

Nicole Eisenman's Path to Genius

In the early 2000s, the painter rediscovered a strain of modernism that doesn't aspire to purity or certainty, but rather is willing to remain, as de Kooning once put it, "wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity."

By Barry Schwabsky

One day in the early 1990s, I ran into my friend Faye Hirsch—an astute critic—who breathlessly informed me that she'd just come from a studio visit with a genius! I'd never heard anyone, and certainly not Faye, say such a thing in my life. "Well, if Faye says so, I'm willing to entertain the idea," I thought. But while I could eventually see what she'd meant—prodigious energy, check; implacable ambition, check; dazzling technical facility, check—it was hard for me to be quite as enthusiastic about the work of Nicole Eisenman as Faye was. Her style seemed so retro: There was something very 1930s about many of Eisenman's paintings, something reminiscent of Paul Cadmus, Reginald Marsh, and Isabel Bishop in the "epic, obscene panoramas" (as Terry Castle has called them) that she was painting in those days—canvases and murals "in which po-faced naked giantesses squat, squat, and break wind, form cunnilingual daisy-chains, rain urine down on the world from baroque cloud-perches, and harpoon luckless males in order to emasculate them with pirate efficiency."

Eisenman's slightly dowdy and all-too-illustrational approach to figuration did lend a definite charm and humor, even a kind of sweetness, to her renderings of sometimes violent fantasies that might otherwise have been hard to take. She was using a gambit I'd seen some artists employ in the previous decade, giving a knowing twist to an unfashionable historical style in order to make something that felt new. In these early works of Eisenman's, a strange reversal was taking place: It was the seemingly "innocent" and nostalgic style that lent sophistication to the ostensibly cutting-edge yet unmistakably and defiantly crude subject matter. And yet, and yet... I was (and remain) too wedded to the aesthetics of modernism—you might even say of formalism—to be entirely convinced by an art fixated on a bygone style that was itself already so indebted to premodernist modes of representation. Two steps forward, but only one step back; two may be one too many for me.

Although Eisenman and I have crossed paths socially now and

again, this wasn't a conversation we'd ever had. But now I wonder, in retrospect, whether she didn't eventually come around to seeing things in a similar way. She recently had two shows in New York City—a presentation of recent work at the Anton Kern Gallery and a bigger (though still not big enough) survey, "Al-ugh-ories," at the New Museum. It was telling that the museum show, curated by Helga Christoffersen and Massimiliano Gioni, included only one work from the 1990s, though a painting from 2000, *Dysfunctional Family*,

harks back to Eisenman's earlier style, albeit in a slightly more sedate manner. The little brownish "conversation piece"—as informal group portraits used to be known—could have been a *Saturday Evening Post* illustration, if the weekly champion of midcentury middle-American mores were apt to promote households in which Mom does the knitting with her skirt hiked up to reveal an undie-free crotch while Dad sucks on a giant bong and Junior, his face conveying disinterested curiosity, smashes his baby penis to bloody bits with a hammer.

But the bulk of the show—paintings dating from 2004

through 2014 and a couple of new sculptures—represents a distinct shift. Not that Eisenman has abandoned her historicism; far from it. If anything, her range of references is wider and deeper than before. But now she's almost always working out her raucously polyvalent approach to contemporary figuration by way of the various modernists who revised the pictorial tradition—Ensor and Munch, Picasso and Matisse, Guston and Baselitz—rather than trying to make an end run around them through a peripheral tributary. The same was true of a much larger traveling show organized by the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, and which I saw at the ICA in Philadelphia in 2014. Its emphasis was on the last decade; although Eisenman's work of the '90s was represented by many of the drawings and watercolors there, only one canvas was dated earlier than 2005.

There are many ways to understand the change that occurred in Eisenman's work in the early 2000s. In an interview with Eisenman



the second of these statements, Eisenman responds vociferously: “No. God, no. I’m not the voice of any group of people! That’s a horrifying thought. I’d never want to define a community or begin to know what the borders of that community even look like. I couldn’t draw a line around a group of people and claim to have a voice for anyone other than myself.” Eisenman isn’t disclaiming a group identity from the standpoint of an individualist; she doesn’t see herself as separate from a community but rather wants to avoid defining its boundaries, and refuses to embrace the notion that she can speak for others in it or rule anyone else in or out definitively.

