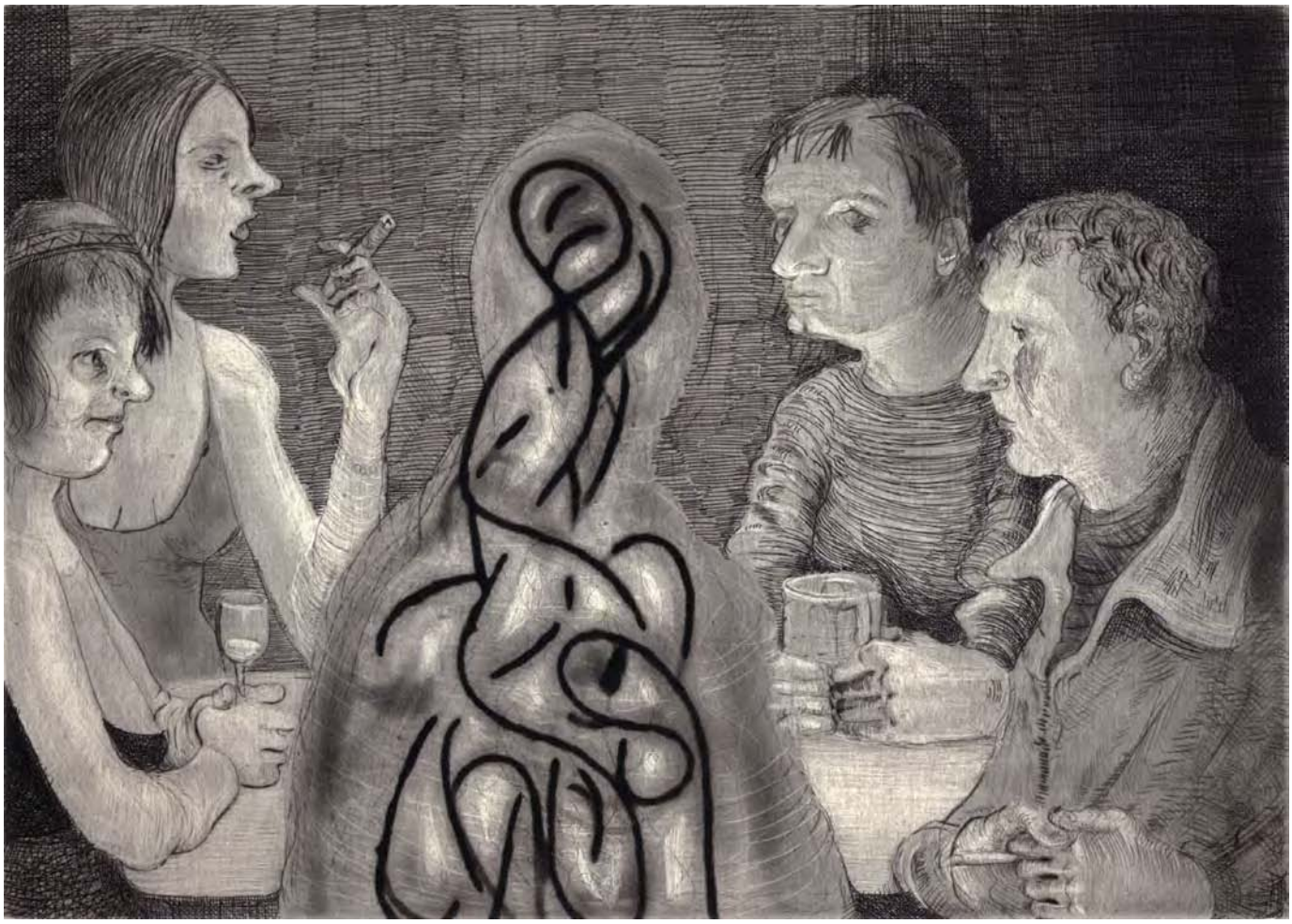
Nicole Eisenman's Year of Printing Prolifically

By Faye Hirsch



Nicole Eisenman, ***Drinks with Possible Spirit Type Entity*** *(2012), etching and aquatint with* chine collé, *10 1/4 x 11 3/4 in. Edition of 25. Printed and published by Harlan & Weaver, New York.*

