

New Work: Alessandro Pessoli



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A man in uniform, his face indistinguishable, holds a cigarette in his oversized hand. He sits in a chair balanced on a supine figure. A tearful dog, its tail between its legs, carries a knapsack and gazes into the distance. A duck with a man's visage leads a funeral procession for the last Caesar. A sun with a human face sets while an inquisitive man with an erect phallus looks on. The words "The tired hero (painter with spleen)" float overhead.

Alessandro Pessoli's (Italian, born 1963) recent drawings, paintings, and sculptures are filled with surreal visions and narrative impressions such as these. At times cynical, sincere, or perverse, his constructions engage restless, exaggerated characters who act out a range of emotions. Like the dreamlike atmospheres they inhabit, the fragmentary forms seem cloaked in a haze of memory, only partially coming into focus.

Pessoli's figures are formed through conventional means: they are drawn, painted, or sculpted.¹ Typically working in series, he often exhibits related pieces together; this is especially true of his drawings. A medium whose inherent directness provides a natural space for recording and chronicling, drawing is central to all aspects of Pessoli's practice. His illustrations are defined by the expressive nature of their lines and the immediacy of their marks, qualities that constitute his narratives' emotive core. Realized without sketches or models, his compositions are developed through a process of layering and erasure. The resulting images are particularly affecting when the emotionally charged traces of their previous states remain visible.

Pessoli's ceramics are fabricated from majolica, a sculptural form and technique synonymous with the Northern Italian Renaissance. Most commonly used for tableware, majolica is covered in a rich glaze that creates a natural surface for painting bold, vibrant designs. This medium retains the nuances of Pessoli's meticulously handcrafted figures, enabling the translation of his drawings and paintings into three-dimensional forms. He first explored the medium in 2002 in Albissola, where artists Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni worked during the 1960s. Albissola is near Savona, home of Arturo Martini. The early twentieth-century artist is an influential figure for Pessoli, who sought out

his work while he was living in this area. Pessoli later made his ceramics in Faenza, the center of majolica production in Italy.²

There is an inherent dexterity in Pessoli's process that allows for seamless shifts between materials. While he does not simultaneously work in different mediums, imagery and emotional resonance carry over from one body of work to the next. Characters and symbols recur, and these stock figures and forms function as the artist's personal *commedia dell'arte*, which he constantly reimagines and re-creates. They are further complicated by references to historical figuration and dramatic imagery that he has repurposed to fit his contemporary needs. Pessoli frequently invokes the formal characteristics of his predecessors' work, a reflection of his sincere reverence for the history of art. He draws on the expressionistic searching of Martini, the dark romanticism of Gustave Moreau, and the mystical symbolism of Odilon Redon. He is influenced by Pablo Picasso's diverse formal practice and focused character studies, Thomas



Below left: From the series *Did you fell? I'm good, I'm so good*, 2010

This page: *Mercury*, 2012

Schütte's flexible shifts in materials and narrative, and Honoré Daumier's strong graphic style and biting caricatures. Art is not the only resource for Pessoli's borrowing. He also quotes science fiction, cartoons, and cinema. In his narratives, characters often pause in order to restage a familiar scene, disappearing from the frame as quickly as they enter. Such interruptions echo filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini's cinematic tableaux vivants. Layered and mixed with personal references, these influences resonate with a familiarity that adds complexity to Pessoli's visual lexicon.

For Pessoli, boundaries between the past and present are tenuous. History continually haunts the present, and the present transforms the past. This melding of divergent time periods reflects the artist's heritage and upbringing in Italy, where history is a vibrant part of everyday life. Pessoli was born in Cervia, located near Ravenna, which is famous for the Byzantine mosaics that fill the Basilica of San Vitale. Though undoubtedly influenced by his Italian roots, Pessoli's recent work also reflects his moving to Los Angeles in 2009 after living and working in Italy for forty-five years. This relocation ignited discernible changes, both personal and social, in his art and provided a new reserve of imagery on which to draw.

New Work: Alessandro Pessoli is the artist's first solo museum show on the West Coast. It highlights his diverse artistic production by including drawings and sculpture from his initial year in Los Angeles alongside a new series of works on paper and sculptures. Together they reveal an imagination in transition: new symbols and influences appear, affecting color, imagery, and form. Inventive narratives unfold. The resulting objects reveal organic meditations on Modernism, mythology, childhood, and artistic identity.

Drafted on irregularly shaped pieces of paper, *The sunset* (2010) comprises twenty identically framed graphite drawings finished to varying degrees. With an underlayer of barely erased marks and images, they have a sketch-like immediacy and perceptible sense of anxiety and tension. Dark, at times sinister, these impressions present twisted realities with undertones of impending danger: a man is dragged behind a horse with a lit candle on his back; another man wields an ax at an opponent brandishing a bat. Symbols long used by the artist, such as musicians, the Virgin Mary, and a cross,



appear throughout. The sprayed border that surrounds these enigmatic scenes accentuates their otherworldly quality.

