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At the Galleries

Taplin's recent work rang changes on familiar images and types, forcing us to look harder and to reconsider our assumptions. His small figure groups tracking the adventures of the British heir to the commedia dell'arte, Punch, had immediate associations with decorative figurines, not only because of their costumed protagonist, but also because of their intimate, precious size, delicate modeling, and refined surfaces. Cast in urethane resin, the sculptures are a sugary, matte, slightly translucent white that has been described, Taplin recounts, gleefully, as "looking like a cross between alabaster and marzipan." Despite these decorative (and tasty) associations, the Punch sculptures are anything but ingratiating. Dreadful things happen to the eternal trickster/victim; he behaves rudely. Taplin's little tableaux can risk becoming too illustrative, but in the best, the near-kitsch associations he courts are countered by notable sculptural invention: a startling scale shift, for example, between a child-size, wizened figure with an unchildlike beaky nose, and a casually dressed, attentive woman who holds his hand, in *The Young Punch Goes Shopping with His Mother* (2005). An isolated figure of a dancing Punch managed to fuse the traditions of the dancing Shiva Nataraja, nineteenth-century porcelain, and the present-day tchotchke with remarkable effect.

The centerpiece—and high point—of the show was an eerie improvisation on the funerary monument, dedicated to the late hyper-realist painter, Gregory Gillespie. Again, Taplin exploited dislocations of scale to heighten drama and mystery. A burly, bald, mustachioed man, about three-quarter life-size, rides on a sleek, muscular dog, represented actual size or even slightly larger than life; the dog stands on a chest with a slightly domed, perhaps padded lid—an ancient burial container? a domestic object? The robust man, stripped to the waist, raises one massive hand before his face, gripping a couple of paintbrushes? weapons? but he seems asleep; his other arm is relaxed, with a flaming wheel of life—an unexpected inclusion, invisible from the other side of the sculpture—dangling negligently from his meaty fingers. The dog appears preternaturally alert and vigorous, all the more so because of the man's paradoxical upright pose and seeming lack of consciousness. The image is simultaneously archetype, portrait, perhaps even displaced self-portrait, its subject a hero, barbarian, warrior, or mystic. Self-contained and introspective, the sculpture seems at once inevitable and puzzling. The clear, assured modeling of the forms, the satisfying balance of the composition, and the matte pallor of the fine-grained, exquisitely finished gypsum cement in which the piece is cast, all contribute to a sense of harmony, yet the imagery and the conflicting scales disrupt these comforting associations. In the medieval monuments known as *gisants,* the deceased is often depicted as lying down but awake, hands folded in prayer, with a dog at his feet, as a symbol of fidelity. (In fact, dogs are more usually associated with women; men frequently have lions, for bravery, but that's another issue.) Taplin plays on these connotations but also invokes other cultures and invents private symbols, to create a haunting sculpture that eludes explanation even as it provokes more and more associations. That may make it the perfect monument for the notoriously cranky, fiercely intelligent Gillespie, author of some of the most complicated, obsessive, and frequently baffling paintings in recent history.