

Joyce Pensato

interviewed by Rachel Youens

I If you go gallery hopping in Paris, you'll undoubtedly catch sight of Joyce Pensato's large scale drawings of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, the Simpsons, and Felix the Cat at Anne De Villepoix Gallery. Pensato's images burst off of the walls and jump into your space with googly-eyed angst. The characters are flabbergasted at their predicament, protesting a premature embalment in the gritty layers of dense charcoal drawing. Pensato gets to the underside of her characters, turning them into ghostly pantomimes whose gestures convey the sheer hilariousness of their insoluble dilemmas.

II. In town, Pensato has shown at Max Protech, Luhring Augustine, Parker's Box, Exit Art, and Flipside Gallery. She has also traveled to Argentina and Ireland, making performances and installations. She keeps a low profile here: working, getting together with friends, and walking her dog, Max. As we stop for a cup of coffee on the way to her studio, she muses about how the neighborhood changes each time she returns from Paris. One wouldn't think that rents have tripled behind the aluminum sided facades that we pass in the heart of Williamsburg, but for the moment, there is a neighborly equilibrium of incoming young people and old timers.

III. In 1979, Pensato was one of the first artists to move to Williamsburg, where she found a building that was once used as a dance hall for a local church for her studio. It is a larger than life dream, a cross between a garret and a loft; two storied, with a gabled roof supported by wooden trusses, it has a cast iron balcony flanked by opposing stairways, and its darkened atmosphere is pierced by a sky light and highly placed windows. The studio is filled with the stuffed animals used as models, which Pensato sets up at eye level and barely arm's length away to observe until she works up the scale and visual intensity of her drawings and paintings.

IV. In New York, with its myriad artists, the edgy competition for recognition is stimulating, but Pensato enjoys the qualities of life that success brings in Paris. She spends 4 to 6 months of the year there, where her audience appreciates the unusual links she creates between popular culture and existential outlook. Her work is included in collections from the City of Paris to the FRAC des Pays de la Loire.

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V. Pensato attended the Studio School during the mid to late seventies, and it became as much a home as an education. Its founder Mercedes Matter had talked to and studied with the great artist émigrés from Europe. She established the school to translate their values of modernism and professionalism for American students. With a stream of well established visiting artists who taught, critiqued, and told stories, study was rigorous and centered around many of many of Giacometti's ideas in particular, adapting his challenge to infuse pictures with the emotive qualities of things and reach beyond habitual ways of seeing. Students practiced measuring space and forms and developing an awareness of the effects of their peripheral vision, with an approach that doing and undoing would lead to a greater vision of nature. Years later, Pensato's processes and methods remain tied to this tradition of looking at and abstracting from nature. Even today, the Studio School's hallways are thick with the smell of turpentine, and its rooms are laden with a bohemian treasure trove of studio props. When Pensato first replaced those revered apples and pears with a series of 'Batman' figures, she broke through the safety net of limitation. This rebellion was rewarded in the high tradition of education.

V. What makes the repetition of her obsession so forceful? Pensato, a native of Brooklyn, reminisces about her childhood when squeaky clean Mickey, grumpy Donald, and sadistic Bugs Bunny came alive for her. Her father, an orphaned Italian immigrant, learned English through movies and cartoons and loved anything connected to the American Dream. He took his children on the subways to see Coney Island, 42nd Street, or Macy's on week ends, or to picnic at the Statue of Liberty. A printer, he made them toys and puppets. Both his stories and his patient listening encouraged her. In the studio, Pensato pursues the pleasures and struggles to find her forms, as the image comes and goes through countless erasures, sometimes scraping the paper with an electric sander to connect its history with the walls of her studio. These methods of "undoing" dislocate the linearity of the original images into the plastic realm where iconic possibilities reside, like splayed lips surmounted on lost limbs, or ovoidal sockets attached to thickly lined balloon-like bodies.

VII. Pensato along with other young artists, was invited to Joan Mitchell's home—Claude Monet's second house—at Vetheuil, France for the summers. It was Mitchell's presence, and her brusque method of challenge that gave Pensato a role model and an attitude with which to continue pursuing her dream of making art. Mitchell "took no prisoners alive," she explains, challenging the young artists to question their thinking in order to reach past conventional thought habits and develop a more articulate level of self awareness. Mitchell woke up late in day, worked into the night, and socialized after dinner. She wanted her circle of young charges to "See," their paintings, themselves, and the fleeting qualities of the natural world.

VIII. Back in New York, Pensato worked at David Davis until she decided to give herself blocks of time in which to build a body of work. She learned about materials and techniques and was inspired maybe by Davis' commitment to the arts, even as she saw living parables of the art world, such as the time Salvador Dali stopped by, and after being given the grand tour by Davis bought only a pencil.

IX. Pensato's first break came in the early nineties. In 1992, American and French gallery dealers visited her studio, which was soon followed by her inclusion in group shows in Paris. The French audience is still captivated by of Pensato's heated, ghostly representations of American icons, although she has also received recognition in the US—she won a Guggenheim grant in 1996. Her most recent paintings, in black and white enamel, are based on scripted repetitions of her repertory of characters, calligraphically positioned, often in rows across the canvas. Across the smoothness of the enameled surface of the canvas, they rotate, shifting gears, becoming disassembled and reconfigured through Pensato's connection to an "unconscious" train of thought. When asked what her defining moments have been, Pensato speaks of self acceptance as part of the process of her maturation and connects this realization to her career as an artist.

Rachel Youens is an artist living and working in Brooklyn.