

JP Yes, it’s totally like life drawing. I have to see the character in three dimensions. I can look at the same thing over and over again and see something different every time.

AS Olive Oyl, Batman, Homer Simpson, Felix, Mickey, Donald, Kenny [McCormick, from *South Park*]—are there any cartoon characters that you haven’t yet incorporated into your work but would like to?

JP I don’t have any other characters in mind right now. There is so much stuff in the studio and sometimes I will see something like a character’s eyes or mouth and decide to incorporate it. Right now I’m putting Groucho Marx’s eyebrows on Homer Simpson.

AS How did you make the transition from black-and-white to color?

JP I’m a black-and-white person, so for me, painting in color was always a struggle. I’m adding color now because it’s a challenge. In painting, I use it with the Batman image. In drawings, I add color and then take it away, so some color still comes through.

AS Do all your works have a lot of underpainting?

JP I wouldn’t call it underpainting. I just keep working and changing the image until it feels right. I erase a lot. It’s like measuring. The expression has to be the way I want. It’s also about how the drips work....

AS The paintings are so vigorous and frenetic, full of movement and gestures. Do you consider yourself an action painter?

JP It is like action painting but it’s not just about the action or abstract expressionism.

Related Programs

Free and open to the public unless otherwise noted. For a complete list of programs, please visit camstl.org.

Artist Talk: Joyce Pensato
Tuesday, January 21, 7:00 pm
Using the mural she is creating on site at CAM, Pensato discusses her working process and concerns.

Opening Night
Friday, January 24, 7:00–9:00 pm

Friday Evening Tours
Fridays, January 31–April 11, 6:00 pm
Take advantage of CAM’s late hours on Friday evenings and stop by for a special 30-minute tour of the exhibitions. Associate Curator Kelly Shindler leads the tour on April 4.

Breakfast with the Curators
Friday, March 21, 8:30 am
Complimentary coffee and baked goods.
Register at camstl.org/breakfast.
CAM members are invited for breakfast and a private tour of the exhibitions.



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Joyce Pensato, *Untitled (Mickey)*, 1995. Enamel on linen, 90 x 72 inches. Collection of Charline Von Heyl and Christopher Wool. Photo: Jason Mandella



For more than thirty years, Joyce Pensato (b. 1941, Brooklyn, New York) has transformed America’s most iconic cartoon characters into psychologically charged enamel paintings and charcoal drawings. Her subjects, such as Mickey Mouse, Felix the Cat, Donald and Daisy Duck, the Simpsons, Batman, and *South Park*’s Kyle and Stan, flicker between comedic representation and menacing abstraction—familiar faces made strange. Pensato’s innovative translation of cartoon imagery and aggressive engagement with materials position her work between the illustrative figuration of pop art and the gestural physicality of abstract expressionism, recalling Eduardo Paolozzi’s appropriation of Disney, Jackson Pollock’s splattering of industrial enamel paint, and Willem de Kooning’s evocative mark-making. Animated characters that originally represented postwar American exuberance become instead contemporary portraits of the manic, the vulnerable, and the worried—cultural mirrors that reflect a compromised morality.

I KILLED KENNY is the first museum exhibition devoted to Pensato’s work and features the monumental wall painting *Running Miceys* (2014), created on-site specifically for CAM. Presenting a selection of key paintings and works on paper spanning Pensato’s career—from being mentored by Joan Mitchell and Mercedes Matter at the New York Studio School in the 1970s to her most recent metallic painting, *Gold Batman* (2013)—the exhibition reveals her work’s evolution from seemingly benign character studies into harrowing aesthetic ciphers.

Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis



January 24–
April 13, 2014

Joyce Pensato

I KILLED KENNY

Joyce Pensato (b. 1941, Brooklyn, New York) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She has recently shown work at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York; Capitain Petzel Gallery, Berlin; Galerie Anne de Villepoix, Paris; and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago. Pensato has also been included in exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Frac des Pays de la Loire, Carquefou. Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Dallas Museum of Art; the Saint Louis Art Museum; and the Speed Art Museum, Louisville.

Major support for the exhibition has been provided by Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York; the Diane and Dorothy Brooks Foundation; and the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. The catalog has been made possible by Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York; Lisson Gallery, London; Galerie Anne de Villepoix, Paris; Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; Olga and George Votis; Sima Familant; and the Nelson Buxton Collection.

Joyce Pensato: I KILLED KENNY is organized by the Santa Monica Museum of Art and Jeffrey Uslip, CAM Chief Curator.



Audio Tour
Download the CAM app at camstl.org/app or ask for an iPod at the front desk to hear directly from the artist and curator on the audio tour.

Follow that Nose: An Interview with Joyce Pensato

The following interview is an excerpt of an interview between Ali Subotnick, curator at the Hammer Museum, and Joyce Pensato on February 17, 2013, the entirety of which will be published in the forthcoming catalog, *Joyce Pensato: I KILLED KENNY*.

AS Joyce, as we have seen, your work draws on the iconic imagery of such cartoon characters as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. As a kid were you interested in Mickey and Donald?

