

# In the Neighborhood: Joyce Pensato's Recent Paintings

by Gregory Volk

Joyce Pensato is one of the few—and perhaps the only—significant Williamsburg, Brooklyn artist who is actually from the neighborhood, and not a transplant there. She lives and works in East Williamsburg, and grew up close by in Bushwick. Her mother was Italian-American, her father, from peasant stock and an orphan, was a Sicilian immigrant enthralled with American symbols including baseball and the Statue of Liberty. It's worth noting, too, that the studio where Pensato has worked for years was formerly a neighborhood dance hall. Back in the day, in the 1930's and 1940's, couples romped on the floor and bands played from the balcony: weekend excitement in a working class Italian-American enclave, Boogie-Woogie and suave crooners on Olive Street as opposed to Manhattan's glittering 52nd Street, a close-to-home version of the famous entertainment over there, across the East River, in what locals called (and still call) "the City."

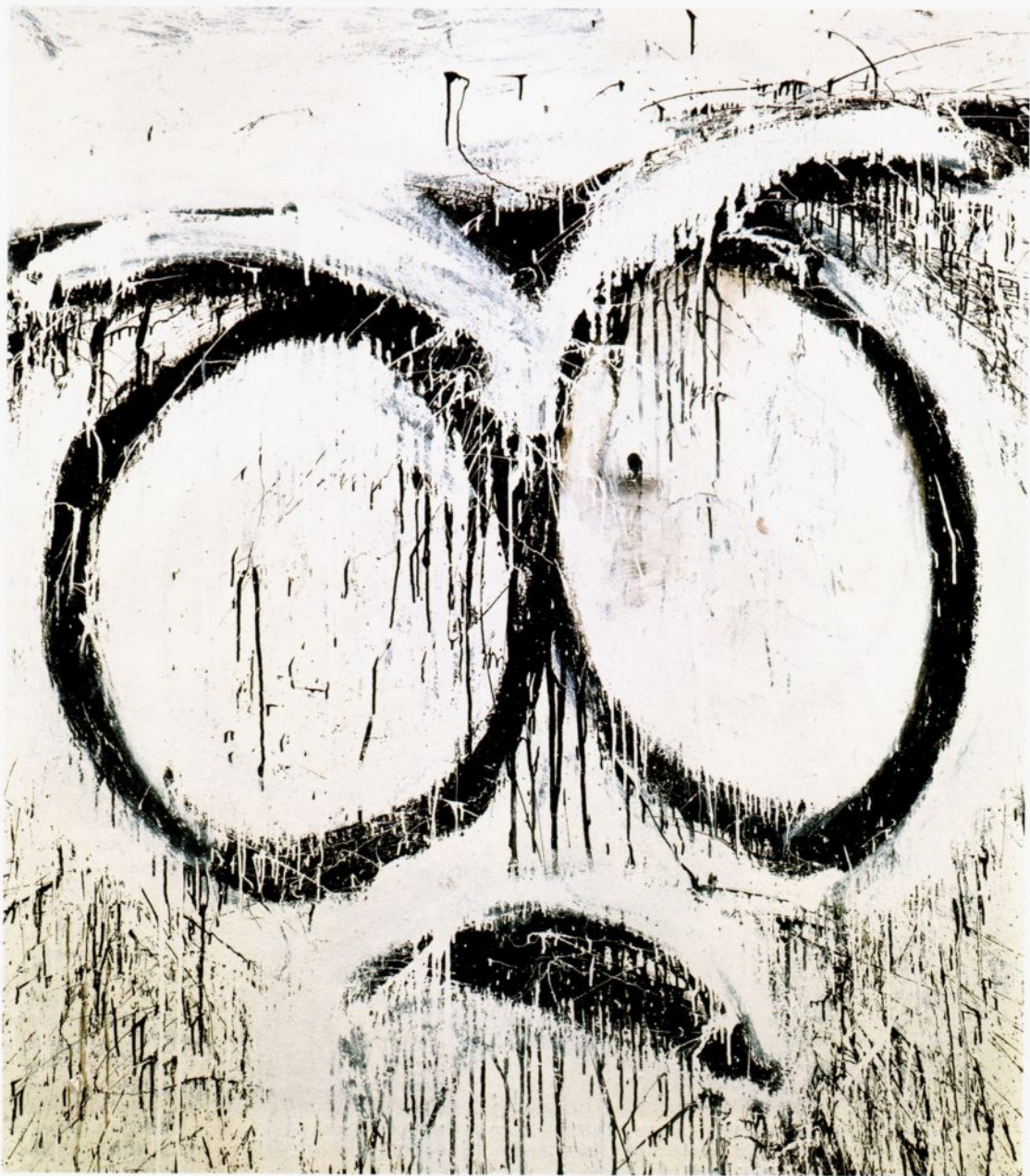
In its prior incarnation, Pensato's studio was the kind of place where her parents or their friends went out on the town while successfully avoiding Manhattan, and Pensato seems especially energized by her proximity to that history. As a child, Pensato was steeped in the rhythms of an ethnic neighborhood clinging to age-old traditions while absorbing the new—a neighborhood in which Catholic iconography and imagery abutted and melded with pop culture jetsam, and in which religious processions easily segued into street fairs and cheesy carnivals. Years later, Pensato radically transforms some of that pop culture jetsam, in black and white paintings of iconic cartoon figures that have a marked psychological intensity and an arresting mix of both exuberance and unease.

