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Gerald Donato  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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Moorefield

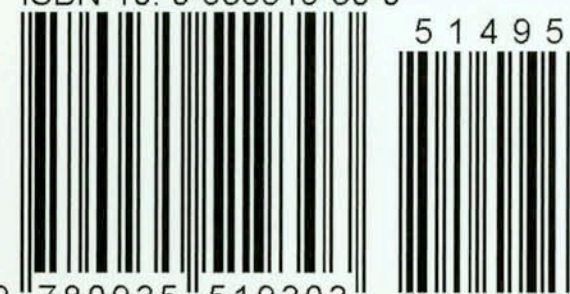
Gerald Donato: Reinventing the Game

VCUarts Anderson Gallery

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*above* **Untitled**, 1988(9)–90 (cat. no. 59). Acrylic on canvas. 48 × 48.

*front and back cover* **Beach**, 1999 (cat. no. 71). Six panels. Acrylic on panel. 80 × 153 ½.

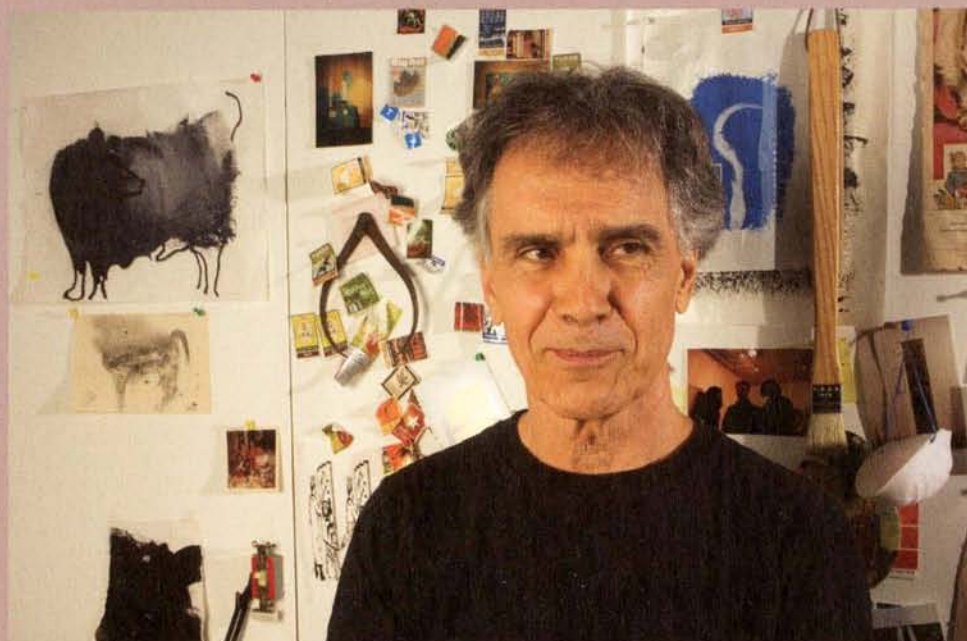




Gerald Donato  
Reinventing the Game

VCUarts Anderson Gallery  
January 26 to March 4, 2007





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Gerald Donato, *Beach*, 1999.

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**Reinventing the Game**  
by Amy Moorefield

A cartoonish figure (imagine a cross between Mickey Mouse and Little Boy Blue) beckons the viewer. He unfurls a curtain to reveal a lovely nude nymph curled up like an oyster in a ghost lover's embrace. The figure slyly winks and grins. Welcome to the whimsical and strange world of Gerald Donato.

This exhibition showcases over forty years of the celebrated artist's paintings, drawings, and prints, but it is not a conventional retrospective by any means. Instead, it showboats Donato's savvy and satirical mechanisms drawn from familiar cartoon imagery and nonsensical sources, and it celebrates his unique pictorial language, displayed in a non-chronological format. The exhibition includes portraits of Donato by other artists that employ diverse media such as LED screens, video, and papier mâché. Additionally, a segment of the exhibition is dedicated to Donato's artistic process through a presentation of his unique collection of objects and preliminary sketches.

Throughout his career, Donato has mined both the high brow and the low, culling visual references from New York's Bowery; from Italy and Paris; from the Richmond art scene; from North Carolina's Avon shores. A visitor glimpsing into his studio is inundated by layers of nonsensical souvenirs. Altered black velvet paintings vie for space next to action heroes, while a sexy, high-heeled vixen in a well-known Allen Jones print tilts against the wall adjacent to a jolly Father Christmas. This layered buildup of images is mirrored in Donato's work. A classic example is his appropriation in the early 1980s of an early Disney precursor to Mickey Mouse, known as Steamboat Willie. Renamed "Mr. Man" by Donato, he pops up routinely, rendered in simple gestures and acting as a rogue foil. Often, Mr. Man is paired with a mysterious feminine muse

*opposite Window*, 1997 (cat. no. 68). Acrylic and oil and collage on canvas. 65 × 55.







the artist calls “Moon-Face.” The two perform as Donato’s intelligent designers, referencing the gaps in humanity’s evolutionary narrative. In Donato’s pictorial plane, Mr. Man plays the fool, the investigator, and the doubting Thomas. Donato once said about Mr. Man, “There is something very American about his self-assured machismo. He could be the wisecracking kid in the back of the class, like me” (Jon Meyer, “Gerald Donato: Steamboat Willie as Mr. Man,” in *ARTnews*, January 1988, pg. 65). Other postmodern artists, such as Red Grooms and Jim Dine, have appropriated imagery from icons of mass culture, but for a different purpose. Donato uses Mr. Man as his alter ego, rather like an avatar rendered in two dimensions.

Important to note in Donato’s repertoire is his choice of everyday materials. Using house paints, he paints on ordinary hollow-cored doors easily purchased at Lowe’s and reuses canvases; no surface is too prosaic a vehicle for him. The flexibility of common materials is a key element for Donato, who punches holes and then inpaints the hollow doors and incorporates the material’s natural wood grain, as



*left* **Untitled #7**, 1976 (cat. no. 21). Acrylic on paper. 29 1/2 × 22 1/4.  
*opposite bottom* **Untitled (Avon Series)**, 1984 (cat. no. 41).  
Charcoal on paper. 19 3/4 × 25 1/2.



in *Curtain* from 1997 – 99 and *Beach*, 1999. The malleability of material evokes Donato's sly wit, as well as his ability to take advantage of the unexpected in the everyday.

Often there is also a sculptural illusion, as Donato creates a playful relationship between actual and illusionary space. Take, for example, *Untitled #7* from 1976, in which he presents a reductive landscape employing only two colors without hue or saturation modeling (imagine Matisse). The picture plane is flat. In the center of the canvas, one section is painted out/erased in the shape of a perfect circle, creating a paradoxical illusion. Is the painting flat or is there a real hole in the center? In the next couple of years others would begin to play with similar techniques, for instance the well-known California artist John Baldessari. In the 1990s, Donato pumped up the volume by adding collage elements. The illusion becomes more defined by way of cutting and implementing elements such as fake wood-grained contact paper to the canvas, as in *Window* from 1997. Years later, in 2002, Donato revisited the topic in a series of paintings exhibited at Mary Baldwin College. In those works, the simultaneous suggestion of both circle/hole or positive/negative space is complemented by a series of artificially painted shapes and shadows, giving a three-dimensional quality and intimating the presence of a portal to another realm.



As an artist, one of Gerald Donato's greatest strengths is his ability to repeatedly reinvent himself. He flexes his humanity through a witty subversion of the world, continually culling from art-historical references and sampling popular culture, taking what he needs but invariably adding funky twists and sharp turns. Paired with his inventive use of common materials, Donato creates unexpected and irreverent relationships in his work. Invoking the title of a Maurice Sendak children's book, Donato's pictorial realm is a land of anarchy and order, yes and no, skepticism and humor — it is where the wild things are.







**Gerald Donato:**  
**Against the Grain**  
*by Richard Roth*

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause  
in the lecture room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

WALT WHITMAN, "WHEN I HEARD THE LEARN'D ASTRONOMER"

### **Chicago**

Jerry Donato spent his formative years in Chicago. The influence of this mythological midwestern metropolis is felt everywhere in Donato's work. Sandburg's "city of big shoulders" was built by tough, ambitious working-class immigrants—they labored in the factories, stockyards, and slaughterhouses. Donato's father, Mike, hoisted train cars as the operating engineer of a huge overhead crane for GM; his mother, Rose, was also a factory worker. All around them were great institutions and fertile traditions: the Art Institute of Chicago, the Field Museum, the University of Chicago, the Hairy Who, and the Cubs. Chicago makes a lasting impression without even trying.

In 1951 the French painter and father of Art Brut, Jean Dubuffet, went to Chicago and gave theoretical support to the development of Chicago artists' burgeoning outsider identity. Dubuffet wrote of Art Brut: "We understand by this term works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture, where mimicry plays little or no part.... These artists derive everything—subjects, choice of materials, means of transposition,



rhythms, styles of writing, etc.—from their own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art. We are witness here to the completely pure artistic operation, raw, brute, and entirely reinvented in all of its phases solely by means of the artist’s own impulses. It is thus an art that manifests an unparalleled inventiveness” (from “Art Brut Preferred to the Cultural Arts,” 1949).

Jerry Donato has an MFA from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, he has clocked countless days intensely looking at art in museums and galleries all over the world, he has taught printmaking and painting for thirty-eight years at VCU, and he has lived and worked in Paris and New York. Donato is clearly not Dubuffet’s outsider “unscathed by artistic culture,” but Donato does value and strive for a painting “raw, brute, and entirely reinvented.” His irreverent, in-your-face attitude, born of Southside streets, is an American story. He revels in the vulgar and the underappreciated, and he stands defiant of all forms of artifice and authority.

It is also interesting to note that Donato came of age just following the Beats and during the rise of hippies, ideological forces that clearly flavor his work. Total freedom in defiance of bourgeois values and experiments with drugs, free-love, pot, and rock and roll—artists were finally on the same page as the defiant masses of young people.

Anti-Vietnam War protests, Zen, macrobiotic food, Gurus, hallucinogens, Bucky Fuller, The Whole Earth Catalog. Jerry Donato was a freewheeling hipster with attitude...and thus he painted.

## Italy

Donato doesn’t work in series—his approach is much looser than that. In fact his method is more episodic, quite like a never-ending Fellini film. He just goes forward from one attraction to the next, finding delight in a shape or a gesture and then moving on. Many of his forms and







devices resurface in works painted years apart. There is evidence everywhere in Donato's work of his Italian/Calabrian heritage—sensual pleasure, earthiness, and passionate gusto abound.

### **Becoming a Painter**

Donato began his art career as a printmaker, and not long after being hired to teach lithography at Virginia Commonwealth University he realized he had the sensibility and constitution of a painter. So...Donato taught himself to paint, methodically and with great determination, over a period of many years. He became not just a painter, but a hard-core, no-holds-barred painters' painter. On a leave from teaching in 1976, he and his wife, Joan Gaustad, spent seven months in New York in a studio on the Bowery, and later in Robert Morris's studio on Greene Street.

Donato's goal was to "paint as good as he could draw." This autodidactic approach might account for the many works that seem to have been arrived at by a logic that is unique and unexpected. Donato's marks ring true, like the shoe store sign painted by the shoemaker who has never painted anything before—the wonderfully wacky sign with the big shoe image is the result of an authenticity that results when one tackles a task without preconception. How does one paint a shoe? How does one paint? Jerry so often finds his own way to build a painting—a series of unique and authentic moments that add up to a distinctly eccentric, off-kilter, and sometimes perverse take on painting.

### **Joan**

It is not possible to think of Jerry Donato without thinking of his beautiful, ethereal wife, Joan Gaustad. Their story and panache are the stuff of Hollywood movies and local legend. Joan is a talented and sensitive painter in her own right; her paintings are delights of gossamer ornamentation melded to a psychological figuration—a kind of visual magic realism. Joan and Jerry have even exhibited together. In 1999 they



had a two-person exhibition at 1708 Gallery in Richmond—remembered by most as the Jerry and Joan Show.

