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.

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 Micsys (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 Museum of Modern Art and Jeffrey Uslip, CAM Chief Curator.

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; and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago. 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; and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago. "Dipa 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 iconic imagery of such cartoon characters as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. 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 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 gallery 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 [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 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 ones 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 Butthead 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?

JP Yes, 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 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.

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