Joyce Pensato

What do you get when you cross the contemporary derangement of American politics, various cartoon heroes (Homer Simpson, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck), the spectres of abstract expressionism and that dystopian goon Donald Trump? The huge new paintings in Joyce Pensato’s show, ‘FORGETABOUT IT’, kid! Funny and sinister, they also provide the weirdest Mickeys’ since Keith Haring drew him, wide-eyed and with a UFO scanning his brain, in 1983. Aged 76, the Brooklynite has found a scuzzy strategy for capturing the madness of right now through pictures that look like broadcasts from a malfunctioning TV. Paint drips down canvas as noxiously as acid rain on chrome and any hints of Looney Tunes zaniness come spiked with something totally ghostly. Robert De Niro’s appearance on the wallpaper upstairs as Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver (1976; who remains hellishly relevant not only as a spree killer but also as the veteran of a hopeless war) is just one example of the American meltdown that Pensato chronicles in her work. The timeliness of such dystopian vibes is undeniable but Pensato’s paintings are also full of goofy delight: she makes mischief with her brush, just like Donald Duck in ‘Wet Paint’ (1946).
The duck is the doomed hero of *Four Donalds 1–4* (all works 2017) – his black feathers melting to goo as he eyeballs the hole where his heart should be, rocking back and forth from one picture to another. (A greedy beast lunching between slapstick crises: the paintings are a hot allegory for the woes of the other Donald.) The backdrop is pure gold, like the walls of a Bond villain’s lair or the toilet bowls on Trump’s private jet before he squelched onto Air Force One. Homer Simpson is feeling the effects of industrial decline according to Pensato’s *Homer in the Hood*. The mugshot-like portrait in smog grey shows – to quote his boss’s assistant, Smithers – the ‘carbon blob from Sector 7G’ as a blue-collar casualty: wrecked from a lifetime of knocking back Duff beer and ingesting plutonium at the nuclear power plant.

Any fancy sucker can bloviate about politics, satire or the subversive use of cartoons and totally ignore how Pensato melts different modes and eras of painting together to make her funky works. She creates tableaux in which abstract expressionism feeds, zombie-like, off pop art’s Day-Glo carcass and combines the formal economy of the graffiti tag with heavy, sludge-caked surfaces. She’s loyal to the gnarly textures of her home turf, too, like other New York painters such as Franz Kline or Christopher Wool, whose abstractions of city life evoke industrial pollutions or scorched tyres recording car crashes. Blank space eats away at wherever the Dark Knight was in The Erased Batman, repeating Robert Rauschenberg’s prankster blanking of a drawing by Willem de Kooning. Somewhere in the void there’s a wisecrack about urban decay, too – the painting might double as a disintegrating subway poster: ‘Make Gotham Great Again!’

Everybody’s mimicking Batman and trying to quit the scene somehow - from Travis in Taxi Driver, aiming his gun at the mirror, to the two beastie boys in Landscape Mickey, who are en route to shenanigans elsewhere. Donald Duck returns as a gangster in the five parts of Let’s Blow This Joint, eyes bug and plumage spiky: the duck’s been at the goofballs or just dropped a stick of dynamite in his shorts. The ‘joint’ could be the body or mind as much as any boring environment because, by the third picture, Donald’s is degenerating from ‘duck’ to frenzied scrawl: it looks like so much fun.
Joyce Pensato
01.24.17

Homer, Kenny, Donald, Mickey. Joyce Pensato’s painterly mashing of these American cartoon icons—diluted in bold-end-white enamele—have been seducing audiences for decades. One of her earliest Mickey Mouse paintings will be featured in the Whitney Museum’s survey of image-making in downtown New York. “Fast Forward: Painting from the 1980s,” curated by Jere Peretti and Melinda Long. The exhibition opens on January 27 and runs through May 14, 2017.