Apparent opposites, celestial Joan and earthbound Jerry are each other's muses; they counterbalance each other, complete each other. They have been deeply enmeshed in the Richmond art scene since 1968. Donato was a founding member of 1708 Gallery, and both have been supporters of the arts in Richmond ever since. They are still encouraging young talent—purchasing student paintings—and are actively involved in keeping Richmond's growing community of artists together.

### The Work

Donato makes prints, paints, and draws. As displayed in the casual disarray of his studio—materials and memorabilia lie interspersed—he has a wide curiosity. In addition to his own impressive body of work, his studio is filled with all manner of visual marginalia, such as the drawings of friends and found drawings, a horse figurine, a skull, a slightly altered black velvet landscape with waterfall, a Coca Cola ad (Santa drinking a Coke), Catholic saint images, and a big three-dimensional Easter rabbit wearing a sweater and tie.

Donato's source material is clearly other art, but he has a non-hierarchical interest in everything visual. He'll look with equal seriousness at Piero della Francesca, Guston, a student drawing, and images from vernacular and popular culture. He also freely appropriates passages and images from painting's history and material culture at large.

**Donato is not a theoretical painter—he stays open to new input and tuned in to his own psyche—he remains fluid.**

**Donato is a bundle of dichotomies. He is at once a lover of the high and the low, a practitioner of abstraction and figuration, and an individual of great sensitivity as well as one capable of robust vulgarity.**

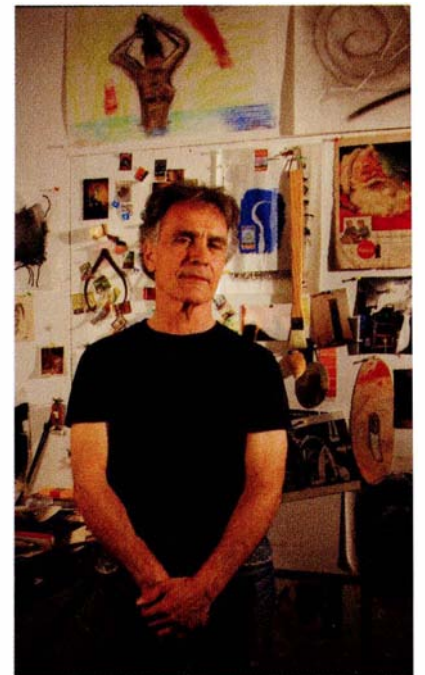




Donato's work certainly coincides with that of other artists and isms; Philip Guston's heroic struggle to escape abstraction and the genre known as "bad painting" are just two that first come to mind. Donato's work also predated many related painting developments: the New German and Italian Expressionists, and the work of David Salle and Julian Schnabel. In the end, Donato's work fits our postmodern era—it is non-dogmatic, it appropriates guiltlessly, it is a display-case of painting devices and signs, it is often funny and ironic, perhaps post-historic, adamantly pop, and stands ferociously against all that is pompous and pretentious.

Today, every painter must reinvent painting. Donato's do-it-yourself approach builds on our Whitmanesque heritage—"the individual contains multitudes!" Jerry Donato shaped an idea of painting that was just right for him—forged of hard work, hard play, and an all-American refusal to follow or to bow. Like the proverbial grain of sand that develops into a protective pearl, Jerry Donato creates paintings that act as irritants that calcify into hard beauty.

*below* **Roofers**, c. 1970s (cat. no. 9). Oil and silver gelatin print on canvas. 54 × 72.  
Collection of The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia  
Gift of the Irene Leache Memorial









*Wary Subjectivity*  
by Stephen Westfall

A lot can take place within the borders of a painting: landscape appears, religious and historical scenes unfold, abstract forms hover and drift, and, occasionally, a psychic territory opens up that is both strangely familiar and beautifully strange. We can find this compelling personal space in the work of James Ensor, Max Beckmann, Philip Guston, Nathan Olivera, and Elizabeth Murray, among many others. Gerald Donato (like Olivera, among the living artists) has worked at some physical distance from the mainstream art center of New York, so his work is less well known. But I believe that for a Symbolist/Expressionist image conjuror such as Donato, a certain remove can itself be working metaphor for a journey into “regions” of the imagination that aren’t so pre-prescribed by prevailing formal strategies and ideologies.

Take the use of the cartoon character in American painting. The cartoon figure, whether fluid or rigid, usually appears in a coherent cartoon space of flattened backgrounds and generic architecture and interiors. Even Guston’s knotty scrawl and the “wild-style” expressionism of early East Village artists such as Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf rely on a consistent material handling through foreground and back space. In contrast, Donato’s pictorial space is far more miasmatic, as though his comic visages are leaves or masks tossed in a painterly whirlwind. His space opens up, as it were, into a swirly Symbolist interiority, where translucent swipes and smears of paint push and reveal more fixed images like veils lifting in memory and dream space; it is a descriptive arena that distinguishes itself from Modernism’s unitary field. At the same time, it seems something older and more personal than a post-modernist “subversion” of Modernism’s hegemonic



field, something arrived at by trial and error, through emotional and material experience rather than a strategy, or even a theory.

And yet, there is always an essential community addressed by the production of meaning, and Donato's imagery finds its address within painting culture even as the community shifts, overlaps, and expands. By the late '70s he was a noted abstract painter working in layers of gestural veils (the "layering" perhaps alluding to the processes of lithography; he was a master printmaker by this time). He commenced to play with the tropes of pop art, deploying generically illustrated, duo-chromatic figures of mid-century magazine, matchbook cover, and comic book advertisements, which often featured half dramatic and half quotidian interactions between men and women. In 1982 he glimpsed an early Disney cartoon on television featuring Steamboat Willy, an attenuated hominid bouncing to music with a smirking mask of a face that would later morph into Micky Mouse. **Donato immediately felt a psychic link with the cartoon figure; in his devil-may-care manner, Steamboat Willy was a kind of doppelganger, or daimon, of the male principle: creature of action, footloose, mischievous, bewildered as often as inspired. This "Mr. Man," as Donato referred to him, was himself soon to be haunted by another figure, an Eve to his Adam.** She most often appears as a serenely sexy feminine figure seemingly smiling to herself with closed or half-closed eyes. Both characters float on Donato's painterly zephyrs, sometimes obscured and other times looming like full moons in crowded twilight dreams. The evolution of Donato's work has thus carried through the discourses of painterly abstraction, Pop, and into an arena of personal expressionism that nevertheless has its own community of reference populated by the artists mentioned at the outset.





*above* **Couple**, 1994 (cat. no. 63). Three panels. Acrylic on panel. 80 × 90.









Donato's subject is really subjectivity itself; it is the "event" in his painting, what it delineates and how it comes to be. In his early abstraction there is an emphasis on keeping the optical space open, ambiguous, and subject to change. As his Pop figures became more personal, the fluctuating space of his abstractions reasserts itself, as if to underscore that even the sexual role-playing of the protagonists is regarded from shifting points of view. Donato knows he's playing Mr. Man, from the blinkered view of his own gender. Within the pictures this figure is a captive of the author, so he winks and gapes a bit like Curious George does before and after he gets in over his head. Meanwhile, the female presence is idealized even in her unknowability. She can be as vulnerable as any living thing, and at other times her power fills the frame. Outside the picture, in the studio, Donato is a bemused Prospero, improvising on a dime, evaporating one figure here and laying one across the ghost of another over there. Like the mangled denizens of Toon Town in *Roger Rabbit*, Donato's figures aren't really erased, they pop up in the next configuration. Nevertheless, they are buffeted by the changes in the artist's chromatic and gestural weather. Somehow Donato makes us see their recurrence as both their great comedy and their tragedy.

His figures also morph into different identities. There are more anonymous round-headed masks, like the "Kilroy was here" type heads peering in from the edges of paintings leaning against the spatial backdrop inside *Beach* (1999), a masterly Americanization of a Surrealist seascape. But Mr. Man and his bride stay with us. They take their place alongside other cartoon couples that function in part as shifting psychic representatives of the painter as author, such as John Wesley's Dagwood

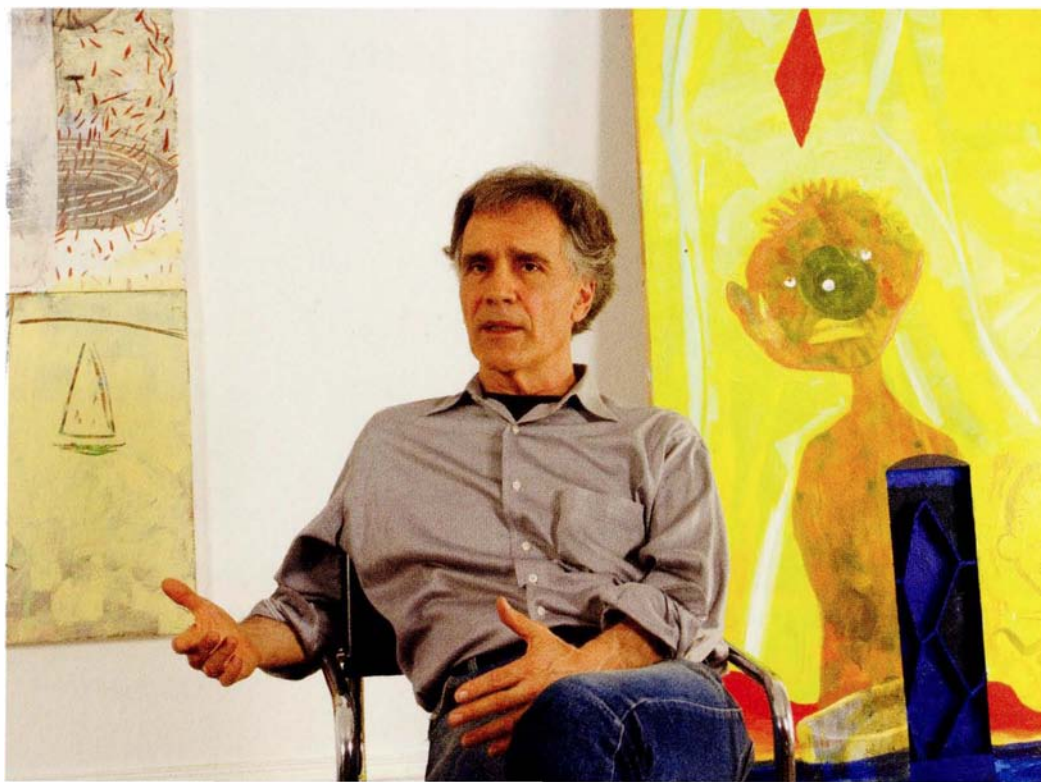
*opposite top* **Untitled**, 1985 (cat. no. 46). Oil on panel. 24 × 36. Collection of Mary Flinn.  
*bottom* **Untitled**, 1983–84 (cat. no. 32). Oil on panel. 24 × 36.



and Blondie, and Guston's Klansmen and golden-haired Musa. In recent paintings, both female and male figures evolve into newer, more specific masks that alter from picture to picture. Neither the male nor female figures of *Curtain* (1997 – 99) or *Untitled* (2002 – 03) resemble Steamboat Willie or the female glamourpuss of the earlier work. These figures are ciphers whose physiognomy has expanded into a range of beautifully rendered cartoon possibilities. The chagrined dark figure next to the smiling feminine kewpie in *Curtain* raises the anxious history of race relations: the grotesqueries of lynching and minstrelsy. But *Curtain* is also a painting, something that discloses as much or more about the painter's relationship to other paintings, painters, and his own process as it does any particular insight into a particular social topic.

So Donato reconfigures Ensor's dreamlike figural distortions into an ironic (and tragic) American scene in this one painting. He goes on to make other paintings inspired by a widening gyre of other aspects of life in America, from personal life to culture. In his mastery of the forms of painting he seems free to cast his glance wherever he wants.

- *opposite* **Untitled**, 1989 (cat. no. 58). Acrylic and collage on canvas. 48 × 24.









