

ARTFORUM

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WISE GUYS

JOHANNA FATEMAN ON THE ART OF NICOLE EISENMAN

ONE MORNING IN FEBRUARY, Nicole Eisenman introduces me to the enormous plaster guys in her studio. *Guys* is her word; she clarifies right away that she means it in a gender-neutral sense. The first one we look at sits sideways, legs crossed at the ankle, on the back of another who's on all fours, head down, hands and knees planted resolutely to form a stable seat. The sitting guy's big palms are outstretched in a beatific pose; they (singular) have a diamond-shaped thatch of wormlike hair growing from their flat chest, and nothing definitive at their crotch. But the uneventful meeting place of the giant's strong thighs, which are textured with vehement crosshatching, feels physiologically plausible somehow, not like the chaste placeholder of a Barbie or Ken.

Throughout her three decades of drawing, painting, and printmaking, Eisenman has patchworked a world from every possible art-historical mode of figuration, bending styles and techniques easily, and often comically, to her will. In her wildly varied body of work, a sensitively observed queer morphology surfaces. One spots hard faces with soft bodies and vice versa. Hairstyles, T-shirts, sneakers, costumes, and slouching silhouettes elude decisive categorization. In the past, Eisenman's own sexuality and gender—nonchalant bearing have encouraged certain interpretations—ambiguous characters are read as lesbians—but who really knows how her figures identify? In our conversation, she freely anthropomorphizes her guys, as if to suggest that it's up to them to decide.

Sculpture is not totally new to the Brooklyn-based artist. When I visit her studio, Eisenman has just closed an exhibition at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden that included more than twenty sculptures. Yet she underscores the novelty of working at this scale, the exhilaration of feeling like a beginner again, and the joy of engaging with other people (assistants, engineers, fabricators) in contrast to the solitude of painting. "This is my favorite object in the studio right now," she tells me, holding out a huge 3-D-printed reproduction of a disposable coffee cup's plastic lid, "but I didn't make it." She shrugs with wonder and a little ambivalence. "I did nothing!" Still, her practice is far from hands-off. A windowsill display of test tchotchkes shows her to be experimenting with materials from cement and self-hardening clay to various waxes, polymers, and paper pulp. Her approach to materials roughly correlates with the collisions of texture, color, gesture—even historical reference—in her paintings.



Nicole Eisenman, *Self-Portrait with Exploded Whitney (detail)*, 1995, acrylic and ink on wall. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Nicole Eisenman, *Betty Gets It*, 1993, ink on paper, 51 × 40".

Tacked to the wall of her studio is a sketch for a monumental sculpture, *Procession*, of which the aforementioned couple will be one part. A trudging Goliath, taller than all the other figures, leads the way. Looped around their waist is a cable that pulls a strange cart or stripped-down parade float with square tires. Another guy walks beside the cart. That's the pole bearer, Eisenman tells me. Rendered in Eisenman's familiar, expert hand, the torqued figure looks over their shoulder at the sad, flagless flagpole, whose base they hug; it has broken, snapped backwards. This character, which has left the studio for the foundry to be cast in bronze, is modeled on the body of a twelve-year-old girl, the artist notes. Eisenman has given them a stubby penis.



Nicole Eisenman, *Self-Portrait with Exploded Whitney (detail)*, 1995, acrylic and ink on wall. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

While other elements remain off-site or secret, there's one more guy on the premises to check out—the humble protagonist of *Procession* (which will be fifty-three feet long, all told). Head bowed, plaster ass in the air, *Museum Piece con Gas*, as the individual sculpture is titled, will ride in the cart on its hands and knees, partially encrusted in lumpy brown wax. Their sloping back is covered in puffy raw sheep's wool. And when the piece is complete in May—installed on the sixth-floor balcony of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art for the institution's seventy-ninth Biennial—the hero's gaping butthole will appear to expel clouds of gas. "Not tear gas," she jokes grimly, referring to recent revelations that Whitney vice-chairman Warren B. Kanders owns Safariland, a manufacturer of "law-enforcement products," including the tear-gas canisters fired at asylum seekers at the southern border this past fall.



Nicole Eisenman, *The Whitney Buy Any Ol' Painting Sale*, 1995, mixed media. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Part operatic history painting, part WPA mural, *Self-Portrait with Exploded Whitney* takes aim at the circus of the Biennial, and maybe of the art world more generally.

"It's base, juvenile," Eisenman says, explaining her motivation for the sculpture's most spectacular feature. "Farting is like . . . blowing air; it's like speech." In the pause, I remember it's the day of the State of the Union address. "We live in a political moment that is pornographic. And pornographic politics deserves a pornographic response," she says, gesturing at the dark orifice.