I WAS SUPPOSED TO HAVE my first ever solo show in the East Village at Fiction/Nonfiction gallery in 1991. A couple of the Mickey Mouse drawings I had started doing were going to be in it. For two years I’d been making work for this show, and just a couple of weeks before it was supposed to go up, it got canceled. The guy who ran the gallery came to me at the last minute and said I wasn’t ready. I was so shocked, crushed. Devastated. This was supposed to be my big break, you know? The world just fell apart. And I told everyone about it, too—my friends, my family. You know what my mom said to me? “We always knew it wasn’t going to happen.” Ha. Thanks, Mom.

Anyway, the cancellation forced me to really look at what I was doing and thinking about, and what I liked looking at. For the longest time I’d been torn, divided—I had two sides to me as an artist, and I was longing to just become one, totally unafraid of who I wanted to be. One side of me was making these colorful, atmospheric, Abbywho landscapes, while the other was making these charcoal drawings that were simple, black-and-white, graphic. And I really wanted to make the drawings paintings—it just made sense to me. I like being messy and I love throwing paint around and fucking it all up. But I also like the structure drawing provides.
The untitled Mickey painting from 1992 that’s going into the Whitney show is maybe the first or second Mickey painting I’ll ever done. The painting was based on a rubber Mickey Mouse head someone gave me—such an unlovely-looking guy—found in a garbage dump. It looked like something out of Edward Munch, really deep and brooding. I thought it was funny when I was approached about being in the “Fast Forward” show because I had nothing to do with the ‘80s. I was the artist looking in on the ‘80s. I saw a lot of people getting attention and shows, but I was so far outside of all that. At that time I was stuck in East Williamsburg—hardly any artists around! I could barely get anyone to come over the bridge and see my work. I was in Brooklyn with another painter friend of mine, Carl Pfieker—we were pioneers. I’m still in Brooklyn, but believe me, I never want to be a pioneer again.

I didn’t feel like I was having problems as an artist because I was a woman. I just thought of myself as a struggling artist trying to get recognition—I wanted to show my work somewhere. But I know women get a lot of shit in the art world. I’ve become a lot more aware of this since the ‘80s. I also have great painter friends like Marilyn Minter. Marilyn told me about all the difficulties she’s encountered.

I’ve had so many incredible people in my life. Thea Westreich was like my fairy godmother in the ‘80s, collecting my work andboosting me up. Mercedes Matter was the first person to see my Mickey drawings and really encourage me in that direction. She was one of my teachers and mentors at the New York Studio School when I was a student there. I met Christopher Wool at the NYSS as well. He introduced me to my first collector, his dad, Ira, who was like a proud father, my biggest cheerleader. The Wools are very important to me. Joan Mitchell was a mentor of mine too. But she could be kind of brutal. She would say, “Do you want to be one of those German Expressionists, all dark? Or do you want to be one of the French painters, like Matisse or Delacroix, with light and color?” I wanted to please her, of course, so I’d say, “I want to be French!” But I realized I was one of those expressionist painters. The last time I saw her she was at my first group show in Paris. God, she just loved giving me a hard time. She would say, “Are you still doing those animals?”—meaning Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck—and “Do you still have that skin disease?”—referring to the rough textures I like using in my work. Ha—she was a tough broad.

—As told to Alex Jovanovich
Preview: Joyce Pensato’s paintings of Batman, De Niro and more on display at the Modern

What's Next? by Joyce Pensato, enamel on canvas Joyce Marshall - Star-Telegram

BY GAILE ROBINSON
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Joyce Pensato is a latecomer to fame.

The Brooklyn-based artist has been rolling around the boroughs of New York since she was born in 1941 and hit the art scene in the 1970s, but her fame only began to percolate in the past four years.

Which is just as well, as she fully admits she is ready for it and can handle it now. If it had come sooner, she might have been one of those early fame fatalities.
MY SHIP CAME IN, AND HOPEFULLY IT WON’T SINK.

Joyce Pensato

Her work is the subject of “Focus: Joyce Pensato” at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. For her exhibit, she has painted an enormous mask of Batman on a 15-foot canvas. For another gallery she has brought photos from her studio that show her influences and the flinging paint that speckles everything — Robert De Niro from Raging Bull, Marilyn Monroe, Abraham Lincoln.

No one and nothing is spared her splatters.

