

Joyce Pensato

The dull threat of Gotham has always been the violence of madness and forcible expropriation. Much of it plays out in the streets, but the rest deposits itself in the city's psyche. Every day, the life force of an entire population is put to work to stave off the entropy aggressively accumulating in its interiors. This is the dark, libidinal economy that governs a city clad in tempered glass and aging brownstone.

Against this psychic backdrop, Joyce Pensato opened the exhibition "Batman Returns" (2012) at Petzel Gallery in New York, featuring paintings of the superhero's horned cowl in dripping decay alongside individual works depicting an apparitional ensemble of cartoon characters. For the past three decades, images of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Felix the Cat, Krazy Kat, Homer Simpson, Krusty the Clown, Lisa Simpson, Eric Cartman, and others have recurred endlessly as the subjects of Pensato's paintings and drawings. These tattered figures, reduced to a few stark outlined features, loom in suspended animation at the brink of abstraction.

The empty stare of Homer. The stunned paralysis of Donald. The addled smile of Mickey. The pensive brow of Groucho. The repressed minstrel of Felix. The moral exhaustion of Batman. Everything appears to be a subject of coercion—pushed along so that the show can continue.

Taking center stage is the historically uneasy relationship between New York Abstract Expressionism and Pop art now escalated to a full confrontation. Drawing on these artistic legacies, including that of her mentor Joan Mitchell, Pensato has developed a practice of pitting the inherent brutalisms of AbEx and Pop against each other: i.e., survivalist imperative of painting versus the death drive of culture, the erased figure versus the empty signifier, and life presence versus the cold hand of commodity culture.

This actively plays out in Pensato's paintings and drawings. Thick black-and-white outlines blister in radiating splatters, fraying brushstrokes contend with trespassing layers and aggressive erasures. Abstraction is the caustic acid that disintegrates Pop, only countered by its reification as a consumable image.

These formal elements seem to fuse, much like the features of the hybridized cartoon characters Pensato has created, such as the monstrous *Duck Mouse* (2008) which is part Donald and part Mickey. They become creatures of heteronomy shaped by the split-life psychosis underlying our culture.

A few months after Pensato's exhibition, Batman uncannily returned to theaters in *The Dark Knight Rises*, this time as a tired antihero whose contradictory roles as benevolent protector and brutal police accessory have become untenable, particularly in the face of disruptive clowns, tricksters, and revolutionaries who bring society's moral quandaries to the fore.

As legend has it, Gotham's namesake was a medieval English town of fools who managed to resist King John's rule by concertedly acting insane, thereby thwarting royal plans for a highway and castle on their land. Perhaps this is the mad cast missing from New York today.

— Howie Chen