Self-Portrait with Exploded Whitney, Eisenman's in situ work created for the 1995 Biennial (her first), similarly features a juvenile joie de vivre with an edge of anger and a vision of apocalypse. Consigned to a wall in the basement of the Whitney's former home on Madison Avenue, the thirty-foot panorama depicts the iconic Marcel Breuer building as a bombed-out site, a vaguely Cubist heap of rubble and paintings. With their backs facing the viewer, exposing their stretcher bars, the works can't



Nicole Eisenman, *Le Kiss Deux*, 2015, ink on paper, 50 1/2 x 45".

be identified; one can only guess which American masterpieces have been damaged or destroyed. In the busy composition's dead center, Eisenman sits on scaffolding. She's a small figure we see only from the back, framed by dense chaos, working away, unperturbed, on a large-scale piece in the now open-air basement.

Part operatic history painting, part WPA mural, the tightly rendered work takes aim at the circus of the Biennial, and maybe of the art world more generally, while also depicting the complicity, alienation, and isolation of Eisenman's position within it. It's worth recalling that this Biennial, curated by Klaus Kertess, followed the media shit show of the historic, unprecedentedly diverse 1993 edition, organized by Elisabeth Sussman with Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, and Lisa Phillips. Depending on whom you ask, Sussman's lightning rod of an exhibition either set the terms or represented the nadir of so-called identity politics in contemporary art. Critical consensus skewed heavily toward the latter, decrying the socially engaged post-Conceptualism the show favored as PC agitprop and pleasureless moralizing. You could say Eisenman answered, two years later, with the pleasure of destruction, eschewing institutional critique for obliteration.

Even before this presidency, Eisenman zeroed in on the pathetic flip sides of the masculine archetypes that drive each cycle of our fresh hell, from Tea Partiers to frat guys.

The buzz surrounding Eisenman's early career was not unrelated to, or unaligned with, Sussman's inclusive, activist agenda. *Identity*, in Eisenman's case, coalesced around the third-wave figure of the "bad girl," that 1990s symbol of sexual transgression as political rebellion. The artist was included in two different group exhibitions with that phrase in their titles: "Bad Girls West," at the Wight Art Gallery at UCLA in 1994 (which ran concurrently and shared a catalogue with "Bad Girls" at the New Museum in New York), and, a year earlier, an unrelated "Bad Girls" at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The well-intentioned term, embarrassing now (maybe then too), aspired to capaciousness while conjuring both youth and a Lita Ford femininity; it framed women's art as slutty misbehavior, albeit metaphorically; and, of course, it constrained meaning. "I was insulted. I didn't want to be limited by it," Eisenman says, reflecting on the logic of such groupings, which were so typical of the era. Maybe it's no coincidence that *Exploded Whitney* contained none of the bad-girl (i.e., raunchy lesbian) figuration that had largely characterized her work up to that point—nothing like the pornographic tryst of Bedrock's matriarchs in *Betty Gets It*, 1993, for example, or the nude female gladiator types of her neoclassical tableau *Minotaur Hunt*, from the same year.

Ultimately, Eisenman was also granted space on an upper floor of the museum, where she installed *The Whitney Buy Any Ol' Painting Sale*, an intricate and hilarious arrangement of (primarily) works on paper. Satirizing the Biennial spectacle from another angle, she presented writhing scenes of consumer frenzy, in which crowds fight over canvases from the museum's collection. In a cartoon narrative again inked directly on the wall, she depicted a guided roller-coaster tour of the exhibition, beginning with a Whitney Houston record cover. ("Welcome to my show!")



Nicole Eisenman, *Sleeping Frat Guy*, 2013, plaster, ceramic, 31 x 24 x 18'.



Nicole Eisenman, *Heading Down River on the USS J-Bone of an Ass*, 2017, oil on canvas, 10' 7 1/4' x 8'9".

This year, Biennial curators Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta welcome their selected artists to a freshly fraught context—and, as of this writing, one artist, Michael Rakowitz, has withdrawn. Outrage over Kanders’s presence on the Whitney’s board seems poised to take center stage in a broader, overdue reckoning with “artwashing” (cultural philanthropy’s not-so-benevolent manner of laundering ill-gotten gains) as the Biennial approaches. Just as recent protests, including die-ins at the Guggenheim and the Met spearheaded by artist Nan Goldin, have drawn attention to the Sackler family’s role in the opioid epidemic (as owners of Purdue, the maker of OxyContin), objections to the Whitney’s association with Safariland may help to expose the big business of authoritarian rule. The “less lethal weapons” supplied by Kanders’s company were also used by the militarized police force in Ferguson in 2015 and against protesters at Standing Rock more recently; they are sold (as Kander put it to the Whitney’s board in response to a letter of protest signed by ninety-five of the museum’s employees) to “government institutions, domestically and internationally.”