The center gallery has a lineup of white eyes on black panels. The oval ones are borrowed from Homer Simpson, the round ones from Fritz the Cat.

Pensato has an inimitable theme that reoccurs in her large paintings. She melds comic-book references and animated characters — the mask of Batman, the eyes of Homer Simpson, the ears of Mickey Mouse, the tiny pupils of the South Park kids. And, with a limited palette of black, white and metallics, she paints the identifying parts in large, sweeping, drippy brush strokes and makes them menacing.

That she can take something as simple as the bug eyes of Homer Simpson, and, with a few deft strokes, render him recognizable yet threatening is remarkable.
“The painting motion is like boxing with a brush,” she says. And the fallout is similar to sitting on the front row at a fight: Things get spattered. Juices flow.

Pensato uses a cherry picker to get the height she needs to paint these large canvases. She used to climb up and down a ladder, but now, she says, “fuhgeddaboutit.”

She was born in Flatbush, N.Y., and moved three subway stops down the line to Brooklyn. She was an early pioneer of the art scene there. She says you have to take the L train to get to her.

“It used to be called the Low Life Line,” she says. Now, because Brooklyn has become trendy, it’s the Love Line.

There is a photograph on the gallery wall of Gena Rowlands from the 1980s film *Gloria*; she is holding a gun and looks directly at the camera lens.

“This,” Pensato says, “is a woman in charge. It’s a feminist statement. She can take care of stuff. I think of it as a self-portrait.”

As the photographer beckons, Pensato rats her hair higher, sheds her gold jewelry and takes off a black blazer, revealing a Debbie Harry T-shirt and black jeans, the outfit of a club kid.

She stands in front of the Batman mask and as soon as she hears the first click of the shutter, she raises her arms in a fighting pose.

Pensato is ready to take on the world.
INTERVIEW:
JOYCE PENSATO

Text / Will Corwin

Joyce Pensato’s Daisy (2007) is among the works currently on view in Painter’s Painters: Gifts from Alex Katz, an exhibition of recent donations to Atlanta’s High Museum of Art, where the portrait of Disney’s famous lady duck hangs with paintings by Rob Pruitt, Laura Owens, and Katz himself. Yet such interventions as Pensato’s recent Joyceland—a March 2014 installation at London’s Lisson Gallery, for which the Brooklyn-based artist transported the entire contents of her notoriously chaotic studio across the Atlantic—suggest that the substance of her practice takes place entirely off any traditional canvas: it spills into the neighborhood, and splatters cultural iconography it finds on the streets.

Joyce Pensato, De Niro, 2014, enamel paint on Fujifilm, signed, titled, dated verso in pencil, 91.4 x 120 x 2.5 cm [courtesy of the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York; photo: Jason Mandella]

When Joyce Pensato turned up at the Clocktower recording studio back in 2011 to do an interview as part of an oral history of the Williamsburg art scene in the 1990s, it was because Mike Ballou, Ward Shelley, and a few of the other Brooklyn mainstays had insisted that any record absolutely had to have her testimony. Pensato, on the other hand, was pretty clear that she hadn’t been part of it. She is from Brooklyn, and she sort of is Brooklyn—like its residents, she either gives you a very straight answer or speaks in riddles—but she also claims to hate it. In her Williamsburg studio, she engages the darkest sides of cultural signifiers such as Homer Simpson, Eric Cartman,
Mickey Mouse, Daisy Duck, and Batman, lending them the authority of saints—though she doesn’t watch cartoons, and they mean very little to her on a narrative basis. Instead these characters mingle with glossy movie stills, headshots, promotional cardboard cutouts, and talking Muppets; a squad of giggling Elmo dolls patrols the premises, and still more grungy toys line the shelves. Everything is spattered in high-gloss enamel paint, which by its apparent wetness only increases the spontaneity of the mess. Here is culture soup, its ingredients rotated in and out of proximity to the viewer and the artist: inverted, negated, or worshiped, they are always familiar. The ensemble functions as a whole, but none of its parts really “work” together. Barely noticeable is a hot plate in the corner by the window, and on it, a frying pan holding a gallon container of Joyce’s highly flammable enamel paint of choice, bubbling merrily. WTF.

