

# Mike Weiss Gallery

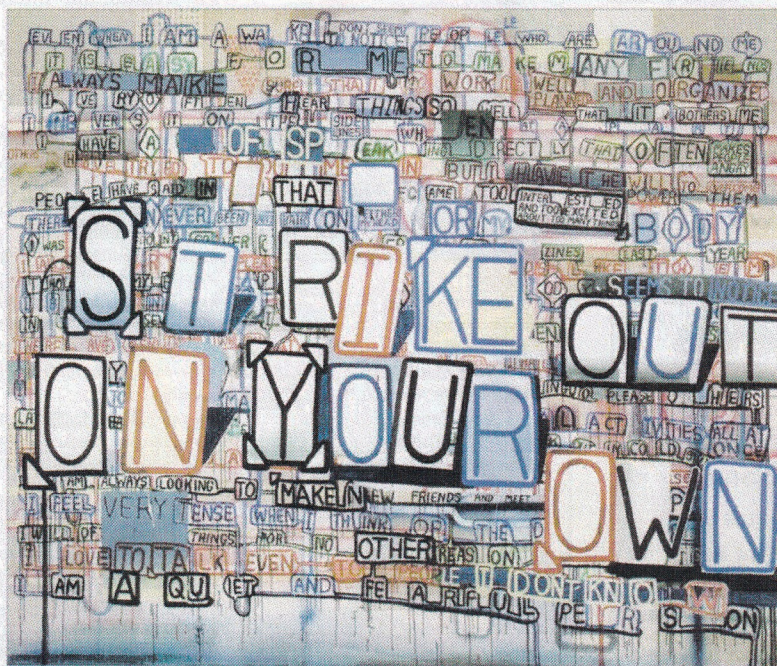
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## ARTnews

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### CRITIC'S PICK

### GRAHAM GILLMORE



Meanings multiply in Graham Gillmore's "wordscapes," such as *Strike Out on Your Own*, 2009.

**G**raham Gillmore understands the power of a well-placed comma. In his show "Drop Dead, Gorgeous" earlier this year at the Mike Weiss Gallery in New York, the addition of the comma to the title turned a gushing compliment into a threat. Such familiar phrases—from "strike out on your own" to "after you"—fluctuate in meaning when held up to scrutiny on canvases that Gillmore calls "wordscapes."

Painting freehand, Gillmore outlines his letters with squares that evoke children's blocks, as well as tombstones. The chunky letters often cast dark shadows and create both a spatial and a psychological landscape. "I'm attempting to invest language with as much substance as possible," says the 46-year-old artist, whose accountant father brought home ledger paper—which has rows of tiny squares—for Gillmore to paint on. "I also want to slow the viewers' reading of the text so they notice the architectonics of the letters themselves, and to suspend meaning until the last minute."

In his show at Mike Weiss, Gillmore focused on the gap between how we view ourselves and how we are viewed by others. For one piece, he co-opted language used in the psychological assessments he has been taking as part of a custody battle—statements he had to rank like "I love to talk even to people I don't know" and "I always make sure that my work is well-planned and organized." At once confessional and mocking, the work is poignant, humorous, and relatable.

The artist, who splits his time between New York and the tiny town of Winlaw in British Columbia, recalls being "hit over the head" by works by Rauschenberg and Ruscha on his first visit to the Vancouver Art Gallery, in high school. He graduated from Vancouver's Emily Carr University of Art and Design in 1985 and started using text after becoming frustrated with the limitations of figurative imagery. "I got into this more psychological domain, where the language was describing something that one couldn't visualize," says Gillmore.

These days he finds source material in everything from *The Sopranos* dialogue to a rejection letter he received, which he parodied in his exhibition this fall at the Monte Clark Gallery in Vancouver. His next show is scheduled for the spring at the OMR Gallery in Mexico City. Gillmore's prices range from \$12,000 for works on paper to \$50,000 for large canvases. "I'm playing a game with my viewers and myself," says the artist. "At the same time, there is some very serious autobiographical information in my work that I hope will help others come to terms with conflict and disappointment."

