

Gerald Donato

STEAMBOAT WILLIE AS MR. MAN

I want my paintings to say yes and no simultaneously, while operating somewhere between the extremes of anarchy and total order," says Gerald Donato. To accomplish this, Donato employs a cast of characters gleaned from newspapers, TV, and old movies. "My characters strike a pose of self-confidence and boldness, as models do in advertising. I transform them from the American dream that ads portray into disproportionate size relationships and impossible cartoon-strip situations."

One day about six years ago, Donato was watching a TV documentary about Walt Disney's animated films when Steamboat Willie, an early Mickey Mouse character, appeared on the screen. Since then Donato's version of Willie—a masklike figure-eight head dubbed Mr. Man—has been a presence in his paintings.

Mr. Man assumes a number of poses—the actor stepping upstage to deliver an aside, the skeptical observer, or perhaps the fool. And he has a female counterpart, an overtly libidinous Mae West-like figure whose cartoon face suggests a Gabon- or Baule-style African mask or even a Modigliani head. "He reflects my feelings, moods, anger, joy, and depressions of the day," Donato says of Mr. Man. "He is



JOAN GAUSTED

Painter Gerald Donato gets a chance to interact with his characters.

also irreverent, funky, ill-mannered, and disrespectful. There is something very American about his self-assured machismo. He could be the wisecracking kid in the back of the class, like me."

Donato, 46, wisecracked his way

through Chicago schools until he reached Lane Technical High School, which in the late '50s was one of the few Chicago schools where a student could major in a particular area of art. He studied commercial art at Lane, went on to Northern Illinois University for a B.S.Ed. and an M.A. in art, and to the University of Wisconsin at Madison for an M.F.A. in printmaking and painting. At Wisconsin, he was heavily influenced by teacher Milton Resnick, who, as Donato says, "painted from the heart."

In 1967 Donato moved to Richmond, Virginia, to set up a lithography studio at Virginia Commonwealth University. He concentrated on printmaking until the mid-'70s and then returned to painting. The artist continues to live in Richmond, where he currently holds a Virginia Museum Fellowship, and shows both locally and nationally. For Donato, Richmond's charms extend beyond its active arts community. "It's a little over an hour's drive to the ocean, an hour from the Blue Ridge Mountains, an hour and a half from Washington, D.C., and six and a half hours to New York. Also, Virginians are well-mannered and civil. All this makes Richmond a good place to live and produce my art."

Donato paints in an old Richmond beer joint, which he converted into a studio—a place where his painted characters would



COURTESY THE ARTIST

Untitled, 1985, 36 by 48 inches, enamel and oil on canvas. In this layered buildup of symbols, figures and objects establish unexpected relationships.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ABOVE Mr. Man wheels (flies?) by the girls in *Walk This Way*, 1985-86, 60 by 75 inches.
BELOW *The Three Graces: At It Again*, 1985-86, 66 by 60 inches. Standing so close, their costumes merging, these women remain isolated from one another.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

feel at home. He likes to work on three or four paintings at a time but usually concentrates for a week on one before switching to another. "When the painting gets too good or too bad, I put it away for a while until I become a stranger to it again."

Halos, boats, spirals, faces, floating lips, and hands appear in his works in a layered buildup of symbols. This layering technique is a natural extension of the artist's previous work with lithography. The backgrounds are loosely painted, with broad brushstrokes and abrupt contrast shifts in bands or color fields. Figures or symbols are frequently incised into the ground, or images are obtained by scraping away previously laid-down paint. Then the figures are applied with a monotype-quality line, as if finger painted with swipes and gestures. Donato is a master at building layers of differing color densities. He is able to superimpose vibrant yellows with blues, greens, and reds to give a light, airy impression, as in *Walk This Way* (1985-86). In other works, he creates a dense effect, with the layers more opaque. *At It Still* (1985) combines both: light wash areas coexist with densely painted masks.

In *The Three Graces: At It Again* (1985-86), the color relationships are different. Here color is used in a literal way, to represent race. Three women, white, black, and Asian, stand against a background of shifting hues that contrast with their faces. Their clothing seems to dissolve into ground. It is significant that while the figures stand very close together, they in no way acknowledge one another's existence.

Donato's deft use of contrasts extends beyond color juxtapositions to the way his characters and symbols interact. The masks, figures, and objects that appear to be independent and totally unrelated to one another are somehow connected by the warping of time and space through the layering process. Though Donato begins with a plan, details impose themselves spontaneously, thereby establishing for the artist and the viewer unexpected associations; the static and frenetic coexist in these paintings. Finally, in his use of the cartoon as a vehicle for social commentary, Donato succeeds in establishing a crucial ironic distance.

This is a smart, sophisticated, nervous humor, not stand-up comedy lampooning current events and famous people—it's more self-reflective. Donato, through Mr. Man, exhorts us to look below the surface, be skeptical, and expect the unexpected. What we find in his work is a vision of the disparities of American culture rendered with a subtle but sharp wit. —Jon Meyer

Jon Meyer is an ARTnews correspondent based in North Carolina.