**Will Corwin:** Is the studio “Joyceland,” or is Brooklyn “Joyceland”?

**Joyce Pensato:** This is no land, this is just a studio! This is the place where the juices are floating, where you feel comfortable to be who you are, and if I just want to lie on the lounge chair for a month or two, I can do it. I’m surrounded by Charlie [Pensato’s English spaniel], Batman, and all this stuff. It’s my world, my environment where I work. My world would be walking to the laundromat, the park, like, right around here—so the studio expanded to this community. Does that make sense? My world.

**WC:** Is there something miraculous on the way to the laundromat?

**JP:** Well, you meditate and space out. It’s very familiar—you could probably walk there with your eyes closed, and that’s part of my environment. If I go to the city, I’m taking a break from my inner space, but if you’re going to the laundromat you can still be in your own world and thinking about your paintings and stuff like that.

**WC:** What do you think of Brooklyn these days?

**JP:** I now like it. Before, I hated being here. Who wanted to be stuck in Brooklyn? When I was younger, where I lived in Bushwick was very provincial—it was like a small town. And then everybody came to me, for God’s sake! Now they want to throw me out, or they did want to throw me out.

**WC:** What do you like about it now?

**JP:** It’s a community, it’s familiar, it’s like a small town—all the things I hated!
**WC:** Do you think you were part of the "Brooklyn art scene"?

**JP:** No. Only when I got back from Paris in 2000/2001 did I become part of it—I was a big snob before that.

**WC:** What scene were you part of?

**JP:** Nothing. That's why my career was nowhere. I looked always to New York and I pooh-poohed Brooklyn. Until 2001, when I was desperate!

**WC:** Why do you have the toys everywhere? They kind of watch...

**JP:** Oh, I never think of them watching me. They have eyes and they're all looking—I mean, right now they are looking at me and the painting—but they can look the other way or at the floor. They hang out.

**WC:** How do they go from being a brand new clean Elmo to being covered with paint?

**JP:** Well, I don't "paint" Elmo. The Elmos are just hanging around by the paint and brushes. I know if it feels [like] too much, then I bring some other Elmos in. It's just part of the feeling of what I want in the studio. I'm not working from them. They kind of make me laugh. I think it's really funny that they're all covered with paint and then they start talking.

**WC:** When did you start using the distinctive enamel paint that's all over them?

**JP:** Back around 1990, a major thing happened in my life: I accepted myself. I was doing these fantastic cartoon drawings, and then I was doing totally abstract paintings. I'd be in different shows for each one—it was like two different people. The abstract paintings looked like everybody else's. I was supposed to have a show with them and it got canceled. It shocked me, and I started to look at what I was doing. I said, "Why am I trying to force these abstract paintings? Why not embrace who I am, what I love to do?"

So I thought, "Who is the hippest guy that I know who's doing something with not-normal paint?" It was Christopher Wool; I asked him what kind of paint he was using, and he told me. I played with it, and I found a way to open a whole new world for me. I found my language and tools. I couldn't screw it up: I didn't know how it worked, but
I knew it dried quickly. I liked the feeling that you just did it—the "wet look."

Joyce Pensato’s studio, photographed by Will Corwin [all images courtesy of the author]

**WC:** What do you feel about other artists using cartoons or a cartoonish metaphor? Would you site yourself within that periphery, within that school?

**JP:** I’m a wannabe; I would love to be. I love, love Paul McCarthy. The first time I met Paul was way back in 1992—we were in a group show at Luhring Augustine. He had a box of dirty toys, and I said, “Did this guy go in my studio and take my toys?” I felt a connection to him immediately. Now he’s cleaned up his act. I’m totally a dirty artist.

**WC:** Well, he’s kind of doing porn now.

**JP:** Maybe there’s a future for me in porn! You’re never too old. I like in-your-face and grabbing onto it and holding it. My hands are all over the place.