**Celebrating Looking**  
by Paul Monroe

About five years ago, I was walking around the New York Armory Art Fair in a daze with Jerry Donato and his wife, Joan Gaustad. After spending eight hours looking at art from over two hundred galleries, probably a thousand artists, everything seemed a blur. At this time immense, bright, incredibly detailed photographs were the rage. Suddenly, Jerry stopped: “This is amazing,” he said, peering closely at a large painting on paper. He was fascinated by the washed out, sickly colors; the figures, which were out of proportion and whose relationship to each other was mysterious; the variety of textures. There seemed to be so much wrong with it—but it worked. He thought it was great—and the more I looked at it I saw his point.

At that time I had not heard of the artist, Neo Rauch, who was just beginning to become popular and influential. It was a classic Donato moment, and one that’s stuck with me ever since and comes to mind when looking at Jerry’s own work: when the rest of us are numbed or bored or otherwise distracted, Jerry is still exploring—whether at an art fair or a student exhibition—and seeing what we miss. When we are looking with our ears rather than our eyes, Jerry has unique, insightful opinions untainted by hype and reputation, always alert for paintings that—like his—challenge our visual sensibility. With his own work, he is always testing himself—experimenting, trying to find and explore the edge between the good and the bad. He has made a conscious effort not to be influenced by fashion or current styles. To that end he has resisted selling his work to free himself from the influence of collectors or dealers.

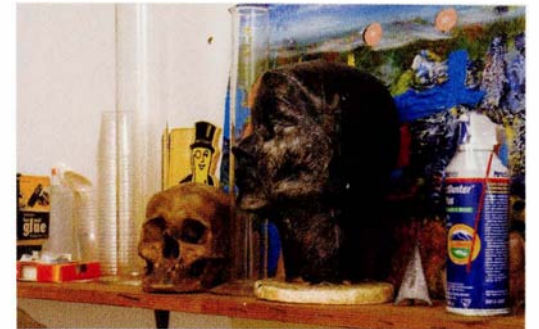
*opposite* **Untitled**, 1994 (cat. no. 64). Acrylic on canvas. 60 × 51.







Jerry tests the limits quietly. He's chosen to work almost exclusively with figure, the oldest subject in art. His figures often include the cartoonish Mr. Man, but since Lichtenstein had introduced cartoon imagery into fine art fifteen years earlier, this was no longer revolutionary by itself. Working within the limits of figurative painting, Jerry is always trying to find the spontaneous, accidental, unconscious gestures that give the painting bite and draw the observer in. He told me once that he looks for the "moment when your hand goes off and makes a mark which is uncontrolled and unexpected." While this sounds similar to the action painting of the abstract expressionists, Jerry's work, constrained by the limits of figurative painting, is amplified by an additional tension that energizes the work. Although we usually think of gestural marks as a sign of spontaneity, choices of composition, color, and technique can be just as impulsively immediate. Jerry frees himself to make unexpected choices, maybe accidentally or unconsciously at first, but then he consciously decides to leave them in the work. This exploration is what makes painting worthwhile for him.



Although there are recurrent images within the works—Mr. Man, a figure in a boat, a stylized woman's face—each painting stands on its own as a new investigation. Thus although there are groups of work that were developed together, each differs from the others in significant ways. Jerry is too impatient to repeat a painting. Whereas many artists explore minor changes in a series of paintings, Jerry is restless and changes each composition markedly within the group.

Jerry is always searching for wrongness—the element of a painting that, at first, may seem illogical, sloppy or mistaken, but at the same time creates an engaging tension between what is expected and what is painted: a jarring color (*Untitled*, 1994), an arm bent at a physiologically impossible angle (*Untitled*, 1987), a perspective that makes no sense (*Beach*, 1999). Sometimes the incongruous





aspect is a small part of the painting off in a corner, such as the mirroring of the image of the ship in *Beach*, 1999. Jerry can't explain why he makes these "mistakes," but such incongruities are what interest him when looking at the work of others, and captivate us when we look at his paintings. Of course, it is easy to paint something wrong—just think of all the bad paintings you have seen. On the other hand, when a painting is completely right, as in the hyper realistic paintings or large format photography that are currently popular, it may initially intrigue us but ultimately may become boring with time. It is harder to paint well, but be on the edge of badness: think of Neo Rauch, Karen Kilimnik or Brian Calvin. **Jerry's work exists in the strange liminal space between the wrong and the right—he manages to use a conservative subject and his skillful draftsmanship to get it right by being wrong in an unexpected way.**

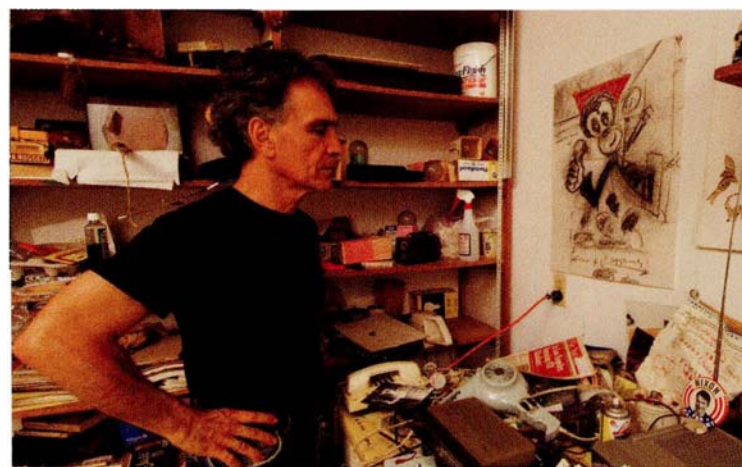
*Beach* (1999) is a prime example of this process. In the 1990s, Jerry started painting on doors. It made sense—they were readily available at Home Depot, well-built, and cheap; nevertheless they were clearly not the usual medium. This painting started out as an investigation of actual and perceived perspective: angling the two doors into a corner, Jerry painted a false visual corner off from the actual corner, echoing James Turrell's early corner projections in its play on visual perception. But Jerry felt this was too obvious, and he painted over most of the original painting, incorporating it into a larger work (*Beach*, 1999). The corner—the subject of the original painting—remains, but now it encloses a grassy room, while the actual corner created by angling the doors has been eliminated. The wall reads initially as a glass partition separating us from a super sized sunburned female body reclining on an ocean beach. The left edge of the painting subverts this reading by turning the body into a mural sized wall. Furthermore, the left edge of the painting is identical to the right, bringing the image back to itself in a repeating pattern. Then there are the classically drawn figure



studies (which were in the original painting) in the center; these contrast both in style and technique with the Mr. Man paintings-within-a-painting scattered around the body/room. Of course, to further complicate the image, there is a single Mr. Man peeking out below the sunburned figure—he seems to have escaped from the paintings-within-a-painting into the “real world” of the scene. Visually, we can’t make sense of the image and its multiple, incongruous visual puzzles. Our mind reads it one way, then another, a head-spinning sensory experience that resonates with the carnival-like atmosphere of the painting.

Which brings me to another characteristic of Jerry’s work: the paintings have a celebratory, upbeat energy and playfulness. When you spend time with a group of Jerry’s paintings, you come out feeling a bit more buoyant, revitalized. To be sure, there is melancholy, romance, nostalgia, and sexiness in the work, but simple recurrent imagery like Mr. Man add giddiness and humor to the paintings. Mr. Man is sometimes a man and at other times a woman; sometimes a self portrait, other times a cartoon. Sometimes he has a cynical smirk, and at other times a benevolent smile. In contrast, Mr. Man’s counterpart—an idealized feminine figure—is not cartoon like. She can be romantic (*Untitled (Postcard)*, 1985) or sad, but may also reflect Jerry’s Italian heritage in a slightly tongue-in-cheek fashion, particularly when paired with Mr. Man (*Untitled*, 1980 – 82). Likewise, Jerry’s bright coloration, sometimes chosen for its “wrongness,” animates the work. His paintings lift the soul, not the easiest thing to do in these ironic and cynical post-modern times.

*opposite* **Four door model**, 1994 (cat. no. 62). Four panels. Acrylic, collage and enamel on panel. 80 × 111 ¾.









Total Eye-poke;  
Or, Why I Love Gerald  
Donato's Paintings  
by Dinah Ryan

Gerald Donato's paintings poke you in the eye. This is a nice thing to do, believe it or not. As a painter and an observer, he is acutely alive to ambivalences in perception and experience, as well as to the oddities of translation that occur in the visual arts. He combines a couple of fine, if seemingly disparate, lineages: the visual language of American popular culture, especially through his cartoon characters, with the ever-evolving genus of painterly expressionism.

His paintings bring the postmodern imagination to the aesthetic possibilities of French modernism and the sense of personal vision promoted by expressionism, the hand-over-hand from Impressionism through Matisse and Bonnard through Diebenkorn et al. Peopling this rich turf with an irreverent and unpredictable "cast of characters," as art historian and critic Howard Risatti called his madcap figures and heads, Donato yields a mixture of high/low, parody, elusive narrative, and luscious painting that coincides with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival, a particular view that turns life "inside out" and shows "the reverse side of the world" (*monde a l'envers*).

It's interesting to note that Steamboat Willie, the Mickey Mouse predecessor who inspired the first appearance of Donato's Mr. Man in the early 1980s, was a fictive roustabout but also part of the company of slapstick artists, both deadpan and screwball, who, like Buster Keaton and the Three Stooges, draw attention to all that is absurd in the straight-up, self-serious terms of everyday life. There is, in Donato's paintings, the contradictory idea that the human beings who look at

opposite **Untitled**, 2002–03 (cat. no. 64). Acrylic and oil on canvas. 60 × 51.







them are the fall guys and that the antic paintings are the stooges—or straight men, which is what this word actually means—that bring to individual consciousness Bakhtin’s “image of contradictory, perpetually becoming and unfinished being.” Or, as Russell Thorburn puts it in his poem “Watching the Three Stooges, After Fifty, in the Hospital”: “Let the pie in the face be your Bible, the finger-poke your lightning bolt.” With their finger-in-the eye painterly beauty, Gerald Donato’s works complement the studio program in Washington and Lee University’s Art Department, where the painting program is grounded in the tradition of richly hued, expressionistic gesture. In this context, the works in Staniar Gallery, culled from the larger exhibition at the Anderson Gallery, reinforce the value of this tradition while roaming out of it to take on more unfamiliar and provocative views.

DINAH RYAN IS DIRECTOR OF STANIAR GALLERY AT WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY IN LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA . THE TRAVELING PORTION OF THE EXHIBITION, GERALD DONATO: REINVENTING THE GAME WILL BE ON VIEW AT STANIAR GALLERY FROM NOVEMBER 13 THROUGH DECEMBER 14, 2007.

*right* **Untitled XXXX (Avon Series)**, 1984  
(cat. no. 34). Pastel on paper. 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 25 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>.





## Curator's Acknowledgements

Sincerest thanks to Richard Roth, Chair of the VCUarts Painting and Printmaking Department, for his tremendous support for this exhibition, as well as for the stellar historical essay he contributed to this book. My gratitude to Richard Toscan, Dean of VCU School of the Arts for his support of the exhibition and catalogue. Deepest appreciation also goes to artist/writer Stephen Westfall and art collector Paul Monroe for their insightful essays. Their words hit a significant nerve in marking Donato's place in art history and unfolding the particularities of his work.

