

**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.

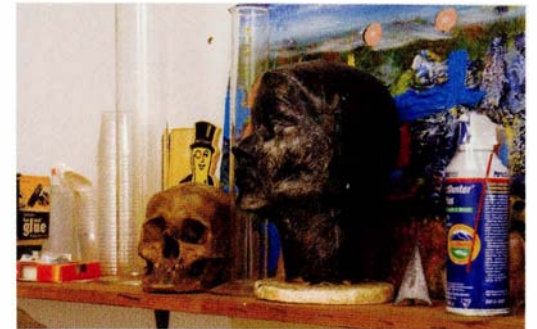
At that time I had not heard of the artist, Neo Rauch, who was just beginning to become popular and influential. It was a classic Donato moment, and one that’s stuck with me ever since and comes to mind when looking at Jerry’s own work: when the rest of us are numbed or bored or otherwise distracted, 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.