—Hilarie M. Sheets



Hilarie M. Sheets is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

COURTESY MIKE WEISS GALLERY, NEW YORK (2)



# Gillmore's Ploy tremendous

## FINE ART |

Vancouverite's  
works also take a  
delightful tangent

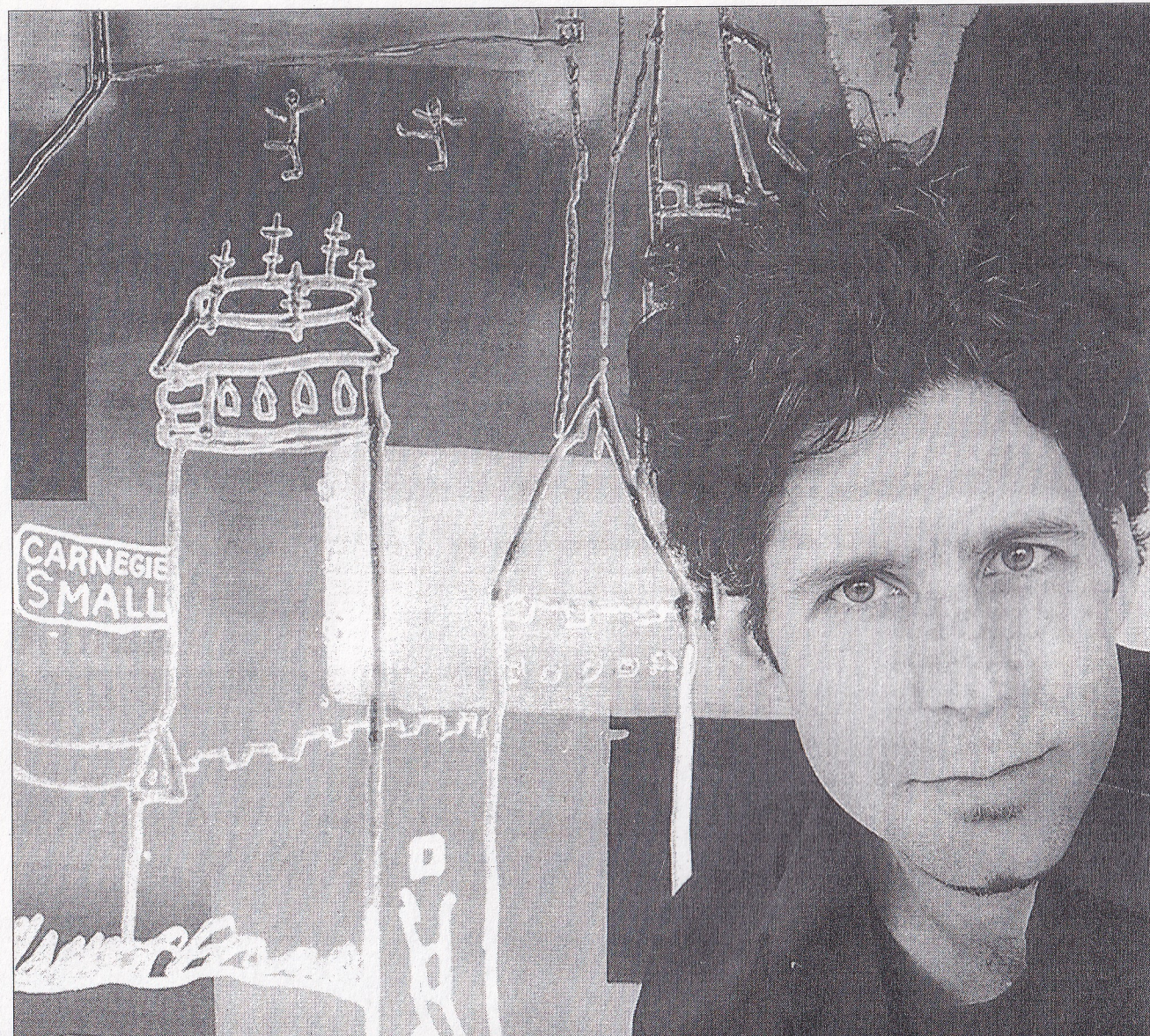
### Ploy

New work by GRAHAM GILLMORE  
Monte Clarke Gallery, 2339 Granville, until March 27