At Leo Koenig Gallery in Chelsea early last summer, the painter Nicole Eisenman mounted an exhibition chronicling her first intensive foray into printmaking, an area in which she had previously only dabbled. On view were more than 60 prints, large and small, in monotype, lithography, woodcut and intaglio. It was as if Eisenman had sprung fully formed and armed from the head of the god of prints. Admittedly, she had an assist from some top-flight New York printers—Andrew Mockler of Jungle Press (lithography), Marina Ancona of 10 Grand Press (woodcut), Carol Weaver and Felix Harlan of Harlan & Weaver (intaglio)—but as all these master printers insist, Eisenman simply has a knack for prints. "A lot of painters want to make prints that look like the paintings," Mockler commented. "Not Nicole."[1]

The works on view were replete with Eisenman's inventive imagery, but the artist also showed herself exploring the material effects inherent to each medium. Her enjoyment was palpable and contagious. I was hard-pressed to remember another occasion in which a contemporary artist (especially one of her generation—she was born in 1965) had made such a bold move into the medium.

"Art history is alive to me," Eisenman told the writer Lynne Tillman in 2007. "It pulls me around in all different directions."[2] From the beginning of her career in the early 1990s, she has busily mined the Western canon, from the kinetic nudes and tumbling skies of the Italian Renaissance to the teeming beaches of Reginald Marsh and Picasso's eroticized women. But when Eisenman arrived in New York in 1987, fresh off a RISD BFA, she was as much enamored of punk as art history. The earliest works with which she gained renown were drawings produced at a feverish pitch on any and all surfaces, from notebook scraps to the walls of the Drawing Center (1993) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (in its 1995 Biennial). These works borrowed extravagantly from cartoons, porn, TV commercial logos, B-movies and other visuals of popular American culture. Tapping into the queer rebellion that prevailed in the early 90s in a New York City riven by the culture wars and the AIDS crisis, Eisenman discovered an audience that was keenly open to her brand of delirious, erotically charged figuration.

To appreciate Eisenman's art requires no specialized knowledge—she has always been a stalwart populist, attempting, as she puts it, to "create something that convincingly takes you into another world."[3] Nonetheless, it helps to understand that high and low—art history, queer politics and popular culture—always co-exist in her work, if not explicitly in the imagery then in her expres-

Nicole Eisenman, ***Untitled*** *(2012), monotype on paper, image 58.4 x 44.5 cm, sheet 61.9 × 47.6 cm. Unique image. Image courtesy the artist and Leo Koenig Inc. New York, NY.*

Nicole Eisenman, left: ***Untitled*** *(2012), monotype on paper, image 58.4 x 44.5 cm, sheet 61.9 × 47.6 cm; right:* ***Untitled*** *(2012), monotype on paper, image 59.1 x 44.5 cm, sheet 61.3 x 47 cm. Unique images. Courtesy the artist and Leo Koenig Inc., New York, NY.*

sive strategies and manic energy.

One wonders if it were not inevitable that Eisenman would take up printmaking, given her graphic predilections. From the mid-aughts onward her painting seems to have drifted toward the conventions of German Expressionism, as beer gardens and characters with multihued skin proliferated. Why not—like her Modernist heroes Picasso and Beckmann, Munch and Dix—make prints?

In August, 2011, as she was going through a tough break-up from her longtime partner, with whom she has two children, Eisenman locked her paints up, as she told me, and turned exclusively to prints. "Having appointments with three different shops and three different sets of people three times a week really kept me going through the fall and winter," she said. "Having that company, that distraction and camaraderie, was kind of a life-saver."[4] She also rented a press from artist and printmaker Lothar Ostenburg in Brooklyn, not far from her studio, and made, on her own, a series of 45 large monotypes. These became her critically lauded contribution to the 2012 Whitney Biennial (though the medium was sometimes misidentified, or not identified at all, in writing about the Biennial[5]). Later she created additional monotypes at the Women's Studio Workshop in Rosendale, in upstate New York. More than 30 editions and dozens of unique prints later, Eisenman is slowing down a bit, as her printers breathlessly race to catch up with her.

Forty-two of the works in the Koenig show were the Rosendale monotypes, each in 28 1/2 x 23-inch frames (though the prints themselves vary slightly in size), ranked in double file along three walls. That Eisenman devoted her first exhibition at her New York gallery since 2009 to prints is a measure of her enthusiasm for them. Coming on the heels of her decision to show her 45 monotypes at the Biennial, Eisenman boosted (for a time) the prestige of monotype, so often the orphan child of the art world.

