

HYPERALLERGIC

A Truly Great Artist

by John Yau on June 5, 2016

At once compassionate and angry, empathetic and satirical, tender and tough, Nicole Eisenman is a storyteller, portraitist, social chronicler, allegorist, fantasist, utopian dreamer and history painter, to name just a handful of her many artistic identities. Few of her contemporaries embrace these genre possibilities with as much conviction as she does. Even fewer handle paint as well as she does. Look at the way she depicts a face in a classical manner or purposefully places globs of dried paint on the canvas, and you are likely to conclude that she can do anything she wants with paint and pretty much does. All that and much else come across in the two exhibitions currently on view: *Nicole Eisenman: Al-ugh-gories* at the New Museum (May 4 – June 26, 2016) and *Nicole Eisenman* at Anton Kern (May 19 – June 25, 2016). Together, they form a wonderful anthology of what Eisenman has been up to in this century, with an emphasis on the last ten years.

What these two exhibitions demonstrate is that Nicole Eisenman has put it all together. She has merged painting, subject matter and an incredibly wild imagination to an unrivaled degree. She has become a force of nature to be reckoned with. What makes Eisenman's achievement all the more delicious is that she makes no bones about her love for, as well as belief in, paint and art history, from the classical renderings of the Italian Renaissance to the Fauvist paintings of Henri Matisse and Andre Derain, to the Expressionist and New Realist depictions of the Weimar Republic, to outliers such as James Ensor, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Edvard Munch, Gabriele Münter, Suzanne Valadon, and the little-known, lesbian expatriate portraitist, Romaine Brooks, who often painted women in suits and top hats. Marianne von Werefkin's painting "Beer Garden" (1907), which is largely populated by women, may have been an inspiration. While many writers are content to point out that she got motifs from Philip Guston – most notably the misshapen, kidney bean head with one oversized eye – not enough attention has been paid to the women she has learned from. In this alone, Eisenman offers us a lesson. Her conversation with art history is guided by curiosity and passion rather than by convention.

Uninterested in lowering or raising the bar, in finding a mechanical alternative to the paint brush or in making a signature commodity (remember that guy who got famous by painting badly on broken dishes?) – all conventional macho choices – Eisenman is fascinated by the challenge of making paintings and drawings about whatever crosses



Nicole Eisenman, "Long Distance" (2015), oil on canvas, 65 x 82 inches (courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York; © Nicole Eisenman)



Nicole Eisenman, "Another Green World" (2015), oil on canvas, 128 x 106 inches (courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York; © Nicole Eisenman)

her mind, tickles her fancy, bugs her, challenges her, worries her, depresses her, brings her joy, or tests her capacity for downright silliness, always – it should be noted – with an edge. She isn't afraid of embracing her contradictory impulses and thoughts. More importantly, she doesn't hide her feelings. When she touches on disturbing subjects and threatening fantasies, she can be darkly humorous.

In the largely sepia portrait of 1950s domesticity, "Dysfunctional Family" (2000), which is one of the earliest paintings included in *Al-ugh-gories*, Eisenman depicts a suited man seated in a wooden chair. He is holding a battery in one hand and, for some inexplicable reason, blowing into a phallic flashlight (or is he taking a hit off a bong). Next to him, the woman on the sofa chair is knitting, her awkwardly splayed legs revealing that she isn't wearing any underwear. As if this wasn't enough to make a Freudian psychiatrist yelp, perhaps with perverse delight, on the floor beside them, their naked toddler son, who has pulverized his penis with a meat tenderizer, is busy poking his finger into the blood gathered round him, curious about the red substance. The nearly monochromatic painting is 21 x 17 inches so viewers have to get up close to the surface to see what is going on. The deliberately generic drawing of the figures within a limited palette tones everything down, makes the scene seem emotionally distant – like something we might see momentarily in a dream – until we realize what's going on. Need I say more?

Confined to one floor, *Al-ugh-gories* is a concise survey of twenty-two paintings and three sculptures, all but one of which was done in this century, including her celebrated paintings, "Biergarten at Night" (2007) and "The Triumph of Poverty" (2009). Starting in this century, everything in Eisenman's work changed, as she began moving away from types and caricatures, and started portraying individuals, including ones whose beliefs she finds abhorrent.

