

# ARTslant New York



## Woodcuts, Etchings, Lithographs and Monotypes

Nicole Eisenman

Leo Koenig Inc.

545 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10011

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## **Figures En Masse**

by Jamie Keesling

There are over seventy woodcuts, etchings, lithographs, and monotypes on view in Nicole Eisenman's current solo exhibition at Leo Koenig, Inc. In addition to making clear the prolific nature of Eisenman's practice, with this throng of works (and approximately fifty more recently installed in the now closed 012 Whitney Biennial), Eisenman hits the viewer over the head with a simple, yet challenging fact: She is a figure painter.

Perhaps given the entire history of art, and given that challenges in painting remain unresolved, this fact should not be as challenging as it seems. But Eisenman's figures are far from complacent nudes. Drawing on the history of expressionism and symbolism, Eisenman's figures demand attention and contemplation—full of action, they desire your gaze. Her subjects kiss birds, handstand while balancing knives, channel spirits through Ouija boards, go to the movies, and embrace, melding into each other. Even simple (but really, not so simple) bust portraits pulsate with vibrating stillness.

Despite more than one instance of bubble-fingers, cartoons these characters are not, for though they might exist for our amusement (who can know?), they have created themselves, arisen out of the fibers of archival paper, through muddy globs of ink via sharp gouges and meticulous strokes. Eisenman might be merely a vessel through which these subjects enter the stark cube that is Leo Koenig, and subsequently, our consciousness. The significance of the physicality within Eisenman's works, activated through the human figure, begs the question, to what extent are these works about humans? In order to answer this question, it might behoove us, as archaic and superfluous as it may seem, to begin precisely where Eisenman's figures do. That is, amidst the mysterious depths of line and color.



**Nicole Eisenman**, *Untitled*, 2012, Monotype on paper, 24 x 18 1/2 in (61 x 47 cm); Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York

One might take for granted these constitutive parts of Eisenman's works, the very elements through which her figures move. Perhaps one can't be blamed for this oversight in a show of such potentially staggering multiplicity. Though in some ways Eisenman is making multiplicity easy for the viewer. The works on paper are of standard size, ranging from medium-small to medium-large, and hung in close proximity. A relative homogeneity of scale encourages the viewer to appreciate variation in the prints themselves. Though many of them are black and white, Eisenman was clearly not compelled to limit the palette of her color prints, which range from muted pastels and earth tones to multicolored works bordering on psychedelic.

Like a good printmaker, the lifeblood of Eisenman's works rests also in her multifaceted use of line, which gives life to her figures. Contoured human shapes gesture, grasp, and fall towards the viewer. In the smallish black and white etching *Drinks with Possible Spirit Type Entity* (2012) the "spirit" is constituted solely of lines, light and dark, swirling through each other. Perhaps the tendency to relegate Eisenman's characters to a world of their own arises from this expression of spirit through line and color—a world where curving disjointed bodies walk amongst each other and collide.



**Nicole Eisenman**, *Untitled*, 2012, Monoprint on paper, 23 1/2 x 19 1/2 in (59.7 x 49.5 cm); Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York

While some of the works on view, particularly the collaged pieces, embody Eisenman's characteristic explicit humor (ex. *The Thinker* [2012], a reclining woman dreaming of a pink can of Bumblebee tuna), the most striking works in the show impart a more subtle and earnest humor. At least within the context of this exhibition, this confrontational earnestness is best expressed through Eisenman's portraits, which comprise a large portion of the exhibition. One might wonder if it is a coincidence that the face, an image in which humans instinctually detect the tiniest variations, is used here as a template for experiments in artistic construction. There is no uniform style among these works, rather, eyes range from pinpoints to deep splotches, lips are barely existent or pillowy protrusions, delineations between face, hair, neck, and background vary in clarity. It may be the case that Eisenman is moving away from explicitly witty works, like her well-known *Alice in Wonderland* (1996), and toward a more complicated subject. It is not clever to paint a face. These faces aren't smart, nor do they contain a punch line. They may, however, stare at us, or at something else. To quote Eisenman, "The over abundance of disposable and meaningless images gives oil painting more value." It is not clear whether it is the case that traditional forms of image-making rise above a "disposable" image to a desensitized viewer, but perhaps through the physicality of her images, Eisenman imparts an ineffable humanness which might drive a wedge through the viewer's potential desire to tumble through her work.

—[Jamie Keesling](#)

(Image on top right: **Nicole Eisenman**, *Untitled*, 2012, Monotype on paper , 23 1/4 x 17 1/2 in; Courtesy of the artist and Leo Koenig Inc., New York)

Posted by [Jamie Keesling](#) on 6/01

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