**WC:** Do you position the toys?

**JP:** I put them there, but I’m not conscious of it. I’m conscious of it in a gallery show; I try to make it feel as natural as possible. But I don’t do it here in the studio. Elmo is Charlie’s favorite toy. If you start playing with it, he’ll come grab it.

**WC:** When did you first discover Elmo?

**JP:** A couple of years ago. You know the fish that talks or sings?

**WC:** You mean the Big Mouth Billy Bass?

**JP:** I thought, wouldn’t it look cool in some sort of setup? So I went into the Chelsea Goodwill store. There was a kid there who was about six years old, and we were both looking at Elmo, and I thought, wouldn’t he be funny? And his mom said to take it because she’d had it with the Elmos. Now I’m on eBay buying Elmos.

**WC:** Did the Ducks, the Mickeys, the Fozzie Bears used to hang out the same way Elmo does now?

**JP:** Oh, yeah! All who remember me in 1973/1974 remember the studio I had. It was full of any debris, ducks, mice—anything I found in the street I would bring up to the studio. It was packed. I had to look at something. It gives you inspiration.
**WC:** When did you start working with cartoons?

**JP:** When I started to work, officially, I was a student at the Studio School in 1976. We embraced Giacometti, Cézanne—the real traditional French guys—and we also embraced Hans Hofmann and Willem de Kooning. Mercedes Matter was the dean at that time. Everybody was working with still-life materials—apples and pears. It was a stale thing to me, so Mercedes said: “I don't care what you work from, get something you want to look at.” At that time they had a life-size Batman cardboard cutout. When I first saw him, I fell in love with his ears. The bells rang, putting Batman in all different positions in the studio. It was a still-life format; then I started to invent my own space after the Studio School, more abstract.

![Joyce Pensato's studio, photographed by Will Corwin [all images courtesy of the author]](image)

**WC:** Do you like Batman as a “trope”—as in, the mythology?

**JP:** I couldn’t give a shit about that.

**WC:** Do you like that he has animal characteristics, as a hybrid being?

**JP:** It’s the aesthetic structure. Superman is too human, Superman has a real face—I like disguises; I like masks. I tried doing Spider-Man, but I found him too round and soft .... Batman is very angular—a tough guy—but he also represents pop culture. They have to have something deeper that I connect to. If I connect to it, I know the viewer is also connecting to something as well. I haven’t analyzed it too deeply, but I think I’m connecting to everyone’s inner self—to their childhood. I know I’m just having fun, but I’m dealing with the American icon. They have to be more than Mickey Mouse with a lobotomy. Icons! I like icons.

**WC:** What do you like about Mickey?

**JP:** It was the early 1980s—and again with the fucking ears. Also, his body is roundish—very abstract. I had a couple of Mickeys hanging out—friends would give them to you, or you could find them in the gutter or the street. I would hunt them down. I like something that has a past, and what a mess they were! Their hair was coming out, they had had a hard time, but you feel a connection to some of them.
**WC:** How do you feel about "cuteness"?

**JP:** I don’t like cuteness. Cuteness is not there.

**WC:** And Cartman and Stan?

**JP:** They’re not cute; they’re bad boys. I use them as a form of getting into the paint. I see them as abstraction—they’re very simple and abstract, a couple of swipes with the brush—but they mean something. Homer is amazing. He’s a symbol of every man with a bald head. I don’t watch The Simpsons, but I love the way they’re drawn. They’re an American culture thing. I seem to connect with that. When I was living in France I tried to get hooked up to the stuff in France and Belgium. Tintin? I had no connection to it. I find I’m still crazed over Donald Duck.

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**WC:** Is it something about anthropomorphization? Donald’s hat and tie ...

**JP:** He [is] also very expressive: he can look angry, he can look very vulnerable .... With Mickey, there’s nothing there but a high-pitched voice. I sometimes put Donald’s beak on Mickey—I start putting favorite parts of different people .... Of different "people"! Of different characters. To me they’re like portraits.

