

## MARRIA PRATTS SOME WIZARDS IN SAVILE ROW LONDON 22.03.2024 - 20.04.2024

Carl Kostyál is delighted to present a new body of work by Catalan artist Marria Pratts, her debut at the gallery in London. Ghosts, mice and melting clocks are just some of the familiar tropes in her painterly arsenal that appear in these monumental paintings.

“Twenty years ago, on a grey November day at the start of the millennium, I stepped into the frosty studio of the celebrated painter Joyce Pensato (1941–2019). A legend in the making, Pensato worked in an industrial nave located in an urban wilderness called East Williamsburg, Brooklyn—Bushwick before Starbucks, Hermes and cafés crowded with Chads and Brads in gray fleece vests. Known for massive black paintings and drawings of cartoon characters—Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Donald and Daisy Duck, Felix the Cat, Batman, the entire Simpson clan and the manic protagonists of “South Park”—Pensato, or “Fizz,” as her friends called her, held forth on the radical freedom her location gifted her.

“I can do whatever the fuck I want here,” she said while drawing deep on a cigarette. As I mulled the idea over I looked up to see snow falling through a five-foot hole in the ceiling.

Defiance, autonomy, resilience, invention, the creative negotiation of the world’s light and dark elements in response to one’s immediate surroundings in ways that layer art and move it beyond mere objects and situations... these are the things that make art turn fructuous, fertile, even feral, whether in Brooklyn, Bern or Barcelona.

All of these factors defined Pensato and her work, but they seem equally attributable to the thirty-five year old Catalan wunderkind Marria Pratts. An intensely generative artist who uses, among other media, paint, sculpture, comics, ceramic, photography, video, music, neon, scavenged materials and whatever is near at hand, Pratts creates discrete artworks that, above all, appear fundamentally energised by their making. A fashioner of drawings, paintings and sculptures and other objects where sheer vitality regularly trumps specific style or technique, she can usually be found hard at work in her studio harnessing multidisciplinary processes of her own invention. These processes she cultivates, develops and refines until they are capable of representing what she calls “a reality that is, at once, honest, wild, and very fragile”—but also populated with “apparitions” that repeatedly and directly challenge her viewers.

Like Pensato’s now demolished Bushwick studio and Francis Bacon’s disheveled Reese Mews hive in London—it was famously transported across the English Channel, spent smokes and all, to The Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin in 1998—Pratts’ well-known working digs provide great insight into her multiple practices and evolving artistic persona. Located on the outskirts of Barcelona in the industrial working class neighbourhood of L’Hospitalet de Llobregat, her massive live-work space has been redesigned to represent, in the words of one writer, a flourishing view of what goes on inside the artist’s head. A soaring warehouse that contains an

island apartment jerry-rigged from bits of wood, polyurethane foam and cardboard recycled from nearby factories—it features a bathtub, a mattress, a wood stove and a literal hole in the wall the artist and others access like a portal—Pratt’s working abode contains a factory’s worth of the multiple projects she constantly juggles, but also recalls a canonical 1960s-era experiment in marrying art and life.

The legendary exhibition *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form*, curated by Harald Szeeman’s for Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, proved to be more than just a mythically influential international survey of Post-minimalism and Arte Povera. It was also a heady primer on how artists and curators could dream up environments of various types with which to actively disappear the borders between events inside and outside their studios. Much like the effervescence overflowing Pratts’ warehouse, Szeeman’s show mobilised multiple spaces for laboratory-like experimentation. Rather than merely foment the “dematerialisation” of the art object or “anti-form,” the exhibition proposed a dynamic prerogative for artists: a propagative ideal with which they could, individually and together, respond to a period defined by rapid technological and social change and the collapse of conventional methods of representation. (Epochal similarities anyone?)

In Pratts’ case, assuming the role of artistic dynamo came intuitively—leading her to explore, among other things, various untried approaches to art making. For someone who has lived precariously, she naturally cultivated a sustained interest in the B-side of her city’s urban fabric (“I feel an aesthetic attraction to stuff most people ignore,” Pratts says; “I’m inspired as much by walks in my neighbourhood, as I am by flowers growing out of the cement, abandoned tires, paint on asphalt, etc.”). She embraced the possibilities connected to ephemeral gestures performed at a monumental scale (these include loose graphic lines and expressive marks, à la Cy Twombly, but also the use of recurrent childlike motifs, like her signature ghost figure which regularly appears as if drawn with a giant Etch-A-Sketch). Lastly—or rather firstly, in terms of strict chronology—she instinctively arrived at a lifetime commitment to painting untroubled by textbook wisdom (i.e., received theoretical justifications), in much the same way children acquire first words and adults simple expressions for challenging ideas.

