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# Seriously Funny

*A Nicole Eisenman retrospective.*

**BY PETER SCHJELDAHL**

*Political and personal: Eisenman's "The Triumph of Poverty" (2009).*
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A succinct Nicole Eisenman retrospective of twenty-two paintings and three sculptures, at the New Museum, is accidentally well timed to the recent news that the MacArthur Foundation has awarded a "genius" grant to the spectacularly talented, darkly hilarious New York artist. That's good. Any attention drawn to Eisenman benefits conversation about contemporary art. At fifty-one—tall and stovepipe slim, with a strikingly long face beneath close-cropped black hair—Eisenman has mellowed only slightly from the raucous wunderkind who burst onto the scene in the 1995 Whitney Biennial. Since then, she has led a kind of one-woman insurgency, bidding to reshape the field, with figurative

works that collapse the political into the personal and the personal into an erudite devotion to painting. She paints narrative fantasies that look bumptiously jokey at first, but reveal worlds of nuanced thought and feeling. They must be judged in person; in reproduction they lose the masterly touch that is Eisenman's signature. The MacArthur Foundation cited her for restoring "to the representation of the human form a cultural significance that had waned during the ascendancy of abstraction in the 20th century." I'd like it to be true. Eisenman's resourceful Expressionism hints at the power of narrative painting to re-situate the art world in the world at large.

Eisenman is an artist of overlapping sincerities. One of them suggests that of a bohemian community organizer. In "Biergarten at Night" (2007), dozens of characters—some realist, including a self-portrait; others fanciful, such as an androgynous figure passionately kissing a death's-head—hoist brews in velvety shadow and glimmering light. Each face is painted a bit differently, in a range from filmy to impastoed, and each feels individually known: liked, not liked, loved, perhaps feared. The longer you look the more meaningful the picture becomes. It does indeed recast bohemia in a convincingly up-to-date guise—in Brooklyn, of course, where thousands of the art world's threadbare strivers reside. Similarly compelling are two big, populous paintings that signal Eisenman's response to the Great Recession. In "Coping" (2008), poignant citizens of a strange village meander waist-deep in a caramel-colored flood. In "The Triumph of Poverty" (2009), a crowd treks past a beat-up car in a rural scene; one of them is a dishevelled rich man whose dropped pants reveal that he is ass-backward.

Another theme that has come naturally to Eisenman since the beginning of her career, and which she has furthered almost to the extent of a civic duty, is sexuality. A detail of "It Is So" (2014), reproduced on the cover of the show's catalogue, depicts lesbian cunnilingus. You see, in sculptural forms, the tops of the women's heads and their linked hands, bracketed by the recipient's spread legs. Eisenman quipped to an interviewer in 2014, "I feel totally inhabited in my role as a possessed-like lesbian authority. Somebody's got to step up and do it." But when the show's co-curator Massimiliano Gioni, interviewing her for the catalogue, hazarded that she is "the voice of a queer community," she said, "No. God, no." She explained, "I couldn't draw a line around a group of people and claim to have a voice for anyone other than myself." The apparent contradiction goes to the heart of her singularity, as an artist delighted to find herself in common cause with others, but only by way of visions and opinions that feel authentic to her. You needn't sign on with any constituency to enjoy her audacity.

*Biergarten at Night" (2007).*
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Eisenman was born in Verdun, France, in 1965. Her father was a U.S. Army psychiatrist, and her mother is an urban planner. When I spoke with Eisenman recently, she told me that her father's Freudian orthodoxy both tormented and inspired her as a child. They were at odds for years, but have reconciled. She paid homage to his analytical bent and his interpretations of dreams in a 2014 retrospective of her work that appeared in museums in St. Louis, Philadelphia, and San Diego. Titled "Dear Nemesis," it was dedicated "To my Dad, who has taught me to see things that are not there and to see through things that are." Also important to Eisenman was her maternal great-grandmother Esther Hammerman, who died in 1984. Born in Poland, Hammerman was an unschooled painter of cityscapes and scenes of Jewish life who emigrated from Vienna in 1937. Eisenman remains close, she told me, to the "Eisenman clan," including two brothers and a centenarian great-aunt who is the

subject of her painting “Death and the Maiden” (2009), as a blowsy nude tippling wine at a table with a patient and even tenderly companionable death figure.

In 1970, the family settled in Scarsdale, where Eisenman embraced her vocation as an artist while still in high school. She received a degree in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design and spent a year in Rome, enraptured by Renaissance painters. Returning to New York in 1987, she lived, by turns, on the Lower East Side, in Chinatown, at the Chelsea Hotel, and, for a few months, in the gallery of her dealer, Jack Tilton. She worked for a bed company in Jersey City and for an outdoor-mural firm in Manhattan.

In the meantime, she experimented with installations, sculpture, and video. But she mainly drew, crowding the walls of the Tilton Gallery with tacked-up cartoons and sketches for a memorable solo show, in 1994. Her sensational contribution to the 1995 Whitney Biennial was a thirty-foot-long mural of the museum blasted to ruins; victims lie on the ground, and only one wall remains, at which she sits on a scaffold and paints. Her early paintings could be nasty. The Norman Rockwellish pastiche of “Dysfunctional Family” (2000) features a father smoking a bong, a mother exposing her crotch, and a baby boy who has taken a hammer to his private parts. But even her darkest visions exude ebullient panache.

Guessing Eisenman’s historical precedents has been something of a sport among her critics. Her favorite Old Master, she told me, dating to her days in Rome, is Andrea Mantegna—the brother-in-law of Giovanni Bellini, who is as astringently flinty as Bellini is meltingly honeyed. She helpfully provides references with the spines of books stacked in “It Is So” and another painting of sexual intimacy, “Night Studio” (2009): Bruegel, Goya, Vuillard, Munch, Nolde, Kirchner, and Ernst, among other forebears, and her figure-painting contemporaries Nicola Tyson and Peter Doig. The influence of Philip Guston is plain in “Selfie” (2014): the stubbly, boulder-shaped head of a man in bed holding his phone so close that its camera picks up only half of his cyclopean eye. Eisenman likes rhyming contemporary subjects with motifs from the past, including, as she told Gioni of a number of pictures, a timeless gesture of “shoulders curled in and our eyes reverently looking down”; it’s a pose familiar from classic paintings of religious piety, reënacted whenever we check our phones.

Eisenman is an enthusiast for fellow-artists and, especially, for poets. “Under the Table 2” (2014) memorializes a happily dissipated day with a crew of the latter, she says. Jumbled heads share a bottle, which a single hand lifts and pours out, under a table that is topped with a stuffed olive, a cigarette emitting an arabesque of smoke, and a huge salami, its sliced end textured with psychedelic dots of color. The image is both lovely and gauche—gaucherie being Eisenman’s when-in-doubt reflex.

The New Museum show is titled “Al-ugh-ories,” a phrasing that Eisenman coined when Gioni proposed “Allegories.” That “ugh,” in response to what seems a reasonable characterization of her style—like the “God, no” with which she rejected being categorized as a political activist—expresses an important distinction. Like her sexual self-assertion, Eisenman’s stylistic genres are means to the end of sustaining her confidence as an artist. They are about being specific. She is a pragmatist in service to creativity that remembers the past, glories in the present, and eagerly addresses the future. She has said, “I’d love to jump ahead thirty years and look back at this moment in art. What will jump out?” She will, I bet. ♦

http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/16/nicole-eisenmans-al-ugh-ories