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PREMIERE ISSUE

# SALT

CAPE MAY COUNTY, NEW JERSEY



[saltnj.com](http://saltnj.com)



# VICTOR GRASSO

*(l'enfant terrible)*

words and images by david todd mccarty

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CAPT. NEMO







# JUST DON'T CALL HIM A LOCAL ARTIST.

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Victor comes to the door and I can't believe my eyes. His head is shaved, but even more shockingly, so is his face. I'm here to shoot a portrait of one of Cape May's best known artists, and I almost don't recognize him. The last time I saw him—to see the new pieces he's been working on for an upcoming show—he was sporting a large black beard and looked very much like the characters in his latest paintings. He's been working on a series that is inspired by Captain Nemo of Jules Verne fame. We'd planned a shoot based on his beard. Or so I thought.

He flashes me a smile and I realize he's been hiding a pretty handsome face under all that facial hair.

"I couldn't help it," he says, "It was for mother's day. I had to do it."

I guess we shouldn't expect anything less from an artist who is known for his unpredictability. Even though his paintings are ultra-realistic, his subject matter changes constantly, so you never really know what you're going to see next. Which is one of the reasons why his upcoming show is being met with a good deal of anticipation. Everyone wants to know

what he's going to do next.

A few weeks earlier, when he still had a face full of hair, we'd sat down to talk in his North Cape May home. Victor lives with his wife Alicia and daughter in what looks like a typical rancher near the bay. The outside is somewhat deceiving though because once you're inside, it's anything but typical. The ceiling is vaulted, allowing for some of his larger work to be displayed and the interior touches show off an artists' flair. The sliding barn door that leads to the bedroom. The kitchen island made from an old see-saw. The dining room table made from a 200 year old barn. Once again, outward appearances do not necessarily reflect what's going on inside.

Victor Grasso started painting professionally when he was 18 years old, he attended one semester of art school, then left figuring why go to school if he could get paid to paint.

"But my first show," he says, "I didn't sell a thing."

But he kept at it. Honing his craft and searching for his own voice.

"Painting isn't about getting respect," he explains.











*Big Baby No.1*  
Oil and Gesso on Drop Cloth | 54" x.72"

"It's nice if you can get paid to do it, but that's not why you paint. You paint because you have to. Because you have no other choice. I don't live to create, I create to live."

We're sitting in his kitchen having coffee. His wife is across the room on the computer. Above her head is an enormous painting of what looks like a doll, with blank eyes. He explains that his one year old daughter Gray, was his model.

I ask him about being a local artist and he stiffens.

"I hate that. The local artist thing. It's like you're not bad, for being from South Jersey," says Victor. "I don't want to be defined by where I'm from. Where you live certainly feeds into who you are as an artist, but it shouldn't define you. It doesn't define me."

Victor's latest project is what he calls The Nemo Project.

"Imagine if Ed Wood painted Captain Nemo from 20,000 Leagues under the sea," he says. "But without the ladies underwear."

Ed Wood was, a now legendary, filmmaker who created low budget genre films back in the 50's. Many of his best known films featured Bela Lugosi, and bad special effects. He was also known for his cross-dressing, following the film *Glen or Glenda*.

"I'm into mashing genre's together," he says. "It's 50's horror films, meets noir, meets Jules Verne."

One of his recent works, *The Presentation of*

*Leviathan*, features a proud Captain Nemo, and two of his crew, revealing a large octopus to three buyers. Each of the three buyers holds a cigarette. But look a little closer and you realize that they are all self portraits of the artist. It's a brilliant piece of work, painted completely monochromatically.

The entire series features Victor as Capt Nemo, all done in black and white.

"Painting in black and white is a lot harder than you'd think," says Victor. "You're literally working in a grey area. It forces you to concentrate completely on the subject. You can't use color to force your eye one direction or another. You can't use it to create a mood or feeling. It's just you and the subject."

It's an interesting turn in his work. Allowing his own likeness to be featured in his work. It's hard to say whether this is a progression, or just a phase. For years his wife was his model, then recently, his daughter. Maybe it's just his time.

Regardless, it's interesting to watch. He has a whole new series he says he's getting ready to start based on his beardless look. No word on whether it has anything to do with 50's horror films, Ed Wood, or Jules Verne, but it's sure to be interesting.

Victor's upcoming show runs August 4th to September 3 at the Soma NewArt Gallery in Cape May. Opening Reception - Saturday, August 4: 6-9pm. [victorgrasso.com](http://victorgrasso.com)





"Drink Me"  
Oil on Linen | 48" x 72"



"The Picaroon"  
Oil on Linen | 26" x 36"



*"The Angler"*  
Oil on Canvas | 84" x 96"









"The Presentation of Leviathan"  
Oil on Linen | 40" x 60"









*(fin )*