**WC:** When you do this pseudo-portrait, it’s you connecting with the "soul" of whatever entity it is?

**JP:** I hope that it has that.

**WC:** How do you position the installations in reference to the paintings?

**JP:** Same thing. My last show at Petzel [Batman Returns, 2012] was bringing my studio there. I see it visually as a beautiful setup: the drippings on the floor, the cans, the empty cans, the paint. Then you add a couple of Elmos—it’s almost like you’re building a theater piece, a set, but it’s not going to work if it’s staged, it has to come from the heart.

**WC:** What’s the process for making a painting, beginning with the blank canvas?

**JP:** I have an idea of what size I want to do, it’s not totally "blank"—usually it kind of
related to some paper size, something I do drawings on, that’s how it starts. I sit here
for a while until I connect to what I’m painting. Like Homer: all of a sudden I could see
that on the canvas. Then I just go ahead and do it.

**WC:** Do you sketch out the image or do you just start painting right off the bat?

**JP:** Sketch? What’s to sketch? We get the big fat Japanese brushes and splash on the
paint. It’s drawing with the brush, like an ink drawing.

**WC:** How do you know when it’s done?

**JP:** When it feels like it has all the things in my head that I would want. At times it
looks like I could stop and it would work, but inside of me I feel I have to work on it,
keep working—I want to make it something else.

Joyce Pensato’s studio, photographed by Will Corwin [all images courtesy of the author]

**WC:** Do you feel guilty if it happens too quickly?

**JP:** Yeah, I feel like I have to really push it. And sometimes I fuck up whatever it is.

**WC:** Are the portraits about recognizability?

**JP:** I like things really big, direct, in your face. I think it has a lot to do with when I
started working in the big studio, seeing from far away. It’s almost like a billboard.

**WC:** That makes me think of your larger, ephemeral wall-based pieces. Do you like the
idea that it won’t exist for long?

**JP:** I accept it. It’s almost like a performance piece to me. I did one in Santa Monica
[Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2013] of Daisy Duck, and I felt the face was so
expressive—it had the feeling of an Edvard Munch. I thought that was a masterpiece.
But I knew going into it that it would eventually be gone.

**WC:** What is the appeal of working on this scale?

**JP:** The feeling is to have a big presence. Growing up Catholic has something to do
with it. Going to church, you’re seeing the altars, the theater. I went to church every
Sunday, but I did a lot of fantasy dreaming there.

**WC:** What did you dream about?

**JP:** Hollywood, and it was not religious! I love all that heavy emotion, the drama of Christ on the cross. I couldn't get enough of it. Even a big Donald Duck face is a symbol that we all know, but it's also very powerful.

**WC:** Do you think your paintings are funny?

**JP:** I know I have a dark sense of humor. When I was a kid, polio was a major thing. The kids were going out like flies, and the news would run pictures of [someone] in an iron lung, smiling happily at a mirror. I mean, it wasn't quite like that, but that's the memory. It made me think, wow, that would really get a lot of attention—they were happy, they were laughing. My parents didn't give me much attention, so I wanted to have polio, too. It's like the Weegee photograph where somebody drowned and there's this woman smiling at the camera.

**WC:** How did photographs start to come into the mix?

**JP:** I always love taking pictures. In my studio I'd have my collages and photos around, and as I worked, paint would be getting on it, and I loved it. They were just part of my studio [the paint-spattered images], and I would become aware of them when somebody visited. It was almost like a boxing ring, splashing paint as punching. Now, I'll purposely get posters of De Niro in *Raging Bull*—there's something beautiful, the emotion on his face.

**WC:** You've also got Muhammad Ali.

**JP:** He's the new one, he needs to get something. [The paint] almost looks like blood, except it's black and white, and the markings to me are quite beautiful. It's like cooking: you don't want to overcook it and ruin the whole fucking thing.

**WC:** You've got almost as many photographic, human icons, as you do cartoon ones: Robert De Niro, Muhammad Ali, Abraham Lincoln—

**JP:** —Gena Rowlands, who I think of as my "inner me." I wanna be Gena Rowlands. I think of that image with her, with a gun, as a feminist image. A strong woman with a gun, pointing at the viewer—that's how I see myself. Gena Rowlands with a gun and then De Niro, all bloody, they're me, both of them. One is, "I'm going to keep going, no matter how much you punch me in the head," and the other is like "All right, gotcha."