Most of the monotypes depict large heads and busts. ("When you can't think of what to draw," she said to me recently, "draw a head."[6]) Some simply stare outward, their facial contours defined in broad areas of bright hues; others do something—read, send a text message, with book or iPhone up against the picture plane, like the foreground devices in Northern Renaissance portraits. In one, the reader is a female gorilla absorbed in a copy of the 1947 Surrealist catalogue *Prière de toucher*; Eisenman has collaged in a reproduction of the catalogue cover, which was adorned with a rubber and velvet breast by Marcel Duchamp. Many of the subjects of Eisenman's monotypes are culturally specific—a Max Beckmann self-portrait with cigar, Van Gogh's Postman, a cartoon mummy. Here and there, the artist herself puts in an appearance; in one, she is wearing a sling.

Some of the heads feel incredibly quick, little more than a slippery outline—not unlike the finger-painting the artist recalls loving in nursery school.[7] There are also monotypes in which more than one figure appears—a pair of heads kissing Brancusi-style, for example—and others in which a whole body is depicted, as in the recurrent figure of a naked woman viewed from between her splayed legs. In one, the woman is masturbating, the explicit vignette isolated in a square of cherry red. In another she spreads her sex wide open with hands collaged from a magazine; in the foreground is a tangled egg-shaped object that looks as though it has popped out.

In a few examples, the monotype interacts humorously with collage elements—as in a flotilla of bicyclists hurtling down slick monotype ramps. Eisenman's monotypes are the most playful of her prints, and the closest in spirit to the fanciful immediacy of her early improvisational drawings.

Eisenman had help from Marina Ancona of 10 Grand Press, a Brooklyn workshop founded in 1999, on some of these monotypes, but her primary efforts at that shop have been in woodcut. The main subjects in the woodcuts are again large heads, but the emotional tenor is quite different from the monotypes. Abandoning hijinks, Eisenman created monumental faces, mainly frontal, broken into defining shapes. Though the heads can be goofy and surreal—as in the Mirò-esque *Untitled* (*Bird Love*), in which a bird and a figure kiss, their eyes bulging and transfixed—mainly they feel solemn and a bit dreamy. Ancona and Eisenman achieved an unusual palette in these works: first printing the woodblock, carved and/or jigsawed into parts, in a dark ink, Ancona then overprinted it with a Plexi plate inked in a translucent color glaze. The result is a kind of halation in the lines, as though the figure were glowing from within.

One is reminded of Picasso's linocuts of his second wife, Jacqueline Roque. Eisenman's *Untitled* (*Crier*), in silver-gray and

Nicole Eisenman, ***Untitled (Crier)*** *(2012), woodcut, image 61.6 x 46.4 cm, sheet 61.6 x 47.6 cm. Edition of 15. Published by 10 Grand Press, New York. Courtesy the artist and Leo Koenig Inc., New York.*

pink, depicts the writer and critic Litia Perta, who Eisenman says found posing emotionally trying. Coifed in a punk haircut, Perta is shown from her naked breasts up. From her right eye a long teardrop falls. Even more direct is the quotation in *Untitled (Man with Moon)*, which Eisenman says was inspired by Erich Heckel's 1919 woodcut, *Portrait of a Man*. "I'm a jealous artist," she told me; when she sees something she likes in a print, she wants to do it herself.[8] Here she borrows the pensive folded hands and sideward glance of Heckel's subject, and similarly bifurcates the background. Printing in black on white, she conveys the effect of being indoors and outdoors at the same time; at the left, a spiraling ear stands out against a white ground, while at the right, a tiny crescent moon peeps out from the top corner of a night sky.

The dozen woodcuts Eisenman made with Ancona were editioned in small numbers—never more than ten—but any given block might trail a number of unique impressions in completely different hues, and even within the edition the inking can vary considerably. The day I visited the press, Eisenman was trying to lighten the yellow in *Untitled (Face with Yellow Eyes)* by hand-coloring; that big head, with its eerie light eyes peering out from a dark face delineated in barely scratched-out features, occurs in a number of unique variations as well, including one in which the eyes are white.

Eisenman had come to 10 Grand to sign her new edition for *Parkett*, a dual publication of 15 unique monotype/woodcuts and one woodcut in 20 impressions (35 all told). The image is a frontal portrait of a bumptious, smiling man in a porkpie hat. The woodcut is printed in silvery-gray under light blue ink, which gives the figure a ghostly air; the multicolored monotypes are more clownlike.

In contrast to the monumental heads of the monotypes and woodcuts, Eisenman's lithographs and etchings favor multiperson narratives. "As I started [my prints], Eisenman said, "I read a lot of books and made trips to museums. Andrew [Mockler] took me to the print collection at the Met. I was getting a crash course in the history of printmaking. Munch is someone I looked at a lot, and Picasso was absolutely the number one man in etchings."