Similarly framed and composed, *Did you fell? I'm good, I'm so good* (2010) presents a more focused exploration in which the ominous visions of *The sunset* give way to a perverse depiction of the artistic persona. In the first drawing, an oversized, deformed figure is topped with a chimney, a familiar symbol in Pessoli's work that acts like a release valve for pent-up emotion. In subsequent drawings the figure of the artist appears beside scenes depicting the successes and failures of the imagination's inner workings. In an almost tongue-in-cheek nod to the trope of the unstable creator, Pessoli adorns the despondent figure with a hat resembling those worn by the Old Masters, positioning him beneath the words "The madness like a breed." Other images include scenes of temptation, such as a man with an erect phallus who leans forward to smell a fruit on a tree; of celebration, as with a man/dog hybrid that carries a trumpet and lifts a bottle; of frustration, seen

in a character with a chimney on his head who raises his fists; and of perversion—a man in a top hat masturbates under the glow of the new moon. The phallus, fully erect or flaccid, appears in nearly every image, materializing as a character in and of itself.

Presented as a sequence read left to right, Pessoli's drawings resemble cinematic storyboards or cells from a graphic novel. The sculpture *Unlife together (my country)* (2010), conceived as a counterpart to *Did you fell? I'm good, I'm so good*, echoes this filmic quality. One of its sides appears like the stage set of an interior sliced off for optimal viewing. Uneven, rough-hewn walls divide a space inhabited by amorphous forms. One character peers out of the window, watching the drawings' dramas and artistic failures unravel. Dark spray paint covers the interior walls, mimicking the drawings' borders.

Using these three earlier pieces as a starting point, Pessoli developed a body of work consisting of mixed-media drawings and majolica sculptures that reflects a distinct shift in palette and influences. High-keyed pinks, oranges, and greens mingle with primary hues. A predominant rainbow-like layering of colors appears in the sculptures, an acknowledged reference to California conceptual artist Allen Ruppersberg and psychedelic hippie culture.⁵ *Crodino e Aperol* (2012) refers to the names of popular Italian aperitifs, the tonal intensity of which fills the drawing's wandering figures.

These drawings reveal Pessoli in the process of forming new relationships to old influences. He directly quotes Daumier, whose work has been a long-standing reference point, in *Jupiter* (2012), an abridged version of Daumier's painting *Don Quixote et Sancho Panza* (Don Quixote and Sancho Panza) (1866–68), which hangs in the Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles. Pessoli's interpretation focuses only on the character of Don Quixote. In it the tragic archetype of failure and hubris rides off into the distance in a transformed world—two suns set in a landscape reminiscent of a science fiction movie. This mirroring is repeated in the works *Io* (2012) and *Mercury* (2012), which reference both mythology and astronomy.⁴ Allegorically, the doubling of natural elements signifies the unknown and mysterious aspects of the universe.

Atomino (2012), which has a scientific particle at its root, is also a reference to Pessoli's personal life: his son, Atomo (nickname Atomino), was born soon after he completed the drawing. The overall influence of astronomy, reflected in works named after planets and constellations, stems from a book on the subject given to his young daughter, Teti, by a family friend. The artist's relationships with his children are also reflected in another new symbol: the goose.⁶ The migratory bird resonates with Pessoli's interest in transient characters and absurd combinations, while also suggesting the fables and fairy tales that accompany childhood. *Petunia* (2012), based on an illustrated children's book,⁶ depicts the story's overly self-confident goose with its head down. Pessoli captures this character in the moment it has lost face, after the farm animals have discovered it is actually not as wise as it had tried to appear.

Geese also carry over into Pessoli's sculptures. In *The last Cesar* (2012), an elegantly shaped bird with a human face leads a funerary procession for the Roman emperor. A brightly painted portrait, resembling modernist sculptures by Henry Moore, accompanies them. In a playful, surrealist turn, Pessoli has attached various types of fruit to the portrait's head and nose.⁷ The final figure in this ensemble is Caesar. Imagined as an Etruscan funerary urn, the regal portrait is crowned with grapes and sprouts feathers. Influenced by the colors of childhood toys,⁸ this bright, embellished burial ritual comically marches along a steel base.

Pessoli usually presents sculpture on custom-made wooden tables, but since moving to Los Angeles he has experimented with formulating intricate metal



bases. This is best seen in *Fighter and Sandrino 63* (2012). The work's title is inscribed on an expressive cylindrical shape placed beside a harlequin-like form. The face of this larger figure is a self-portrait: Sandrino is Pessoli's nickname, while the number refers to his birth year. On an adjoined platform, a fighter sits with coins balanced on his head, shoulder, and hand, appearing more like a defeated opponent than a champion. A bronze armature unites these sculptures; its unfinished sections create rainbow patterns that resonate with the ceramics' palette, particularly the fighter's atmospheric background.

Pessoli fuses classically based tradition with a contemporary impulse, formulating a hallucinatory world in which the past is continually reinterpreted and corrupted. Familiar and historical imagery is resuscitated and intermingled with personal associations, while specific artists and art historical references appear throughout. These artistic precedents are important for Pessoli, but he may be just as important to them: by reconsidering and re-analyzing their significance, he preserves their legacy and relevance. No longer living in a country that takes its identity from its vast history, Pessoli is situated in a city whose past is at times a reflection of its Hollywood persona. His new work reflects a palpable, inherent sense of freedom, defined by a strengthened personal vocabulary and continued sense of invention.

