

*A Centennial Retrospective*

ENRICO DONATI

WEINSTEIN GALLERY



*Photograph of Enrico Donati by Hans Namuth, c. late 1940s.  
Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate*

Front and back cover: *Above & Below* (detail, see p. 51)  
Inside front cover: *3 Grigi e Nero* (detail, see p. 27)  
Inside back cover: *Coptic Wall Verdoso* (detail, see p. 44)

# ALCHEMY

ENRICO DONATI  
(1909–2008)

**A**s an artist, I was always involved with the aesthetic values of alchemy and magic, and in their influence on the creative imagination of man.

Even though the alchemists have maintained that their art was ancient, it is a fact, instead, this "magic vision" is actually very young and can attract the "real," and influence people.

What interests me is the fight in which alchemists have sought the fusion of the spirit, the brain, and the divine. The alchemic vision of the world, for me, is not the creation of gold, but something else, infinitely superior to mere craft or science because transformation cannot be reproduced solely by ability. Moral virtues are necessary. Only when a man has fused spirit, brain, and divine encompassed in a moral orbit will he reach a sublime state of perfection and will he be able to create in a vacuum of purity.

The alchemists have lived in seclusion as if they were in a tacit protest against life and its external elements, and in this seclusion I find a *real, common stamp*, the external stream of life that has always attracted me. With his intelligence and art, man has always wished to rejoin this stream via studies and contemplation, ascending gradually toward the divine light.

*Khunrath* could not be bored. On the door to this entrance was written: "Be vigilant, even when you sleep."

*Khalid* wrote: "The stone holds within itself all the colors of red, white, yellow, blue sky, and green."

Every philosopher agrees with this subject. Beyond the transformation of metals, the stone has other miraculous virtues, among which is prolonged life beyond the limit of natural. In all of this I felt tied up, and I tried to maintain this vision in the life of my work. The people whose company I frequented, were, in a major way, involved in Alchemy and magic: André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Antonin Artaud, Kurt Seligmann, etc.

I started to get interested in alchemy around 1942–43.

An artist can create an isolated element. For me, art starts when the brain is conscious that the element does not exist by itself, but has needs, contrasting and complementary, and requests a visual situation to give it life. My work is involved with the isolated elements of nature and their different forms. This intuitive and spontaneous development creates forces that become one with the situation.

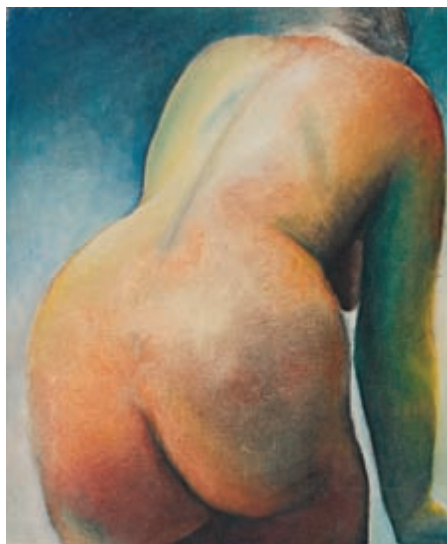
# A CENTENNIAL RETROSPECTIVE

ROWLAND WEINSTEIN

One of the great pleasures of my professional career was the opportunity to work with Enrico Donati, who passed away in 2008 at the age of 99. I discovered his work through the 2005 exhibition *Surrealism USA*, which also featured the work of Jerome Kamrowski and Gordon Onslow Ford, whose estates the gallery represents. Among a series of wall tags bearing both artists' birth and death dates, there was one which read simply "Born 1909." Enrico Donati was in fact, at that point, the "last living Surrealist." I wrote a letter to him and was invited to meet him.

I was to discover a studio full of Enrico's masterpieces, virtually intact from the early 1940s to the 21st century. These pieces had resided since their creation in one of Manhattan's most beautiful lofts overlooking Central Park South, which was Donati's studio. Enrico and I spent the day admiring the works together, Enrico as enthusiastic as I. This meeting led to our 2006 Weinstein Gallery exhibition and an overwhelming resurgence of interest in Donati's artwork and life. In the larger sense, this show also helped to shed much needed light on the cultural and intellectual transfer that occurred during World War II from Europe to the United States, of which Donati was a key example.

The most palpable consequence of our initial Weinstein show was that Timothy Burgard, the chief curator of American art at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, was so moved by seeing the work in person, which previously he had only read about in the history, that he decided to mount a solo exhibition of Donati's work. The result was *The Surreal World of Enrico Donati*, which took place in 2007 and examined Donati's remarkable contributions to Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. Simultaneously the gallery complemented this showing with a fuller exhibition of works from all of Donati's seven decades of painting. Our current exhibition marks the first posthumous retrospective of the work of Enrico Donati. It is our first opportunity to look back in a comprehensive way over the 100 years since Donati's birth and celebrate the legacy and life of this most accomplished of individuals.



*Untitled (The Peach)*, c. 1941  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches

Donati first came to the United States in the 1930s to study Native American culture and to collect their artifacts. He would move between the U.S. and Europe several times before making New York his home in 1940. Having set aside his early career as a composer, he threw himself into painting full time. His work showed a certain level of introspection and an innate ability to handle paint. One of Donati's early works, a nude titled *The Peach* (c. 1941, opposite) foretells his fascination soon after with the medieval myth of the mandragora,

a mysterious plant that is a member of the nightshade family. The transition was a natural one, as its large poisonous root system in fact strikingly resembles the human figure. The lore surrounding the mandragora root makes reference to its magical properties regarding concepts of birth, death, and rebirth. It would prove to be the perfect metaphor and inspiration for Donati's ongoing painting. It would also capture the attention of André Breton, Surrealism's prominent leader.

