

Art in America

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Nicole Eisenman

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at New Museum and Anton Kern

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The New Museum's tightly curated survey of the last twenty years of Nicole Eisenman's career and Anton Kern Gallery's concurrent presentation of her newest works clearly showed the artist to be among the most important New York painters working today. While Eisenman has had success since the 1990s (her inclusion in the 1995 Whitney Biennial helped catapult her career), her practice has grown and matured over the subsequent decades. Her status as a major force in contemporary art was also bolstered last year when she received a MacArthur "genius" grant.

In her paintings, Eisenman shifts between different genres and emotional registers seemingly without effort or hesitation. She turns from portraits to epic canvases with dozens of figures, and from records of small everyday incidents to allegorical compositions and complex fictional scenes. As a rule, she does not distinguish between the personal and the political: her most intimate, autobiographical scenes may be read as commentaries on gender and queer politics, while her social commentary is shaped by her personal struggle to survive as an artist in a capitalist economy.

Eisenman's compositions are populated with a vast menagerie of characters: people with green, blue, and yellow skin or clawed hands; flat, shadowy figures and figures built from scabs of dried paint; potato-head personages and walking mummies. Portrayed individually or in groups, these characters are engaged in activities that appear strange or absurd but suggest familiar psychological states. Among the works at the New Museum, for example, was *Coping* (2008), which shows a motley group of characters wading through a mysterious substance that fills a small-town street, each bent on his or her own course, seeming preoccupied with inner struggles.

Many of Eisenman's paintings appear to be autobiographical. Some of them, such as *Progress: Real and Imagined* (2006), are likely self-portraits. In other works, the intimacy or authenticity of the portrayed scene or emotion speaks undoubtedly to firsthand experience, even if the characters do not physically resemble the artist. *From Success to Obscurity* (2004), for example, shows a craggy-skinned humanoid creature (perhaps the Thing from the Fantastic Four) staring sorrowfully at an opened

letter in its hands. In *Night Studio* (2009), two women lie on a bed under a cone of light from a floor lamp. One is on her back, naked from the waist down, her skin yellow, a glimmer of self-assured bravado in her lazy squinting gaze. Her lover is at her side, fully naked and propped on one elbow, looking at her partner with gentle curiosity; her pink body seems to float between the bed and the starry blue sky that fills the upper half of the canvas. Books are stacked beside the bed, their titles reading like an incantation: Picasso, Bruegel, Vuillard, Goya, Max Ernst, Peter Doig, Henri Matisse. Both intimate and humorous, *Is It So* (2014) uses a comically compressed perspective to depict an act of lovemaking: one figure's head between another's splayed thighs, the two characters' hands pressed tightly together, their fingers intertwined.

Eisenman borrows freely from other artists, from Bruegel to Guston, quoting their compositions, figures, and gestures, briefly adopting their styles, and mixing different modes of representation in painting and, more recently, sculpture. *Inhaling Object Symbol Guy* (2013), displayed at the New Museum, is a standing plaster figure, its head tilted back, who appears to be sucking in the world through a wedge-shaped item that it holds in its mouth. Scattered on the ground at the figure's feet are strange objects resembling small bones and misshapen plants, which seem to have tumbled out from between the figure's legs. Evoking Picasso, the work is a powerful mixed-medium portrayal of the artist as creator.

Eisenman's paintings at Anton Kern were generally bigger, more ambitious, and exhibited a more finished aesthetic than her earlier paintings at the New Museum. *Another Green World* (2015) is a formidable creation measuring roughly eleven by nine feet and filled with more than two dozen figures skillfully arranged in tiers in a deep, receding space. The setting is a house party, with couples kissing, dancing, talking, and sleeping, their colorful entwined bodies making a palpitating pattern that weaves together different parts of the composition. The artist displays various skills and techniques in this work, which offers a clever design, a masterful handling of color, and meticulous depictions of small details, including vinyl LP covers and a rolled-up ten-dollar bill on a coffee table.

Such paintings attested to Eisenman's increased confidence and sophistication. The technical progress, however, was at times accompanied by a sense of detachment or withdrawal, whether in the artist's manner of painting or in her subject matter. In the brilliantly rendered *TM and Lee* (2016), for example, the romantic image of a couple dreaming and making music among the sand dunes contrasts oddly with the uncharacteristically cold, though elegant, style in which it is painted. The composition of *Long Distance* (2015) recalls that of *Is It So*, but replaces the intimate physical connection between the two lovers with virtual communication via a computer. *Morning Studio* (2016) echoes *Night Studio* but turns the two mythical figures of the earlier work into more realistically rendered, ordinary women. The yellow-skinned figure, now fully clothed, nestles against her pink-skinned lover; looking sad and vulnerable, she stares directly at the viewer with dark, anxious eyes. While a limitless starry sky filled the background of the earlier work, here the cosmos is depicted as the desktop image for a Mac computer whose screen is projected on the back wall of the studio.

Whether the remoteness and disillusionment seen in Eisenman's new paintings conveys her current mood or reflects her weariness with her previous styles of figuration, some important changes are under way. They are evident in her increased interest in sculpture. (The New Museum presentation included not only *Inhaling Object Symbol Guy* but also two other sculptures, both from 2016; Anton Kern exhibited a 2015 plaster piece that appeared on this magazine's cover.) The changes are also apparent in paintings such as *Shooter 1*, *Shooter 2*, and *One Eye* (all 2016)—her most abstract works to date. The flat geometric planes and lines that make up the figures and faces in these canvases, combined with the precise and deliberate application of paint, create a powerful effect that reinforces the dark message of the images. Perhaps the exhibitions came at a turning point in Eisenman's practice, offering us not only an overview of her work to date but also the first glimpse of a new period in her career.



Nicole Eisenman: *Night Studio*, 2009, oil on canvas, approx. 5½ by 6¾ feet; at the New Museum.