BY LEE HENDERSON

**REVIEW** | Graham Gillmore is coming off the buzz of a hugely prolific year of art-making, with more than 40 new pieces shown in more than seven solo shows in as many cities, and he's hit his stride. It's a serious challenge for a painter to have to produce that much work, knowing you really shouldn't turn down the chance to show at ConTEMPorary in New York, Kidder Smith in Boston, or Galeria OMR in Mexico City. You do the work, as Gillmore has, and trust you're ready, because the risk is always of losing that essential balance between intuition and investigation, and letting whichever side feels easiest take over.

In Gillmore's case, that would probably be intuition. On his well-known Masonite panels, oily pools of colour are usually clotted by unfussy thought bubbles filled with word associations, random samples of radio chatter, or half-remembered phrases. He likes visual puns, especially if they refer to sex. His style is primed with the reptilian-brained history of abstract expressionism, up from de Kooning and Pollack to Schnabel and Basquiat, and fits right





You walk into Monte Clarke right now to see the huge eight-by-nine-foot canvas that gives the show its title, and it's eye-bogglingly obvious Gillmore is feeling self-assured, energetic and very uplifted by his success during the past few years. On scale and in content, *Ploy* is a major work.

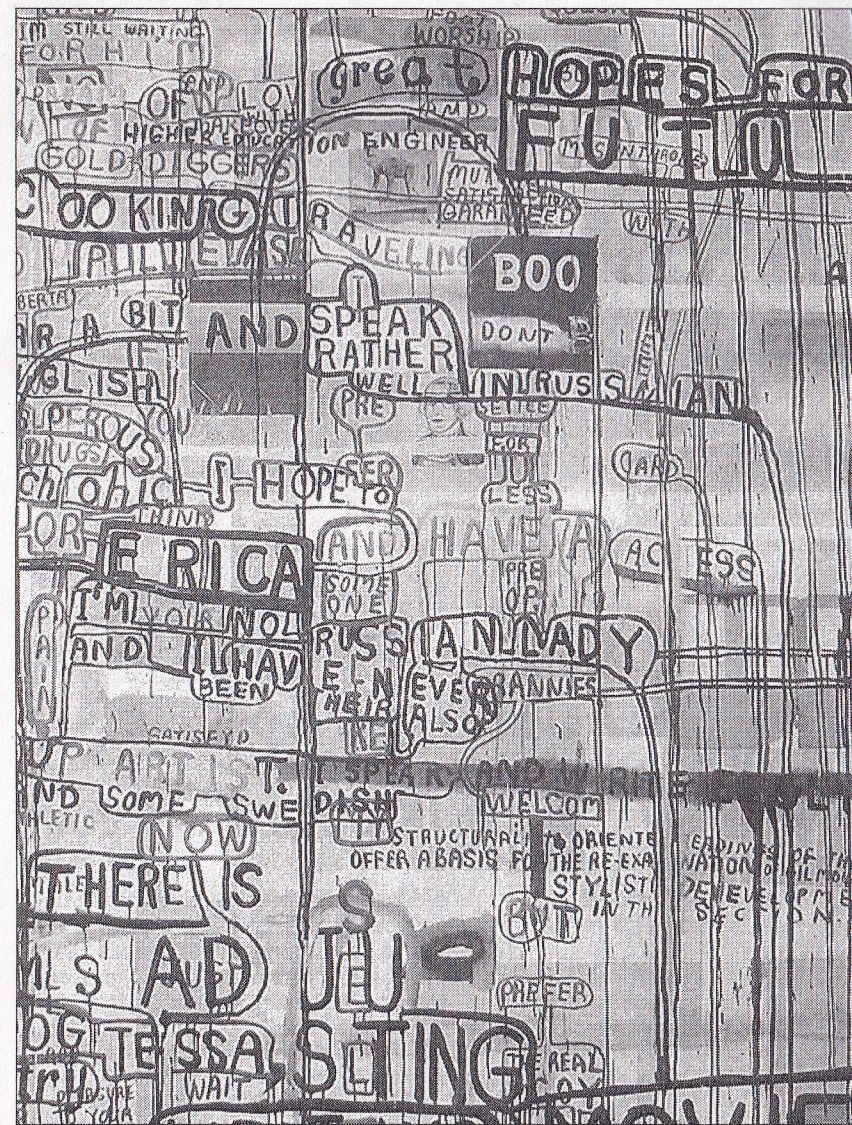
It's a canvas glued-over by 20 years of source material Gillmore has collected, including pages from San Francisco's Hotel Brunswick registry book, and old tipped-in prints of taxidermy. The subject of the painting is men and women, where they find each other, and how their relationships pan out. This choice between clandestine affairs signed in at the hotel registry with phoney erotic surnames, or a life of stuffed, lacquered, and zombified marital bliss is seen duking it out on Gillmore's canvas, and in the painted bubble trails of text, as well.