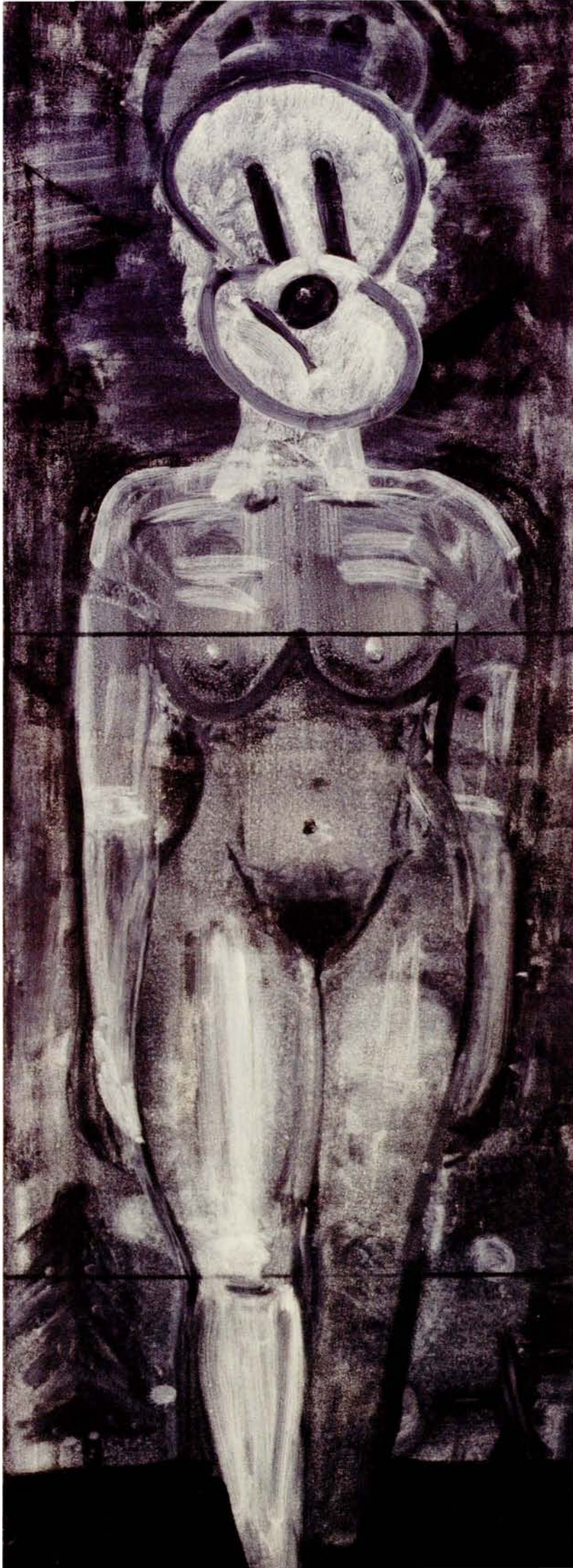
Thanks to Rachele Riley for designing a stunning book that complements the whimsical and strange verve of Gerald Donato's work, and great appreciation to editor George Cruger for his astute and careful attention to the text. Dinah Ryan, Director at Washington and Lee University's Staniar Gallery, deserves appreciation for her role in presenting *Gerald Donato: Reinventing the Game* in Lexington, Virginia, in November of 2007. Finally, this project could not have been carried out without the multiple talents of the Anderson Gallery's faculty and staff: Assistant Professor and Gallery Manager Leon Roper; Gallery Projects Coordinator Traci Flores; Gallery Associate Chris Carroll; Virginia Samsel, Curatorial Project Assistant; and the work-study staff.

The exhibition was made possible by the generosity of many individuals who provided financial support and who loaned works to the exhibition. Primary funding has been provided by the VCUarts Painting and Printmaking Department, with additional funding and support provided by Main Art Supply and Picture Framing, Janet De Cover, Maruta Winebrenner, Rick Michaels, and Heyn and Sandy Kjerulf. Elizabeth King and Carlton Newton, Mary Flynn, Phyllis De Maurizi and Rick Michaels, Heyn and Sandy Kjerulf, James Deveney and Janet De Cover, and The Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, all lent work by Gerald Donato from their collections to be included in the exhibition.

It has been the highest honor of my career to work with Gerald Donato and his wife/muse Joan Gaustad in presenting this retrospective exhibition. Their trust and good humor throughout the myriad of details involved in the process has been a humbling and rewarding experience. Jerry and Joan's energy in advising us on all phases of the exhibition has kept our eyes on the prize. We are fortunate to have had access to their formidable strength and keen artistic vision.

A.M.





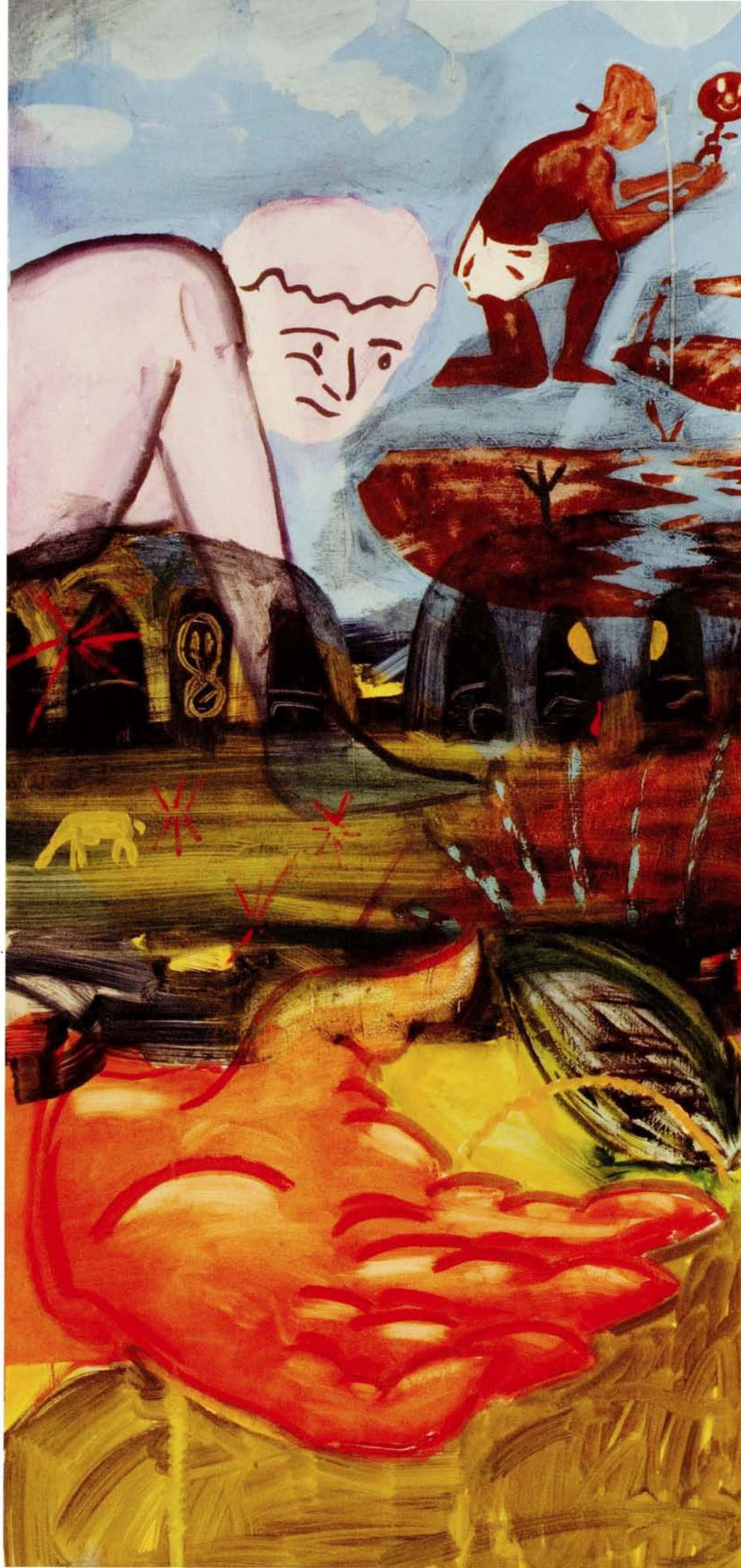




opposite **Brooklyn**, 1988 (cat. no. 56). Acrylic and oil on canvas. 50 × 15.  
Collection of Drs. Paul & Sara Monroe.

above **Untitled**, 1982 (cat. no. 30). Acrylic and charcoal on paper. 58 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 59 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>.





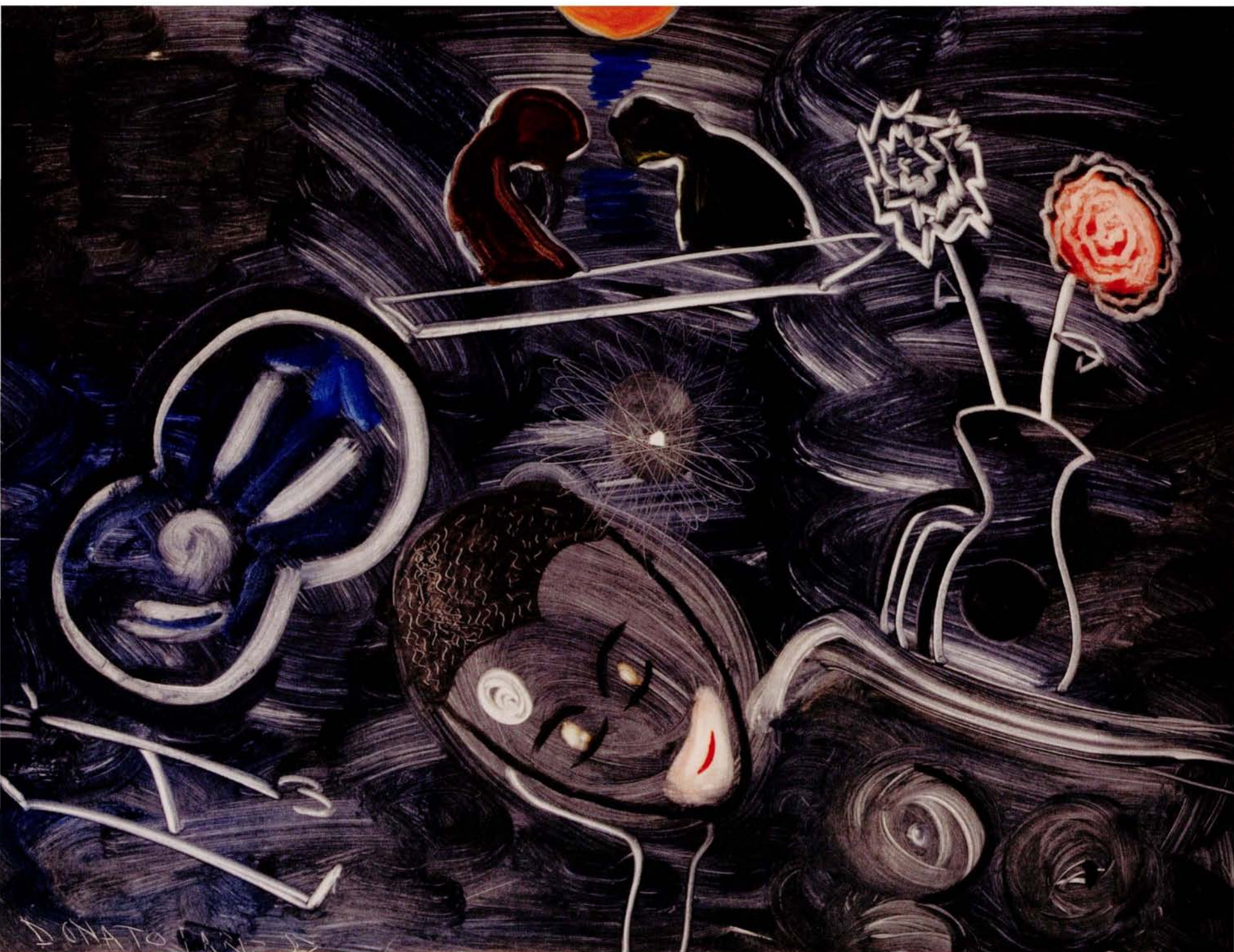




*above* **Untitled**, 1987 (cat. no. 55). Acrylic on canvas. 72 × 72.  
Collection of Elizabeth King and Carlton Newton.

*opposite* **Look at it this way**, 1985–86 (cat. no. 49). Acrylic and oil on canvas. 66 × 30.