“For me, conceptual art feels like it is trapped in museums,” Pratts says, distinguishing herself from generations of Spanish artists who eschew two-dimensional work on canvas, “Painting, on the other hand, is invested with magical and radical power.”

“I very much believe in finding a special space for creation,” Pratts told this writer. “That’s where I can push my materials to the limit so magical things happen.” Not a few of those spellbinding things have taken centre stage as giant canvases at several major Spanish institutions during the last few years. At the Miró Foundation, for instance, Pratts covered the walls of the museum’s project room with curved sheets of stainless steel that did double duty as both supports for individual sculptures, drawings and XL sized canvases—many sporting her trademark ghosts, clocks and chairs in Goyaesque black and bubblegum pink—and a sweeping framework for her trippy, mirror-like installation. Though pegged as “expanded painting” by Pere Llobera, the show’s curator—he also suggested the more felicitous phrase “painting in three dimensions”—Pratts describes her *Alice in Wonderland* environments more prosaically. At the Miro Foundation, her efforts proposed, in her words, an immersive “architecture, a

stainless steel frame with chapels that allows the paintings to float in the space in a unique way.”

If new forms of painting allow viewers a break from the conventional rectangle, then Pratts is on her way to becoming a Benjamin Franklin of 21<sup>st</sup> century painting. Given pride of place at Barcelona’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) 2022 triennial, the artist contributed a twenty-six foot rectangular canvas across which, to paraphrase Paul Klee in his *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, she deftly took pink, yellow, blue and black lines out for a walk (“An active line on a walk, moving freely, without a goal,” Klee wrote in his 1925 volume, is above all “A walk for a walk’s sake”). Additionally, the title of Pratt’s painting ‘Sento una música dintre del cap (Transformació d’un pensament borrós)’—English translation: “I feel music inside my head (Transformation of a blurry thought)” —layers additional poetry onto areas electrified by lyrical brushstrokes, spray lines, scribbles, handmade neon bars and burn holes (the artist regularly scarifies her canvases with flame in order to “transform” what she describes as “a malaise in painting”). Her ultimate purpose: to underscore the near limitless possibilities of painterly freedom but also to represent what she calls “a wound.” “There is no life without a wound,” she declares shrewdly.

According to Pratts, ‘Sento una música’ spent some time kicking around her L’Hospitalet studio before she thought it ready for prime time. It “fermented,” the artist says, using a typically organic metaphor, before being moved to MACBA. Once installed there, she transformed the canvas once more by pushing the limits of what is possible, at least institutionally. Having titled the exhibition *Apunts per a un incendi dels ulls*, or “Notes for Setting Your Eyes On Fire,” MACBA proffered an invitation for Pratts to intervene inside their walls. This the Catalan artist did by activating a signature element of her studio practice—the burning of specific sections of canvases—inside the museum’s galleries. Blowtorch in hand, she alternately exhilarated and terrified curators and staff, while returning the elements of surprise and risk to an age-old practice doctrinaire detractors claim as played out, conventional and diminished.

“There is something ridiculous to begin with about dirtying up a piece of cloth and expecting people to leave their homes to go see it,” the late critic Peter Schjeldahl told legendary curator Robert Storr in 1995. When I relayed this quote to Pratts, she laughed and responded: “I also think there’s something that’s very caveman about the entire exercise. But painting is also the closest I think I will ever get to absolute freedom, to something like founding my own nation state—someplace where I set the rules and change them when I like.”

When I concurred, she delivered herself of a comment worthy of other creative dynamos, but with a generosity that brought me back to Pensato and her unruly defiance, which I now understand to be an expansive embrace: “To that I would add that painting is also like a ceremony, an age-old one that goes back millennia. For me, at least, it’s like a ceremony where I get to also say ‘Everybody’s welcome.’”

Christian Viveros-Fauné

Brooklyn, 2023.

Pratts's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at at The ELM Foundation in New York, the Fundacion Joan Miró and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona. In June 2023 she was was commissioned to make a monumental sculptural installation at the Liceu Barcelona Opera House Hall of Mirrors, titled '1 Sardana, 3 Ghosts.' In March this year, her paintings 'El Naixement' and 'Esperant 1 Nou Temps' were acquired by the renowned Fundació María Cristina Masaveu Peterson, who have exhibition and research centres at Yale University and in three locations in Spain, Madrid, Asturias and Morasverdes.