



photo: Skye von der Osten

"I am not a pop artist!"

Brooklyn artist Joyce Pensato pursues her exploration of pop Americana at Uferhallen Wedding

BY ANKA BOTZOMAN Joyce Pensato was the first of the 18 American artists in the exhibition *Carnival Within* to arrive on the premises of the 3,000-square-metre Uferhallen Wedding. "I wanted to be here, feel the space and see what I could bring to it," says the Brooklyn artist. She's been given a full wall, both faces of which she's to paint on site. She plans to put a pair of eyes - Felix the Cat's - on one side and a clown on the other. "Because the space is so large, I want simple and strong images, sort of billboard images." A nostalgic reference to the huge signs on Times Square that populate her childhood memories.

Pensato grew up under the spell of her dad's fascination for American pop culture. A Sicilian immigrant, he arrived in NYC when he was 13 and learned English through movies and cartoons. "He loved anything connected to the American dream. The symbols and all the tourism places," she remembers. "We had so many picnics by the Statue of Liberty. Meat balls and spaghetti were only a Sunday thing."

At the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting & Sculpture, Pensato found natural in-

spiration in her discarded toys and former cartoon idols. The student who first replaced those revered apples and pears with a series of "Batman figures" went on to dedicate her artistic life to an endless exploration of icons of American pop culture. Pensato also painted her recently-deceased dog and tried to do a portrait of Bush, but he turned out to be a little too "human" for her. "He needed a big nose or something." Her current favourite is Felix the Cat. But don't expect too much resemblance to the original: the characters all look very different after being subjected to the Pensato treatment - stripped of their colour, innocence and quietness, they suddenly look drippy, a little scary and sometimes diabolic. And when it strikes her fancy to mix their features, to pair Donald's beak with Mickey's eyes, they end up looking what she calls "Frankenstein-like". "They should look different: they have to have their own personality. Otherwise I don't see any interest."

Despite her choice of subject and a dripping technique reminiscent of abstract expressionism, Pensato's large scale, black and white, enamel on canvas paintings don't look like any-

thing you've ever seen before. "I'm not a pop artist and I don't want to be a fourth or fifth generation abstract expressionist," says the energetic sexagenarian. Her visceral take on the medium reinforces the liberating quality of her paintings - which look as if they were done in one go. "But that is deliberate," she adds mischievously.

For her first show in Berlin, Pensato brought (literally) a suitcase full of stuffed animals and porcelain or plastic figures of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Bugs Bunny and Felix the Cat - the creatures that have inhabited her paintings for the last 30 years - along with more modern ones (she recently developed an interest in Homer Simpson and the "nerdy boys" from South Park). Pensato's lifelong fascination for the animated icons of American culture is now paired with more straightforward national pride. "Obama is just great. Since his election, I don't have to lie about being Canadian."

Carnival Within: An Exhibition Made in America, Uferhallen Wedding, Uferstr. 8-10, Wedding, Tel 4690 6871, U-Bhf Pankstr., Tue-Sun 12-19. Through May 3