

The Commanding, Flamboyant Joyce Pensato

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Pensato favored pop culture flotsam marred by the real world, which she transmuted into adventurous artworks dealing with raw, real world concerns.

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Installation view, *Joyce Pensato: Fuggetabout It (Redux)*, Petzel, 2021 (courtesy the Joyce Pensato Estate and Petzel, New York)

Way back in 2007 — which seems like another world ago — I wrote the catalogue essay for Joyce Pensato's first exhibition at Petzel Gallery, titled *The Eraser* (December 19, 2007–February 2, 2008). After many lean years, during which she was cherished by ardent enthusiasts (especially fellow artists) but little known to the larger art-going public, and even less remunerated, this was the breakthrough show that rocketed Pensato — with her scruffy and bold, yet elegant and exacting, black and white enamel paintings of iconic cartoon and comic-book figures — to rapt acclaim and commercial success.

Back then, we had a memorable hours-long studio visit at the Olive Street building in East Williamsburg, formerly a dance hall, that was Pensato's art lair for 32 years. Her space was striking: weathered, with holes in the ceiling allowing rain and snow to enter, and several feral pigeons flapping about. Clutter abounded: tchotchkes and wigs, garish sunglasses and stuffed animals, hats and masks (Pensato often liked to dress outlandishly), paint cans and paint-splattered milk crates. Paintings and drawings, some finished and some in progress, were everywhere, and the walls and floor were thick with paint; it was often tough to distinguish between artworks and architecture. Pensato was clearly living, not just making, her work, and had been for years.

There were copious Felix the Cats, Homer Simpsons, Lisa Simpsons, Elmos, Batmans, Donald and Daisy Ducks, Mickey and Minnie Mouses, South Park kids, and many other characters in various guises, including toys and comic books, gadgets and posters, piled on furniture and strewn about on the floor — a pop culture eruption.

Most of the plush toys were sullied or damaged, things Pensato had found on the street or bought in thrift stores, brought home, lived with, and scrutinized. She didn't just paint Bart Simpson or Elmo, but rather a very specific Bart Simpson, who looked like he had been plucked from a dumpster, or an Elmo who might have been run over by a truck. She favored pop culture flotsam marred by the real world, which she transmuted into adventurous artworks dealing with raw, real world concerns.



Joyce Pensato, "Not Groucho" (2011), enamel on linen, 72 x 54 inches (courtesy The Joyce Pensato Estate and Petzel, New York)

Concurrent exhibitions at Petzel's two locations are Pensato's first solo shows with the gallery since her death in 2019 at the age of 77. The Chelsea show, titled *Fuggetabout It (Redux)*, begins with an enamel on linen portrait of Groucho Marx. It is a marvel of energy incarnate and fierce concision: just two brushy, bushy black eyebrows, which look downright explosive; two prominent eyes (or maybe glasses), which are nothing more than black circles outlining white areas with black and gray smudges; and a thick, black mustache or mouth ("Not Groucho," 2011). Black drips and trickles course down the painting. They are messy and unruly, but also delicate and graceful.

Paring down to the comedian's famous facial characteristics — those prominent eyebrows, those bespectacled eyes, that over-the-top greasepaint mustache — Pensato's revamped Groucho is anything but buoyant and comedic. Instead, he looks troubled, somber, contemplative, on edge — a renowned public figure in private consternation. Pensato had an amazing way of humanizing her iconic figures, investing them with complex emotions, among them anxiety, agitation, hopefulness, fear, and wavering joy.

In the neighboring room are large charcoal and pastel portraits on paper of Homer Simpson, Lisa Simpson, and Daisy Duck. (Large works on paper are an important part of Pensato's oeuvre.) Homer resembles a criminal in a mug shot or a fugitive on a wanted poster, yet his eyes are thoughtful and sensitive, and his expression is curiously tender ("Underground Homer," 2019). Lisa, with searing eyes and an extra wide grin, looks both maniacal and ecstatic ("SmackDown! Lisa," 2018). Swirling, sometimes jagged yellow, green, red, and purple marks, interlaced with black areas, make this one of Pensato's more colorful works.

Pensato's Daisy is anything but the bow-wearing, coquettish, ultra-feminine character of Disney fame ("Daisy," 2012). She still sports a bow atop her head, but it's drawn in frantic, rapid scribbles. Confronting viewers head-on but also welcoming them, this Daisy is a brazen, action-packed figure with her arms outstretched, her bill half open, as if exclaiming (or bellowing, or laughing), her body full, plump, and crackling with energy.



Joyce Pensato, “SmackDown! Lisa” (2018), charcoal and pastel on paper, 90 x 90 ¼ inches
(courtesy The Joyce Pensato Estate and Petzel, New York)

Jet-black rings around her arms seem to be pulsating and whirling; slight, abstract areas of blue and yellow, rendered in just a few marks, are subtle and enchanting. Pensato likely smuggled aspects of self-portraiture and self-analysis into her works. Like this emphatic, diva Daisy, she could be a flamboyant, commanding presence, thoroughly at home in the spotlight, although it took far too many arduous years for her to get there.

In 2011, just as Pensato was understandably reveling in her newfound success, she lost her beloved studio in a dispute with her landlord. This displacement was all the more painful and ironic because she was from the neighborhood and steeped in its culture — the daughter of a Sicilian immigrant father and an Italian American mother, she grew up in Bushwick and lived in Williamsburg for many years.

