

Paint Queer, Gender Fluid, Meaning Ambiguous: Nicole Eisenman at Anton Kern

by Dennis Kardon | June 22, 2016

The sudden embrace of Nicole Eisenman as culture hero should come as no surprise. She's a prolific painter whose unleashed imagination and hungry heart have produced memorable and disturbing works of art. She also happens to hit the diversity buttons of underappreciated woman, queer, and gender fluidity that animate current cultural discourse. And of course the trifecta of MacArthur Fellowship grant, survey exhibition at the New Museum, and concurrent first solo show at Anton Kern gallery, has obviously made her the focus of attention. But what makes Eisenman important, rather than merely au courant, is her approach to ambiguity.

Something significant has happened to Eisenman's paintings since the work shown in "Al-ugh-gories" at the New Museum. Much of "Al-ugh-gories," though compelling, is fairly easily parsed, and critical interpretations seem remarkably consistent.

At Anton Kern, the truly subversive nature of Eisenman's vision flowers when she focuses on "normal" everyday life. Her new focus recalls a passage from Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*:

It reminds us that any bodily experience can be made new and strange; that nothing we do in this life need have a lid crammed on it; that no one set of practices or relations has a monopoly on the so-called radical or the so called normative.

The more one gazes into the mechanisms of these paintings, the more it is apparent that ambiguity has become the medium with which she now paints. In so many different ways, ambiguity animates every new Eisenman painting. If it isn't the uncertain gender of her figures, it's a subway train's direction of travel in a station, the era in which a party occurs, whether a shooter is gangster or cop, or the nature of the figure/ground relationship.

The tour de force Grand Guignol here is *Another Green World* (2015), which is also the title of the Brian Eno album the central character is examining. A huge 128-by-106-inch party scene that is inhabited by 28 figures (by my count, if you don't include Grace Jones on an album cover) of indeterminate gender and sexuality who are making out, doing drugs, listening to music, eating, drinking, dancing, conversing, smoking, moon-gazing, or passed out under the coats on the bed. Oh yeah, and despite the '70s disco ball, vintage turntable with vinyl LPs, and lines of coke, there is a figure raptly gazing at a cell phone, which throws the whole era of the party into question. The binaries of male/female and gay/straight and past/present quickly break down, as we try to assign gender to all but a few obviously female figures. It is interesting how reflexively we desire to do this in order to navigate our social world. But here it doesn't matter; it's a party, everyone's welcome.

In *Another Green World* Eisenman also successfully confronts the figure/ground problem that has increasingly



Nicole Eisenman, *Another Green World*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 128 x 106 inches. Courtesy of Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

challenged her as a painter. Eisenman has great skill as a draughtsman, but her talent lies in expressively depicting people. Against the blank paper, there is no problem, but in her paintings she has to invent the environment in which they occur. The details of background have evidently always been less compelling to her, and might have seemed like tiresome labor. With scaled up canvases, the figure/ground dilemma has become more urgent: how to animate every inch of the canvas while preserving the hierarchies of attention needed to construct emotional legibility. It has been interesting to watch Eisenman tackle this as an idea she seems to have realized that she needed to address.

Part of her solution has been to increase the number of figures so that sometimes much of the background is now other figures. But more interestingly is the way she now considers paintings as a jigsaw puzzle of shapes. And whether they are the positive shapes of feet, hands, faces, clothing, and objects, or instances of negative space revealing surfaces of carpet, furniture, table, or landscape, Eisenman treats each shape as an arena of painterly invention of differing facture, not letting big expanses of emptiness dominate. What keeps it together is her masterful drawing, creating space through exaggerated changes in scale, juxtaposing oblique surfaces coexisting in impossible perspective, and establishing different points of focus using her sharp tonal color sense.

Despite the cacophony of *Another Green World*, Eisenman gets the whole drama to revolve around the brightly lit woman at the center raptly studying the eponymous album, and rubbing her nose in reaction to the bump of coke she has probably just snorted. Our attention rotates to the lower left to the kissing couple, a topless woman sprawled upside down on the couch in the embrace of an impossibly blue figure of indeterminate gender, though perhaps the stubble on her legs indicates female—but that’s how closely you have to look.

There are many compelling paintings in this show, which also invite rigorous analysis particularly *Weeks on the Train* (2015). Despite focusing on a central young person slouched in a window seat working a laptop, whose cat in carrier occupies the aisle seat, Eisenman pulls off the neat trick of rotating the windows 90° to fit parallel with the side of the vertical canvas. This pushes the viewer’s perspective high above the painting. From this point of view, our focus is pulled to the cartoonish Guston-like head ensconced by big red headphones, with a single, large bulging eye in the bottom foreground staring out the window. At the level of this eye, the view out of the window becomes thick with impastoed booger-like flowers.

Though more emotionally subtle, another focal point of this show is the tenderly haunting *Morning Studio* (2016). Here Eisenman eschews the butch/femme brazenness of her two pre- or post-coital chapeau’d women in *Night Studio* (2009) at the New Museum and replaced them with two embracing figures whose erotics are more maternally consoling than flatly conversational. In *Morning Studio*, the faces are painted with different levels of specificity but it is the boyish person with ochre skin who fixes the viewer with a wary stare, and who is comforted by a more generically represented topless woman who is also simultaneously reaching a hand beneath her jeans. Eisenman then explodes this intensely personal moment with references to the world out a window and the universe via a large spiraling galaxy computer screen, which watches impassively over the scene. This is where we see Eisenman striving for an emotional complexity that she achieves specifically in her recent paintings.

The measured construction of her paintings provides a pointed contrast with the still wonderful drawings in the second, back room of the show. They demonstrate how Eisenman’s work has previously been driven by her drawings, which are fairly direct depictions of any idea that crosses her mind, no matter how silly, heretical, or gross. Her drawings are pure id, she doesn’t seem to judge or censor, and they have a spontaneity and freshness that has always been thrilling and noteworthy.

But this show seems to indicate that Eisenman’s present ambition, her desire for significance, now lies in her paintings. Earlier paintings seemed often like large elaborations of various ideas originating in drawings and fleshed out with details in paint. Now the paintings seem to develop on their own terms, with the ambiguities and complexities that the act of painting promulgates seizing control over the content. Drawings are direct and fast and in the present, while paintings are slower, much more calculated, and connected to a history that is mostly white and male. In her new paintings, we see Eisenman sublimating the immediacy of her drawing talent and examining historically established protocols that she either honors, flouts, or fucks with. It is now in these mature paintings, that Nicole Eisenman is finally confronting her artistic superego.



Installation view, “Nicole Eisenman” 2016, at Anton Kern Gallery. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.



Installation view, “Nicole Eisenman” 2016, at Anton Kern Gallery. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.



Nicole Eisenman, *Weeks on the Train*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 82 x 65 inches. Courtesy of Anton Kern Gallery, New York.