Eisenman was particularly impressed by Picasso's *Suite 156* etchings, from which she took permission to represent the personal drama of her break-up. "[Picasso] was able to siphon raw feeling," she told me, "his reactions to a drama he created, really, between his mistress and his wife."[9] While the woodcuts (and even, to some extent, the monotypes) channel Eisenman's heartbreak elliptically, the etchings and lithographs often allude to it in barely disguised terms.

*Nicole Eisenman, **Man Holding his Shadow** (2011), two-color lithograph, image 40.6 × 30.5 cm, sheet 56.5 × 45.7 cm. Edition of 25. Published by Jungle Press Editions, Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy the artist and Leo Koenig Inc., New York, NY.*

She intersperses such content, however, with scenes of beer gardens and dinners, along with sexual encounters—the sensual pleasures of a life that goes on despite setbacks.

Eisenman had worked with Mockler in Brooklyn in 2010 on three small etchings, but when she returned in 2011, it was to tackle lithography. She says she has found lithography to be the most mysterious of the processes she has undertaken. "Still after nine months of doing it," she told me last June, "I am as much at a loss as I was when I first started. Etching I get. You throw acid on and it burns the metal. But try to explain to me how water and oil etch a rock. I don't get it."[10] Still, as Mockler described it, she was a natural: "Drawing," he said, "is her default activity." Eisenman worked the stone in many different ways: *in manière noire*, painting in tusche, drawing in crayon, scratching and biting the surfaces. In her dozen lithographs with Mockler's Jungle Press, Eisenman exploited the fluidity of lithographic execution to fashion tales of loneliness and excess.

In *Man Holding His Shadow*, a mournful-looking, ill-groomed fellow in a baggy suit and soft cap stands, bearing his own limp shadow in his arms, and one can't help feeling sorry for him, despite the absurdity of Eisenman's conceit. There is an affinity in these works to those of Neo Rauch and other painters of the Leipzig school, noted for mixing the surreal with the expressionistic. This combination is also found in a smaller print, the mysterious *Little Drummer*, in which the title character beats an

oversize drum as he walks along a nighttime street. Spattering the stone with gum and painting over it with a solvent tusche, drawing and counter-etching, Eisenman created a speckled surface, white on black, as if visualizing the drum's emanations. Such images are reminiscent of her paintings of the previous five years or so, such as *Coping* (2008), in which characters in a trancelike state wander a flooded European street, an unlikely mix of refugees (a man in an old-fashioned bowler hat, a mummy) from some meltdown of our current cultural scene. In *Ouija*, a six-colored lithograph, three ghoulish, Munch-like figures consult the paranormal in a crazily lit room.

Though Eisenman tends to steer clear of politics in her work these days, preferring to address the broader foibles of humanity, in *Tea Party* she skewers a right-winger in a tricorne hat, along with a capitalist fat-cat straight out of early 20th-century political cartoons. The "flag" they grasp is a scythe wielded by Death, who appears (as so often in Eisenman's work) in the form of a skeleton. A moody sky in the background, created by sponging water on the surface and drawing through it with greasy ink, portends ill. More typical, however, is the shadowy *Sloppy Barroom Kiss*, in which two figures, their heads resting on a table, seem to have passed out in mid-kiss.

Eisenman has produced her most refined and cerebral prints at Harlan & Weaver, though the subject matter can be just as dark and is in many ways more personal. "There is something about trauma," says Carol Weaver. "Etching is where artists seem to go." Eisenman, she adds, "needed somewhere to go. She would have been at the workshop all day and all night—she was indefatigable. We gave her as many plates as we could find."[11]

Watermark offers a lush, detailed scene of Eisenman's two children at their grandparents' (Eisenman's inlaws') house, reading on the sofa in a room crowded with bookcases and hung with art. In the foreground, we see a hand spooning food from a bowl, a vignette sharply divided from the cozy scene behind by a table. We surmise that the body that belongs to the hand is that of the artist—and by implication the viewer, from whom she demands empathy for her separateness.

