



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