Horizontal red sentences tell stories of Eastern European women advertising for American husbands and the potential for a green card. Vertical blue letters spell out the vaguely demented, perversely specific, albeit temporary, needs of men as quoted from their personal ads. The sets of sampled language are braided and knotted together so that from a distance the colours and letters become abstract, and the noise from the red and blue voices is muted by a larger roar.

*Ploy* is a summary of a kind for Gillmore's career so far. All the elements of his work, the sex, the abstracted space and especially his love for the plasticity of words, is here inside this huge, tremendous canvas.

People at last Wednesday's opening kept saying it felt like being in a New York gallery. I don't think everyone meant the same thing by that, but it was true either way. *Ploy* is one of those gregariously amazing shows, the kind you hope to see in New York, even if it isn't in fashion with critics. Even heavyweight New York artist Julian Schnabel makes an explicit appearance in the form of a scrawled remark — "buy this painting because I want to make a

**Graham Gillmore with his painting, Carnegie Small, in background.**



**Detail of Gillmore's huge canvas, *Ploy*, on view at Monte Clarke.**

movie" — across the top right side of Gillmore's *84 Card Tricks*, a reference to Schnabel's shift from lucrative neo-abstract expressionist paintings to making movies. Schnabel is a sure influence on Gillmore's improvisatory style of painting, so who knows, perhaps we'll see Gillmore direct sometime soon. The painting is sold anyway. So are all the rest. He might have the dough to pull it off.

The other three canvasses and the one Masonite piece in the window are also pretty awesome. *Roadblock* is like one

boozy language of the piece an extra finish by urinating all over the canvas before it dried, smearing the letters like wet mascara off eyelashes. *The Sky is Falling* is the least aggressive work in the show, and even then the repeated phrase is a blunt equation linking sex and mon-

The weird stuff is at the back. Here we've got 25 works, smartly framed and hung sort of willy-nilly together, that make up a group of comic analyses of the implications of magazine language. You remember the last page of *Mad* maga-

joke on the first, well, that's what Gillmore has done. These smaller pieces are basically reassembled or folded magazine pages, so that the wrinkled words spell out things like "Polar Manics" instead of "Popular Mechanics," and "Canadian Ho" instead of "Canadian Home."

