

Art in America

JUNE/JULY 2007

Toon Noir

In black-and-white paintings and drawings, Joyce Pensato portrays a cast of cartoon characters rendered with ferocious energy and a peculiar empathy.

BY STEPHEN MAINE

Though Joyce Pensato's palette is primarily black and white, she explores emotional and psychological gray areas in her turbulent recasting of big, bouncy cartoon characters and stuffed animals as randy rogues of dubious intent. By turns pathetic and nightmarish, her subjects' rubbery faces veer from wide-eyed wonder to homicidal dementia with a flick of the brush. Pensato has been an unsung, under-known quantity on the New York scene for many years; her legendarily open-throated engagement with materials, suggesting both anxiety and playful abandon, was recently on display in the solo exhibition "This Must Be the Place" at Parker's Box in Williamsburg. The show included new enamel-on-canvas paintings and works on paper dating back to 1999, as well as an installation of stuffed animals, a video and photos.

Among the earliest of the enamels on paper was the sublime *Double Mickey* (1999). In this 23-by-29-inch work, palette-knifed in ghostly black-and-white, a pensive, striding Mickey trails behind him a second head, like a balloon or a naughty thought. Pensato used

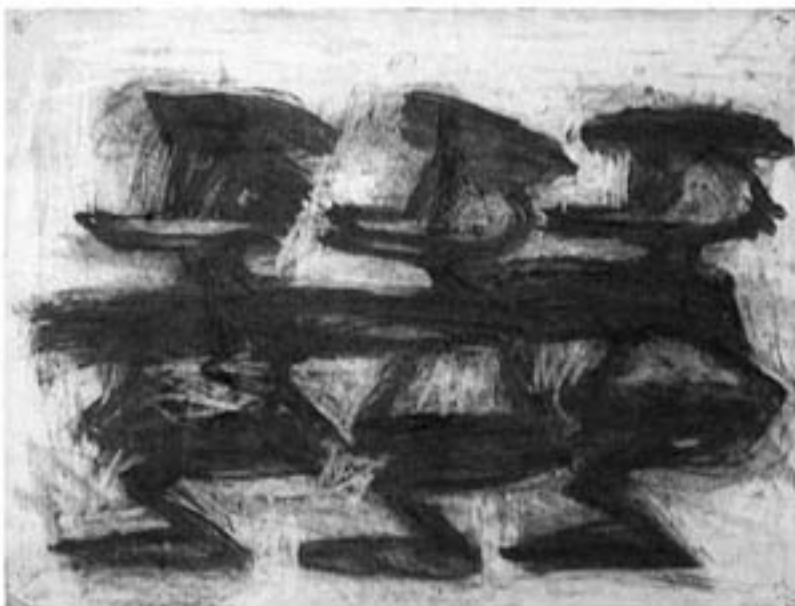


Joyce Pensato: *Felix I*, 2005, charcoal on paper, 29 1/2 by 22 1/2 inches.

the same technique in the "Wanted" series of 2003, in which the usual suspects—Porky, Snoopy and their cronies—are rendered as frame-filling mug shots. However, these mugs look startled/aggressive rather than sullen/defiant. Also on hand were a number of Pensato's charcoal drawings in which the image is often reworked beyond the limit of the paper's durability. In the 30-by-22-inch *Felix I* (2005), the exposed fibers of the traumatized sheet impart a literally fuzzy texture to the subject, a one-armed, one-legged fur ball. The three lockstepping characters in *Marching Ducks* (2005) suggest a decorative frieze, tribal art, a conga line or cheerleaders for waterfowl. The 10-by-11-foot, charcoal-and-pastel *Homer Simpson* (2006), looming and creepy with its mesmeric, bird-bath eyes, just might satisfy the legal standard for public nuisance.

The seven paintings in the exhibition are predicated on a supple, slitheringly brushy contour that implies mass. (As a result, they are more drawinglike than the painterly, textural works on paper.) The relationship between line and shape is almost always in equilibrium, so that, for example, the bulbous head of the large *Zozo* (all paintings 2006) is pulled from the torrent of enamel drips not just by the sharpness of his doughnut eyeball but also by the precision of the line that forms his lower lip and jaw. (The model is a cartoon monkey popular in 1950s France—a continental Curious George.) In *Bunny*, white orbs at the height of the floppy-eared subject's chest might be fists, in the white-gloved manner of Bugs, or pasties worn by that famously androgynous rabbit. An exception to the balance is the unequivocally schematic head of *A Different Homer*, in rattling white lines on a black ground. The bell-shaped hybrid of flesh and skull, with yawning eye sockets, gleaming cranial dome and ample jowls, suggests a sort of Darth Vader-cum-vanitas.

The appeal of many classic animated cartoon characters, continued on page 221



Marching Ducks, 2005, charcoal on paper, 22 1/2 by 29 1/2 inches.
All photos this article Meredith Allen, courtesy Parker's Box, Brooklyn.



Joan, 2006, enamel on linen, 90 by 72 inches.

Pensato

continued from page 195

such as those by Warner Brothers and Disney, is that they are lovable even though profoundly flawed; Pensato pumps up this polarity to a fever pitch. In the 10-by-6-foot *Mr. MotoMickey*, the dominance of white makes the menacing subject—an amalgam of Mickey Mouse and the Japanese secret agent played by Peter Lorre



Left to right: Homer, Mr. MotoMickey and Donald Rising, all 2006; at Parker's Box.

in numerous films—appear washed out, as if caught in the glare of headlights, or the paparazzi's flash. An Oedipal Donald Duck, irisless eyes streaming, confronts the viewer in *Donald Rising*. The artist's bravura paint handling is not without chromatic subtlety. The chubby-cheeked microcephalic in *Hello Stranger* displays Pensato's skill at coaxing dynamic color relationships from a minimal palette. In her subject's crossed eyes and disquieting, edge-to-edge grin, a thin black enamel wash over white yields a warm gray, while elsewhere a cooler gray emerges from thinned white scrubbed over black. Pensato may be a comedienne, but she is a painter first and foremost.

An ad hoc installation of paint-spattered stuffed animals, presumably sometime sitters, was tucked into a corner of the gallery; rounding out the show were the artist's snapshots of friends and other photos from her collection. *Studio Visit with Joyce Pensato* (2005), a seven-minute video loop that played at the rear of the gallery, supports the creeping suspicion that these works are veiled self-portraits. Sending up the self-mythologizing function of much video "documentation," it shows the artist at work in frantic fast-motion, hopping around her studio and mugging for the camera to a sound track of Little Peggy March singing "I Will Follow Him." Pensato's work has found an enthusiastic audience in France, where it is widely interpreted as commentary on the American Dream gone sour. But such a moralistic reading does not take into account the artist's evident affection for the dark side of her subjects' psyches, her identification with their neuroses, and the gusto with which she embraces and enhances these foibles. □

"This Must Be the Place" was on view at Parker's Box, Brooklyn (Oct. 20–Nov. 20, 2006).

Author: Stephen Moine is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn.