings in the so-called real world. Their use of the grid has a concrete and functional quality which painters can only envy. Burton has preserved this aspect of his training and understands that structure can mimic the way nature builds upon itself. It's a ready-made language that conveys conviction and may be developed in a myriad of ways, including lyrical ones.

Burton has consciously based his work on the greatest of modernist giants, the most prominent of which is Henri Matisse. Burton has absorbed the leaf and fruit shapes from Matisse's late cut outs. Also a pod-like shape, rendered in an edgy black line, reveals it's origins within an earlier period of the Frenchman's oeuvre, reminiscent of Matisse's *THE MOROCCANS, 1915/16*. Burton uses the grid like a diaphanous wall, the way Matisse used the walls around his figures in *BATHERS BY A RIVER, 1913*. This is not so much a spatial divider, as to throw a screen across the viewer's field of vision. In turn, it partly obscures and frames.

There is also Paul Klee to consider, who like Matisse, made a trip to North Africa and developed a profound relationship with Islamic art. Klee and Burton share a propensity for organic generativity contained within the grid. Before the First World War, Klee experimented with luminous blocks of color inspired by sunlight and built up his paintings cell by cell, a technique that Burton would use. Like Klee, Burton uses abstraction as a forum for ocular experimentation. Also like Klee, Burton fuses the very small with the very large. He's intrigued with the preoccupations of science, the microscopic photography of plants, as well as the macroscopic systems of order, which decenter old hierarchies, yet hold things together.

By melding this to a Matissean screening technique and Islamic ideals about abstraction, Burton comments on other realities tangentially connected to the phenomenological arena. In other words, you become aware that there are other experiences occurring on deeper levels while you peer out from the world of objects.

Burton's other orientations are Abstract Expressionism, but of a particular kind, specifically that of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, who in turn looked back to Matisse and Islamic art. The swirl of the arabesque, a notational jotting down of sensuality is reduced to a systematic blocking out through a series of repetitions.

In the note-worthy catalogue essay by **Review's** very own Dominique Nahas, there is a quote by Maldiney concerning Paul Klee: "The first response to the abyss is vertigo. . . Rhythm is the second response to the abyss."

If we accept this presumption, then we can accept the more serious psychological implication of Burton's work. The repetitions come off as a warding off, or undoing of the abyss as a gesture of obsessional compulsion. Modeled on the beauty of a Muslim garden, they are replete with fruits and paint drips. In such works as *MORPHING FIELDS, 1999* or *CABINESSENCE, 1999*, the "void" is multiplied into a series of pod shapes that float and recede into multiple black or white holes. Each void separates into it's own gravitational pull, less like Existentialism, more like contemporary physics.

Just as the grid is deployed, it disintegrates or is broken down. In *A.C. MANIFESTO, 1999*, there's a spatial tension between plant shapes that gives the impression of an expressionistic vortex and containment within it's block-like structures. When we come to the massive triptych *META, 1999*, the grid has become a model of a medieval cathedral, sculpted in wax and dripping in harsh sunlight. Burton retains the grid only to play with it, bend it, smash it. It's like the bonds that hold us to our physical reality, one that can be tethered and stretched only so far.

Burton's use of color augments this feeling, as Matissean red, greens and blacks rub shoulders with a skillfully rendered range of metallics. These bronzes, golds and silvers are shaded with chroma, so that at odd angles they glow warmer or cooler. It takes a while for your eyes to grow accustomed to

this phenomena, and it happily refers back to a long history of non-Western decorative arts, Art Nouveau, and others. It's an interesting range of color to compliment his rhythmic structure: sacred, luminous, merely bright, schematic, repetitious, iron bound, sallow. His paintings are mixed with a great deal of organizational skill in order to embrace a chasm of meanings.

This brings us to the issue of interpretation. Deriving from a solid list of blue-chip modernists, we may see Burton as "in the tradition of," and mark him as a very commendable and serious abstract painter. Another side to him: light, humorous, at times even PoMo friendly, is also in evidence. His most recent paintings like *Rise, 1999* and the triptych *Meta* border on the ironic. Op Art is certainly evoked, but also the frenzied Sixties wallpaper that a generation of young people got stoned in front of. These kinetic patterns are currently in a fashion revival; exactly the kind of thing that a Postmodern painter would appropriate. Like Ross Bleckner's stripe paintings, they are emblems of dizziness pointing to low art references. Any further in this direction and his paintings would cease to be abstract experiences. They would merely comment on the flattening out of content within the abstract tradition. Burton, however, remains a believer and his paintings are always, first and foremost, journeys of travel and discovery.

High or Postmodernist, should we even be asking the question? Burton's very nature seems to dodge the answer. He has carefully developed an abstract language that seems correct for our times: serious and playful, compulsive yet meditative, calculated, but, above all, painterly. It's a contradictory achievement shaded with subtlety. While contradiction may not equal heroism, in Burton's hands, it's a facsimile that in these times looks more and more attractive.

Gregory Gillespie

New Paintings and Drawings

Forum Gallery through December 31

BY JOEL SILVERSTEIN

Over the years, Gregory Gillespie has employed a plethora of visual styles. Gillespie was part of a generation (which would include Jim Dine, Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein) that rebelled against abstract formalism and it's Greenbergian legacy. He is still the kind of artist that separates shape-making for its own sake from storytelling, which is part of the narrative/figurative tradition. In fact, when he paints or sculpts a shape, his goal in his own words, is to imbue it with "character." The same qualities he has in mind for his portraits and landscapes.

Emerging from the hegemony of Abstract Expressionist orthodoxy, Gillespie, like the slightly older R. B. Kitaj is probably winking over his shoulder at the great formal freedoms of Picasso. His work look little or nothing at all like the great Spanish artist, but there's a similar "Damn it, I'll paint whatever I want" attitude that gives Gillespie's work a conviction, momentum and a sense of joy which carries it over its weaker moments.

Gillespie's interests are wide ranging. He's strangely drawn to Northern and Italian Renaissance painters like Bosch, Bruegel and Uccello, those knotty, idiosyncratic masters who painted people like rutabagas and who were known as bristling and difficult colorists. They were also, given their various European and Christian traditions, painters of dreams, delusions and transformations through realistic metaphors.

If Gillespie can comfortably be placed within any artistic tradition, it is American Magic Realism, derived from European Surrealism. He shares the crepuscular shifting light and erupting surface qualities of Ivan Albright and the complex figurative compositions of Philip Evergood, two artists often overlooked today. Gillespie also combines the crusty ribbed surfaces and organic tangle of Max Ernst with the alienated loneliness of Yves Tanguy.

Gillespie's subject is consciousness. An avowed user at various times of mind- expanding techniques such as meditation, drugs and hypnotherapy, he focuses on how surfaces and images erupt and change. Even within figurative landscapes like *Provincetown, 1999* or *Lani's Game, 1999*, a simple beachscape or baseball game within a grove of trees is transformed. Every stroke of foliage seems to bear a face which is in the process of coalescing and peering out. There are also metaphorical fantasies more akin to the northern European tradition, *Red Sky Landscape, 1999*, for example, where unnatural red-green combinations and mutating bodies take on a Dantean metaphysical slant.

Gillespie is fearless in his formal juxtapositions, and he casually shifts if and when it fits his purpose – from the altarpiece and votive reliquary of *Severed Head, 1999*, which includes wood construction, bright graphic color, window screening and a floating self-portrait, to the erupting, near pornographic internality of *Male Orgasm, 1999*, to the series of brightly