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The will to dissolve or relax boundaries is part of what makes Eisenman’s work feel so of the moment right now. It’s the same acceptance of ambiguity that allows the artist, when asked why her single-figure paintings have been mostly of men, to remark: “Representing bodies is complex. What looks masculine in a painting could be a self-determined gender mutineer, or trans, or something completely off the spectrum. It seems that I present as masculine in the world, and I think I use my body as a baseline jumping-off point for representation, which I think goes a long way toward explaining the preponderance of masculine-looking bodies in this show.” What’s true of the painted figure also goes for the act of painting itself. When pressed with the observation that the painters who caught her eye in the 1980s—the likes of Julian Schnabel and the German Neo-Expressionists—were “very macho and conservative,” Eisenman explains: “To me, it’s radical, and it felt radical when I saw it for the first time.... My feeling about painting and gender is that whatever any dude feels entitled to, I feel like: ‘Fuck, I’m entitled to that too.’”

The title of the New Museum show, though, points to the ambivalence of Eisenman’s relation to the age-old traditions. At least some of her paintings are genuine allegories, with appropriately moralizing titles like *The Work of Labor and Care* (2004); *Progress: Real and Imagined* (2006), a diptych oddly represented in this show by just one of its panels; and *The Triumph of Poverty* (2009). At the same time, they are also send-ups of allegory, maybe even expressions of disgust with it. The didactic function of painting can only be sustained, Eisenman implies, if it is pursued with self-critical humor, if it tacitly acknowledges that it does not speak from a position of vested authority—allegorizing on behalf of church or state or any social consensus on values—but instead on the basis of its own cogency. Also essential is a degree of acuity that necessarily demands wit, irony, incongruity, and the overturning of hierarchies such as those between crude physicality and subtle intelligence. Eisenman’s complex, contradictory multifigure “machines,” as well as smaller, more understated ventures into tongue-in-cheek allegory like *Commerce Feeds Creativity*—it’s a sadomasochistic kind of feeding—and *From Success to Obscurity* (both 2004), are wry but rueful challenges to uplift: Our efforts are liable to go so wrong. This art doesn’t offer utopia or even a promissory note on happiness, but simply the hope that we can persist in the face of defeat.

In a surprising way, Eisenman recognizes that today, allegory can only ever be “al-ugh-ory,” and that the artist can only be—as another of her paintings, *Were-artist* (2007), would have it—impure, contaminated by irrational animal impulses. Behind this attitude lies her shift, in the early 2000s, to a manner of painting that more deeply acknowledges modernism. She rediscovered a strain of modernism that doesn’t aspire to purity or certainty—the art of Mondrian or Reinhardt, let’s say—but rather is willing to remain, as de Kooning once put it, “wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity.” If there’s anything these two modernisms share, it’s a flattening of pictorial space. But these are two distinct interpretations: on the one hand, a drive toward simplicity

and unity; on the other, a willingness to keep multiplicity and conflict close to the surface, to let it press in on the viewer, rather than putting it at a safe distance in deep space. Eisenman is a fantastical painter of everyday life who depicts what only she can imagine as though it were a self-evident reality. Less important than making space for a multitude of figures is finding a multitude of ways for paint to appear and render sensations. In her teeming canvases, the whole world seems to crowd in on us.

But not always. In some of Eisenman’s more recent work, there is a kind of respite on offer. It’s evident in her paintings of couples. In the gorgeous *Night Studio* (2009), two women loll abed, their legs intertwined. One of them, wearing a white cap, has white slits for eyes—she looks completely out of it. But her companion, sporting a black derby, gazes at her appreciatively. Their bedding, a patchwork of grids, floats amid a night glittering with stars. Surrounding their bed are bottles of beer and water, a pack of Camels, and piles of books with titles like *Emil Nolde Portraits*, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective*, *Japonisme*, and *Hans Bellmer*. Such respite, however sweet, may only be momentary, but at least it can recur. Or can it? The show at Kern included a sort of pendant to this painting. The two women in *Morning Studio* (2016) exhibit coupledness in something more like the clear light of day: One woman seems completely engrossed in her lover, but the other looks out toward the viewer, restless, her mind clearly on something somewhere else. The starry sky has been reduced to a computer desktop image projected on a screen.

Come to think of it, maybe Eisenman’s flatness is as much of the computer screen as of the picture plane; another of her couple portraits is *Long Distance* (2015), a kind of visual diagram of a seductive Skype session. But it can get threatening. Writing this not long after the massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, I can’t stop thinking about two of the other recent paintings at Kern, *Shooter 1* and *Shooter 2* (both from 2016): They are the closest Eisenman has ever come to geometrical abstraction, or rather to the kind of high-impact graphic design that emerged in its wake. In these close-ups of a pistol pointed at the viewer, the muzzle becomes a stand-in for one of the shooter’s eyes. It’s the nightmare of a world where seeing and shooting have become almost synonymous. The paintings are as aggressive and confrontational as the nightmare world—our own—that they evoke. To be able not just to show that, but to make us feel it as well, does take a kind of genius, but one that Eisenman has needed some time to attain.