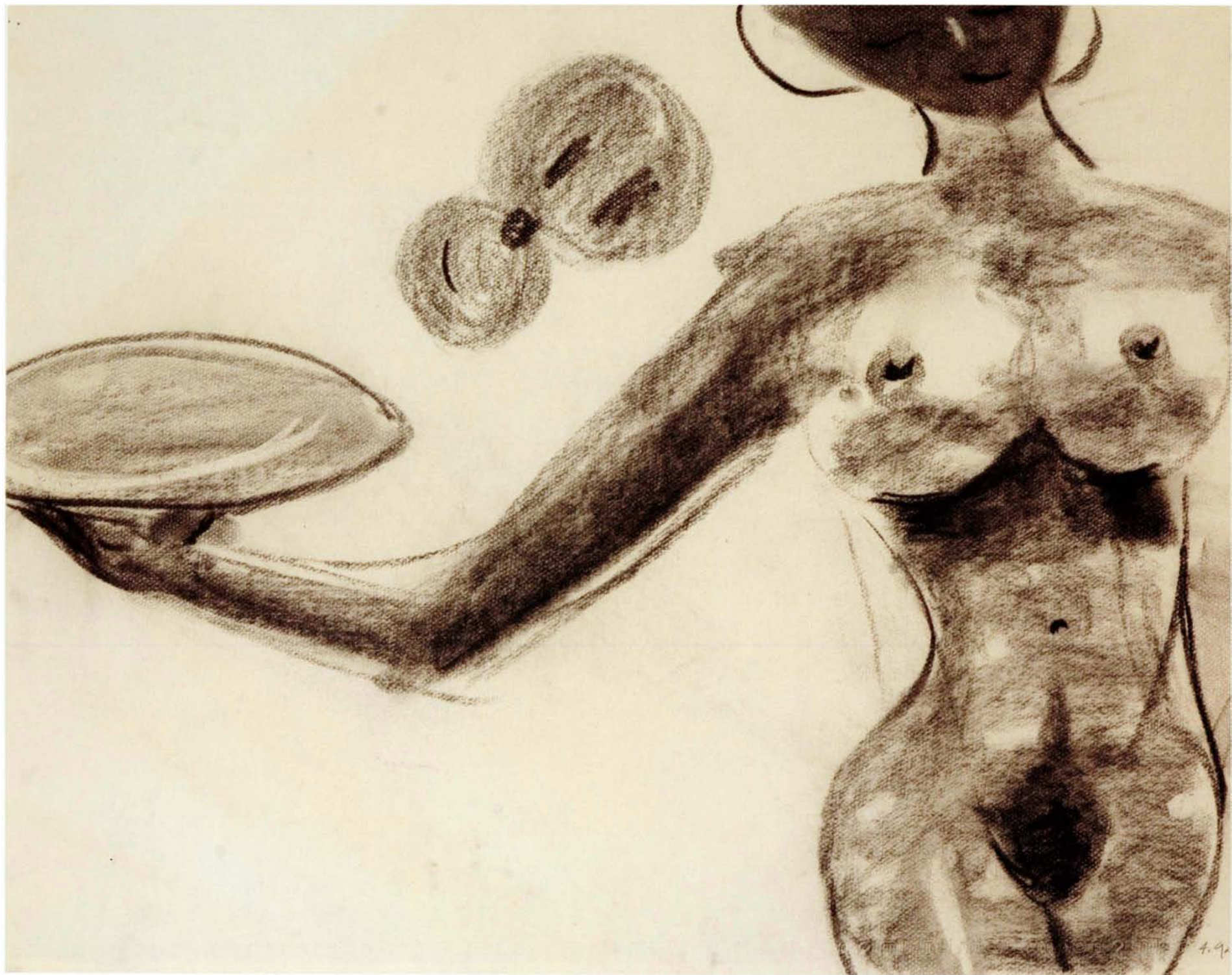




above **Untitled**, 1985 (cat. no. 45). Monoprint. 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 26.

opposite **Untitled**, 1985 (cat. no. 43). Charcoal on paper, 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 25 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>.



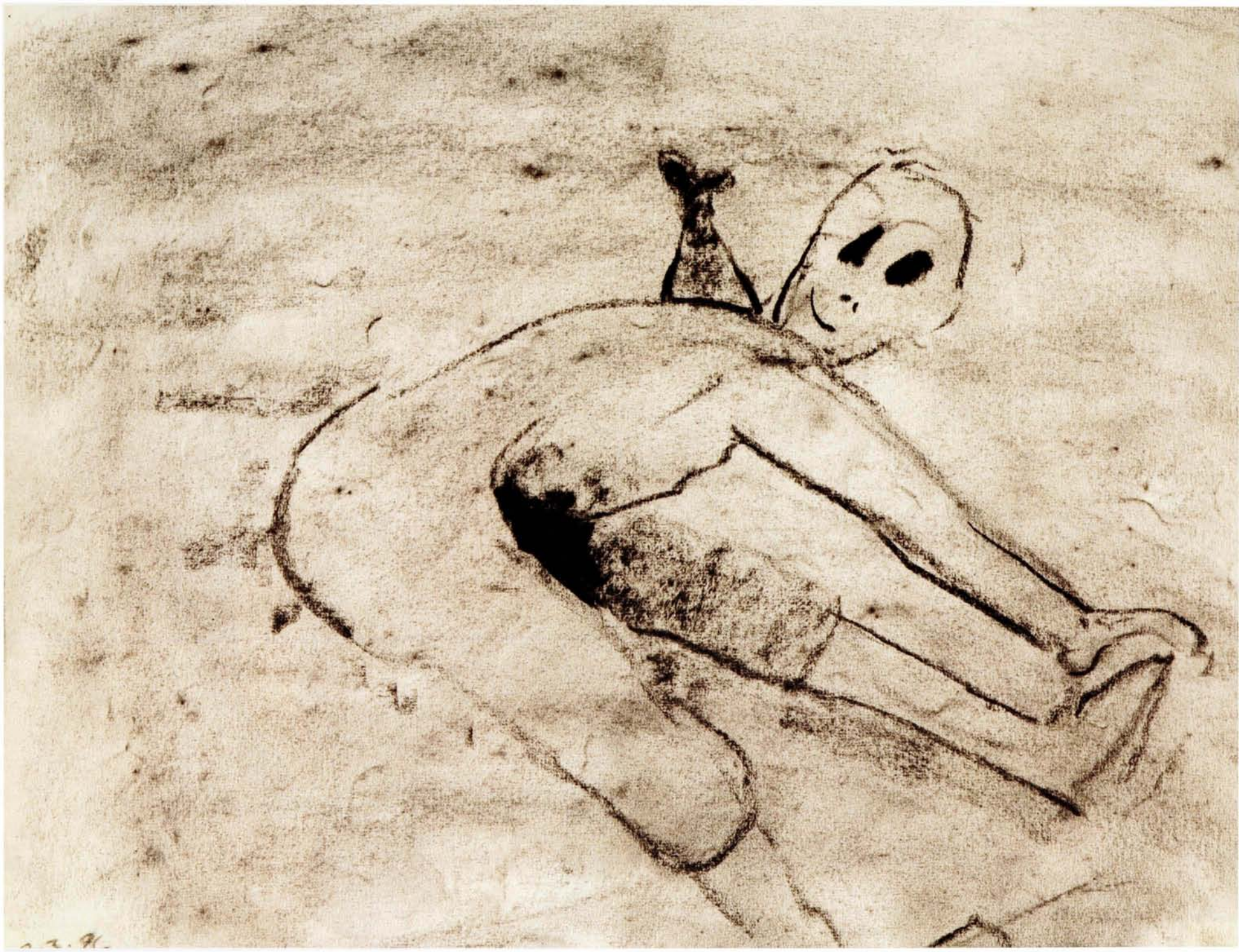






above **Untitled XXVI (Avon Series)**, 1984 (cat. no. 36). Pastel on paper. 19 × 25.  
opposite **Untitled**, 1996 (cat. no. 66). Charcoal and pastel on paper. 19 ½ × 25 ½.