While hardly nostalgic, many of Pensato's paintings (notably of Mickey Mouse, who debuted in 1928, Donald Duck, who debuted in 1934, and Felix the Cat, who predates both to 1922) evoke a more innocent America at mid-century and before, and send that milieu careening into contemporary conflicts, anxieties, and desires, both personal and national. Witness Pensato's latest version of Donald Duck, titled

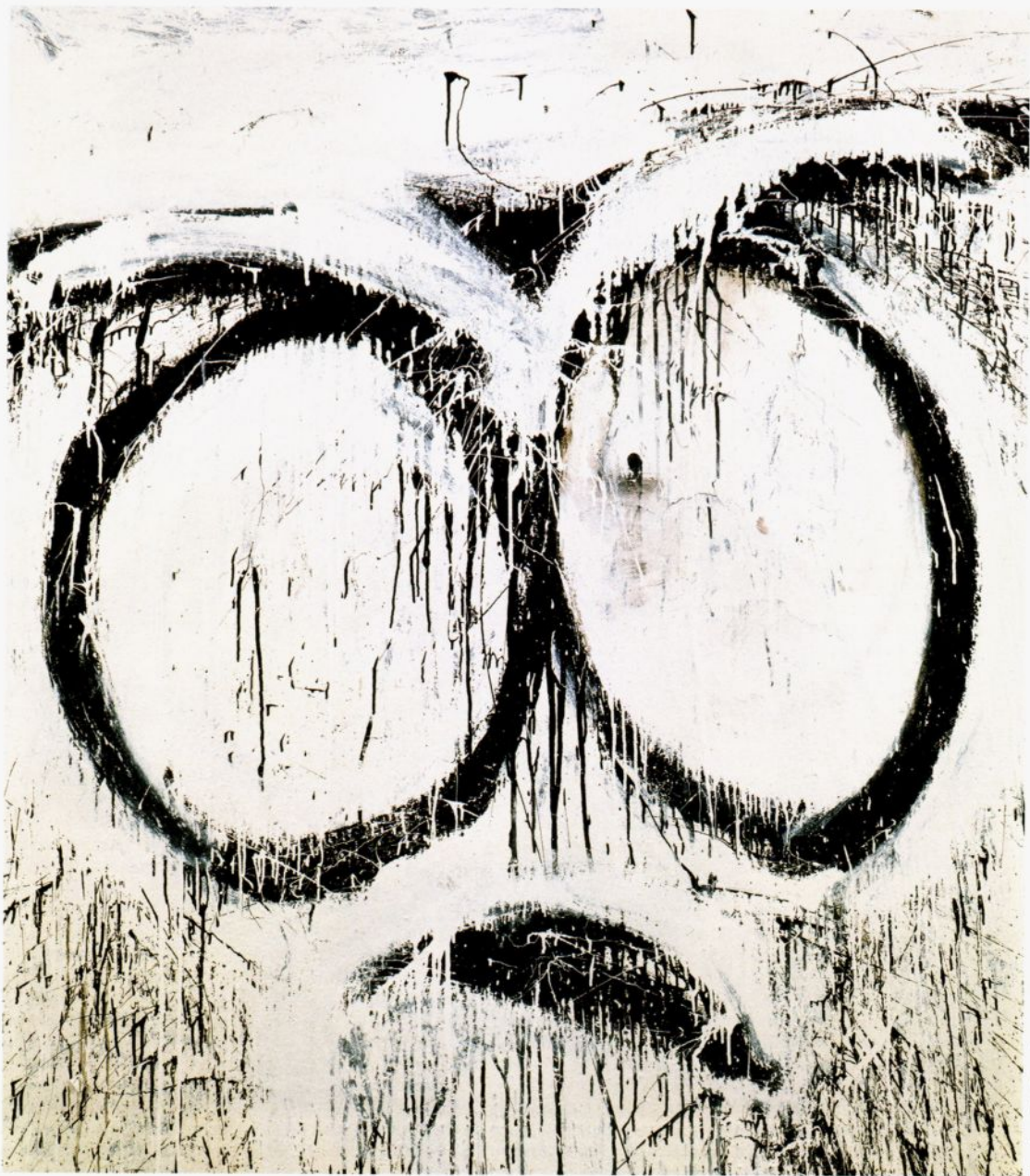
*Don't Go Donald*, in streaky and dripping white enamel on a tough black ground. This wide-eyed Donald is particularly nervous, almost unhinged, and the black ground is ominous, a bit like toxic smoke or an oil spill. At first glance the painting looks casual, perhaps dashed off in a few minutes, but that casual look was patiently achieved, and the complex behavior of paint is a key to the work. Gradations of thickness, splatters, tangential mini-streaks that jet at odd angles, and borders that fray into particles and gaps all make this Donald Duck at once intact and precarious. He's a jaunty guy buffeted by powerful worries, and you get the feeling he doesn't know where he belongs, or whether he should escape or remain.

