

## *Joyce Pensato, Who Made Cartoon Characters Complex, Dies at 77*

Ms. Pensato, who found art-world success relatively late, transformed the likes of Mickey Mouse and Batman into ambiguous and sometimes scary creatures.

**By Roberta Smith**

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Joyce Pensato, a painter who took the Abstract out of Abstract Expressionism and added a little Pop, making large-scale black-and-white paintings that transformed popular cartoon characters into ambiguous, emotionally complex and sometimes scary creatures, died on June 13 in Manhattan. She was 77.

Petzel Gallery, which has represented her since 2007, said the cause was pancreatic cancer.

Ms. Pensato was a late bloomer: Her art did not mature until after she turned 50, in the early 1990s. Success in the form of a fully committed New York gallery arrived even later, when Petzel staged the first of several solo shows of her work in 2007.

But she possessed the irrepressible joie de vivre and irreverence needed to make up for lost time. She started dyeing her hair blond in the late '90s and tended to dress like a punk teenager, in black leggings and black T-shirts emblazoned with band logos and often accessorized with bling.



“Big Mickey” (2007). Ms. Pensato once said that she thought Walt Disney had made Mickey Mouse seem “lobotomized.”  
Joyce Pensato/Petzel, New York

She was frequently photographed, or photographed herself, vamping in front of her paintings, wearing mirrored aviator glasses or making gang signs. Her Williamsburg studio was well known for its piles of dirty, paint-splattered toys, stuffed animals, figurines and masks of pop culture characters: Batman, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Felix the Cat, the malcontents of “South Park” and members of the Simpson family.

Rescued from the street or thrift shops, these artifacts served as her models; in essence she worked from life. Yet she was uninterested in her subjects' projections of innocence and happiness. She once said, during a videotaped studio visit, that she thought Walt Disney had made Mickey Mouse seem "lobotomized." She wanted to extract much stronger, more conflicted, feelings and a sometimes demonic energy from her seemingly placid pop-culture sitters.

In a sense, her paintings are acts of liberation achieved with large-scale, aggressive, action-filled brushwork and a severe black-and-white palette. Her images often bear down on or tower over the viewer; one writer compared them to Easter Island heads. They are variously comedic, menacing or pathetic — or, confusingly, all three at once.

Painted and repainted in broad, blurred strokes, the images hemorrhage torrents of drips and splashes and appear to be made quickly, furiously. In fact Ms. Pensato worked relatively slowly, studying, adjusting and revising her compositions until she got what she wanted.

In all her work she subverted both sides of the high-low equation, ridiculing and exaggerating Abstract Expressionist technique while imbuing popular culture characters with raw, uncontrollable feelings that were more real and gripping than the angst of the Abstract Expressionists. Her 2013 survey at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in California was titled "I Killed Kenny," a variation on a line frequently heard on "South Park."

A Pensato work on display at the South London Gallery last year. Andy Stagg/Petzel, New York; South London Gallery

Joyce Marie Pensato was born on Aug. 20, 1941, in Brooklyn to Stefano and Anna (Lombardo) Pensato. Her father was a printmaker who worked with artists on their books; her mother was a homemaker.

She is survived by a brother, Benedict.

Ms. Pensato grew up wanting to be an artist. After graduating from P.S. 123 in Brooklyn, she ended up at the Art Students League thinking she would study commercial art, with some painting on the side.

But lacking the necessary steadiness of hand and eye for detail for commercial art, she was directed toward painting. She studied primarily with the painter Morris Kantor and described his class as “love at first sight.”

“I knew this was it,” she said.

When a friend told her that she should be at the New York Studio School — something of a bastion of figuration and pure painting in Lower Manhattan — she applied but was rejected. Returning to the league, she received a travel scholarship from it and spent a year in Europe soaking up art.

On her return, she applied to the Studio School again, and this time she was accepted. She arrived in the summer of 1973, completed the school’s four-year program and stayed on as an alumna in residence. She studied with Mercedes Matter, a painter and one of the school’s founders, who supported her work unstintingly; had her efforts critiqued by the painter Philip Guston, who did not initially like her work; and for a time shared a studio with the painter Christopher Wool, who remained a friend. His use of enamel would later influence her decision to switch to it from oil paint.

A Pensato installation at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. Petzel, New York; Rose Art Museum

While at the school, Ms. Pensato began collecting pop-culture detritus in her studio, and when Ms. Matter suggested that she make a still life, Ms. Pensato based a charcoal drawing on a life-size Batman cutout she had found on the street.

She continued to make charcoal drawings based on her pop culture material over the next decade, developing a vocabulary of expressionistic marks and erasures. But she did not consider exhibiting them; at the time, she was pursuing abstract, expressionistic landscapes in oil, and color, on canvas.

In 1983, Ms. Pensato began to be included in group shows in New York and elsewhere in the United States, and around 1990 she landed a solo show with the Fiction/Non-Fiction Gallery in SoHo (the Team Gallery today). But it was canceled at the last minute; the dealer felt that her work was not ready. Ms. Pensato was devastated, but she regrouped.

Recognizing that she loved making her charcoal-drawing characters more than the paintings, she decided to release these beings onto canvas, replacing oil paint and color with black, white and occasionally silver enamel, which was thick yet quick-drying and crucial to her style.

Ms. Pensato in 2016 in her Brooklyn studio, where piles of dirty, paint-splattered toys, stuffed animals, figurines and masks of pop culture characters could be found.

Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

In addition to Ms. Matter, Ms. Pensato often cited the Abstract Expressionist painter Joan Mitchell as a mentor during her time at the Studio School. Ms. Mitchell, known for her lush revisions of French Impressionism, once bluntly asked whether Ms. Pensato wanted to paint French (meaning with light and color) or German (meaning dark and expressionistic).

French, Ms. Pensato answered, but she knew it wasn't true. As she later said, "It took me until 1990 to realize that the color was not working for me."

**Correction:** June 25, 2019

*An earlier version of this obituary and its headline, using information supplied by a publicist, misstated Ms. Pensato's age at her death and her birth date. She was 77, not 78, and she was born on Aug. 20, 1941, not Aug. 29, 1940.*

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art. @robertasmithnyt