Jenny Gheith
Assistant Curator, Painting and Sculpture

Notes

- In addition to making paintings, drawings, and sculptures, Pessoli has also created the hand-drawn animated films *Caligola* (1999–2002) and *Baracca's Time* (2005).
- Pessoli made majolica sculptures at the Bottega d'arte ceramica Gatti, in Faenza, from 2003 to 2008.
- Alessandro Pessoli, conversation with the author, June 11, 2012.
- This artist's unofficial subtitle for this exhibition is *Orbiting Planets*. Titles of additional works in this series, not included in this exhibition, similarly reference astronomy. They include *Asteroid*, *Comet*, and *Charon*, all from 2012.
- In this exhibition a goose appears in the drawing *Petunia*; goose and duck figures appear in *Europa* (2012) and *Charon*, two other drawings in the same series.
- The children's book *Petunia*, by Roger Duvoisin, was originally published in 1950.
- Fruit also appears in Pessoli's drawings *Io* and *The son of P* (2012).
- Pessoli, conversation with the author, June 11, 2012.

Alessandro Pessoli was born in 1963 in Cervia, Italy, studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, and currently resides in Los Angeles. Pessoli has had solo exhibitions at Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, Italy; MACRO Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma; Chisenhale Gallery, London; The Drawing Center, New York; greengrassi, London; Anton Kern Gallery, New York; Marc Foxx, Los Angeles; Xavier Hufkens, Brussels; and Studio Guenzani, Milan, among others. His work has been featured in numerous group shows, including *Making Worlds*, at the 53rd Biennale di Venezia; *Italics: Italian Art between Tradition and Revolution 1968–2008*, at Palazzo Grassi, Venice, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; *Jean-Luc Blanc: Opéra Rock*, CAPC (Centre of Contemporary Visual Art), Bordeaux, France; *RAW, Among the Ruins*, Marres, Centre for Contemporary Culture, Maastricht, the Netherlands; *After Cézanne*, MOCA The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and *International Paper*, at the Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles.

Works in the Exhibition

<i>Did you fell? I'm good, I'm so good</i> , 2010 Twenty drawings Graphite and spray paint on paper Each 13 x 11 in. (34.9 x 27.9 cm) Courtesy the artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels	<i>Jupiter</i> Spray paint, oil pastel, and oil paint on paper 24 x 19 in. (61 x 48.3 cm)
<i>The sunset</i> , 2010 Twenty drawings Graphite and spray paint on paper Each 13 x 11 in. (34.9 x 27.9 cm) Courtesy greengrassi, London	<i>Klippenberger</i> Painted majolica and bronze 64 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 22 in. (163.8 x 49.5 x 55.9 cm)
<i>Unlife together (my country)</i> , 2010 Painted majolica and iron 48 1/4 x 43 1/4 x 16 1/2 in. (122.6 x 109.9 x 41.9 cm) Courtesy the artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels	<i>The last Cesar</i> Painted majolica and steel 41 1/2 x 91 x 18 in. (105.4 x 231.1 x 45.7 cm)
<i>Atomino</i> Spray paint, oil pastel, and oil paint on paper 24 x 19 in. (61 x 48.3 cm)	<i>Little rider</i> Painted majolica and bronze 7 x 10 x 6 1/2 in. (17.8 x 25.4 x 16.5 cm)
<i>Crodino e Aperol</i> Spray paint, oil pastel, and oil paint on paper 24 x 19 in. (61 x 48.3 cm)	<i>Mercury</i> Spray paint, oil pastel, and oil paint on paper 24 x 19 in. (61 x 48.3 cm)
<i>Fighter and Sandrino 63</i> Painted majolica and bronze 50 1/2 x 27 x 22 in. (129.3 x 68.6 x 55.9 cm)	<i>Petunia</i> Spray paint, oil pastel, and oil paint on paper 24 x 19 in. (61 x 48.3 cm) Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York
<i>Io</i> Spray paint, oil pastel, and oil paint on paper 24 x 19 in. (61 x 48.3 cm)	<i>The son of P</i> Spray paint, oil pastel, and oil paint on paper 24 x 19 in. (61 x 48.3 cm)
	<i>Testa k</i> Painted majolica and bronze 53 1/2 x 14 x 13 in. (135.9 x 35.6 x 33 cm)

The artist would like to thank Tony Marsh and California State University, Long Beach, for assistance with the production of the new ceramics.

Unless otherwise indicated above, all works are 2012 and courtesy greengrassi, London, and Anton Kern Gallery, New York. All images courtesy greengrassi, London, and Anton Kern Gallery, New York, except *Did you fell? I'm good, I'm so good*, courtesy the artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels. All images © Alessandro Pessoli

Reverse, from left: *Fighter and Sandrino 63*, 2012; *The son of P*, 2012; from the series *The sunset*, 2010; *Jupiter*, 2012

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new work

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