

Dorothy Gillespie's son rediscovers her decades-long art career

By Mike Allen mike.allen@roanoke.com

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ORLANDO, Fla. — Gary Israel drove up the parking garage ramp, a six-story spiral that encircles his mother's tallest sculpture. The late Dorothy Gillespie's "Celestial Joy" consists of 720 painted aluminum starbursts hung on 36 support cables that rise to the building's full height. Over the years, a passion flower vine has grown among the starbursts and bloomed.

In 1998, the Roanoke-born Gillespie oversaw the construction of "Encircled Path to the Enchanted Castle," a colorful 63-foot-tall column of aluminum panels that stood in the same spot. Hurricane Charlie destroyed the sculpture. In 2006, at age 86, Gillespie took the remains of the original and created "Celestial Joy."

Israel marveled, "How many artists have had an opportunity to do two different installations in the same space?"

Israel, 66, is on a large-scale journey not unlike the ride around his mother's sculpture, taking him to cities all over the United States, with her art always the central focus. He wants to reconstruct her decades-long career and make sure her pioneering ventures in the art world aren't forgotten. In the next few days, he'll undertake yet another series of trips, with stops in Harrisonburg, Staunton, Roanoke and Radford, as well as North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina and California.

He describes himself as a detective, tracking down leads, learning things about his mother that he hadn't known while she was alive. "She was everything but a typical artist or a typical parent," he said. "She definitely lived a life that no one knows or knew."

He's been recording interviews with collectors of his mother's work, with an eye toward writing a book, assembling a documentary, or both. Ultimately, he'd love to see a retrospective exhibition at a national museum, and he has a specific one in mind, an eclectic choice: the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas.

Though Gillespie was a successful artist by every metric, she didn't publicize her lengthy list of accomplishments or take steps to cement her legacy, the tasks that Israel has shouldered. "My mother would not be happy with what I'm doing now," he said, unless he could assure her that he found it personally rewarding, or that it would inspire other artists.

Her career reached an apex in 2003, when she was 83. She made the 185 sculptures that comprise "Color, Light and Motion" to fill the plaza in front of New York's Rockefeller Center. At the opening, Israel suggested that he could walk around the corner to the NBC television headquarters and pitch a story about the massive art installation nearby, assembled by an artist in her 80s. His mother's response?

“She cursed me out,” he said. “In a way, I’m glad she said no.” If not for her aversion to publicity, “I wouldn’t be on this journey.”

After driving thousands of miles to at least 45 different cities, he said, “I am beginning to realize not only how much my mother accomplished in her lifetime but more importantly how many lives she touched.”

Enough career for two people

The most recent issue of Woman’s Art Journal used an overview of Gillespie’s career as its cover story, written by Steve Arbury, director of the Radford University Art Museum, which holds about 90 of her artworks in its permanent collection. Israel aided the research for the article.

“At a time when women artists struggled to come into their own, Dorothy Gillespie forged a career that was independent, innovative, and individual,” Arbury wrote.

For Israel, cataloging his mother’s work poses a daunting task, even though she kept meticulous records of her sales in her New York studio. His labors have involved digging through decades of her career, back to 1939, when she was 19. She produced thousands of pieces.

“She was probably as prolific as anyone I’ve ever heard of,” he said. “For her, art was 24/7.”

A 1938 graduate of Jefferson High School in Roanoke, Gillespie defied her parents’ wishes when she chose to enroll in the Maryland Institute College of Art rather than train to become a teacher. She had known since she was a child that she wanted to become an artist, but Roanoke afforded no opportunities for her to pursue that goal.

She moved to New York and plunged into the art scene there. She also met her future husband, Bernard Israel. Together they operated a night club in Greenwich Village, where her paintings were displayed on the walls. Gillespie didn’t take her husband’s last name when they married in 1947, a rare choice at that time in history.

The couple moved to Miami, Florida, with their three young children, and there, Gillespie’s art career flourished. “She was so well-known that she would be stopped on the street,” Israel said.

Yet, when he was 13, his family moved back to New York, in the midst of the school year. Israel recalled being upset by the decision, but his mother, who sought new artistic challenges, had no regrets. “Here’s a person whose every decision turned out right in her mind,” he said. “She lived a life doing exactly what she wanted to do.”

Gillespie numbered among her acquaintances such art-world luminaries as Jackson

Pollock, Lee Krasner, Alice Neel, Louise Nevelson and Georgia O'Keeffe. “She had amazing stories that unfortunately are gone,” her son said.

During the 1960s, she built multimedia art installations that made political statements, such as 1965’s “Made in the USA,” that used blinking colored lights, mirrors, shadow boxes, rotating figures and tape recordings to convey a chaotic look at American commercial fads. The floor was strewn with real dollar bills, which visitors assumed were fake.

She took a leadership role in the Women’s Interart Center in [New York’s] Hell’s Kitchen, which was devoted to supporting female artists across different disciplines. She maintained a studio in the same building.

“She was a very complex person, not just that artist who became a sculptor,” Israel said. “She was an educator, a lecturer.” A far-flung traveler, she went on archaeological digs in Egypt, Greece and Italy, while her production of art never seemed to abate. “I sometimes wonder, were there two of her?”

