

Curator



"To be by her side as her career hit was a blast, and she was ready for it. She had the work, the stories, and the vision."

— Elizabeth Ferry

Joyce Pensato (1941–2019) lived and worked in Brooklyn, New York, and studied at the New York Studio School. The artist was best known for her paintings and drawings which employed a familiar cast of cartoon characters, including Mickey and Minnie Mouse; Donald and Daisy Duck; Batman; Felix the Cat; Homer, Bart, Marge, and Lisa Simpson; and the characters Stan and Cartman from the series "South Park." Pensato was committed to her baleful transmutation of American cartoon culture—employing her fast, assured, and gestural hand—to shed light on the arguable darkness lurking within our familiar Pop iconography through her own Abstract Expressionist technique.

Elizabeth Ferry worked closely with Pensato over the last ten years of the artist's life and now serves as executor of the artist's estate. Petzel Gallery, which has represented

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Dan Golden, “Joyce Pensato | Part One,” *Curator*, February 2021.

Pensato since 2007, recently announced representation of the Joyce Pensato Estate (with dual Pensato exhibitions currently on display at the gallery’s Chelsea and Uptown locations).

Curator spoke with Ferry about her time working with Pensato. (or “Fizz” as she was lovingly known)

Interview by Dan Golden

For readers who may not be familiar with Joyce’s work, how would you describe it?

Extremely expressive, gestural drawings and paintings that Frankenstein parts of iconic cartoon characters to create charged psychological portraits. It looks fast but it’s slow. The energy from the mark making is able to work because the structure of the drawing is so strong. I love the works from the 70’s currently on display at Petzel uptown. You can see a lot of the beginning of everything in them. Fizz would often say “it’s like Mickey Mouse had a lobotomy”. That would always make me laugh. I think she infused her cast of characters with an edge, even if it was a lobotomy with an edge.



Joyce Pensato, *Shout*, Charcoal pastel on paper, 60 x 87 1/2 inches, 2007

What was it like working with Joyce?

It was a non-stop party with no boundaries. We became best friends—some people describe us as soulmates. She was in a sense my mentor, but more accurately, it did feel like we ended up sharing a brain, or at least part of one. I guess that’s probably the norm for two people that hung out as much as we did.

Joyce's career really started to take off (finally and deservedly) during the time you were working with her. What was that experience like for her, and for you?

As she put it, she "had been making the same fucking drawings and paintings for years, and now it's in!". She always had a way of saying things with a tone and a smile that made everyone fall in love with her. She carried no resentment for her "ship coming in" later in life.

To be by her side as her career hit was a blast, and she was ready for it. She had the work, the stories, and the vision. I can remember one of our early trips to Paris after her opening we hit a few parties. I was beat, and she was ready to go to another three. I asked her if she was on drugs because if so, I would need some to keep up. She confirmed that she wasn't. I just thought there's no way this 70 plus-year-old is outlasting me. She was high on life and embraced everything that eventually came, even if she joked "finally". Fizz would say, as she got smaller, the bigger the paintings and drawings got. One of the last large drawings she made measured forty-eight feet in length—not bad for someone who was barely five feet even with a great backcomb job.

I could go on and on...



Joyce Pensato's studio in Brooklyn, NY in 2014. Photo: Jason Mandella

Pensato famously worked in the same studio for many years and filled it with her large-scale works and collected materials. Unfortunately, she was eventually forced out by the landlord. Can you talk about the space?

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Yes, her old studio! What a space. It's actually where we first met. Joyce worked for years in a giant studio space in East Williamsburg, which she filled with her large scale work and collection of objects and toys.



Joyce Pensato, *Untitled*, Enamel on paper, 17 x 14 inches, circa 1998



Joyce Pensato, *Untitled*, Enamel on paper, 17 x 14 inches, No Date



Joyce Pensato, *Batman vs. Spiderman* Installation view (detail), 2021

About ten years ago I was working as a freelance art handler at Petzel. At the time, the gallery was looking for someone to spearhead the project of moving Fizz out of her studio of thirty plus years. They explained she was extremely attached to the space,

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that it was essentially rotting, and she had, in the course of being there for so long, accumulated a lot of things.

