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ART & DESIGN

A Career of Toasting Rebellions

A Nicole Eisenman Midcareer Survey in Philadelphia

By HOLLAND COTTER September 25, 2014

PHILADELPHIA — Queer is here to stay. So are feminism, art history, unruly flesh, anarchic laughter and painting. You’ll find them all in “Dear Nemesis, Nicole Eisenman 1993-2013,” at the Institute of Contemporary Art here, a spicy and tightly edited midcareer survey of one of the most interesting New York artists to come out of the 1990s.

“Brooklyn Biergarten II” (2008) is one of the paintings in the “Dear Nemesis, Nicole Eisenman” exhibition in Philadelphia, which is a midcareer survey with more than 120 eclectic works by a painter who has challenged racial and gender division. Byron Smith for The New York Times

The first part of that decade, with multiculturalism peaking and postmodern thinking still warm, was American art’s last sustained countercultural moment. All kinds of productive hell was breaking out. The 1987 financial crash had blown down the protective walls surrounding the market. Gatekeepers staggered around in confusion. A long-excluded population — women, nonwhite artists and those of heterodox gender persuasions — capered onto the scene.

Ms. Eisenman was part of the arrival. Born in 1965 in France, she graduated in 1987 from the Rhode Island School of Design and was soon living in New York and painting big, funny, irascible pictures of women in revolt. People noticed. In 1992, she was in a slew of smart group shows and with another artist, Chris Martin, she organized one of her own, “The Lesbian Museum: 10,000 Years of Penis Envy,” at Franklin Furnace. Solos quickly followed, as did a spot in the 1995 Whitney Biennial.

Success can lead to strutting, but not in her case. She was sort of a studio wonk. As a kid, she had scanned art history books the way people surf the Internet today. Ancient Greek sculpture, Renaissance painting, Bosch, Goya, Ashcan: They all flashed by, they all seeped in. For her initial New York shows, including her Biennial appearance, she turned galleries into studios, pinning up just-done pictures and painting murals on the walls.

Visitors take a look at “Winter Solstice 2012 Dinner Party” (2009). Ms. Eisenman’s arrival in the art world followed the 1987 financial crash, which blew down the protective walls surrounding the market and allowed a long-excluded population — women, artists of color and those of heterodox gender persuasions — to caper onto the scene. Byron Smith for The New York Times

You can get some sense of the look of that work from a 1999 painting called “Man Cloud,” in which a tangle of writhing male nudes floats grandly on high, completely ignored by female couples dozing, body to body, on the grass below: Sistine Chapel meets Thomas Hart Benton meets Classic Comics.

Earlier in the decade, the mix was similar, but the politics harsher. In the 1993 “Monorail Over No Man’s Land,” one of over 120 works here, Ms. Eisenman gives the conventional Renaissance battle scene a new spin: Packs of women take men captive, truss them up and treat them rough. In “Minotaur Hunt (Large),” from the same year, Picasso’s bull-headed alter ego gets his comeuppance at the hands of a horse-riding Amazon band. Some viewers took such images as militant, anti-male anthems. But, while certainly asserting female power, they’re really cartoon sendups of that idea.

Clear to everyone was the artist's gifts as a painter, her abilities so secure as to let her stretch, mold and push the medium to its limits, which is what she's been doing for some 25 years. The retrospective is not, however, framed chronologically, as a record of a progressively developing style. Progress, like programmatic politics and brand production, doesn't seem to interest Ms. Eisenman much. Style is something she goes back and forth with, trying this, returning to that, renegotiating particulars every time out.

From left, the works "Sloppy Bar Room Kiss," "Guy Reading the Stranger" and "Guy Artist," all from 2011. Born in 1965 in France, Ms. Eisenman graduated in 1987 from the Rhode Island School of Design and was soon living in New york and painting big, funny, irascible pictures of women in revolt. Byron Smith for The New York

This sort of improvisatory rhythm isn't the most practical career strategy. Flexibility can be taken for inconsistency. Variety gets the market all confused. But it's her way, and because the sensibility is consistent throughout, she makes it a good, fruitful way.

This is not to say that there have been no distinctive shifts in her output. Around 2000, she seems to have had maxed out on the "classical" nude crowd scenes and political jokes. A large, bust-length portrait from that year, of a green-skinned woman of Botticellian perfection and Picabian spookiness, is unlike anything that preceded it. It was followed by a series of experimental depictions — in paintings, prints and plaster sculptures — of the human face that is collectively, above all, a daring and virtuosic formal exercise.

