

REYNOLDS GALLERY

For Immediate Release

Donato: Fresh

Curated by Paul Monroe

April 21 – May 26, 2017

Opening Reception
Friday, April 21
7 – 9 pm



Couple, 1994, acrylic and house paint on doors, 80 x 90 inches, 3-part panel.
Image courtesy of Travis Fullerton and Reynolds Gallery.

Reynolds Gallery is pleased to present the opening of *Donato: Fresh*, an exhibition of paintings and drawings by Gerald Donato, the late artist and prominent figure in the Richmond arts scene. *Donato: Fresh* marks a significant showing of the artist's work, as this will be his first retrospective exhibition since his passing in 2010. It is curated by Paul Monroe, a retired physician and extensive art collector in Richmond who was a close friend of the artist. The exhibition will open with a reception on Friday, April 21 from 7 - 9 pm, and will run until May 26, 2017. The show will benefit the VCU School of the Arts Donato Prize in Sculpture and Painting.

Gerald "Jerry" Donato grew up in Chicago in the 1950s and '60s, adapting to the irreverent age of hippies and the Beats, when cynicism and irony were as prevalent as roller skates and peace signs. Donato became a collector of ideas, appropriating his worldwide travels and studies of Classicism, Pop Art, and Postmodernism into a panoptic expression of art and culture. His eclectic approach translates into his artwork, as paintings and drawings become whimsical expressions of high art aesthetic and pop culture elements. Deliberately curated yet intuitively casual, no composition exists predictable or guaranteed.

Paul Monroe's relationship with Donato extended beyond the formalities of art collecting. The two would travel to art fairs and museums, taking trips up to New York, accompanied by Donato's wife, Joan Gaustad. They soaked it all in together, consumed by a similar fascination for the peculiar, inexplicable, yet-to-be-explored things of the world. For *Donato: Fresh*, Monroe was intrigued by the subtle transformations emerging throughout Donato's work, notably its increased abstraction circa 1990. To distinguish this transition, one side of the downstairs gallery includes earlier work from the 1980s, while the adjacent gallery work spanning from the 1990s to early 2000s.

From the treasure house of imagery arises an authenticity, amplified by Donato's sense of material and unrestricted by conventional methods. Wooden doors replace canvases, and

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house paint supplants acrylic as subtle lines of wood grain peer beneath cartoonish scenes. Cut-out canvas exaggerates surface, paralleling shapes and forms within the paintings. The contrast between two- and three-dimensional spaces is reproduced in his imagined characters, ranging from smiling Buddhas, muted nudes, bowties, and wonky figures.

One side of the gallery presents a collection of Donato's symbolic paintings, delving into a world of characters which flit across his earlier work. The most prevalent figure is a round-face cartoon with long eyes and a slanted smile. Known as "Mr. Man", the fleeting character was inspired by Steamboat Willie, the precursor to Disney's Mickey Mouse. Donato's wife, Joan, states "he first did that image on a napkin in a bar." As the image developed, *Mr. Man* becomes a voice for Donato, emerging as his alter-ego—a compelling force even in Donato's passing. Contrasting the stick-like figure of *Mr. Man*, a shapely female silhouette often appears in tandem with him. Dubbed *Moon-Face*, the vibrantly captured woman references Joan, a romantic muse within the quirky scenes. In Donato's later work, on view on the opposite side of the gallery, abstraction takes precedence over his figures. Characters occasionally appear, but dance behind paint chips, psychedelic dots, and geometric forms as abstraction becomes the new adventure within the paintings.

In a recent catalog correlating with this exhibition, Monroe notes, "In Untitled (2002-3), a striped pattern is present both in the background at the bottom and in the center of the foreground, with polka dots of various sizes and colors sprinkled throughout...there is a palpable sense of movement between foreground and background; on the left edge of the painting, Mr. Man leans forward, striding into what appears to be a puddle—perhaps a promise of further slapstick movement yet to come. What is going on? We don't know, but we engage in the paintings, trying to figure them out."

These narrative landscapes communicate comedy and wit, laced with implications of race, culture, religion, and alienation. They require an intense engagement; as we assess each scene, unravelling the complexities of characters and nuanced art references, we undergo a deeper process of inner-reflection. The paintings exist mirror-like; created years ago, they adapt and challenge their current age as relevancy and historical narrative merge.

The Chicago-born artist (1941) received his MA and BS degrees from Northern Illinois University, and later earned his MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He was among the core founding teachers of VCUarts (originally known as the Richmond Professional Institute), where he taught for 38 years in the Painting and Printmaking Department. Among many accolades, he received two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and a VMFA Professional Fellowship. He was a founding member of 1708 Gallery, a non-profit contemporary art venue in Richmond, VA. He mounted exhibitions nationally and internationally, at galleries including Hunt Gallery, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, VA; Kathryn Sermas Gallery, New York, NY; Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA), Winston-Salem, NC; and galleries in Belgium, Peru, and Moscow. His work is held in numerous private and public collections, including Markel Corporation, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Federal Reserve Bank, all, Richmond, VA; Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA; among others.

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