Joyce Pensato in her studio, photographed by Will Corwin [all images courtesy of the author]
Will Corwin is a sculptor based in New York City. His public project The Great Richmond, a collaboration with urban planner Neil Greenberg, will be on view at the Staten Island Ferry Terminal, St. George, in fall 2014.
Batman, Beavis and Bart: welcome to artist Joyce Pensato's funland

From battery-powered Elmos to a murdered Mickey Mouse, Pensato's funny and sinister new show, Joyceland, will make you look at pop culture in a whole new light

Adrian Searle
theguardian.com, Wednesday 26 March 2014 17.13 GMT
Jump to comments (...)
The painter’s quagmire can be taken as a sign of authenticity, and their art as being born out of the chaos of the universe. Or it could just be a tedious affectionation. The overly orderly can be worrying too: I once knew a painter so anal he arranged his tubes of paint alphabetically. Rigour and clear thinking? OCD? No, just colour-blindness.

As well as bringing her paintings, and making works in situ, US artist Joyce Pensato has shipped the entire contents of her Brooklyn studio to the Lisson Gallery and set it up just like home. A team of guys in white suits had to forensically log everything and arrange it just so, leaving a heaving mire of Simpsons dolls, superhero masks and comic-book and cartoon memorabilia. A cardboard cut-out Elvis, posters of Bart and Beavis and a plethora of collages and portraits fill one of the galleries. Battery-powered Elmos chirrup at my feet.

Pensato has even dragged in the bespattered lino from her studio floor. This is the sort of thing curators have done with dead artists such as

Francis Bacon, whose frighteningly disordered South Kensington studio was painstakingly resurrected in Dublin after his death, at the Hugh Lane Gallery. Bacon would likely have been appalled, happy though he was to be photographed in his muck, aware that his theatrical self-dramatisation added to his allure. Painters, who often spend too much time alone, sometimes become method actors in their own fantasy studio lives.
All this easily gets in the way of the art, fascinating though it is to rifle through clutter. Pensato is happy she has everything here. When I met her, she quipped she wanted to wreck the gallery.

Pensato pointed to a high stool, whose upper surface and cross bars drooled with dried-up black enamel paint, as if it had been dredged from the Black Lagoon. "That's Joan Mitchell's stool" she told me, which she had rescued from the late artist's Manhattan studio before the hard-painting, hard-drinking Mitchell moved to France in the 1960s. All this stuff — which Pensato calls Joyceland — is piquant and fun, and may be necessary to inspire her imagery (artists keep all sorts of talismans and fetishes). But the paintings themselves have a hard time floating free of the dreck.

Mitchell's stool is in a corner amid a pile of paint rags and a spattered Mickey Mouse doll lying dead on the floor, as though to keep Pensato company while she painted a mural on the back wall. The mural is a huge heavy shower of black, white and gold enamel, with a silvery Batman mask as the central motif. Pensato, who is not tall, painted the whole thing from a cherry-picker. The paint has managed to spatter the adjacent walls. It rains over a door and ejaculates up to the rafters. When Pensato paints, it's best to keep well clear.

Her paintings are resolutely frontal emblematic faces, that seem to have grown from blizzards of enamel. They look at you with a dumb, bulgy-eyed assertiveness. White over black, black over white, black and gold or silver, her process destroys and remakes the image in successive layerings of spat and spray. Pensato homes in on her fictive characters,
giving them new life. But the range of all that drip and drool is a bit limited, however much they remind us of Pollock, Jean-Paul Riopelle (who lived with Mitchell in the 1960s) or Pat Steir. It's almost better to see her paintings as assertive abstractions, except they won't let you.

Pensato's art is more than a cartoon, and her abject, funny and sometimes sinister paintings draw from the same well of popular culture as Mike Kelley and early Claes Oldenburg. Whether her subject is Homer or Marge, Groucho Marx, Batman or Donald Duck, her big-eyed behemoths have a similar kind of visual attack. This gets wearing. Subtle they are not. Pensato's work is resolutely in-your-face. It has the beat of the kind of street you might want to avoid on a dark night.