Pensato's paintings are also not overtly autobiographical, yet it's likely they have an implicit streak of self-portraiture, with her beleaguered cartoon figures functioning as outlandish surrogates and masks. *Big Mickey* is a large drawing of Mickey Mouse on paper, although Mickey certainly looks female in his smudged red dress (with yellow tones elsewhere, this is one of Pensato's few recent works that incorporates color beyond black and white). Call it a portrait of the artist as a big mouse. Clowning around in full view, this grinning Mickey Mouse is an antic figure, but his clownishness comes with a dark twist. With frenetic hands made of squiggles, a twitching and shuddering body, and searing eyes, he looms over the viewer, exuding riotous energies. It's also likely that Pensato's experience of being an outsider (by temperament) in an insular neighborhood, as well as of being an outer borough immigrant's kid—at once wary of and attracted to "the City"—very much feeds into her adventurous art, which has everything to do with intently examining, questioning, finding her own relationship with, and radically altering some of America's most recognizable and ubiquitous pop culture symbols.

Consider *I Don't Want to Be Tamed*, one of three recent paintings based on characters from South Park. This one is of Kyle, the super-smart kid in a chunky green hat, who is often made fun of because he is Jewish. Pensato's trans-



There's a Riot Going On, 2007, Enamel on linen, 70 x 62 inches, 177.8 x 157.5 cm



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formation of this character is extraordinary. He looks adult, for one thing, and his dark-rimmed eyes (perhaps black eyes, as if he'd been punched) peer out with both sadness and defiance. Thick, black, slightly ragged bands delineate the figure's head, but then become a rigid collar, loosely suggestive of prison shackles. Thin black drips spilling from his brow, and down his face and chest, are abstract and unruly, but also conjure sweat and blood, while a white smear at the lips suggests a foaming mouth.

As always with Pensato's paintings, one hesitates to affix particular content to a specific image. Possible meanings are far too layered, and in any event Pensato never sets out to address this or that pressing issue. Still, this portrait of a figure under obvious duress and resisting restrictions rather humorously suggests a mug shot, and rather eerily recalls sullen prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and at Guantanamo Bay. Pensato's paintings are freewheeling and funny, but they are also hard-hitting and, at times, downright harrowing.

In addition to finished paintings, and myriad paintings and drawings in progress, Pensato's studio sports a sprawling assortment of stuffed animals and plastic toys based on cartoon figures, which serve as models for her paintings. As one sorts through this ragged collection, one finds multiple versions of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, various characters from South Park, and Bart and Homer from The Simpsons, among others. Almost all are American pop culture icons, which have long since spread to become global icons as well, but in Pensato's studio you notice how worn, sullied, rumpled, and used they really are. Some were purchased in thrift stores, some were found on the street, others have simply been with Pensato for years.

You surmise that Pensato has a peculiarly personal and intense relationship with these toys, and that there is a mysterious route leading from them to her complicated childhood in the neighborhood years ago. You surmise that they've been looked at and touched a great deal, and that some of them have also been battered by circumstance:

a child's favorite plaything, for instance, that was lost or tossed out willy-nilly like garbage and rescued by Pensato, and that has proved deeply engaging to her, visually and psychologically. These are vulnerable toys, toys with a past, toys marred by encounters with the real world, and it is precisely such real world encounter—vitality undercut by sadness and loss, psychological stability challenged by nagging fragility—that imbue Pensato's work with such complex humanity.