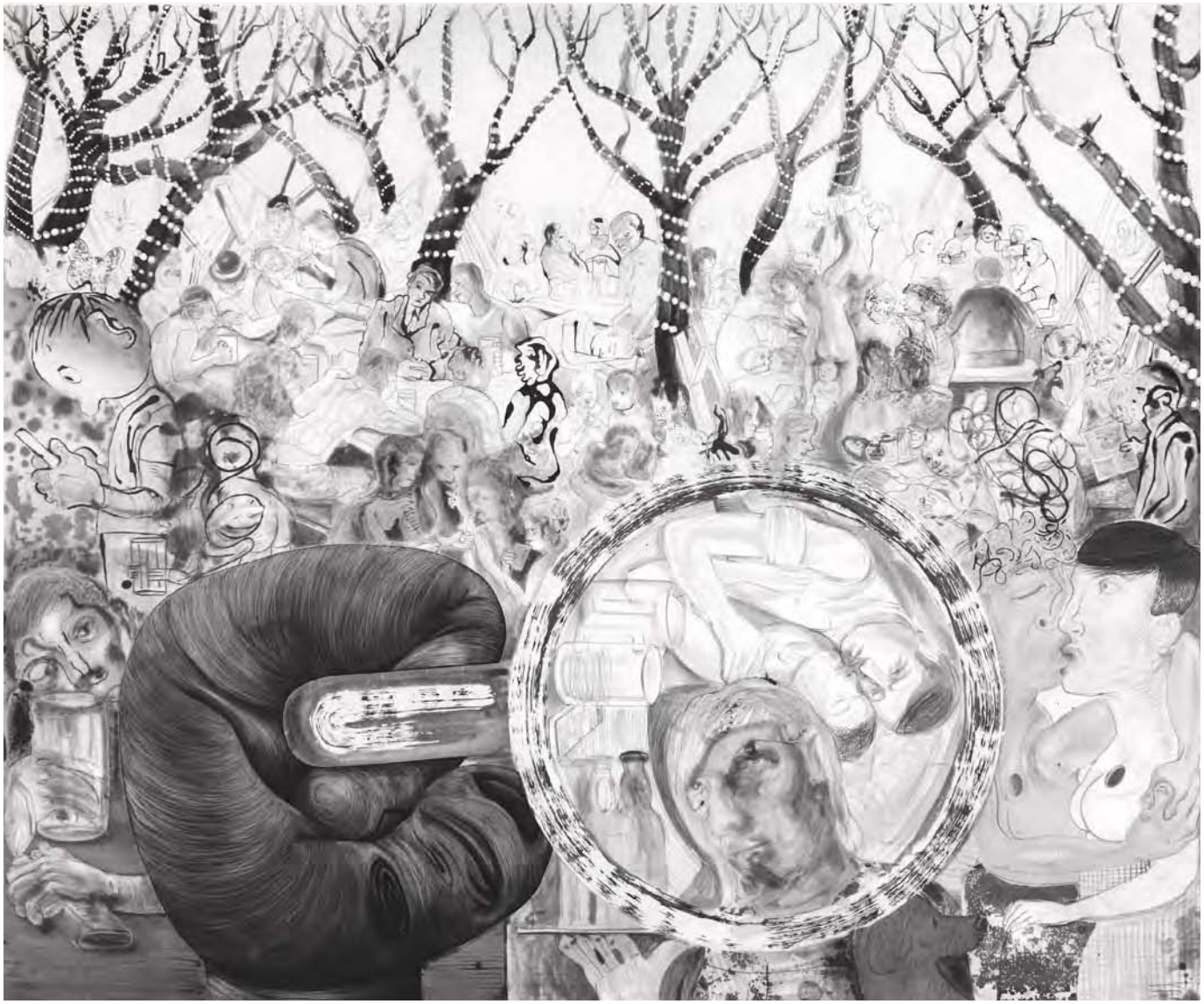
A less subtle image of the artist's predicament is depicted in a mordant little etching in which a blindfolded man is sent packing (he is about to step over the edge of a cliff, in fact) by a gorilla-like woman; on the roof of the shack in which she hulks are two baffled little frogs. Scribbled clouds provide a meteorological metonym for the emotional turbulence. "It was a deep time for Nicole," comments Weaver about the personal content of the prints, "and she was dealing with it on the metal."[12]

Among the grandest of Eisenman's recent paintings are the beer gardens—a classic trope, along with the cabaret, of German Expressionism. Eisenman's are set in her neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Here she mingles portraits of friends and strangers, indulging her penchant for crowds and paying homage to the community that inspires her. At Harlan & Weaver, she has worked these scenes through a variety of intaglio techniques; the most ambitious, *Beer Garden with Large Hand*, is still in process as I write. (She has now made 12 prints at the workshop.)