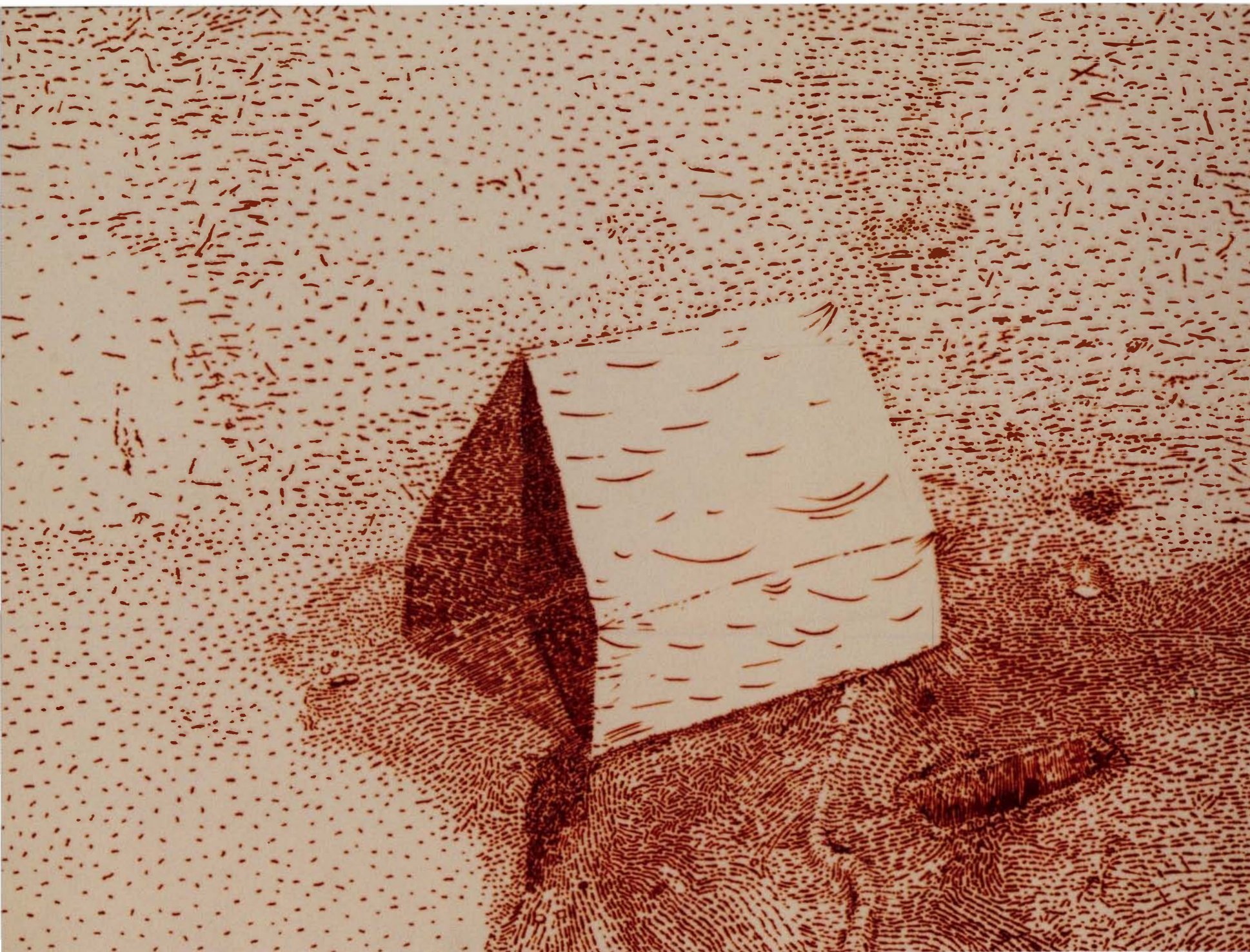






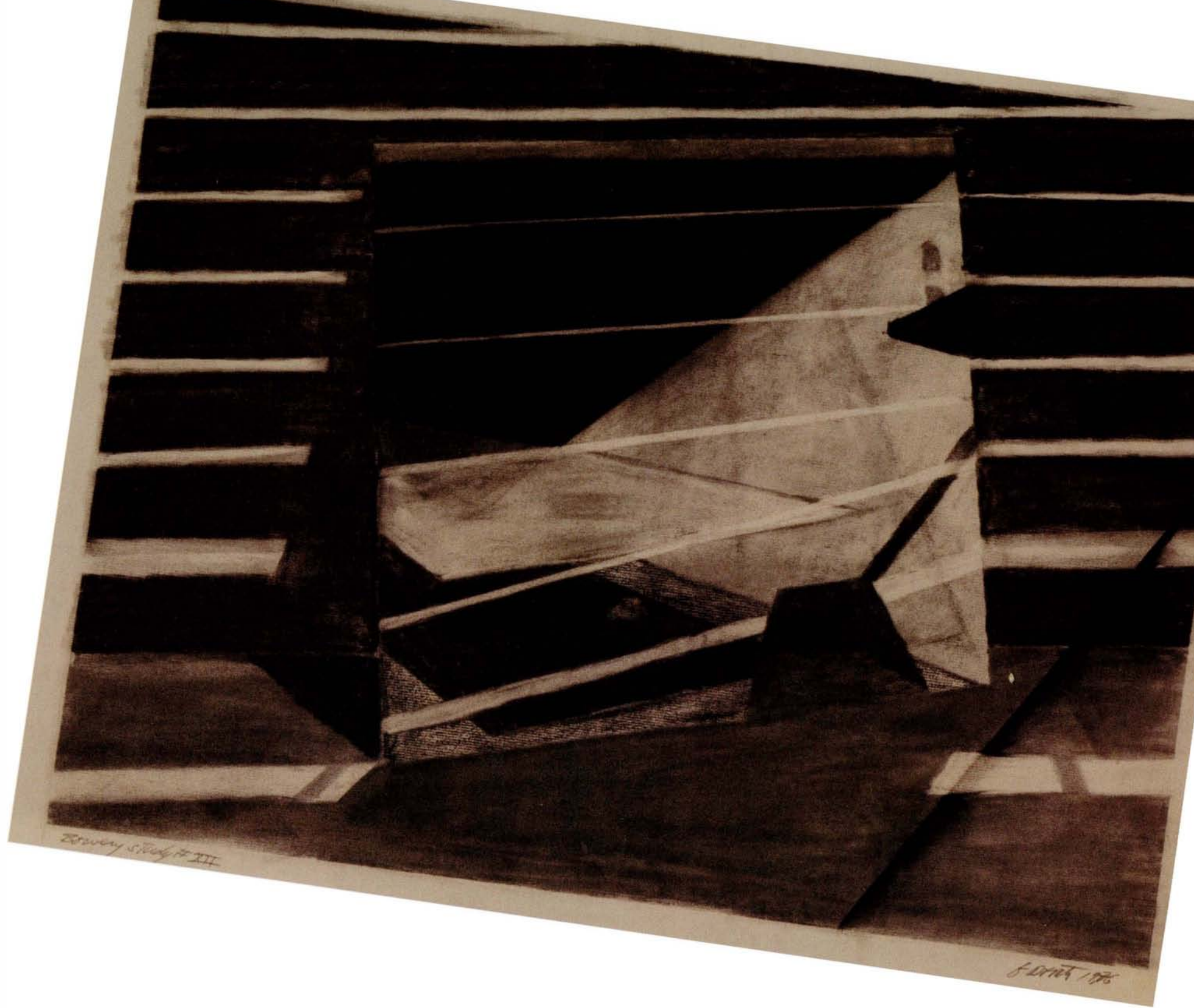
*above* **Untitled**, 2002–03 (cat. no. 72). Acrylic on canvas. 45 × 66.  
*opposite* **Mr. Man**, c. 1980s (cat. no. 26). Mixed media. 48 × 42.  
Collection of James Deveney and Janet DeCover.





*above* **Untitled (iron filings 1)**, 1975 (cat. no. 16). Ink and graphite on paper. 22  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 30.  
*opposite* **Bowery Study XII**, 1976 (cat. no. 19). Charcoal on paper. 19  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 25  $\frac{1}{2}$ .

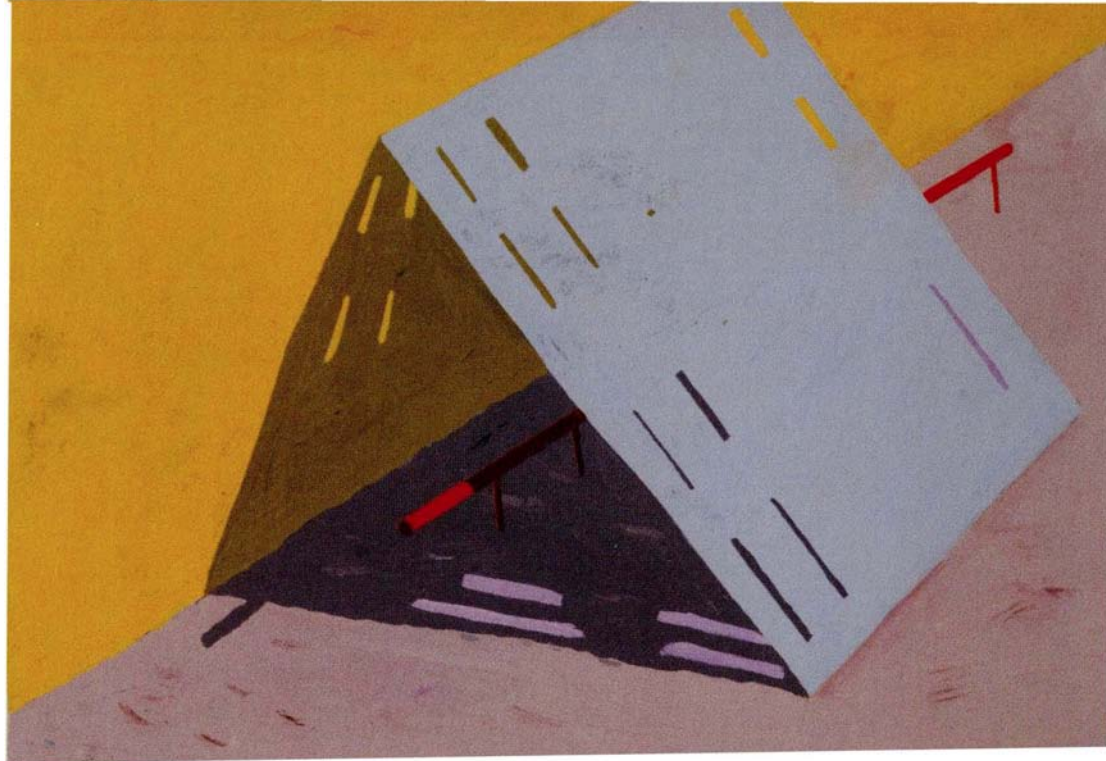
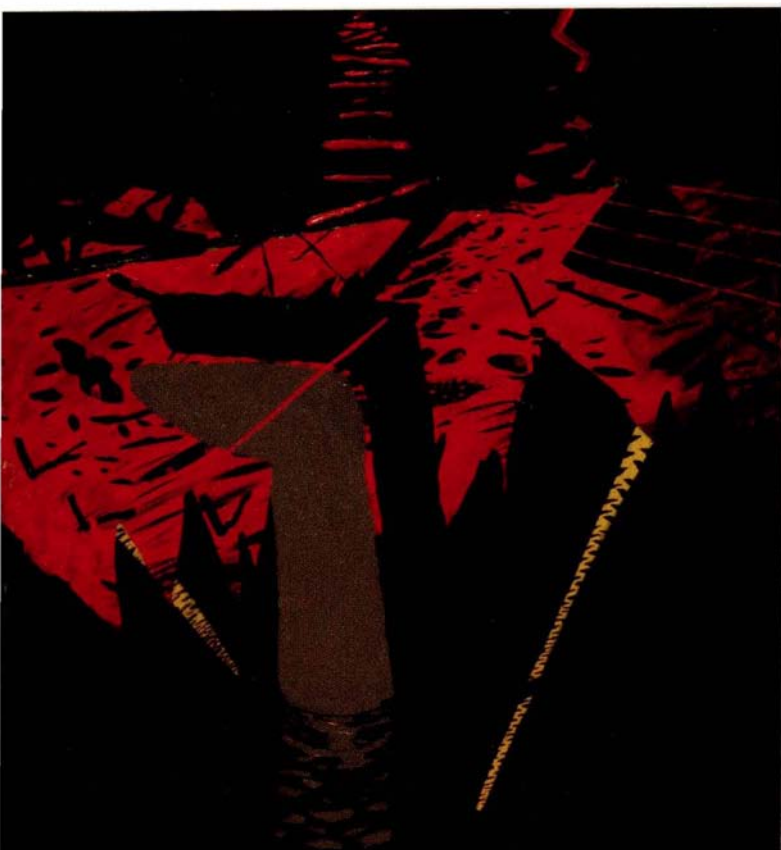




Study III

1976





*above left* **Untitled #16**, 1976 (cat. no. 23). Acrylic on paper. 30 × 22.

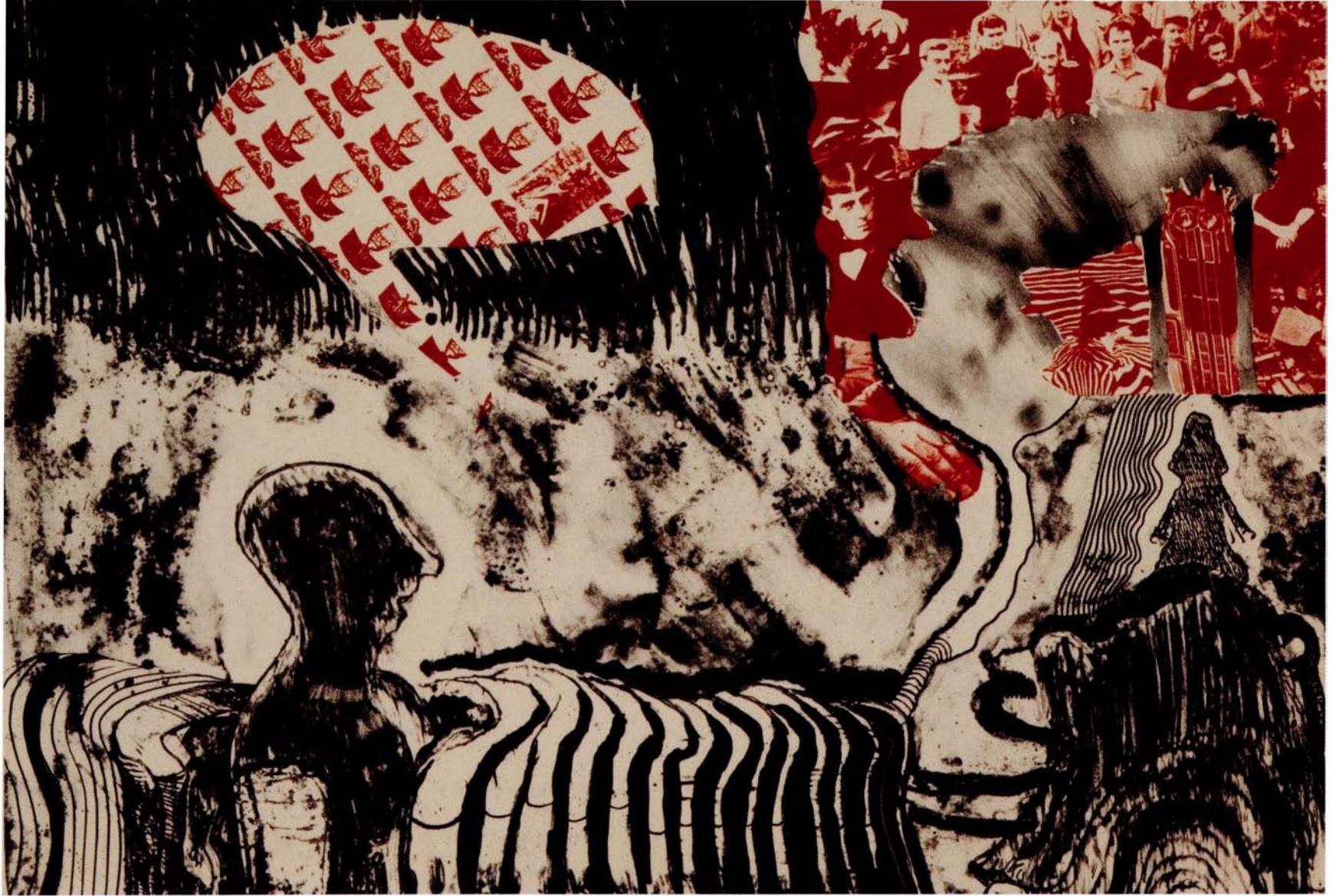
*above top right* **Study #II**, 1976 (cat. no. 22). Acrylic on paper. 22 ¼ × 29 ½.