In Pensato's collection of toys there is a small plastic statuette/television remote control device of Felix the Cat, which she purchased in a Japanese store on Second Avenue in the East Village. As far as her knickknacks go, this is a high-end item. In this version, Felix is upright, smiling, and communicates a really chipper disposition; he's satisfied with himself and delighted with the day's events. But Pensato's painting of this miniature model, on a silver ground and titled *Felix*, is a great deal more nuanced and conflicted. She focuses on Felix's head, and particularly his facial expression. In effect, a cute gadget becomes a looming, magnified portrait, and this magnified portrait is a remarkable blend not only of painterly techniques, but also of acute psychological states, ranging from whimsy and excitement to sadness and gnawing doubt.

Considerably more frightening is *I Must be Dreamin'*, another silvery painting of Felix, this one based on a cheap toy. Fanatically peering to the left, Felix's dark eyes, circled by white streaks, are curiously detached from his face and seem to hover like pulsating disks. They're implacable black holes in which all light, logic, and sympathy disappear, and the effect is nightmarish: a cartoon cat in murderer mode, a friendly companion who has grown up to become a horror flick demon or a serial killer. Felix's grin, which is the other most prominent feature in this work, is likewise deranged. A bit too far to the right, and smeared by white at one end, it's at once lascivious and maniacal, and makes one think of a clown's garish make-up. A painting that could easily be an ironic send-up of a mass-market doodad is anything

but. Instead, it is riveting, and conjures aggression shading into mania—but does so with levity and a gleeful note of the absurd. This Felix the Cat seems especially apt in an era of rampaging ideologies and an amok war that started grandiosely but has long since detoured into total mayhem.

Among the many fascinating aspects of this painting is its thorough conflation of abstraction and representation. Look at one section, for instance the scruffy drips and splatters descending from Felix's chin, a single oval eye, or a sweeping gesture delineating the figure's head, and it is strictly abstract, with echoes of robust New York School painters like Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and the early Philip Guston. Step back a bit and a familiar pop culture image assembles, but in a most unfamiliar way, and one of Pensato's great strengths is to defamiliarize, destabilize, and render completely her own some of the most recognizable cartoon images of the past several decades. Pensato's painterly touch is vigorous and willfully rough, with broad gestures, drips, smears, scrapes, and erasures making for an action-packed surface. Still, this turbulent surface (it should also be noted that Pensato is not a rapid, instinctual painter; on the contrary, bursts of activity are accompanied by long contemplation, scrutiny, editing, and innumerable adjustments) discloses moments of supreme beauty—an elemental meeting of a few black drops and a white ground, a tiny black line gracefully angling across a white expanse—that have an aura of serenity and loveliness.

Far from limiting Pensato, presenting everything in black and white—and paring things down to portraits of solitary cartoon figures—instead emphasizes how much she ranges and explores from painting to painting. *There's a Riot Going On*, based on Cartman from *South Park* (he's the fat kid who's the butt of countless jokes) is encrusted with, and almost overwhelmed by, white paint, as if this figure was lost in a blizzard. Two tiny eyes set in large black circles, two curving white eyebrows, and a pair of crooked black lips are enough to evince a figure beset by a great host of inner travails. Here, Pensato's unkempt drips and streaks perfectly fit with the figure's fraught psychological state.

In *Psycho Killer*, also based on Cartman, one of Pensato's Ab-Ex horizontal gestures (in black) at the top along with two eyes gazing through broad black and white circles, and prominent lips at the bottom delineate the figure and resemble a cartoonist's quick sketch, although one embedded in an elaborate network of small drips and smears. This truncated figure's expression is engrossing, even haunting. He is solemn, but his solemnity is tinged with raw sadness: He gazes out at the viewer but, seems withdrawn in private contemplation. In the midst of his solitude he also seems extraordinarily kind.

While Joyce Pensato has exhibited sporadically for years, she's had an under-the-radar career of the artist's artist variety; she is a painter enormously respected by her peers, but seriously underknown to a larger public, and that's something this exhibition may very well change. However, it could be the case that Pensato is among the most questing and convincing painters of her era, and certainly one of the most eccentric. Her portraits of cartoon figures, rendered with a mix of wildness and precision, are intricately human—imbued with our ridiculousness and profundity, our ungainliness and grace—yet they also respond to the country in this era of uncertainty and crisis.