Pensato's defiant, can-do response for her third show with Petzel in 2012 was to move a big part of that studio, including toys, knickknacks, and props (many spotted and streaked with paint), along with paint cans, brushes, ladders, and furniture into the gallery as a sprawling, exuberant installation (*Fuggetabout It*, 2012). Grinning, delighted viewers (there were many) could explore the myriad connections between Pensato's eclectic materials — culled from the generative and immersive studio environment that she sometimes called “Joyceland” — and her finished art.

Fuggetabout It (Redux) features a reprise of that installation — a teeming assortment of Pensato's wild stuff. It is fascinating to scout through what mattered to her, while feeling her presence: a cut-out of Muhammad Ali skipping rope, Batman masks covered with Pollock-like splatters and drips, clown shoes, an ersatz palm tree. And paint, always paint, loads of it, on everything — an art material but also lifeblood. One would hardly expect that paint-encrusted paint cans could look so compelling and sculptural, but they do. Jane Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) has written of inanimate objects as “thing-power” and “vital materialities” with power and agency. There were, and are, a great deal of both in Joyceland, including a cheap, plastic Lisa Simpson mask that was likely the model for the excellent “SmackDown! Lisa.”



Joyce Pensato, *Untitled* (at various times, *Joyceland* and *Fuggetabout It!*) (2012 – 2019), studio installation materials, dimensions variable (courtesy The Joyce Pensato Estate and Petzel, New York)

Two large paintings on the walls of eyes in this space maintain a watchful presence. More “eyeball” paintings in different configurations — peering from the dark, casting tremulous sidelong glances — are in the next room. All are based on the bulging, excessive, and expressive eyes of Pensato's favored characters, now amped up to whopping proportions.

The full range of Pensato’s combinatory and idiosyncratic approach is on display in these paintings, which freely meld representation and abstraction: sweeping AbEx gestures, near-monochromatic expanses, rudimentary geometric forms, drips, smears, multiple layers, erasures that leave faint traces of tiny, abstract marks. All of these eyes, most shedding drips, are supremely evocative. They suggest trepidation verging on terror, worry merging with curiosity, vulnerability mixed with cautious vitality.

For those who only know Pensato’s work post her 2007 Petzel debut, post art world sizzle, post Instagram celebrity, the uptown show, titled *Batman vs. Spiderman*, will be especially significant. It includes previously unexhibited works from two series that are pivotal in her development.

In the 1970s Pensato was a student at the New York Studio School, absorbing its focus on drawing and painting from life, and on the rigorous refinement of painterly techniques. Fellow students from this time, including multimedia artist Holly Zausner and painter Christopher Wool, became close, supportive friends and remained so for the rest of her life.



Installation view, *Joyce Pensato: Batman vs. Spiderman*, Petzel, 2021 (courtesy The Joyce Pensato Estate and Petzel, New York)

According to the press release, which features quotes from Pensato, she was intensely frustrated with still life drawing and painting, tired of “apples and pears and all that crap.” Her instructor and mentor, the painter (and co-founder of the school in 1963) Mercedes Matter, advised her to incorporate what she really did care about — for instance, a life-sized cutout of Batman that she had found on the street.

In six charcoal on paper works, all “Untitled,” circa 1976, and measuring 50 by 38 inches, Batman, Spiderman, and, in one case, Superman are startling additions to otherwise quite conventional scenes. A thin, spindly Batman with a tense, dogged expression uncomfortably tries to cavort with two kids, one of whom is riding a hobby or carousel horse. No longer a muscular and confident scourge of villains, he looks vulnerable and uneasy as he attempts to fit in with a context that he does not understand.

In another work, he is more cheerful, dancing and vamping with a woman and a child, again on a horse. Crouching next to a chair, with his left arm wrapped behind his head, Spiderman looks far closer to a limber ballet dancer than a wily crime fighter. Pensato didn’t just render her iconic characters, she transformed them, giving them fresh roles and identities. Her prominent black outlines, with subtle shading and erasures, enlivened these drawings from static depictions to active, shifting forces.



Installation view, *Joyce Pensato: Batman vs. Spiderman*, Petzel, 2021 (courtesy The Joyce Pensato Estate and Petzel, New York)

In the late 1990s, inspired in part by Christopher Wool, Pensato began using enamel paint — which would become a signature material — for its flatness, hardness, industrial look, and quick drying time, while adding a twist: she pressed newspaper onto the wet paint, then peeled it off to yield eventful, variegated surfaces.

Twelve small (mostly 17 by 14 inch) enamel on paper portraits in white on black grounds, from 1998 to 2000, feature the heads and pronounced facial expressions of Tony the Tiger, Batman, Pensato’s dog Max, Snoopy, and others. They are hard-hitting and absolutely riveting.

The relentlessly chipper Tony the Tiger suddenly looks shocked and aghast (“Tiger,” 1998); Batman, with hollow, black eyes and a black abyss of an open mouth, looks frankly agonized (“Batman,” 1999). Pensato’s dog looks both bony and spectral, evoking an alien creature in deep space (“Max,” 1999). These experimental portraits are the genesis for the large, dynamic paintings that would bring Pensato — for me and quite a number of others something of a national treasure — such rousing and deserved acclaim.

Joyce Pensato: Fuggetabout It (Redux) continues at *Petzel Gallery Chelsea (456 West 18th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan)* through March 6. Joyce Pensato: Batman vs. Spiderman continues at *Petzel Gallery Uptown (35 East 67th Street, UES, Manhattan)* through March 20.

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