Look at the individualized faces and poses of the motley men in "Tea Party" (2011), as compared to the generic types in "Dysfunctional Family," and you get a sense of the seismic change that has taken place in Eisenman's work during the first decade of this century. In "Tea Party," as in other recent paintings, Eisenman's attention to detail adds another layer of meaning and feeling into the work. Once you take your eyes off the three disgruntled men and a woman asleep cradling a rifle, all gathered around the makeshift table, most likely in someone's cellar, with one man working on a dynamite bomb, you notice the patriotic emblems on their coffee cups, and, on the grid of metal shelves behind them, stacks of blue Bumble Bee tuna fish cans, gold bars, a blue water cooler bottle, and a large box of rifle cartridges with their specifications lovingly rendered. In making these changes, Eisenman moved away from an "us – them" world-view, which was true of much of her work in the nineties, to one that is infinitely more personal and



Nicole Eisenman, "Dysfunctional Family" (2000), oil on canvas 21 x 17 inches, collection Richard Gerrig and Timothy Peterson



Nicole Eisenman, "Tea Party" (2011), oil on canvas, 82 x 65 inches, Hort Family Collection

nuanced. In the process, her humor and emotional depth gained many more notes.

Eisenman is interested in the individual, what he or she does when alone, with someone else, in a domestic situation, or at social gathering. The situation may be private or public, real or imagined, or both. Reality and dream have slipped into each other. She is as deeply attuned to the epochal change of our times – from radical individualism, alternative communities, the growing

imbalance of power and money, extremist views, and queer politics to the rise of the Internet and social media – as Édouard Manet was to his. Both are quintessential painters of modern life and all the ways the new or previously hidden has become manifest.

In “Coping” (2008), a group of citizens – including one wrapped like a mummy in white strips edged in red – determinedly make their way through the caramel-colored sludge that fills the streets of their weird Bavarian town. Smearred slabs of brown paint hover above them. The painting is allegorical, but the artist doesn’t provide a key, leaving viewers to determine the cause of the calamity. On a formal level, Eisenman’s placement of figures within a receding space is masterful, while her attention to detail further animates the scene. I cannot think of anyone else who does this with the ease that she does. Stuck in the muck like everybody else, the brown cat with a green parrot on its head, in the middle of the painting’s foreground, is one of the many quirky things the viewer is apt to be delighted by in an Eisenman painting.

In “Night Studio” (2009), Eisenman depicts two women in bed. One woman, whose skin is yellow, is lying on her back, wearing a white sailor’s cap, while the other, who is pink and turned towards her lover, is wearing a bowler. They are lying on a bedspread made of a myriad network of lines – little grids fitted together – that artist has patiently scratched in the pale green paint, infusing the intimate scene with a tactility that hints at weaving and passionate violence. Equal attention is paid to the two piles of books, bottle of beer and vitamin water, and pack of Camels. In these things one sees all the contradictions of everyday life surrounding them, and the choices they have made. In this and other paintings – “Is It So” (2014), which depicts lesbian cunnilingus – Eisenman introduces subject matter that has hardly ever been seen in paintings hanging in a museum or gallery. By cheerfully undermining unspoken taboos, she reveals much about the repressions governing art. Like Guston, who broke conventions, Eisenman, who quotes one of his motifs, breaks others.

Didn’t Manet also break conventions when he exhibited “Olympia” (1863) for the first time in Paris in 1865? Eisenman recognizes how rapidly the world around her is changing. Instead of being nostalgic, she registers the new. Cell phones, laptops and surveillance cameras are some of the modern contraptions we see in her paintings. One result of these inventions is the rise of different forms of social behavior, from the selfie to skyping, both subjects Eisenman has tackled in paintings included in her exhibition at Anton Kern, where the 32 drawings hung salon style in the back room are not to be missed.

Another subject is signaled by the title of two large related paintings, “Shooter 1” and “Shooter 2” (both 2016), in which a cropped, abstracted face points a gun straight at you. Across from each other, the gun’s round black muzzle



Nicole Eisenman, “Coping” (2008), oil on canvas, 65 x 82 inches (courtesy the artist, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, and Galerie Barbara Weiss; Photo © Carnegie Museum of Art)



Nicole Eisenman, “Shooter 2” (2016), oil on canvas, 82 x 65 inches (courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York; © Nicole Eisenman)

and the face’s coldly impersonal eye (or camera lens) are chilling. These paintings remind us that unexpected invasions and threats are basic staples of life. We can’t assume that everything is going to be all right. The best we can do is to manage our worries so that we are not at their beck and call.