*above bottom right* **Someday my prince will come**, 1971 (cat. no. 11). Photo lithograph, 4/18. 23 × 33.

*opposite top* **What's it all about**, 1967 (cat. no. 7). Lithograph, 6/8. 22 × 30.

*opposite bottom* **Unsquare Dance**, 1967 (cat. no. 5). Lithograph, Artist's Proof. 22 × 30.



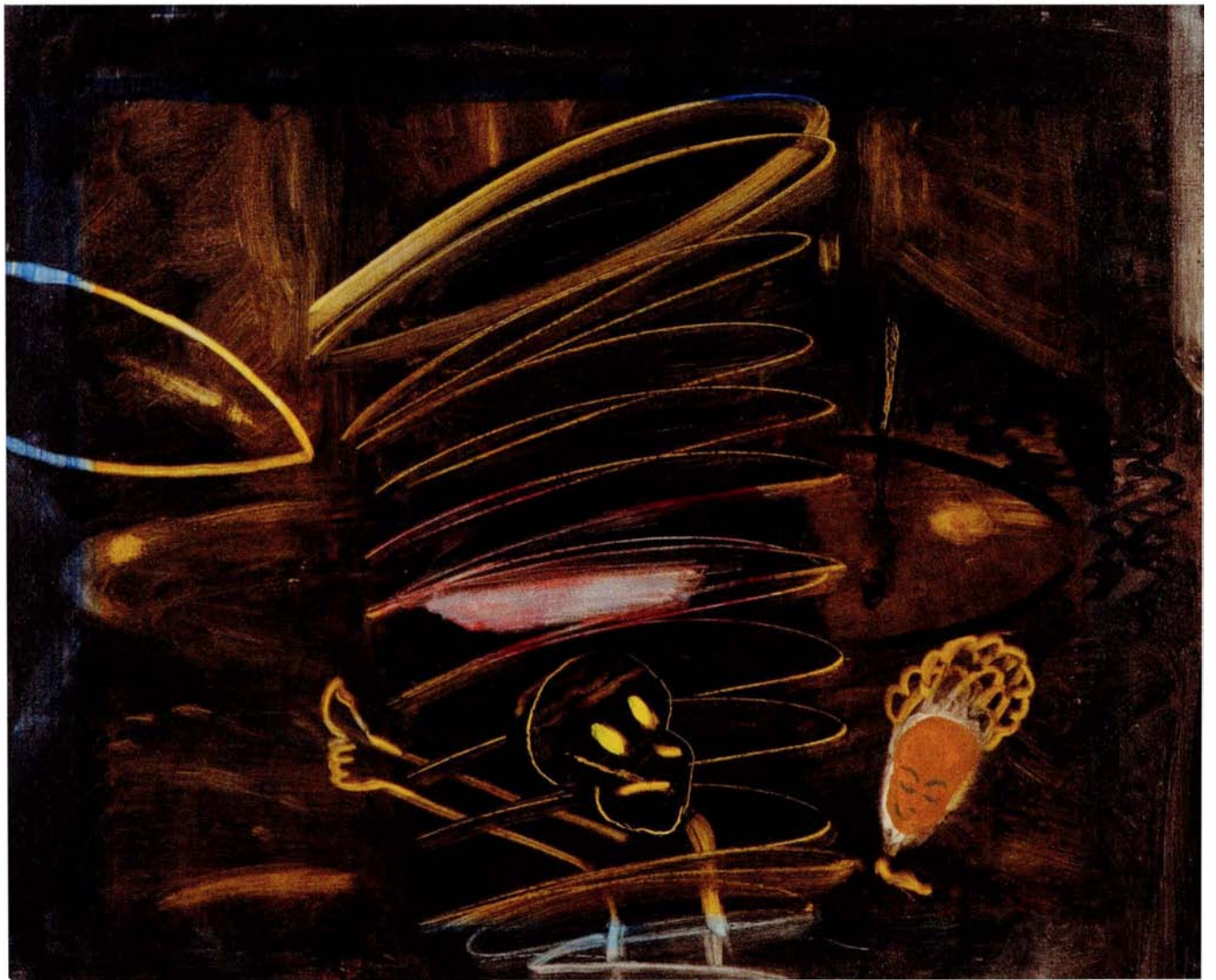




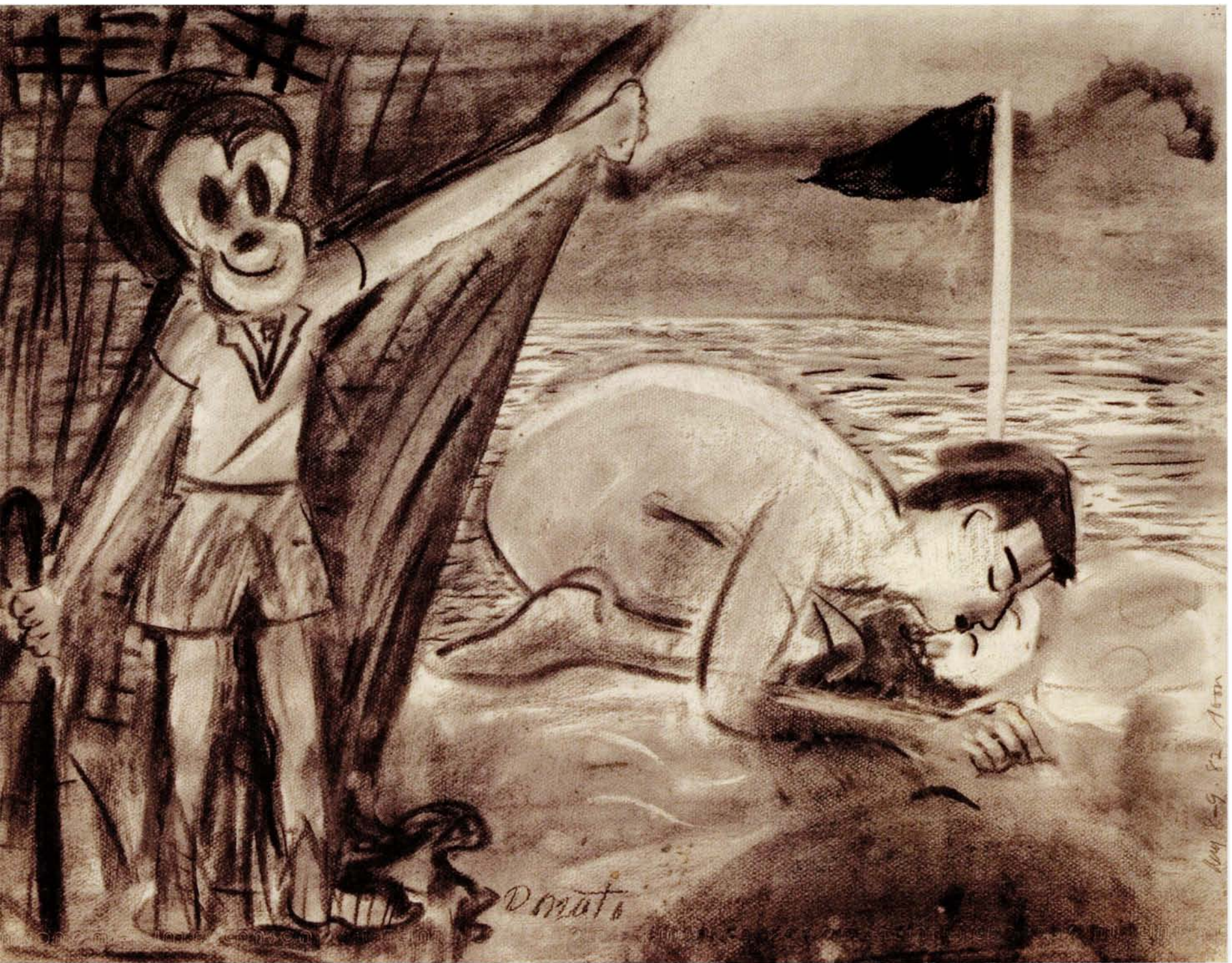


above **Curtain**, billboard for 64 magazine, 1997–99 (cat. no. 70). 14' × 48'.  
opposite top **Untitled**, 1983 (cat. no. 31). Oil on panel. 25 × 37.  
opposite bottom **Untitled**, 1985 (cat. no. 47). Oil on canvas. 20 × 24.  
Collection of Heyn and Sandy Kjerulf.









above **Untitled (Avon Series)**, 1984 (cat. no. 41). Charcoal on paper. 19  $\frac{3}{4}$   $\times$  25  $\frac{1}{2}$ .  
opposite **Untitled**, c. 1980s (cat. no. 24). Marker and pastel on wallpaper. 17  $\frac{1}{2}$   $\times$  19  $\frac{5}{8}$ .





















*opposite* **Untitled**, 1980–82 (cat. no.27). Acrylic, oil and enamel on panel. 36 × 24.  
*above* **Untitled**, 1987 (cat. no. 53). Acrylic on canvas. 36 × 47.





*above* **Untitled**, 1987. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 78 × 68.

Collection of Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. The John Barton Payne Fund.

© Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

*opposite* **Untitled**, 1987 (cat. no. 54). Three panels. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 100 × 36.







## Exhibition Checklist

1. Untitled  
1960s  
Charcoal, pastel on paper  
21  $\frac{3}{4}$  × 29  $\frac{1}{2}$
2. Untitled  
1960s  
Charcoal, pastel, and ink on paper  
30 × 22  $\frac{1}{4}$
3. Untitled  
1960s  
Graphite and color pencil on paper  
19  $\frac{1}{4}$  × 24  $\frac{7}{8}$
4. Homage to Motown  
1966  
Lithograph  
22 × 32  $\frac{1}{2}$
5. Unsquare Dance  
1967  
Lithograph, Artist Proof  
22 × 30
6. Five men that mean a lot to me  
1967  
Lithograph, 1/4  
22  $\frac{1}{2}$  × 30
7. What's it all about  
1967  
Lithograph, 6/8  
22 × 30
8. The American Sterilizer  
1969  
Lithograph, 2/10  
22 × 30
9. Roofers  
c. 1970s  
Oil and silver gelatin print on canvas  
54 × 72  
Collection of The Chrysler Museum of Art,  
Norfolk, Virginia. Gift of Irene Leache Memorial.





