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Nicole Eisenman: Woodcuts, Etchings, Lithographs and Monotypes at Leo Koenig

By Charles Schultz

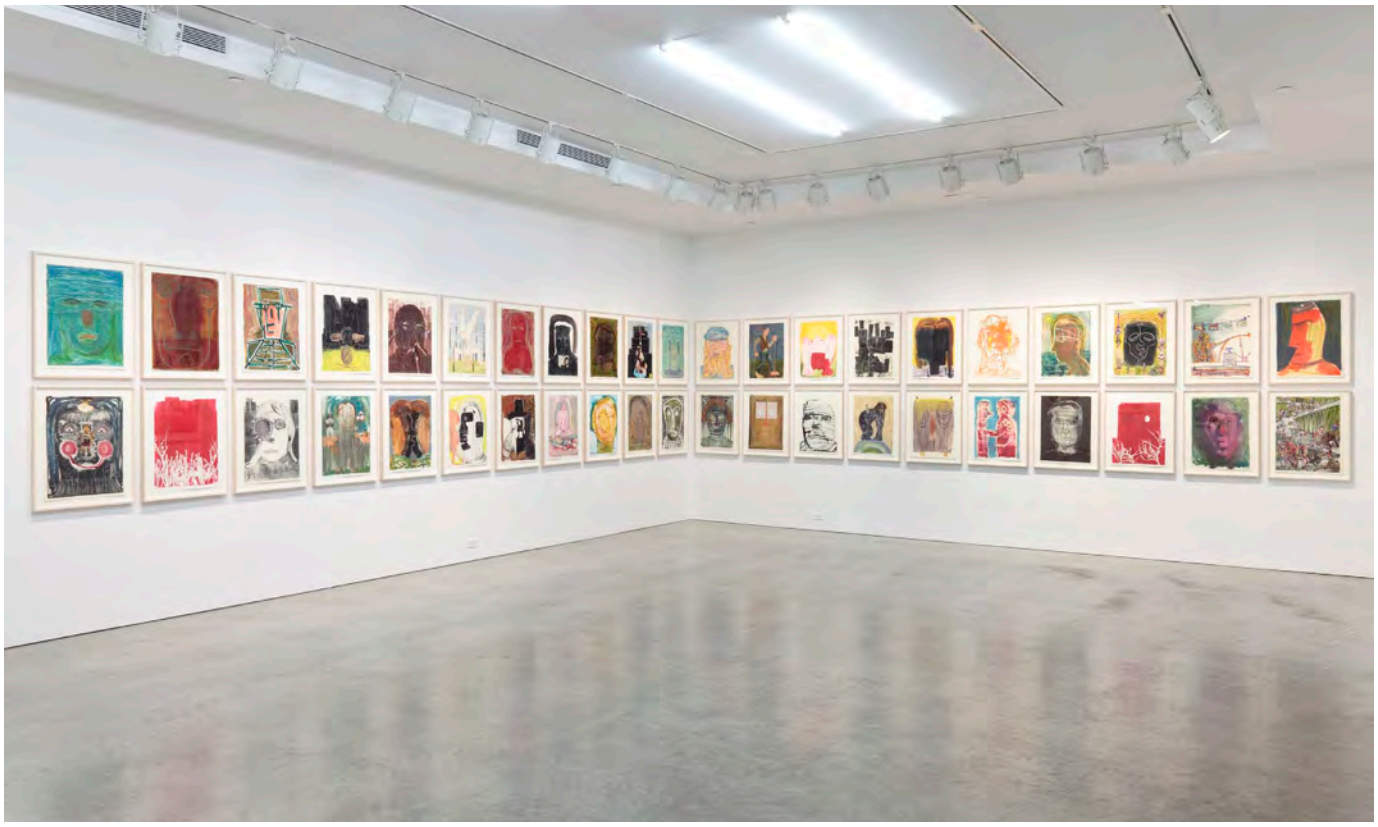

Fig. 1. *Installation view of "Nicole Eisenman: Woodcuts, Etchings, Lithographs and Monotypes" at Leo Koenig Inc., 2012. Image courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York.*

In the recent prints of Nicole Eisenman desolation is a destination and it's teeming with the faceless, the nameless, the wasted, washed out, worn down, and worried. There are familiar faces too; Van Gogh's Postman is here. He is one of many untitled portraits in a series of forty-two monotypes that are the meat of the exhibition, though not its highlight. The paradox of Eisenman's very full show—there are around sixty pieces—is that it's ultimately uplifting despite the abundance of morose and taciturn characters. Our communal affection for commiseration is matched with the strange pleasure of sympathy given and received. The lonely have a champion in Eisenman, in her work they find ample company.

Another impression: Eisenman is a tireless craftswoman whose technical prowess—at times verging on virtuosic—does not compete with the representational tableaus she depicts. To appreciate this, one need only recognize the variety of mediums in the exhibition, each of which is attended to in a manner that suits the strengths of the particular process. Her painterly brushwork is on full display in the grand suite of monotypes, while the etchings demonstrate a degree of draftsmanship to which few attain. These two skillsets coalesce in the half a dozen lithographs, perhaps nowhere more so than in the 9-color piece, *Bar* (2012), in which a pair of ball cap wearing beer drinkers cast one another discouraging glances. Meanwhile the moody untitled portraits executed as woodcuts derive much of their emotive force from the traces of divots and scrapes incised by her chisel and blade.