In a 2006 painting, "Mountain Man," the face is slathered on, the nose a thick dollop of squeezed-from-the-tube red pigment. The features look oddly edible, as if they were meat and candy and already being nibbled away at. A 2011 picture called "The Stranger" is different in every way. The face is painted a solid, textureless black, the features defined by patterns of fine drawn or incised white lines. The image is as crisp as a Luba mask or a Japanese woodcut.

As the art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson notes in the catalog, in much of Ms. Eisenman's recent work, race, as judged by skin color, is an inoperative category. So is gender. The two lip-locked, passed-out lovers in "Sloppy Bar Room Kiss" could be male or female. The single regal, full-length figure in "Deep Sea Diver" is both.

The artist has raised and finessed the question of either/or in her self-portraits. In one drawing, she has long, feminine blond hair; in another, she tries on a bunch of male roles: soldier, banker, jockey, werewolf. Will the real Ms. Eisenman please stand up? She is doing so, and has been, right along.

"The Triumph of Povery" (2009) is on view at the exhibition. In the last several years, Ms. Eisenman, known for her deeply, forwardly political work, has been painting new, more personal, even autobiogrpahical group scenes, closer in spirit to the bad-dream world of James Ensor or Edvard Munch. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, Dr. Thomas J, Huerter, Omaha, NE.

In the last several years, she's been painting new, more personal, even autobiographical group scenes, wonderful ones, but closer in spirit to the bad-dream world of James Ensor or Edvard Munch than to classical Greece. In the 2008 "Brooklyn Biergarten II," dozens of figures sit around tables in a lantern-lit pavilion at the edge of a dark wood. This could be a Williamsburg bar with artists, students, suits and longtime residents mingling. But it has a hellish look. Nobody's smiling. Despite beers' being knocked back, the people look frozen and blank, like zombies. Sitting alone and observing the room from a distant table is Death, with a skull face and a black hood.

Even in the 1990s, when AIDS was raging and the conservative tide rising, Ms. Eisenman tended to favor the metaphorical over the immediately topical. Yet her art was always deeply, forwardly political, and still is. In one unforgettable 2009 picture, we see a procession of exhausted, diseased-looking people pushing a broken-down car through a suburb. A woman carries a baby. A child holds out a bowl; the blind-leading-blind men from Bruegel's great painting stumble into view. Ms. Eisenman's picture is titled "The Triumph of Poverty," and it couldn't be more timely.

And her investment in the politics of gender remains strong. In 2005, she and the artist A. L. Steiner founded Ridykeulous, an activist, lesbian, feminist project with a wide-reaching collective membership. One of the group's functions is to organize and preserve an archive documenting not just the history of art by women and queer artists, but also the history of the position of that work within an industry that continues to rest on the hard, high cushion of straight, white, male privilege.

An installation of Ridykeulous material, with a sizzling cache of letters from the likes of Kathy Acker, Lucy R. Lippard, Adrian Piper, Carolee Schneeman and a polygendered passel of younger artists, is in the Institute of Contemporary Art's lobby. It's intended to complement the retrospective — organized by Kelly Shindler for the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, and in Philadelphia by Kate Kraczon — though once you start reading, it's hard to stop and move on.

Still, it's the Eisenman show you're here for, not just for the story it tells of a remarkable career now in its prime, or for the way it captures an alternative piece of the American past that has only begun to be studied. You're here to see the images — gross, tender, hilarious — one by one. A perplexed man holds his shadow in his arms like a baby. Death consults a Ouija board to learn the future. Gender-war scenes turn everyone into barbarians. Two kissing faces turn into one.

Everywhere you look, new ideas whiz around everywhere, almost too fast. The great thing about art is it lets you catch a thought and hold it as long as you want.

"Deep Sea River" (2007). In much of Ms. Eisenman's recent work, race, as judged by skin color, is an inoperative category. So is gender. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, Joachim Splichal, San Marino, CA

"Dear Nemesis, Nicole Eisenman" tells the story of a remarkable career now in its prime, capturing an alternative piece of the American past that has only begun to be studied. The artist uses her gifts as a painter to stretch, mold and push the medium to its limits, which is what she's been doing for some 25 years. Byron Smith for The New York Times

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"Dear Nemesis, Nicole Eisenman 1993-2013" runs through Dec. 28 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 118 South 36th Street, Philadelphia; icaphila.org.

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