By the early 1940s Surrealism had been at the forefront of avant-garde art for nearly twenty years. Many of its members had been exiled to the United States for the duration of the War. Breton and Donati met through a mutual friend, Lionello Venturi. Venturi was a respected art historian who gave Donati a letter of introduction to Breton after seeing his show at the New School for Social Research in 1943. Upon meeting Donati and seeing his work, Breton immediately proclaimed him a Surrealist. In this way Donati came to know and collaborate with such twentieth-century giants as Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, Roberto Matta, Alexander Calder, and Marcel Duchamp. He was quickly regarded as the future of Surrealism and began an eight-year exploration into the deep realms of the subconscious using the mandragora myth as a guide. Donati's works of this period were greeted with much fanfare. The art critic Nicolas Calas concisely stated, "Donati's paintings are love songs," and Breton himself would famously say, "I love the painting of Enrico Donati as I love a night in May."

In 1947 Donati and Duchamp collaborated and helped to organize the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in Paris. Although the show announced Surrealism's return to Europe after the War it also marked the beginning of the end of Surrealism as a viable art movement. Donati chose to stay in New York City to remain at the ever-evolving forefront of twentieth-century art.

Donati's post-Surrealist work would undergo a major transition in the late 1940s to include series of finely detailed geometric abstractions that were as mechanized as the mandragoras were organic such as *La Prière* (p. 18). He also experimented with a series he called "spaziale," or "spatial" paintings. The thin color washes stand in contrast to the light texture that populates and subtly directs the viewer's eye. In the case of *Spaziale XXIII* (p. 20) we sense a pyramidal base that appears to vaporize as we look for more detail. The surface itself seems to have undergone a kind of erosion, with drips and other evidence of the artist's allowing random chance to guide him.

By the early 1950s Donati's artwork had undergone a complete metamorphosis, and he had begun to show his work at the prestigious Betty Parsons Gallery, which had also exhibited the work of Pollock, Rothko,



*Mandragora Nest, 1947*  
Ink on paper, 14 x 11 inches

Reinhardt, Newman, and others of the New York School. Donati's interest in texture had also evolved; it was now the primary visual element in his painting. By applying thick opaque layers of vacuum cleaner dirt and dense carpet fibers that had been mixed with pigment and medium, Donati was able to create a surface that was, as Duchamp described, "like the surface of the Moon." The name would stick and the "Moonscapes" were born. These beautiful rich canvases (see pp. 26–29) left any sense of illusion behind. The nature of the texture is so encompassing that Donati's work of the 1950s must be seen to be truly experienced, as any form of reproduction comes up strikingly short. The dark colors of the Moonscapes would be replaced by the earthen-toned "Sargon Series" paintings of the mid- to late 1950s (see pp. 30–31), just as the carpet fiber and vacuum dirt would give way to finely crushed sands and silicates. They would be applied to the canvases layer by layer and worked back into it while the surface was still malleable. The nature of the texture creates a surface of marvelous dimension and motion.

Through this period of growth Donati also came to accept the fossil as a metaphorical guide in his work. According to Donati, "The fossil has an incredibly animated inside form. . . and carries the whole cycle of creation in it. . . to me the fossil contains within itself all the mystery, power, and indestructibility of life." It would be through this revelation that Donati's great Fossil Series would begin. In 1960 Donati brought together his mastery of texture and the intense beautiful color that had been absent from his art for a full decade. Paintings such as *222 CPS* (p. 33) exemplify his use of multiple layers of texture infused with interwoven bands of colors that allude to having been deposited on the canvas by some grand geological force. Upon closer inspection you see the gray central surface has been scored in such a way that it appears inscribed in some forgotten language. Throughout the next decades Donati would continue to expand his research into the possibilities and concepts of lost cultures and language. Whether he be revisiting the Gaelic myth of the walking stones (pp. 38–39) or exploring Egyptian history with his Luxor and Coptic Wall Series (pp. 43–44), he always managed to apply the pioneering precepts and vitality of the early Surrealists.

I was privy to Donati's personal vitality on numerous occasions during those last three years of his life. I remember fondly his gift for storytelling, as he regaled me with delightful anecdotes of his lunches with Duchamp, Breton, Ernst, and others at Larré's French restaurant. His zest for life was on display in full form when, upon stepping into the gallery at his 2006 retrospective, he cried with joy at the sight the full display of all the "children"—decades' worth of paintings he had been saving—that he had released to my care. And this vitality was never so vivid as when, at the age of 98, he made an impromptu speech that captivated a crowd of hundreds for more than twenty minutes at the dinner at the de Young Museum in honor of his 2007 exhibition there.

One day in particular stands out. Donati and I were in his studio selecting work for the 2006 exhibition. He pulled out one work after another, and each time he would exclaim rhetorically, "Who would do such a thing? What was I thinking? I must have been crazy." This, again and again. The answer, though, was clear—only Enrico Donati would have done these things, and done them so magnificently. I could empathize with and revel in his sentiments, however. To re-approach the work of Enrico Donati, in all its phases, is to be constantly surprised by its freshness and life. This collection of Donati's work is like no other. The pieces in this show were the ones he chose to keep until his death, the ones he kept to remind himself of the incredible journey that was his life. And, in many ways, this exhibition is the grand epitaph not just of Donati but of Surrealism as well. Donati was the last surviving member of the single most influential art movement of the twentieth century. His death marks the end of Surrealism as a living movement. It is now purely historical and has become a fossil in itself. But the works live on in vibrant form. I am pleased to present this *Centennial Retrospective* celebrating the life and art of Enrico Donati.

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