

Petzel

Nick Bennet, "Joyce Pensato: The Fizz is Still Fizzing," *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 6, 2021.



ArtSeen

Joyce Pensato

The Fizz is Still Fizzing

By **Nick Bennett**

To enter Petzel's 18th Street gallery is to enter Joyceland, Joyce Pensato's self-described twisted and beautiful version of Disneyland, where Mickey Mouse, Cartman, Bozo the Clown, Batman, and others greet you in Pensato's paint-splattered world. The artist takes on many personas here: the heroic Abstract Expressionist painter and Pop provocateur who goes by "The Godmother" and "The Fizz," always true to her Italian American roots as a lifelong New York artist. In the first gallery, three massive works on paper are on view: Homer and Lisa Simpson and Daisy Duck. These large-scale works allow you to indulge in the artist's process of fast, expressive lines of black charcoal, with touches of color. The comically frightening *Daisy* (2012), arms outstretched as if in confrontation—like a Bowser-style boss you have to beat in order to make it to the next level—challenges the viewer: *you think you can beat me?*

The next room (or level) is a redux of the artist's studio-as-installation at Petzel in 2012, after her longtime studio space was lost in a landlord dispute. *Fuggettabout It (Redux)* (2012–2021) is an installation of chaotic precision; paint brushes cemented into their cans are aligned like a chorus next to *Runaway Eyes* (2016), the first painting of bulging eyes, content that continues later in the exhibit. Ephemera is everywhere and covered in paint: photographs of Oprah, Abraham Lincoln, and Big Ang are in company with cardboard cutouts of Muhammad Ali and Elvis Presley, conspicuously confronting each other at opposite ends of the room. This is a grand illustration of the media all around us, an endless assault that is messy, unrelenting, and significant. It's also pure fun and farce: a gold-plated gun, unlit cigarette, and paint-splattered suitcase rest near each other, ready for the artist's next getaway to Santa Monica.

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Joyce Pensato, *Daisy*, 2012. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 115 1/2 x 113 1/2 inches. Courtesy The Joyce Pensato Estate and Petzel, New York.

Level 3: The Panopticon (the third gallery) is Pensato at her most triumphant, balancing the relationship between the comic and the terrifying. Here is a gallery of 11 paintings, all of eyes—many in pairs, some in clusters, and one singular. This is what Joyce Pensato is known for: taking pop culture figures and isolating their visage (here, their eyes) to the point of abstraction with her own Ab-Ex flair. You can see Pensato making her place in the canon here: stylistically with the expressiveness of Pollock, de Kooning, and Joan Mitchell (Pensato's mentor) with the black and white severity of Franz Kline. But conceptually, these paintings take Pensato's connection to Warholian Pop a step further: the seriality of eye after eye is a repetition that is not exact but consistent; variation from work to work is part impulse to draw from the Pop lexicon Pensato loved so dearly, and part angst, terror, and anxiety about their ubiquity in society. Whether the artist intended this or not, one could argue a trajectory starting with the comics of the '60s, leading to the MTV generation of the '80s-'90s, and then to the social media generation of today (born at a time when adolescence is coupled with various social media avatars) are in this gallery conveying a sense of ongoing scrutiny. Not just of social media, but of data and video surveillance, of not knowing where the boundary exists (if it does) between our consumption as viewers of the media around us and its steady eyes on all that we do, both online and in the "real world," like the ever-watchful Greek god Argos.

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Joyce Pensato, *Untitled* (at various times, *Joyceland*, *Fuggettabout It!*), 2012–2019. Studio installation materials, dimensions variable. Courtesy The Joyce Pensato Estate and Petzel, New York.

At the intimate 67th Street gallery, early works are on view, including never-before-exhibited still lifes of Batman, Spiderman, and other figures. They are an interesting look into the artist's genesis, where she first realized it was the discarded toys and memorabilia on the streets rather than the traditional fruit and object still lifes that inspired her at the New York Studio School in the 1970s. The figures in these drawings are indeed battling as the exhibition title suggests, but they also convey a sense of choreography and grace as one may appreciate in a boxer dodging a punch. *Untitled* (ca. 1980) stands out as one of the few self-portraits made by the artist and contrasts with her more recent self-portraits in gold shower-cap, giant sunglasses, with a cigarette hanging from her lip and a gun pointed at the viewer. You can see how much influence Mitchell had on her at this point; surprising use of ochres and varying shades of blue and green are present for an artist known for her monochromatic works. Another charcoal drawing, *Untitled* (ca. 1990) presents Elmo looming in a wonderfully uncanny perspective, in terms of scale resembling Odilon Redon's *Cyclops* (1914) or perhaps even Goya's *Colossus* (1808–1812).

In the 1974 *Godfather: Part II*, Vito Corleone convinces a local landlord not to evict an elderly tenant for violating his rules by keeping a dog in her apartment in secret. "Ask your friends in the neighborhood about me. They'll tell you I know how to return a favor." Ask anyone who knew Joyce Pensato and they'll share the ebullient and dynamic artist and person she was. She was always both The Godmother and The Fizz, never just one or the other. Pensato was a consummate New York artist of her generation, right up until her death in 2019. This exhibit marks a small returning of the favor to an artist

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Joyce Pensato, *Untitled*, ca. 1990. Charcoal on paper, 22 1/2 x 30 inches. Courtesy The Joyce Pensato Estate and Petzel, New York.

who received her much-deserved recognition later in life—as is all too common for women artists. The legacy that is being preserved by Petzel and the Joyce Pensato Estate is just the beginning of much more to come. The Fizz is still fizzing.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2021/02/artseen/Joyce-Pensato-nb>