

**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.

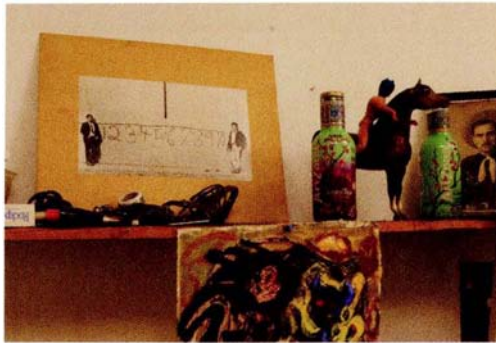
Important to note in Donato’s repertoire is his choice of everyday materials. Using house paints, he paints on ordinary hollow-cored doors easily purchased at Lowe’s and reuses canvases; no surface is too prosaic a vehicle for him. The flexibility of common materials is a key element for Donato, who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