Comparisons have been made with Christopher Wool, with whom Pensato once shared a studio at art school. Wool's recent Guggenheim show in New York, with its wise-guy, stencilled phrases and washed-out smudges and traces, have also been likened to the distressed look of faded graffiti. Both artists capture the tempo of gritty urban life that Mayor Mike Bloomberg wanted to eradicate from a gentrified New York. The only place for all this now is on collector's walls. Compared to Pensato, Wool is as effete as Watteau.

No wonder, then, that among her trove of source-material pin-ups, Robert De Niro as Travis Bickle in Scorsese's Taxi Driver keeps returning. Like Bickle looking at himself in a mirror, Pensato's paintings stare you down, saying, "You talkin' to me?" In the end, for painter and viewer alike, it's all a face-off.

• Joyce Pensato: Joyceland is at Lisson Gallery, London NW1, until 10 May.
JOYCE PENSAITO: JOYCE LAND

Published on 17 March 2014
Joyce Pensato creates extraordinarily exuberant and commanding paintings of characters from cartoons and comic books. For her upcoming exhibition at Lisson Gallery, Pensato will be displaying new works featuring Homer Simpson, Batman and Donald Duck.

For a month prior to the show Pensato has been working at the gallery, painting a large-scale mural, a medium she has also returned to for her major museum displays in Europe and America.

Alongside her paintings, Joyce Pensato will also transport and display contents from her Brooklyn studio, referred to as 'Joyceland'. Her studio environment will be recreated as installations, using items from Joyceland including stuffed toys, action figures (used as inspiration for her paintings) paint pots and scraps of newspaper covered in splatters of paint. I spoke to the artist ahead of her debut exhibition at Lisson Gallery.

YOUR WORK OFTEN HAS IMAGERY FROM POP CULTURE, MAINLY FROM CARTOONS AND COMIC BOOKS. CAN YOU EXPLAIN YOUR FASCINATION WITH THESE CULTURAL ICONS?

My Dad came to New York from a small town in Sicily and embraced his new country. He wanted to be a super American and he loved American Pop culture. He would take my brother and me to great places; Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade was one of my favorites. We would take the train from Brooklyn and go to 42nd Street to see the bright lights and the over the top billboards. We went to the Statue of Liberty and Coney Island. New York City was my playground. It’s in my D.N.A.

YOUR WORKS HAVE OFTEN BEEN IN BLACK AND WHITE, WHY DO YOU CHOOSE TO WORK WITH A REDUCTIVE PALETTE?

To hold onto my images and give them a strong punch!

YOUR WORK OFTEN INCLUDES REFERENCES TO, OR AN IMAGE OF BATMAN. WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THIS PARTICULAR SUPERHERO?

Batman is an iconic image – so direct and simple – and everyone knows what he represents: strength and power.

YOU’VE BEEN DESCRIBED AS A COLLECTOR, HOARDING STUFFED TOYS. TOYS HAVE MORE EMOTIONAL WEALTH BUT ARE NOT SEEN AS HAVING ANY MONETARY WEALTH, IS THAT WHY YOU SURROUND YOURSELF WITH THEM?
I do collect some stuffed animals that I connect to, but I'm not a hoarder. I have them in my studio for inspiration.

YOUR STUDIO IS IN BROOKLYN. WHAT ROLE DOES THE AREA AND YOUR STUDIO PLAY IN YOUR WORK?

It's Home... it's everything... it's my world. It's been "Joyceland" for the last 30 years.

WHERE DO YOU SEE YOUR WORK GOING NEXT?

Maybe some color paintings will take me to the next place. One thing leads to another. I'm open!

WHAT WORK WILL YOU BE SHOWING AT LISSON GALLERY?

Paintings, drawings, collages, photos and installation, it will be over the top. I am also making a wall painting of Batman or Homer, and I'm bringing my Marge from Hell drawing. I may do a wall drawing as well. My gang, with lots of passion!!

Joyce Pensato – Joyceland runs from 26th March until 10th May at Lisson Gallery, 27 Bell St.