The atmosphere of the barroom and beer garden scenes ranges from sinister to elegiac. *In Drinking with Death Kiss*, a drypoint printed on *chine collé,* a figure in the foreground with one closed or blind eye cups his beer while in the crowd Death kisses a female figure—a "death and the maiden" motif that has deep roots in German art and literature. Is the man in the foreground a self-portrait? The face resembles Eisenman's, and she has often depicted herself as a male in her paintings and drawings.[13] The mood is more woozily convivial in *Drinks at Julius*, where the doodle-like drawing of the figures conveys a kind of drunken porousness, and uneasy in *Drinks with Possible Spirit Type Entity*, where a ghost appears at the table, his strange energy manifest as abstract lines. In its combination of droll absurdity and graphic refinement, this print is pure Eisenman. But the real tour-de-force of her time at Harlan & Weaver is *Beer Garden with Big Hand*. The print draws on many of the etching techniques Eisenman experimented with in *12 Heads*, an etching and aquatint ganging a dozen small plates, each bitten using a different process, such as dipping a wire mesh or matchstick in acid and laying it over the rosin. At 40 x 48 inches *Beer Garden with Big Hand* is Eisenman's largest etching. (An earlier state with pencil and ink additions was included in the Koenig show.) Against a backdrop of figures passing the time in a beer garden drinking, kissing, conversing, or in one case, fretting over a cell phone, a big, Guston-like hand in the foreground lifts a mug of beer. We see the hazy reflection of the drinker—presumably the artist—in the liquid. Again, Eisenman inserts herself both within and outside the depicted scene. The face in the beer has one clear and one bleary eye, somewhat like the eyes in *Drinking with Death Kiss*, which may be an allusion to the artist's former appearance. (She used to have a bulging eye that she often portrayed in her early work.) One might read the disparity as a metaphor for inner vision—or perhaps, more accurately, for Eisenman's uniquely backward- and forward-looking vision.

As much as Eisenman pays homage to her many idols from the past, there are surely few other artists alive today who can so effectively translate the dark comedy of a Beckmann cabaret into the foibles of a Williamsburg bar, or transform the priapic heterosexuality of Picasso into a queer eroticism, or, more accurately, seize upon the master's excesses as a license to represent those of her own life and milieu. In her propensity to fold history into her life and art,

*Nicole Eisenman, **Watermark** (2012), etching, image 45.7 x 61 cm, sheet 60.6 x 74.6 cm. Edition of 20. Printed and published by Harlan & Weaver, Inc., New York, NY. Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York, NY.*



*Nicole Eisenman, **Beer Garden with Big Hand** (2012), etching, image 101.6 x 121.9 cm. Edition size to be determined. Printed and published by Harlan & Weaver, Inc., New York, NY. Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York, NY.*

Eisenman has found a particularly effective outlet in prints, as she marshals the most traditional of techniques to a vital, contemporary expression. ■

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Notes:

1. All comments by Andrew Mockler were made to author at Jungle Press, Brooklyn, Nov. 20, 2012.
2. "Nicole Eisenman in Conversation with Lynne Tillman," in Beatriz Ruf, ed., Nicole Eisenman*, exh. cat., Kunsthalle Zürich, 2007, Zurich, JRP/Ringier, 2007, 15.*
3. Eisenman with Tillman, 15.
4. Faye Hirsch, "Nicole Eisenman's Prints and People" (interview) (http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2012-06-15/nicole-eisenman-prints/.)
5. For example, Elle Dispatch *called them paintings (http://www.elle.com/news/culture/the-2012-whitney-biennial-opens-today-38517) and* Artnet *"primitivist drawings" (http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/nathan/whitney-biennial-2012.asp).*
6. Nicole Eisenman to author, Nov. 20, 2012. She also said, of her beer garden imagery, "When you don't know what to do, draw people drinking." "Nicole Eisenman's Prints and People."
7. Eisenman with Tillman, 11.
8. Eisenman to author, Nov. 20, 2012. This comment reinforced something Andrew Mockler said to me in an interview that same day: "Nicole permeates time. She wants to live up to, or communicate or compete with, artists from the past—Heckel, Grosz, Munch, Picasso."
9. "Nicole Eisenman's Prints and People."
10. Ibid.
11. Carol Weaver to author, Nov. 3, 2012.
12. Ibid.
13. As, for example, in her 230-foot-long canvas Progress: Real and Imagined*, (2006), a grand saga that focused—in a grand allegory—on the efforts of her partner to get pregnant—and on her own ambivalences with the prospect of parenthood. Faye Hirsch, "Tides and Tidings,"* Art in America*, Oct. 2006, 176-81.*