Moving into the scenes themselves we find a compositional tactic deployed to implicate space beyond the plane of the picture and, in fact, draw viewers directly into the scenario. Two etchings, both of which stood out as exceptional achievements, are notable: *Watermark* and *Beer Garden with Big Hand* (both 2012). In each work a stylized hand is situated in the foreground and set in action; in the former it's hoisting a spoonful of something and in the later it lifts an empty mug. Both suggest consumption and imply that it is the viewer who is doing the consuming, figuratively and literally. This trick of perspective allows us to stand separate from her picture while we are accounted for within it. In a sense she makes us complicit with the scene's action.

Smooching is sloppy and slouching is standard in Eisenman's beer gardens. If there is a smile to be found it's churlish. Of all the drinking episodes in the exhibition (there are many) *Beer Garden with Big Hand* is the largest and most complex. It's loaded with socio-cultural references contextualizing it decisively within the contemporary moment. Someone thumbs the touchscreen of a mobile device, an iPhone lays face up on a table displaying a melodramatic SMS-chat thread, while deep in a corner another patron holds a newspaper with the headline "Drones over Occupy Protest."

Fig. 2. *Nicole Eisenman,* ***Watermark*** *(2012), etching, image 45.7 × 61 cm, paper 60.6 × 74.6 cm. Edition of 20. Published by Harlan & Weaver, Inc. Image courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York.*

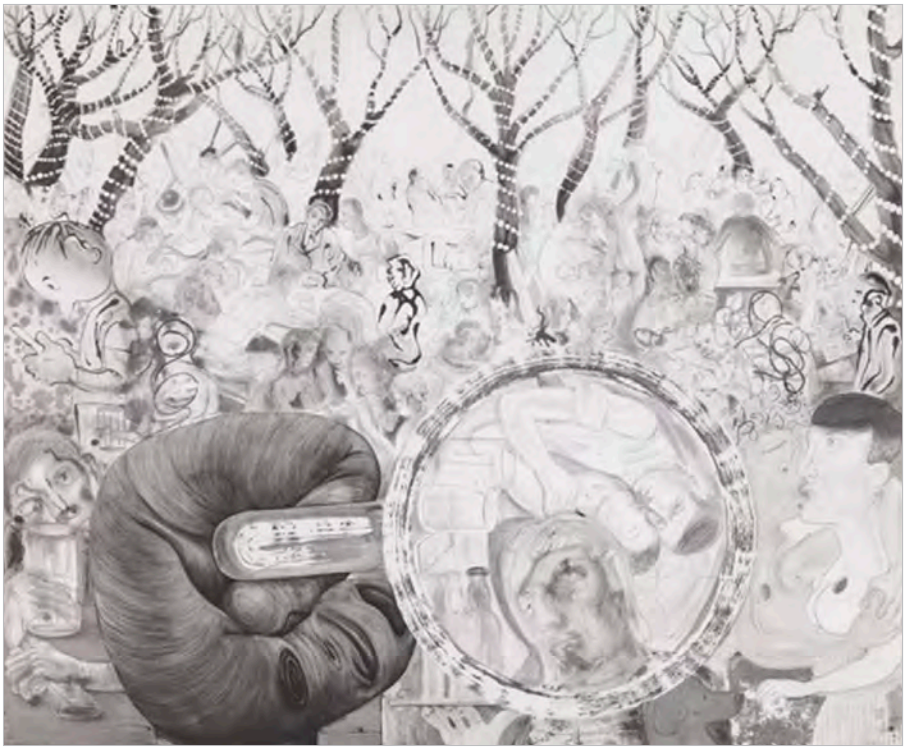

Fig. 3. *Nicole Eisenman,* ***Beer Garden With Big Hand*** *(2012), etching, image 101.6 × 121.9 cm. Edition of 12. Published by Harlan & Weaver, Inc. Image courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York.*

This might be read as a form of social critique; the beer garden is a communal environment and phones and newspapers are ultimately tools that keep individuals connected with their communities, but within the physical mass there is a psychological distance that isolates all these hip tipplers. It's a packed house, but many seem to be drinking alone—including the viewer.

That these pieces are among the most worked is evident in the notation beneath their imprints. *Watermark* is labeled as the 18th-state print. It shows. The scrupulous attention to detail and the rich tonal range, itself a testament to careful aquatinting, encourages a long look and rewards it with an abundance of visual data that amplifies the narrative thrust of this domestic tableau. *Beer Garden with Big Hand* is only a second state print, but one can see that Eisenman continued to work on the image after it was printed. Drawing with graphite atop the ink she included more characters in the deep space and further defined a few near the foreground. Unlike *Watermark*, which is an edition of twenty, this big etching is actually a one off work of art that could even qualify as mixed media.

This is the first exhibition devotedly solely to Eisenman's prints. She has worked with the medium in the past, though never with such concentrated activity. For the last eighteen months, printmaking has been her principal focus and that engagement is evident—these are not minor works. If there were ever any danger of Eisenman's prints being seen as somehow less significant than her paintings, sculptures, or installations, this show has forestalled it. ■

Charles Schultz is a New York-based art critic.