It's all in keeping with the spoonerisms and word destructions he performs in his more serious, labour-intensive works, but these are more plainly spontaneous. Since the canvasses around them are all pasted and collaged with old, found paper, and the title of *Ploy* comes from a folded *Playboy*, this well-chosen bundle of crumpled loose-leaf works are ephemeral in the right sense of the word. It's a funny, productive tangent that's acceptable beside the more significant works in the show.

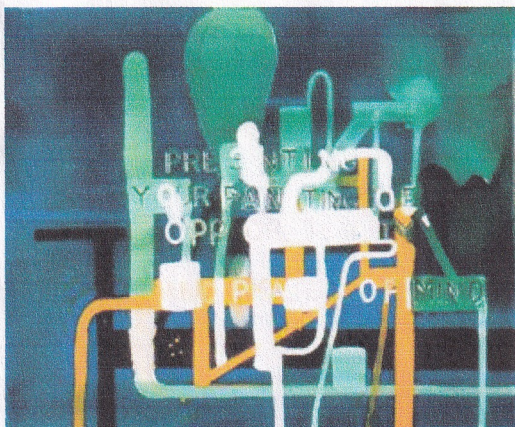
Gillmore's ideas and technique anticipated how many younger New York painters approach representation of our contemporary, Internet-enmeshed reality. Artists like Julie Mehretu, Casey Cook, and most definitely Erik Parker, use the canvas in the same kind of lexically shifty, visually atomized way that Gillmore's been committed to for close to 15 years.

Since 1991, Gillmore has been working steadily and with great commitment to an eccentric, semi-abstract vocabulary that's become more relevant the longer he proceeds. Vancouver artist Jason McLean, who'll be in New York's Armory Show this month, has told me he feels the "word bubbles connected by strands" in his drawings are motivated by seeing Gillmore's work over the years. And it's true that Gillmore's style is intangibly and immediately familiar to anyone whose life includes text messaging, appreciation for indoor graffiti, and a favourites folder of web links to William S. Burroughs fan sites.

With work in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (the only Canadian artist besides Jeff Wall MOMA owns), the Ghent Museum in Belgium, and Canada's Museum of Contemporary Art, it's a welcome rumour to hear that Gillmore's *Ploy* is on permanent loan to the Vancouver Art Gallery by the private collector who snapped it up before the opening. It would be a shame for this work to leave Gillmore's home city, considering how well it synthesizes his career, and validates his international success by its steady, confident rhythm of



## GRAHAM GILLMORE

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*Presenting this painting*, 2003  
Oil and enamel on board, 60" x 74"

The word 'palimpsest', defined as 'writing material used one or more times something having diverse layers beneath the surface' has been used by Graham Gillmore to describe his work. It is an appropriate description for an artist whose forte lies in discombobulating linguistic interpretation; Gillmore explores physical layers by routing into Masonite board, creating smooth, glossy jewel-toned paintings, erasing the artists' physical presence while words crawl freely about, unchained by need for meaning.

Another ongoing series is built up of layers of ledger paper on canvas over which his trademark words are painted, often trapped in bubbles and connected in a web of meaningless complexity across the canvas. The documents were given to him by his accountant father, and create a 'financial and mercantile foundation (upon which) Gillmore layers the aesthetic and literary.'

A thread that runs consistently throughout Gillmore's practice is his acknowledged desire to 'debase the exalted and exalt the debased'. Examples of this willful misunderstanding can be seen in his re-arrangement of the title of Walter Benjamin's famous text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* as *The Art of Work in the Age of Repoductive Mechanics*, and in his smaller *Fold-Ins* where, for instance a magazine cover of the lofty *Architectural Digest* gets reworked as *Clit*.

Staggeringly beautiful and frustratingly elusive, Gillmore's paintings are filled with information yet offer no vehicle for its interpretation. 'Gillmore is bringing to the surface interpretative complexity, thereby calling art theory and the process of looking'. A viewer may seek to interpret the work, or simply absorb its sublimity.