

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 ³/₄ × 25 ¹/₂.

