

EXHIBITION

Anatomy as Design and Art: Nicole Eisenman at the Anton Kern Gallery

By FRANCES BRENT | June 20, 2017

One of the pleasures of Nicole Eisenman's new show, *Faces: Painted Reliefs* at the Anton Kern Gallery in New York, is the way it deconstructs the design of the human face, both in profile and frontally: its surfaces, holes and slits, wedges, bulges, and declivities. At the same time that the artist breaks down the solid geometry of the face, she demonstrates how everything that is human is distilled there, from passion to playfulness and violence to terror. You can see this in the silver painted, contemplative and scruffy bearded countenance (all the work is untitled) that stares forward with what seems like an array of complicated emotions and thoughts. Eisenman's formal exploration of shape, line, and volume is clear here, but the work manages to approach the expressive intensity of primitive masks.



Eisenman, who was a 2015 MacArthur Fellow, is best known for her evocative and representational figurative paintings but she's also recognized for her mastery as a graphic artist and, more recently, as a sculptor. With each medium she stakes out, she enlarges her analysis of the human figure, the human face, and sometimes the human comedy, carrying forward her keen and often satiric vision. This exhibition includes twenty relief sculptures constructed from insulation foam, glue, wood, cardboard, and found materials (such as cord, the lid of a can, and a pair of goggles) cast in aluminum and vividly colored with oils. The faces are drenched in the same vibrant hues used in her paintings—orange, red, yellow, turquoise, and sometimes gold or silver, sharply contrasted with green, gray, black, and brown. Something magical happens when they come together. Sometimes the paint is applied in splashes, sweeps, and globs, and at other times it glistens like enamel. A portion of the masks are almost flat like the elongated burnt red face covered with abrasions and scratches, which you could either read as the etched lines of intaglio or scarification, while others jut into three-dimensionality, especially the ones which comically wear hats. It's been Eisenman's habit to play with the ambiguities that are produced when figures are reduced to their constituent parts as with a set of separated profiles which could fit together as a unified whole. Several of the masks are dream figures such as the surreal silver face, encircled by what looks like a cord of bunched-up aluminum foil, with cut-out images of cats peeking from behind the edge of its nose. It's often the case with design and art that you leave the work and see things differently. In this case, you may well find yourself putting together any odds and ends your eye lands upon and finding a face.