10. Taking home a family pet  
1971  
Photo lithograph, 5/15  
24  $\frac{3}{4}$   $\times$  34
11. Someday my prince will come  
1971  
Photo lithograph, 4/18  
23  $\times$  33  $\frac{3}{4}$
12. Logansport, Indiana  
1972  
Photo lithograph 1/17  
23  $\frac{1}{2}$   $\times$  32  $\frac{1}{2}$
13. Iron Works  
1974  
Lithograph, 6/14  
22  $\frac{1}{4}$   $\times$  29  $\frac{3}{4}$
14. Ground Study  
1974  
Lithograph  
22  $\frac{1}{2}$   $\times$  29  $\frac{3}{4}$
15. Untitled (Iron Filings #2)  
1975  
Ink and graphite on paper  
22  $\frac{1}{2}$   $\times$  29  $\frac{1}{4}$
16. Untitled (iron filings 1)  
1975  
Ink and graphite on paper  
22  $\frac{1}{8}$   $\times$  30
17. Untitled  
1976  
Ink and tempera on paper  
22  $\frac{1}{4}$   $\times$  30
18. Untitled  
1976  
Pastel on paper  
19  $\frac{3}{4}$   $\times$  25  $\frac{5}{8}$
19. Bowery Study XII  
1976  
Charcoal on paper  
19  $\frac{3}{4}$   $\times$  25  $\frac{1}{2}$
20. Bowery Study XIII  
1976  
Charcoal on paper  
19  $\frac{3}{4}$   $\times$  25  $\frac{1}{2}$
21. Untitled #7  
1976  
Acrylic on paper  
29  $\frac{1}{2}$   $\times$  22  $\frac{1}{4}$
22. Study #II  
1976  
Acrylic on paper  
22  $\frac{1}{4}$   $\times$  29  $\frac{1}{2}$
23. Untitled #16  
1976  
Acrylic on paper  
30  $\times$  22
24. Untitled  
c. 1980s  
Marker and pastel on wallpaper  
17  $\frac{1}{4}$   $\times$  19  $\frac{5}{8}$
25. Untitled  
c. 1980s  
Pastel on wallpaper  
19  $\frac{3}{4}$   $\times$  17  $\frac{1}{4}$
26. Mr. Man  
c. 1980s  
Mixed media  
48  $\times$  42  
Collection of James Deveney  
and Janet DeCover
27. Untitled  
1980-82  
Acrylic, oil and enamel on panel  
36  $\times$  24



28. Untitled  
1982  
Charcoal on paper  
19 1/2 x 25
29. Untitled  
1982  
Charcoal and pastel on paper  
19 1/2 x 25
30. Untitled  
1982  
Acrylic and charcoal on paper  
58 3/8 x 59 7/8
31. Untitled  
1983  
Oil on panel  
25 x 37
32. Untitled  
1983–84  
Oil on panel  
24 x 36
33. Abbondanza  
1984  
Pastel on paper  
26 x 20  
Collection of Phyllis DeMaurizi  
and Rick Michaels
34. Untitled XXXX (Avon Series)  
1984  
Pastel on paper  
19 3/4 x 25 1/2
35. Untitled XXI (Avon Series)  
1984  
Pastel on paper  
19 x 25
36. Untitled XXVI (Avon Series)  
1984  
Pastel on paper  
19 x 25
37. Untitled XXXVII (Avon Series)  
1984  
Pastel on paper  
19 x 25
38. Untitled XXVIII (Avon Series)  
1984  
Pastel on paper  
19 3/4 x 25 1/2
39. Untitled (Avon Series)  
1984  
Charcoal and pastel on paper  
30 x 22
40. Untitled X (Avon Series)  
1984  
Charcoal on paper  
19 3/4 x 25 1/2
41. Untitled (Avon Series)  
1984  
Charcoal on paper  
19 3/4 x 25 1/2
42. Untitled (Post Card)  
1985  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
36 x 48
43. Untitled  
1985  
Charcoal on Paper  
19 3/4 x 25 1/2
44. Untitled  
1985  
Monoprint  
19 1/2 x 26



45. Untitled  
1985  
Monoprint  
19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 26
46. Untitled  
1985  
Oil on panel  
24 × 36  
Collection of Mary Flinn
47. Untitled  
1985  
Oil on canvas  
20 × 24  
Collection of Heyn and Sandy Kjerulf
48. Have you got what you need?  
1985–86  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
72 × 42
49. Look at it this way  
1985–86  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
66 × 30
50. Untitled (Mask)  
1987  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
76 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 66 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>
51. Untitled (Heatwave!)  
1987  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
77 × 67
52. Untitled  
1987  
Acrylic, oil and collage on canvas  
65 × 55
53. Untitled  
1987  
Acrylic on canvas  
36 × 47
54. Untitled  
1987  
3 panels  
Oil and acrylic on canvas and panel  
100 × 36
55. Untitled  
1987  
Acrylic on canvas  
72 × 72  
Collection of Elizabeth King  
and Carlton Newton
56. Brooklyn  
1988  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
50 × 15  
Collection of Drs. Paul & Sara Monroe
57. Untitled (Brooklyn)  
1988–89  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
60 × 50
58. Untitled  
1989  
Acrylic and collage on canvas  
48 × 24
59. Untitled  
1988(9)–1990  
Acrylic on Canvas  
48 × 48
60. Untitled (Painter)  
1990–91  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
72 × 50
61. Four door model  
1994  
4 panels  
Acrylic, enamel and collage  
on panel  
80 × 111 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>



62. Couple  
1994  
3 panels  
Acrylic on panel  
80 × 90

63. Untitled  
1994  
Acrylic on canvas  
60 × 51

64. Untitled (Hello!)  
1995  
Charcoal on paper  
18 × 24

65. Untitled  
1996  
Charcoal and pastel on paper  
19 ½ × 25 ½

66. Untitled  
1996  
Charcoal on paper  
19 × 25

67. Window  
1997  
Acrylic, oil and collage on canvas  
65 × 55

68. Tilted  
1997–98  
3 panels  
Acrylic, oil and collage on panel  
80 × 82

69. Curtain  
1997–99  
2 panels  
Acrylic on panel  
80 × 40

70. Beach  
1999  
6 panels  
Acrylic on panel  
80 × 153 ½

71. Untitled  
2002–2003  
Acrylic on canvas  
60 × 51

72. Untitled  
2002–2003  
Acrylic on canvas  
72 × 52

Unless otherwise noted, works are from the collection of the artist. All dimensions are in inches.



## Biography

### Gerald Donato

Born 1941 in Chicago, Illinois

#### Education

- 1967 M.F.A., University of Wisconsin–Madison
- 1965 M.A., Northern Illinois University
- 1963 B.S. Ed., Northern Illinois University

#### Solo Exhibitions

- 2003 *Gerald Donato: New Paintings*, Hunt Gallery, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Virginia
- 1999 *Connection* (J. L. Gaustad & G. M. Donato), 1708 Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
- 1997 *Gerald Donato: Recent Paintings*, Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Richmond
- 1994 *Paintings: Gerald Donato*, 1708 Gallery, Richmond
- 1991 *Gerald Donato: Recent Paintings*, Kathryn Sermas Gallery, New York
- 1988 *Un/Common Ground: Featuring the Work of Twelve Virginia Artists*, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), Richmond
- 1986 *Gerald Donato: One Year 1985–86*, 1708 Gallery, Richmond
- 1984 *Fill in the Blanks*, Anderson Gallery, VCU, Richmond
- 1980 *Paris on My Mind*, 1708 Gallery, Richmond
- 1978 Anderson Gallery, VCU, Richmond
- 1976 Scott-McKennis Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
- 1972 Robinson House, VMFA, Richmond

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2004 *C'mon Fluff my Pillow*, Inns of Virginia, Richmond
- 2003 *Thumbnails and...*, Main Art Gallery, Richmond
- 1995 *Diverse Images 1*, Galerie Corti, Brussels, Belgium
- 1991 Group Show, Museum Pedro de Osma, Lima, Peru
- American Prints*, Cinema Center, Moscow
- Painting in the South*, Sarah Moody Gallery, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa
- Group Show, Cultural Center, Kishinev, Moldova
- 1988–89 Group Show, Pleiades Gallery, New York
- 1988–89 Group Show, John Davis Gallery, New York
- 1988 *The Drawing Show*, Koslow Rayl Gallery, Los Angeles
- Surrealism Continued*, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina



- 1987 *Five from Richmond*, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia  
Group Show, Nexus Gallery, Philadelphia
- 1985 Gallery Artist Show, Patricia Wayne Gallery, Richmond
- 1984 *Extremely Current*, 1708 Gallery, Richmond
- 1982 drawing included as part of Michael Smith's installation *It Starts at Home*,  
The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
*The Edge of Night*, Gallery Yves Arman, New York  
*The Expressive Anecdote: Directions in Figurative Art*, ICA Gallery,  
VMFA, Richmond
- 1981 *1940–1980: A Selection of Fellowship Recipients*, ICA Gallery,  
VMFA, Richmond

### **Special Awards, Fellowships, and Other Honors**

- 1987 National Endowment for the Arts Grant for Prints, Books and/or Drawings  
Professional Fellowship, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
- 1981 National Endowment for the Arts Grant for Painting

### **Public and Corporate Collections**

- Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond  
Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia  
The Federal Reserve Bank, Richmond, Virginia  
Loyola University, Chicago  
Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Virginia  
Ohio State University, Columbus  
Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina  
University of Utah, Salt Lake City  
University of Wisconsin–Madison  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond



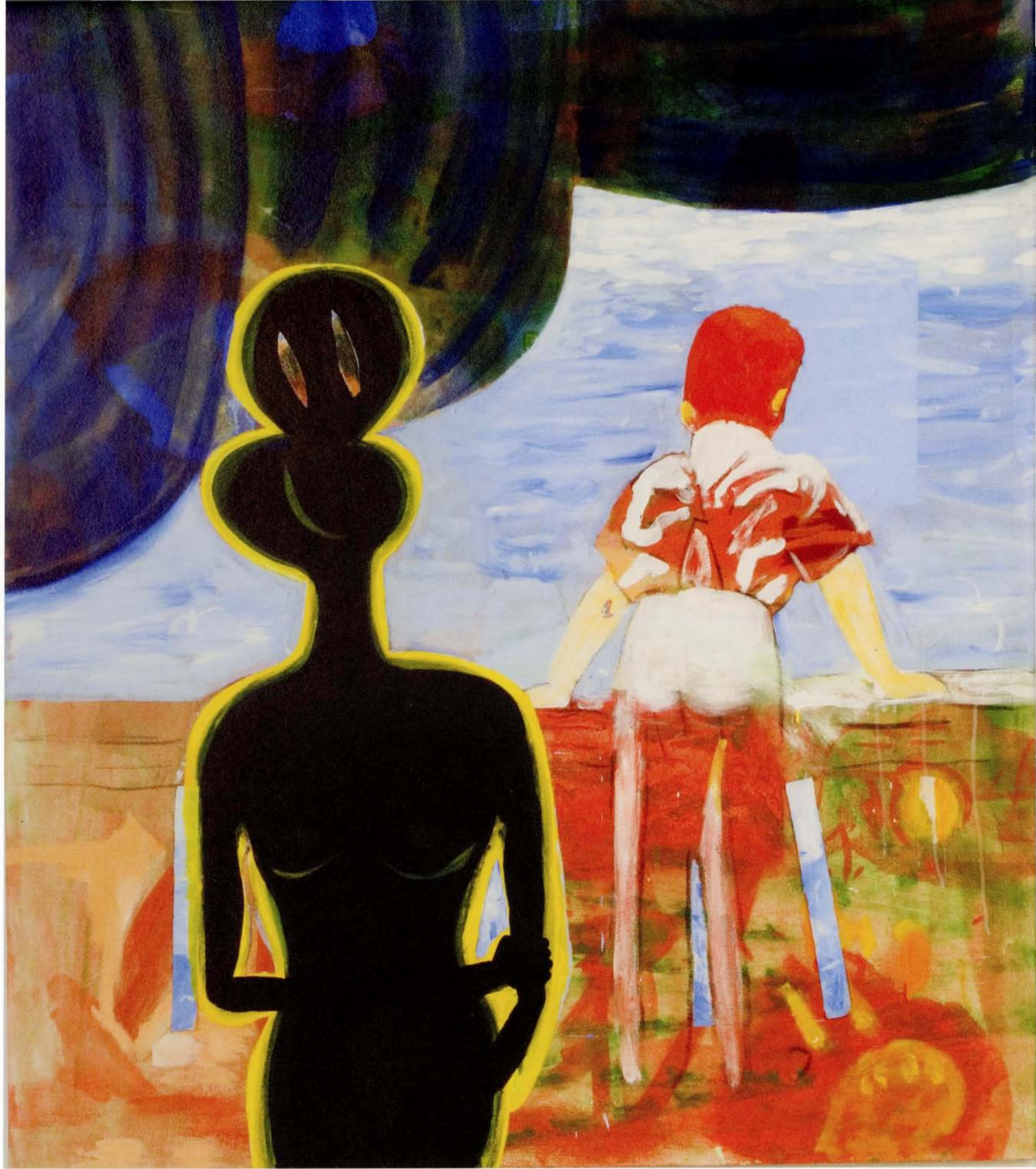


This book is dedicated to my wife, Joan Gaustad, and my parents, Rose and Michael Donato. I would like to thank Rick Toscan, Richard Roth, and Amy Moorefield not only for all they have done to make this show possible, but also for their part in making the Richmond art community as rich as it is.









*above* **Untitled**, 1987 (cat. no. 52). Acrylic and collage on canvas. 65 × 55.



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