In 1987, Birmingham-Southern College in Alabama honored Gillespie at a gala celebrating the careers of “Legendary Women.” Others who were celebrated included “60 Minutes” reporter Lesley Stahl, magazine publisher Anne Sutherland Fuchs and singer and actress Dinah Shore. In his mother’s records, Israel discovered thank you notes from the other honorees for small sculptures she gave to each of them.

Amazing life, amazing death

Gillespie became best known for the aluminum sculptures she started to produce at the end of the 1970s. She would paint sheets of the metal, cut them into strips and connect the strips together to resemble cascades or starbursts of bright colored ribbon. The New York Times once summarized her work as “topsy-turvy, merrymaking fantasy,” and in another review declared, “The artist’s exuberant sculptures of colorful aluminum strips have earned her an international reputation.”

Examples of her art shimmer and glisten in prominent Roanoke locales, such as the Center in the Square atrium, the Jefferson Center lobby and entrances to the Carilion Institute for Orthopaedics and Neurosciences and to the Historic Roanoke City Market.

Her sculptures are also quite prominent in Orlando. If you live there and have an eye for art, “it’s very difficult not to notice Dorothy,” said Alice McLaughlin, a Venezuela-born art merchant and host of the reality show “Frames & Fortune,” which has aired on Spanish language networks.

In Orlando, Israel visited a Neiman Marcus luxury department store, where a black and white starburst by Gillespie adorned the sales floor, part of the corporation’s official art collection.

McLaughlin cited Gillespie's presence in corporate collections as evidence of her chops. Personally, she admires everything about the sculptures, visions realized with "good technique, good balance, good craftsmanship."

She met Gillespie toward the end of the sculptor's life, and reached out to Israel after his mother's death. She encouraged him to use a GoPro camera to film his meetings with collectors, with an eye toward creating a documentary from the footage.

He imagines the film could be called "Connect the Dots." His mother went by Dot, he said, adding that she was sometimes called "The Wizard of Art," a play on Dorothy.

Israel describes his mother's last days with a mixture of admiration and bewilderment. At 92, by all accounts in great health, she began to refuse food. Even her death took place on her terms.

"Her life was amazing and her death was, too," he said.

Preserving a legacy

There's a common saw that an artist's works increase in value after his or her death, reinforced by tales of paintings by the likes of Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock selling for hundreds of millions of dollars at auction.

But for most artists and their families, the reality is quite different, Israel said, especially if the artist was a woman. "The art world is a man's world."

Though he's not an artist, Israel has had an eclectic career in his own right. He was once a tennis instructor to the likes of "60 Minutes" reporters Mike Wallace and Morley Safer. In 1986, he changed careers to become a teacher at Morris High School in the Bronx, where he founded an award-winning robotics team. Even though he retired in 2006, he still coaches the team.

Since the year his mother died, he's also been president of the Dorothy M. Gillespie Foundation in New York. His sister Dorien Bietz and brother Richard Israel are on the board of directors.

When he visits with collectors, he explains what his plans are to preserve his mother's legacy, and asks if they will be willing to loan their pieces out for retrospective exhibitions.

"Many times, no one has seen these pieces," he said.

At the same time, he looks for places to donate his mother's art, such as medical facilities. A children's hospital in New York City's Bronx borough will get six starbursts. The piece at the new Carilion orthopedics clinic is another such donation.

Not every venture has been a success. Last year, Israel tried to meet with the owner of a downtown Roanoke building that sports a huge Gillespie mural, much faded since his mother put the finishing touches on it in 1979. Israel said he hoped to get a restoration started, but the owner declined to see him.

An upcoming show at the Taubman Museum of Art, “Legacies: Honoring Artistic Luminaries from Southwestern Virginia,” will include some of Gillespie’s work when it opens in August. Israel intends to meet with Taubman officials when he visits next week.

He also wants to keep his mother’s legacy alive in other ways. He has been establishing art scholarships in his mother’s name at universities that have her art in their collections, or that worked with her in some other way. The scholarships help carry out the foundation’s mission “to support, develop and encourage the talents of young and emerging female artists in the United States,” he wrote.

If the school doesn’t have one of her pieces, he’s willing to donate one, “so the student who receives the scholarship can see the works of Dorothy Gillespie and hopefully be inspired by my mother’s story.”

He’s established scholarships at universities in Virginia, Arkansas, New Jersey and Florida. Next week, Israel also intends to talk to officials at Roanoke College and Hollins University about establishing scholarships there.

He’s also looking for a permanent home at a university for his mother’s archives.

Should Israel’s journey become a film, it will need an ending. He said McLaughlin has asked him what he would consider an ideal conclusion to the project’s story.

He decided the perfect cap would be a show at the Crystal Bridges Museum, with its southern location and contemporary art focus. Open since 2011, the museum is a newcomer to the national art stage, founded by billionaire Wal-Mart heir Alice Walton.

Israel took a tour of the museum in 2015, but in a page that could have been taken from his mother’s book, he did not approach the staff about his interest in seeing his mother’s art in those galleries.

“I want to get enough evidence so that they, the museum, will see all this body of work,” and will then call to say, “We see Dorothy Gillespie should be here.”