



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.