In the angled, bird’s eye view of “Weeks on the Train” (2015), a figure in a jacket, pink sweater and dungarees sits on a train, looking at an open Apple laptop. The figure’s gender is not immediately apparent, another indication of Eisenman’s eye for the choices that people are making today. A cat in a carrier is on the next seat. In the foreground, spanning the bottom of the composition, a truncated pink head with one large eye, wearing red earphones, gazes out the train window, at the green

meadows rushing by. Next to this person, whose gender is also unclear, Eisenman depicts the large grey head of a man who has fallen asleep. His mouth is wide open and a trail of spittle runs out of the right corner. From imprisoned in a carrier, to looking at a laptop, to listening to headphones, to sleeping – everybody exists in a completely separate world. By painting each individual in a different style and color, Eisenman underscores her belief that we are more different than alike, and that terms such as male and female, straight and gay, don't reveal much about the individual to whom they are applied.

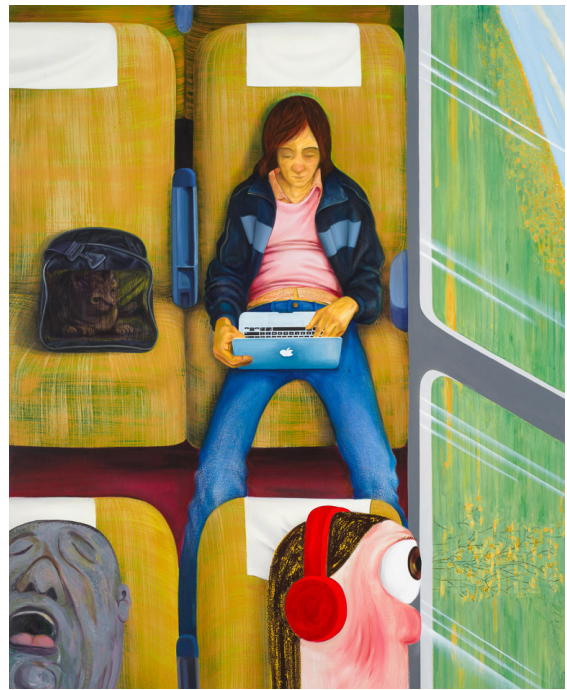
For Eisenman, color and style are political. Her use of different styles – from expressionist to classical – and different colors (blue, green, gray, yellow and pink, to name just a few) to distinguish her individuals suggests that stylistic unity is an illusion, that the world never conformed to such repressive strictures. Among other things, she recognizes that all of us, in our many differences (sexual, racial, and lifestyle) don't fit in, and that the ideal of fitting in is not actually community building. When she paints a figure blue, green or gray, she is inviting us to see beyond racial identity.

Eisenman has depicted extremists who believe they are forming colonies of the saved, social gatherings of disparate individuals that seem to have little in common, and intimate moments between two people, usually painted in different styles and colors – individuals of all kinds, including the emotionally disfigured and the hapless schlub. An inveterate doodler, she seems predisposed to draw on any scrap of paper made available to her. What comes across is the urgency to make art. A deep current of sympathy runs throughout her work, even when she is painting a perfectly creepy individual.

I think it is fair to say that Eisenman has moved painting back into the heated dialogue about the many changes going on all around us, that all of those narratives about painting's death, irrelevance and marginal position have been rendered meaningless. In all of her work, viewers sense that Eisenman recognizes how deeply isolated and lonely they are likely to feel, as well as the brief comfort brought by intimacy, however tenuous it might be. She possesses the qualities we associate with greatness and generosity. It is a truly rare combination. We should all be thankful for what Eisenman has opened our eyes to.

Nicole Eisenman: Al-ugh-gories continues at the New Museum (235 Bowery, Bowery, Manhattan) through June 26.

Nicole Eisenman: Magnificent Delusion continues at Anton Kern (532 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 25.



Nicole Eisenman, "Dysfunctional Family" (2000), oil on canvas 21 x 17 inches, collection Richard Gerrig and Timothy Peterson