In its prime, it functioned as a community dancehall. The balcony where the band used to play had become packed with moldy books. I eventually found a mummified cat up there too.

I remember scanning the studio during my site visit, taking it all in; stacks of books, paintings, paint cans, posters, knick-knacks, amongst hundreds of toys staring back.

It was a musty, demented toy store/crime scene. Everything, even Fizz's dog Charlie, was coated in a patina of charcoal and drips of 1 Shot. It was a special space. I could see why she didn't want to leave. I reassured her that the move would be simple, and it wasn't overwhelming to me personally because I grew up in a hoarder's house, to which she replied, "I'm not a hoarder, I'm a collector." It was such a perfect response, we both started laughing. We just immediately clicked.

On the first day of the job, I was rolling up a giant Daisy Duck drawing. Charlie proceeded to walk over the drawing to get closer to me. As I reached down to coax him off, he started peeing all over Daisy. I thought for sure I would be fired. Fizz responded, "Oh, look at that, he loves you! Don't worry, they'll pay more for it." What planet did I land on?!

Every now and then you'll catch a charcoal print of a dog paw on her drawings.

After the studio was packed up, I borrowed my roommate's van, which was painted as a giant American flag, and a crew of friends and I hauled everything to her new space.

Fizz loved the car so much she hired me as a driver and soon after I became her "right hand".

Fizz, Charlie, and I ended up driving around NYC for ten years hitting the hot spots; Central Art Supply, second-hand shops, Barney's, New York Costumes, and having thousands of extremely long lunches. The more we hung out the more we realized our lives paralleled each other. We both went to the New York Studio School, as well as Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, just forty or so years apart.

After her first big museum show at Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2013, it felt like everything took off. We were traveling every few months, sometimes for shows and sometimes just to find great sunglasses.

The abstract expressionist painter, Joan Mitchell was an important mentor and friend early in Joyce's career. Can you talk a bit about the importance of that relationship?

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Fizz described her time spent with Joan in France as allowing her to see what she wasn't, which in turn allowed her to embrace who she was. Joan would ask, “What kind of painter do you want to be? Do you want to be one of those German Expressionists painting without color, without light? Or, do you want to be French—with light and color and air?”. Fizz would say “French” to appease Joan, but soon after she realized she was a no color using Expressionist. Fizz kept the letters she and Joan exchanged over the years. There are a lot of gems.

Please tell me about the Joyce Pensato Foundation.

The Joyce Pensato Foundation was established in Fizz's will with the twin goals of supporting developing artists and fostering Fizz's artistic legacy. I, along with Katy Siegel and Christopher Wool, are the board members, once it is active.

Pensato is an inspiration to artists for a number of reasons; primarily, of course, for her immense talent, uniqueness, and creative output—but also for her commitment to her work over decades throughout various career ups and downs. How did Joyce maintain her strength of focus and work?

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There are so many stories connected to this. Fizz gave great interviews imbued with her humor and conviction. I would suggest finding the answers in them, there are many. Hearing it first hand is the best. I will say, Fizz was relentless in her vision. She constantly imparted this wisdom; "Own who you are, make the work, show the work, and keep going". She stayed true to who she was once she found it. She got a rush from "fucking up a space", after all, she was the self-proclaimed Queen of Drips.



Feature Portrait: Joyce Pensato in her studio in Brooklyn, NY in 2018. Photo: Elizabeth Ferry.

Fuggetabout It (Redux). January 15—February 27, 2021, Petzel Chelsea, 456 West 18th Street
Batman vs. Spiderman, January 15—February 27, 2021, Petzel Uptown, 35 E 67th Street, New York

<http://curator.site/interviews/2021/1/22/joyce-pensato-part-1>