

Nicole Eisenman

by Stephen Truax

Nicole Eisenman | ANTON KERN GALLERY | May 19 – June 25, 2016

Al-ugh-ories | NEW MUSEUM | May 4 – June 26, 2016

Two lovers recline in a familiar embrace on a yellow foam pad on the wooden floor in *Morning Studio* (2016). A Bumble Bee tuna can full of cigarette butts sits next to them on a milk-crate end table. The movie has ended; the projector now displays an Apple desktop screen. One figure, their face pressed into the naked breast of their lover, gazes over their left shoulder directly at the viewer with an expression as calm and defiant as a Balthus portrait of a young girl. Behind them, a de Chirico window looks out to the opposite façade, the sky a bright ultramarine in the approaching dawn.

Eisenman's view is remarkably intimate. They are images of interiors and internal moments, even when surrounded by people. What relationship is safe enough to make it the subject of one's work? *Morning Studio* pictures Eisenman's close friends, Grace Dunham, and Willa, in her Brooklyn studio. Are we witnessing a return to real life, to lived experience? And if so, what would be the significance of a queer, autobiographical work now?

In a recent *New York Times* interview with Dunham, Eisenman revealed that she identifies as gender-fluid, but chooses to use the pronoun "she" to further subvert gendered social norms.¹ "Her portraits are of friends whose gender cannot be resolved at the level of the pronoun,"² wrote Julia Bryan-Wilson on Eisenman in 2014. While embedded in this feminist and queer discourse, Eisenman's paintings transcend it to address timeless human themes: love, isolation, and desire. Her images are as relatable as they are arresting.

Her show at Anton Kern is made up of everyday situations: waiting on a subway platform; standing in a crowded party; the ecstasy of the beach. The work is concerned with painting and its histories, specifically traditionally masculinist tropes like history painting.

One of her most iconic images, *The Breakup* (2011), depicts a nameless, cartoon figure staring down at their iPhone in horror and disbelief, ears burning bright orange, their heartbeat slowed, breathing constricted, a hollow in the pit of their stomach. Eisenman's cartoon figures give her an "everyman." While the emotion is immediately understandable, the figure is a blank slate upon which we can project ourselves.

The show at Kern is far more specific. *Long Distance* (2015), shows someone of indeterminate gender from behind, seated and looking into the window of an iMac at their lover, who stares back coyly from the other side of video call. The centrifugal composition leans toward the symbolic; one head in video is mounted onto the other, merging them to a single form. One fears becoming appreciative of hipster aesthetics: plaid shirts and trucker hats, Brooklyn youth culture, Apple products, etc., but in Eisenman's work these symbols give primacy to the authenticity of visual experience, rather than their own trendiness. Eisenman visualizes our dependency on contemporary technology, and how it transforms the way we relate to one another as well as our visual surroundings.

In *Another Green World* (2015), the door opens to the party on the extreme right edge of the painting to reveal an arriving Bacon figure in profile. A blue person in jeans and a t-shirt makes out with an inverted shirtless woman draped over the back of the couch. In the foreground, a coffee table displays lines of cocaine, Newport cigarettes, Corona beer bottles, and several identifiable records, including The Beatles' *Revolver*, and Grace Jones's *Nightclubbing*. At the center of the painting, a gay male couple hold each other in a tender embrace, their heads resting on each other's shoulders, unaware of the saturnalia around them. Their interlocked hands are a single bulbous form. They are more like a drawing, scraped flat with a palette knife. It seems the more emotion a character is experiencing, the further Eisenman pushes their portrayal away from realism; their abstraction indicates an internal psychology versus an external reality.



Nicole Eisenman, *Morning Studio*, 2016. Oil on canvas. 66 × 83 inches. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York. © Nicole Eisenman.

Other figures appear in crisp focus, rendered with almost photorealistic sensitivity, as is the beautiful white woman in a white tank top who studies Brian Eno’s record *Another Green World*, the painting’s namesake. In the distance, the painting opens up out the back door to reveal the New York skyline under a green-yellow moon, and three figures stare out at it, leaning on a banister, silhouetted in its golden light. The highly saturated color palette, the tight analogous color relationships, and the way she squeezes figures into slender columns at the margins of the painting, recalls Bonnard. Twenty-eight figures in all are crowded on top of one another, life size, like a church fresco. They are all connected, either by direct physical contact, or perspectival proximity.

A maximalist virtuoso, Eisenman employs a wide variety of painterly vocabulary, multiple styles, tropes, and tricks with paint within a single composition. Adept gestures in one area are circumvented by intentionally ham-fisted drawing in another. Some areas look like dried, caked on pastel, layered color over color, others are richly painted impasto, recalling Guston, whose influence appears over and over throughout her nearly thirty year career.