JP My father was an Italian immigrant who loved New York and America, so he would often take my brother and me to 42nd Street, the Statue of Liberty, all of these New York tourist sites, and then he would buy us comic books.

AS What were some of your favorite comic books?

JP Well, *Lulu* and *Donald Duck*. I'm sure I was also a Disney fan. But not Batman—when I was young, that was more of a boy thing.

AS Did you grow up watching a lot of TV?

JP Yeah, I embraced it fully. My older brother was into cartoons and I was always copying him. I'm very competitive, so I would follow him and do whatever he was doing. He studied commercial art and I tried to study commercial art but failed at it. You had to do hand lettering ... and I was terrible at it; all my letters came out looking like abstract-expressionist letters. So I had my brother do my homework for me! But at the same time, I had two wonderful art teachers who encouraged me to go into fine art instead.

AS So once you got to the New York Studio School, were you being taught traditional still-life painting? And were they also teaching Ab-Ex?

JP Everything was based on Hans Hoffman's idea of push and pull. It was drilled into you that you were drawing like Cézanne, Giacometti, and Matisse, and then you painted like De Kooning. I keep up the tradition. I shared a studio at the school with Christopher Wool



Joyce Pensato, *Punk Homer*, 2012. Enamel on linen, 90 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Lamay Photo

when he was about eighteen, and I remember he was always in the studio looking at his paintings on the floor. Now we are holding up the Studio School tradition. He only went there for a year; I stayed longer.

AS So when did you start doing Batman?

JP It was my third year in school. I didn't want to do traditional still lifes. Mercedes Matter [the artist and founder of the Studio School] said I should try to find something I would like to look at. I love finding discarded things in the street, and at that time there was a lot of that kind of stuff.

AS Did you already have a collection of old toys at that point?

JP I started collecting pop culture stuff and toys and things that would interest me to look at and work with. At that time, whenever a new Batman or Spider-Man movie came out, the theaters would put up life-size cardboard cutouts of the main characters. I got them all.

AS What was the reaction when you started painting and drawing the cutouts?

JP The Studio School and Mercedes Matter were so supportive and really positive. She was not known to be a feminist, but she told me not to be like her—exhibit your work! When she saw my work she put up a whole

show. I had around fifty Batman images, all drawn in still-life space.

AS Did you work with any other subjects?

JP I also made drawings of broken chairs. They had a lot of personality. Then I started therapy in the early 1980s.

AS How did that affect your work?

JP The therapy was a positive thing because I learned to own my own space, and that affected my drawings.

AS In what way? How were you “owning your space” in the drawings?

JP I no longer had to follow what was in front of me. I could work on drawings in any size, move things from place to place, add them, take them out, put them back, make them larger or smaller. It made me realize that I am in charge of what I look at and what I make.

AS What happened after you finished school?

JP What I was about was pop culture. I got out of school in '79. I was doing atmospheric abstract paintings and drawings of cartoon figures and I felt like two different artists. The big moment came in the early '90s. I was going to have my first one-person show of the abstract work, but the gallerist called it off two weeks before it was supposed to open. I was so shocked and disappointed that I really started looking at what I was doing. I loved drawing the cartoon characters so I decided to accept myself and find a way to paint them. The figures would get screwed up when I used traditional paints, like oils or acrylics. But then I tried using the enamel paint that [fellow artist and friend] Christopher Wool was using and that worked because it is a different process.

AS Is it because the enamel paint dries more quickly than oils?

JP Not exactly. Basically, it's black and white and you can't fuck around with it. If you're painting something black you have to wait for it to dry. Usually you have to wait until the following day to put something else on it.

AS So how do you start with the enamel paintings? Do you first do a drawing on the canvas?

JP No. The size and shape of the canvas tells me what form to put in. I start with whatever form I am interested in at the time, maybe cartoony Elmo eyes, or Olive Oyl's horizontal nose. And Groucho Marx is a bushy moustache and eyebrows. Keep in mind that I am working from images that are already distorted. I also think about the expression I want to use: for example, scary, dumb, or sad. The images have to have life.

AS How do you begin a painting or drawing?

JP I always start with the caricature and the basic features. I once did a drawing on a wall for some private collectors. Their house was all clean and white so they put me in a tent to do the work. They wanted Felix [the Cat] and I always start with the big lips and big eyes. They got very nervous when they came and saw it in progress. I said “Don't worry; it's just the beginning, that's how I start.” Later on in the process, I change everything. I want to own it, to make it my own.

AS Are the *South Park* characters the only contemporary characters you've taken on?

JP I've used *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. I like to take a bad drawing and make it into high art. Beavis and Butt-Head are really badly drawn. I had the *South Park* toys sitting around for the longest time and then all of a sudden I said “I see it now, on the canvas.” Before, I thought it was too simple.

AS When you're working on the drawings and the paintings are you constantly looking at the toys?

JP I have to look at something, yeah. I'm looking at the toys.

AS So it's almost like life drawing?



Joyce Pensato, *Batman*, 1976. Charcoal on paper, 29 3/4 x 22 inches. Collection of Ira G. Wool and Barbara Mirecki.