Eisenman seems to seize on art-historical moments when abstraction erodes the binary extremes of Western figuration.

Meanwhile, the troubling issues raised by the last Biennial, especially around the ethics of representation, still linger. The 2017 edition was also historic and unprecedentedly diverse; and it, too, was a lightning rod that, once again, either set the terms or represented the nadir of so-called identity politics in contemporary art—but for different reasons. The inclusion of Dana Schutz’s painting *Open Casket*, 2016, which depicted lynching victim Emmett Till’s mutilated face, and protesters’ indictment of Schutz’s use of that image, precipitated one of the bitterest art-world debates in recent memory.

Procession marches downcast into the thick of things like a ludicrous, antiheroic take on *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, a reimagining of the Continental soldiers’ valiant exploit as an absurdist fool’s errand. In place of ice floes and snow, Eisenman offers the impediment of nonrolling wheels; in place of the flag bearer who battles buffeting winds, there is the hapless giant dragging a pole; in place of a boat carrying the future first president of the United States, a platform for a farter. Since 2016, our nation’s symbols have appeared in Eisenman’s work with increasing urgency, in ways both oblique and overt. In her large-scale allegorical painting *Heading Down River on the USS J-Bone of an Ass*, 2017, a zombie sailor, a piper in a sweater vest, and a pink-cheeked George Grosz-style businessman crouch in an enormous donkey mandible, sailing obliviously through toxic runoff toward a deadly drop.

In *Dark Light*, 2017, a man in a maga-red cap and camo gear stands in the bed of a pickup truck, his flashlight projecting a cone of gloom. But even before this presidency, Eisenman zeroed in on the pathetic flip sides of the masculine archetypes that drive each cycle of our fresh hell, from Tea Partiers to frat guys. It’s the identity politics of the white ethno-state, or some closely related fucked-up fantasy world, that she explores in these works, which, in the scheme of her practice, stand as chilling foils to the inviting spaces of her Brooklyn beer



Nicole Eisenman, *Dark Light*, 2017, oil on canvas, 10' 7 1/4" x 8' 9".



Nicole Eisenman, *Sketch for a Fountain*, 2017, plaster, bronze. Installation view, Münster, Germany. Photo: Henning Rogge.

gardens, living rooms, and lesbian bedrooms. But the towering, gentle guys in her studio are more mysterious; they're not from either world. Unmoored from a pictorial setting, their struggle feels semitranscendent, as if Eisenman were pushing them, and stretching herself, toward a tongue-in-cheek (though not sarcastic) metaphysical realm.

It's a trip to consider her plans for *Procession* while flipping through monographs of her early work. There is no era of her career in which her art is not immediately identifiable as hers, but between the 1990s and now she has moved from brilliantly scattershot installations and feats of Boschian or Italian-Renaissance draftsmanship to a more painterly, anything-goes approach. Comic-book mummies and Fauvist villagers mingle on the street or wade through shit in vibrant canvases; a legion of severe and sheepish faces stares out from expressionistic prints; busts of passed-out frat guys parody Brancusi's dreaming muse but still achieve their own tragicomic beauty. Brancusi has, in fact, loomed large in her work for a while, even in her 2-D output. The smushed-together lovers of *Romantic Kiss*, 2007; *Springtime Kiss*, 2011; and *Le Kiss Deux*, 2015, are all shown in profile, recalling the almost symmetrical, almost androgynous figures of the modernist sculptor's famous blocky embrace. Eisenman seems to seize on art-historical moments when abstraction erodes the binary extremes of Western figuration. With erudition and irreverent criticality, she repurposes these slippages in service of her own vision of gender indeterminacy.

