



R. TOM GILLEON

# A New Direction

*By Christina Leimer*



*Over the Rainbows, oil, 50" by 50"*

*"This is a favorite fishing spot on the Missouri River. An abundance of rainbow trout inspired the painting title."*

**D**uring the past decade, R. Tom Gillean's career has skyrocketed, earning him

*(Left) Slow Bull's Eye, oil, 50" by 40"*

*"Slow Bull had a unique design for his face paint. It was to help him observe how all things in life have beginnings and endings but do not begin or end. His wife was rather frightening in appearance and might have inspired the Bull's Eye."*

tremendous recognition and rewards. But now, at age 79, he's most excited about projects that are taking him in a new direction—what he calls his "2020 Vision"—and that might well be the most daunting challenge he's ever undertaken. It's a new phase of his artistic life from which paintings that he describes as "MMXX Masterworks" are emerging.

Gillean is best known for his iconic paintings of tipis and Native American images. His background in illustration, his sensitivity to nature, and his respect for the Old West unite in bold colors, sparse and direct composition, luminosity, and evocative lands and skies.

In the early 2000s, when Gillean was making his way toward a career as a fine artist, he painted his first



*Zebra, oil, 60" by 60"*

*"The word 'zebra' blended with the word 'brave' began with a dream featuring the mixing of the two words. To my knowledge, no Native American ever saddled a zebra."*

tipi and thought, "Don't quit your day job," he says. He was amazed when it sold and has come a long way since then.

In 2013, he became the first living artist to have a solo exhibit—Let Icons be Icons: The Art of R. Tom Gilleon—at the C. M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana. He also

broke the museum's record auction sale price for a living artist when his painting, *Hair Apparent*, sold for \$265,000. Two years later, he was inducted as a founding member of the Russell Skull Society of Artists.

Today Gilleon's works are in the permanent collections of several museums, including the C. M. Russell,



(Top right) Gary Owen Blues, oil, 48" by 36"

"Gary Owen refers to the marching music favored by General Armstrong Custer, which was reputed to have been played during the attack on a village on the Washita. The music was heard but no soldiers were seen because of the heavy, misty fog and ice."

(Bottom right) Bad Moon On The Rise, oil, 24" by 30"

"The last warmth of a weak winter sun passes over a lone tipi in the shadows. The lodge's design suggests the nature of the starving time: long, cold nights and little food, skeletal bison, and a 'bad moon' on the rise."

the Denver Museum of Art, the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, and the Scottsdale Museum of the West. "A lot of my work isn't very public, but was bought by some pretty impressive people, private collectors who prefer not to have their names known," Gilleon says. "One gentleman collects Remingtons and Russells—and Gilleons. I just like saying that. It's been so encouraging for me."

Many artists become pigeonholed as they become successful, and Gilleon didn't want to be one of them. As the year 2020 approached, he asked himself, "What would I paint if I knew it was my last painting? How would it change me? Would the paint flow effortlessly or become a battle?" At first, it was only a mental exercise, but then he decided that he would never know the answers to those questions unless he took the plunge. And that, he says, is the driving force behind his 2020 Vision.

So it was that Gilleon began to paint free from market considerations. If he wants to spend weeks on a painting, he does. If he wants to destroy a painting, he can do that, too. He is free to paint what he wants how he wants—and that includes his dreams.

For years, images came to Gilleon in his dreams but, if he painted them, he shaped them to fit gallery expectations. That's no longer true. Now, if his dreams show him what to paint, he'll paint it as he experiences it. For example, he saw the word "zebrave" in a dream and, when he





painted it, it came out on canvas as a Native American astride a zebra. Another dream resulted in a painting of a flaming tipi. He thought no one would want it, yet everyone who walked into his gallery in Cascade, Montana, gravitated directly to it—and it sold. In fact, the first 10 of his Vision 2020 paintings have all sold.

What has Gilleon learned so far

in answer to his questions? “It’s the hardest thing [I] will ever do,” he says, adding that having no guidelines or requirements means he is free to put anything he wants onto a blank canvas. “It’s like you don’t have an umbilical cord, and you’re floating. The freedom is exhilarating and scary. It’s 100 percent on you if you fail.”