Eisenman’s survey at the New Museum, *Al-ugh-ories*, seems dated—not out of style, but anachronistic, as if the paintings were found in Weimar Republic and updated with some contemporary painting effects. While tied to present-day New York, all are heavily loaded with reference to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In Coping (2008), harlequins, mummies, and sad clowns, lifted from Picasso’s Blue Period, wander through waste-deep sewage in a town that looks like Cologne. Shit-brown clouds float by buildings, scraped on thickly with a palette knife over the top of what must have looked like a finished painting. The spatial distance and cloudy palette immediately brings to mind Gustave Caillebotte’s *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (1877). *The Fag End II* (2009), recalls Isherwood’s queer safe-haven Berlin. A man in a tuxedo and a white face-mask and top hat stands outside the Williamsburg gay bar, The Metropolitan, enticing the viewer salaciously, staggering. His inebriation is reinforced by the paint, which curls around him like cigarette smoke.

As rich with history and reference as *Al-ugh-ories* might be, the back room at Anton Kern lends the exhibition a sense of levity. A group of framed drawings and paintings on paper, and a single sculpture in plaster and ceramic, are funny, whimsical, off the cuff. The humor in Eisenman’s drawings is strategic. “Her work has a cutting, political humor—the kind that reveals a terrible truth as you laugh through gritted teeth,”³ Bryan-Wilson told me.



Nicole Eisenman, *Another Green World*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 128 × 106 inches. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York. © Nicole Eisenman.

Eisenman could not have envisioned the recent event in Orlando (the single deadliest mass shooting in United States history, and the first large-scale, targeted attack on the queer community in living memory) when she began this project. The “Shooter Paintings” (2016) uncannily address private notions of the possibility of extreme violence in society. In these new works, she arms her signature cartoon bubble-figures with revolvers—pointed, again—directly at the viewer. The “Shooters” are absolutely flat, like an abstraction; they suggest an awareness of something terrible happening elsewhere, this idea absorbed from the newsstand, social media, or the murmur of NPR. As the world reels from the shock, Eisenman’s “Shooters” take on an even greater horror, pain, and meaning. Their abstract plausibility became a terrifying reality in Orlando. Juxtaposed with the moments of incredible intimacy—trust within the group, being out-and-proud queer—recent events recontextualize these images: suddenly, we fear they contain something that would incite someone else, a stranger, to violence.

Throughout Eisenman’s show at Anton Kern, all the relationships we encounter, their length and breadth, those we embrace momentarily at a party to those we connect to long distance over the years, are articulated. *Al-ugh-ories* seems generalized in comparison, and while it takes on timely topics such as the Great Recession of 2008, the historical references and antiquated styles create a distance between her and the viewer that just isn’t there in the Anton Kern show. As much progress has been made, as complacent as we are living in a major metropolis (where being queer⁴ is largely unremarkable), Eisenman’s portrayal of her personal life becomes a statement of continuing political urgency right now, in the wake of trauma.

Endnotes

1. “I’m gender fluid, but I use the ‘she’ pronoun. I’m a little old school. I believe in the radicality of stretching the definition of what ‘she’ is.” Deborah Soloman, “A Conversation with Nicole Eisenman and Grace Dunham.” *The New York Times*. May 6, 2016.
2. “That perversion occurs not only at the level of form, when Eisenman’s figures mutate and morph, but also when she takes on classic subjects such as family life or scenes of labor and queers them—in queerness’s many senses— making them hilarious, grotesque, violent, and twisted. Many of her portraits are of friends whose gender cannot be resolved at the level of the pronoun, altogether thwarting the he/she binary (page 50). Her queerness has sometimes been narrowly understood as a type of manifesto triumphing non-normative sexuality; such a position reduces her work by focusing on (one part of) its ostensibly self-evident ‘meaning,’ as if she were a content provider whose only goal was to provide easily decipherable social commentary.” Julia Bryan-Wilson. “Draw a Picture, Then Make it Bleed.” *Dear Nemesis: Nicole Eisenman, 1993-2013*. (Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis/Walther König, Köln, 2014): 96-107.
3. Interview with Julia Bryan-Wilson. June 9, 2016.
4. “Queerness is, in my view, an approach to ourselves and one another that makes the bare minimum of assumptions about our own and one another’s bodies, self-conceptions, and trajectories. It is the willful cultivation of our ability to keep ourselves open to the simple fact that everything, and everyone, changes.” Gordon Hall, “Commencement Address.” *Parsons The New School for Design Fine Arts BFA, School of Art, Media, and Technology*. May 19, 2016.