

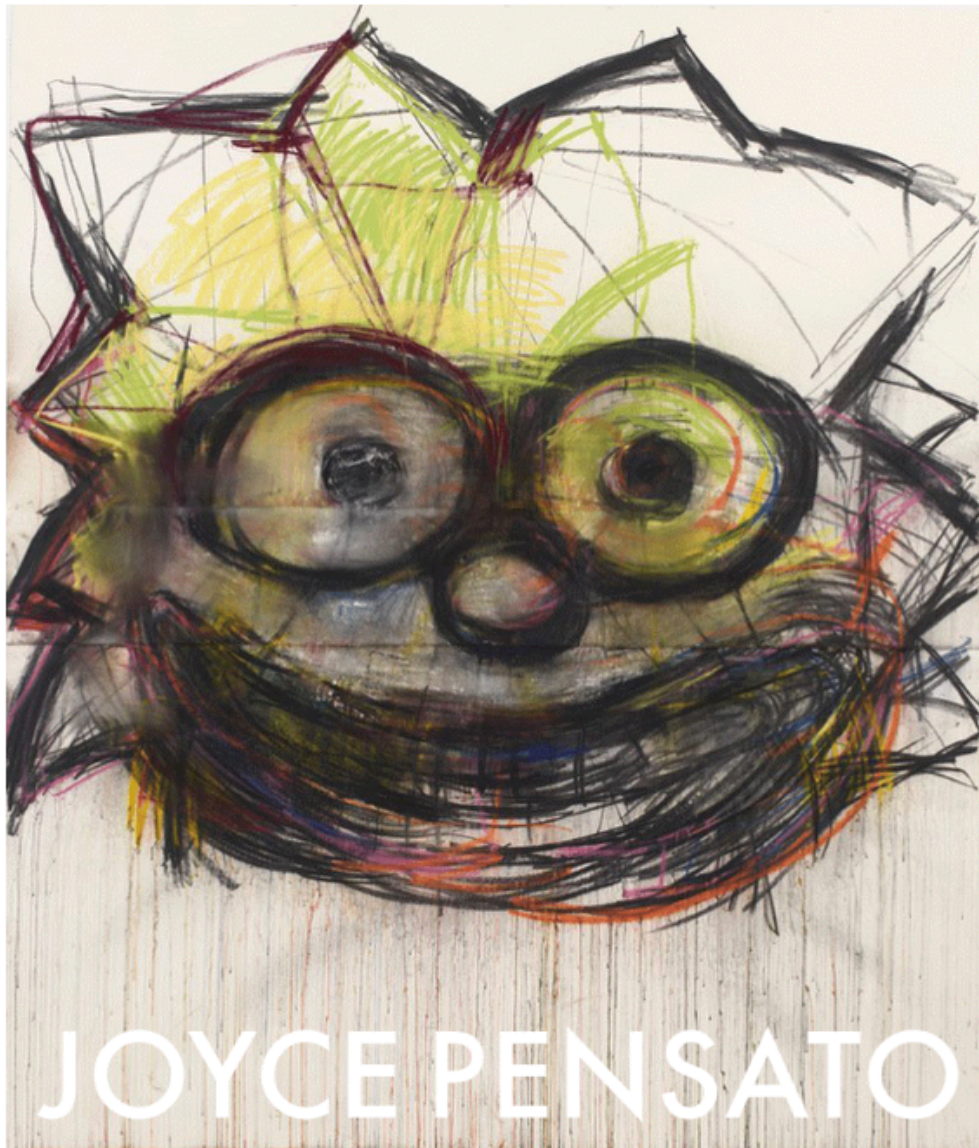
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Gary Yeh, "Joyce Pensato," *ArtDrunk*, January 14, 2021.

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Joyce Pensato | January 14, 2021



SmackDown! Lisa, 2018. Charcoal and pastel on paper.

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Editor's Note

If you're anything like me, every day is trying to keep on a pretty face while the emotions run wild. That's a **Joyce Pensato** painting in a nutshell. But her work is also a guide to setting ourselves free.

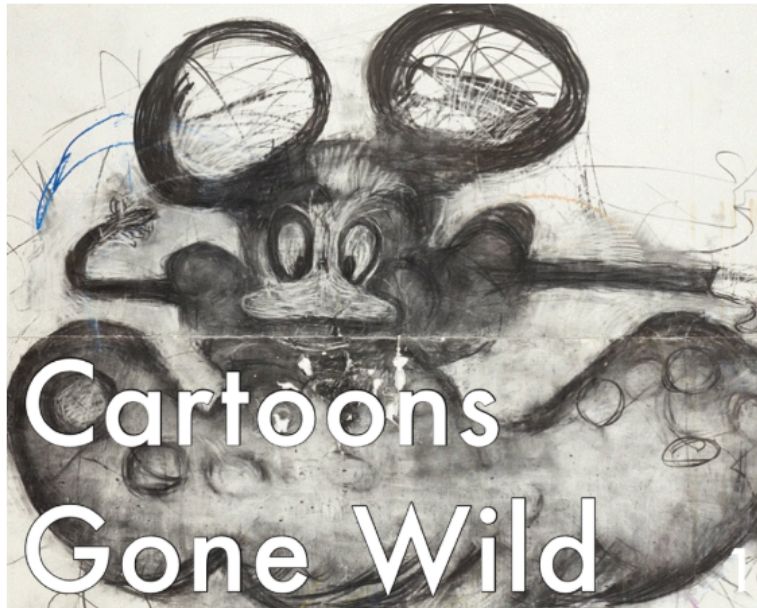
In her world, Mickey Mouse isn't just that happy-go-lucky Disney character that giggles and steers steamboats. Instead, she paints him with exaggerated, emotionally-charged smiles. Think Heath Ledger's version of [The Joker](#). Plus with the way Pensato's paint drips, Mickey is falling apart.