When we discuss *Sketch for a Fountain*, 2017, Eisenman speaks of the puzzle of imagining a gender-nonconforming figure (actually, five of them) in real space. The varied bodies are "big and strong and heavy and, though I'm a little tired of this word, *queer*," she explains, confident in her results but somewhat mystified by the alchemy of her own process. Finding positions or stances suitable for these humanely in-between nudes, whether queer or something else entirely, was a challenge too. Commissioned for the most recent iteration of the decennial exhibition *Skulptur Projekte Münster*, *Sketch for a Fountain* was her first public artwork. A video tour I find on YouTube shows its idyllic, grassy site on a June day. The larger-than-life figures, exuding an unexpected, Rodin-like gravitas, are gathered around a small reflecting pool. Birds chirp and a jogger cuts through the frame as the camera circles the piece to show anatomical distortions, unarticulated genitals, and studied poses of leisure. One bronze figure stands with hands on hips, ankle-deep in the pool, a stream of water flowing from the side of their leg; a reclining plaster person leans back on their elbows, their calves spraying arcs of water like a sprinkler. This is the figure that, as some readers may recall, was decapitated by persons unknown one night in July. Eisenman thinks the act was not malicious, exactly, but rather executed with the intention to keep the head. (The neck was carefully sawed through rather than violently smashed off.) A couple of months after the beheading, on the eve of the German elections—during which the far-right AfD party won enough votes to enter parliament for the first time—Fountain was spray-painted with a swastika and a cruciform cock and balls, its figures' faces and crotches blotted out with bright blue.



View of Nicole Eisenman's Studio, Brooklyn, New York, 2019.



View of "Nicole Eisenman: Baden Baden Baden," 2018–19, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden, Germany. From left: *Flag Pole + Eagle in a Box*, 2018; *Nothing Hysterical*, 2016; *One Eye*, 2016. Photo: Judith Fruzsina Jesse.

The artist says she doesn't want to assume that the work was targeted because its maker is a queer and a Jew, or because its beyond-gender qualities constitute an affront to fascist norms. She thinks the sculpture may have been selected simply because it had garnered so much press. (The Münster community has launched a crowdfunding campaign to permanently install a version of the piece, which was voted the most popular of the exhibition.) Eisenman notes that it might be because she's a queer and a Jew, and thus historically proximal to so-called populist hatred and violence, that she wasn't unduly upset to hear about the vandalism—rather, she was relieved that a group sculpture, not a group of people, was attacked that night.

Procession deploys and develops *Fountain's* lexicon of ambiguous embodiment, and will likewise change—even if not purposefully damaged or defaced—as it is subjected to the elements. The unstable whiteness of raw plaster left outdoors (to which Eisenman sometimes applies charcoal, revealing its scratched, marked, or abraded surface texture) and the gradually changing patina of bronze will contribute, intentionally, to the profoundly unfixed condition of her figures. But the newer guys, while of the same species, exist far from the peace of the reflection pool. Elements of their dystopian predicament echo another, previous work, *Flag Pole + Eagle in a Box*, 2018, which, as the title suggests, is composed of a massive pole—planted in the earth but folded like a bendy straw and tipped to rest on the ground, with a giant coffee-cup lid roped to it—and a dumpy, bedraggled plaster eagle, flopped belly-up in a cardboard box. A close cousin of that eagle, also in a box, will appear in her Whitney commission. The dejection of the heraldic animal speaks for itself; the destruction of the pole evokes the loss of another American symbol, as well as the impossibility of hoisting up a new one in its place.

A few days after our visit, I text Eisenman asking for photos of the guys and her studio-wall sketch to refer to as I write, and I send her a picture I found of Rodin's studio in the Paris suburbs, circa 1912. The image features an enormous nude guy on his hands and knees, ass pointed toward the camera: Rodin's farter. Actually, it's his portrayal of Ugolino, the aristocrat in Dante's *Inferno* who, imprisoned with his sons for treason and left to starve, ate their corpses.

In the pictures she sends me, I see her guys have changed a lot since my visit. (Coincidentally, one of them now has a postcard of *The Thinker*, framed by a hive-shaped tangle of debris, glued to its back.) I realize that, for all my speculation, it's impossible to say how her piece, once bolted to the balcony, will come off. A scene of giants trudging across the Delaware and through the gates of hell does seem like the kind of terrible, funny, sutured allegory you might expect her to whip up for the Whitney this year, but even that delirious narrative might be too clear-cut. The radical indeterminacy of her work, in this case at least, seems to characterize not just bodies and body parts but the panoramic whole of the ramshackle cavalcade—and its relationship to our political backdrop, now and come May.

For a moment, Eisenman suggests the existential slog of her figures is optimistic. "They are all facing in the same direction; their feet are all pointing forward. There is a connotation of movement, which is hopeful," she says. Pausing to glance around the studio again, though, she reconsiders. "I don't think we get to have a hopeful sculpture right now. I take that back."

Johanna Fateman is a writer and musician and the editor, with Amy Scholder, of Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin (Semiotext[e], 2019).