Until he was about 6, Gilleon lived in the Florida countryside with his Scottish immigrant cabinetmaker grandfather and Cherokee grandmother, who taught him to be independent. They lived in a small house lit only by kerosene. That dim light fascinated the young boy, as did his grandfather’s drawings and curled wood shavings on the floor. Living



near the Suwannee River, their yard was white sand, and that's where Gillean learned to draw. Using a stick, he drew in the sand—a sailboat, the ocean, and various geometric shapes.

Following his high school graduation, he enrolled at the University of Florida on a baseball scholarship but dropped out and joined the

Navy, continuing to draw during his service. He got married in the early '60s, started to raise a family, and studied at the Art Students Guild at Brevard in Melbourne, Florida. He was also a freelance illustrator and later worked for Pan Am, illustrating NASA's Saturn and Apollo space programs.

In the '70s and '80s, Gillean illus-

*Evolution of Evolving Lives, oil, 60" by 120"*

*"Native American lives quickly evolved toward extinction. This painting is painted layer upon layer of not only paint but also image overlaying image over image, layer upon layer—evolving."*

trated and designed theme parks and shows for Disney Imagineering,



*Native Trilogy, oil, 56" by 90"*

*"This is a reflection on the three (trilogy) lodges."*

before buying a 2,000-acre ranch in Cascade, Montana, and turning to fine art. Now divorced, he paints in a studio on his ranch and at his gallery in a renovated 1910 bank building in town.

Gilleon is proud of his most recent innovative project: digital paintings. The idea came to him as he watched nature's cycles come and go over nearby Square Butte. "It doesn't move, but everything around it does," he says. "I want you to get the experience I get of the mountain." In order to show the many changes in those cycles, he would have to do many paintings, but even then, viewers would not get the sense of motion and time he wanted to convey.

Gilleon found the solution with digital paintings. Using digital brushes, he paints a landscape at different seasons or times of day on a computer screen. He then merges those images electronically, uses additional digitization to capture natural motion such as falling snow, and adds a soundtrack.

Those paintings, Gilleon says, are not simply animation or computer-



*Brule, oil, 60" by 60"*

*"This is the result of another dream. It is still unclear what the dream meant, but the most likely answer is reaction to the sad, violent, and tragic treatment."*

(Right) Three of 32 selections from Gilleon's Fort Mountain series, oil, 46" by 75"

generated art. "You can see the texture of canvas and the brushstrokes in the digital paintings," he says. "I worked hard to do that. It's not a painting to me without it."

Another unique quality of his digital paintings is that, while most other digital art is futurist in its content and technique, "I go back to oil painting and the Old West, the opposite direction, which is pretty much the story of my life," he says.

Gilleon recently completed a series of digital paintings for clients who live on a lake in Wisconsin and invited him to visit and paint what he saw. The result was 22 paintings that cover a day and a half, with changes in lighting, clouds, moon, fog, and birds. His most recent digital piece, titled *Fort Mountain*, consists of 32 paintings that take viewers through seasonal cycles.

Last summer, Gilleon was interviewed for National Geographic's 10-part TV series about Native Americans and artists who live along the Continental Divide. He currently is partnering with family friend, art collector, and independent filmmaker Richard King to represent his work. King is handling the logistics, lining up auctions, and working to get Gilleon's paintings into major galleries in Europe and Japan and is shooting a PBS documentary titled "The World of Tom Gilleon," which will air next year.

Next year will bring another highlight when Gilleon's paintings will be shown alongside those created by Ken Riley, who passed away in 2015, at the Scottsdale Museum of Western Art. "I love his work," Gilleon says. The exhibit will be on view for six months and will include 40 of Gilleon's past paintings, 20 illustrations from his days at Disney, 10 new paintings, and a digital painting created specifically for the show.

In 2010, Gilleon told a writer for *Art of the West* that his goal was "to live



and paint for a very, very long time." Now, his goal is to come full circle, to be an artist as free as the little boy with a stick in his hand, drawing in the white sand of his grandparents' yard. His intent, he says, is "to begin

each new painting as if it is to be my last." 

*Christina Leimer lives in Marin County, California.*