While that might not seem inspiring in the traditional sense, I find solace in seeing even the happiest of characters have their troubled moments. It's art that tells you, "It's ok. What you're going through is normal." After all, when asked in the podcast [Talk Art](#) what she wanted people to think when looking at her work, she responded: *To be uplifted and have a joy of life.*

– Gary Yeh, Founder

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How To Spot Her Work



Details of: 1. *Donald as a Crossdresser*, 1999. Charcoal and pastel on paper, in 2 parts. || 2. *Evil Stan*, 2007. Enamel on linen. || 3. *2012 Batman*, 2012. Enamel on linen.

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To spot Pensato's work, look out for:

- **Cartoons gone wild.** Take the outlines of The Simpsons, Felix the Cat, Disney characters, and other pop cartoons. Now add some manic energy.
- **Black & white enamel.** That's her go-to combo that makes for a glossy sheen to her paintings. Charcoal and colored pastels are common with her drawings, too.
- **Swooping gestures.** Heavily retraced lines, splatters of paint, and erratic erasing inject life into these characters.

Let's Talk Pensato

Tl;dr. Joyce Pensato (1941-2019, New York, NY) was an American artist known for adding an emotional, dark twist to pop culture cartoons in her scrawled drawings and paintings.



1. Both *Untitled*, c. 1976. Charcoal on paper. || 2. *Sunset Batman*, 2016. Enamel and metallic paint on linen.

If Pop Art and Expressionism had a child. Early on, Pensato danced between abstract paintings and cartoon drawings. She found her unique voice once she combined the two.

- It started with Batman in the mid-70s. A life-size cutout inspired [Untitled](#) (1976) [above](#) (1) and introduced pop culture into her work.
- Eventually, pop motifs made their way into her paintings, which captured the action of [Abstract Expressionists](#). *Sunset Batman* (2016) [above](#) (2) has that [Jackson Pollock](#) feel to it.
- Later work continued to incorporate pop cartoons. But instead of cardboard cutouts for inspiration, she found toys on the street or off eBay. [How many Elmo dolls can you spot in her studio?](#)

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Big Mickey, 2007. Charcoal and pastel on paper.

Mickey Mouse beyond the smiles. Her signature style isn't just about aesthetics, though. Using highly expressive techniques strips these cartoon characters of their usual innocent cheer and adds tension.

- She put it simply: "I just don't want the work to be nice or sweet. Disney's cartoons are usually very sweet. I want the work to be deeper, to have more personality."
- *Big Mickey* (2007) above stands with a blank stare, giving off slightly creepy vibes. Probably not what you'd expect when running into Mickey Mouse at Disneyland.
- Mickey — along with the other characters in her work — is liberated from his standard identity. The complexity of his personality comes through in the different ways he's painted and drawn. [He shows up a lot.](#)

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1. *Four Donalds 1-4*, 2017. Enamel and metallic paint on linen. || 2. *L'area Donald eyes!!*, 2000. Enamel on canvas.

Duck, duck, and more duck. By now you should have guessed: Pensato is really into repetition.

- Take *Four Donalds* (2017) above (1). Donald Duck's rocking motion combined with the typical paint drips emphasizes their anxious energy.
- In another series, she painted just eyes. By isolating them from the rest of Donald's body in *L'Area Donald eyes!!* (2000) above (2), Pensato refocused on their abstract qualities.
- For Pensato, it wasn't necessarily about working the same image over and over. Rather, these characters became "like a scripture or calligraphy... It was about writing and repeating."

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Want More?

 What's better than one Pensato show? Two! Visit Petzel Gallery in New York for new shows opening tomorrow. [Batman vs. Spiderman](#) is on view at their UES space (on E 67th St) and features works on paper. [Fuggetabout It \(Redux\)](#) takes up their Chelsea space (on W 18th St) and includes paintings and a partial recreation of her old studio. Both are on view through February 27.

 If you're a fan of South Park (or just a fan of Pensato's work after reading our newsletter), check out [I Killed Kenny](#). It's the catalog from her first solo museum show and includes pictures from across most of her career. Admittedly... we'd get it just for the cover.

 Take a stroll through Joyceland in this [NOWNESS video](#). That's what Pensato used to call her Brooklyn studio. She takes you through the neighborhood and her favorite hardware store, too. Cookie Monster makes a cameo.

Images courtesy of the Joyce Pensato Estate, Petzel Gallery, and Lisson Gallery.

<https://mailchi.mp/artdrunk/feature-joyce-pensato?e=c50cf05cfc>