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HISTORICAL FRICTION: NICOLE EISENMAN AT THE NEW MUSEUM AND ANTON KERN, NEW YORK

BY Alex Greenberger POSTED 06/09/16

Nicole Eisenman's thrilling New Museum show, "Al-ugh-gories," opens with *Deep Sea Diver* (2007), a painting that might as well be a self-portrait. In it, a diver stands on a dock, having just emerged from the sea, his suit still a little wet. What's remarkable about this painting is the diver's expression—his almond-shaped eyes portray a real sense of malaise. That diver, not unlike Eisenman, has gone below the surface (of art history, in Eisenman's case), seen what's there, and come up fatigued.

Unlike most of Eisenman's art, *Deep Sea Diver* is fairly straightforward; the rest of the work is often as droll as Woody Allen's best films and as incisive as the best feminist art. (Consider *I'm with Stupid*, a 2001 painting in which a pants-less man gazes down at his underdeveloped penis.) When she's at her best, Eisenman tears into art history as a lame, white, and male narrative, while still managing to laugh at serious problems.

Hers is a style and attitude that came about naturally. After studying at RISD and immersing herself in the Lower East Side scene in the '90s, Eisenman began working in many mediums. A few years after making a self-portrait featuring an exploded Whitney Museum, she settled into her signature painting style, which tends toward figural scenes with the LGBTQ crowd and women spotlighted. (She still makes sculptures, occasionally. Three are in the New Museum show; they are relatively weak in comparison to her paintings.)

Throughout "Al-ugh-gories" is a delicious distaste for the myth of the Great White Male Painter. *Were-Artist* (2007), for example, depicts a Picassoid painter as a horror-movie villain, his brush left dangling between two sharp, furry claws—his art has transformed him into a monster. Ironic as these paintings are, Eisenman is a genuine art-



Nicole Eisenman, *Under the Table 2*, 2014, oil on canvas, 82 x 65 inches. New Museum.

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history geek. Which painting is her slung-up Andromeda quoted from? How many Picabia (or Rosenquist?) references are crammed into her epic art-history allegory *Progress: Real or Imagined* (2006)? These allusions are fun, but they also have a serious endgame: to prove that art history is, fundamentally, also sort of boring. If you hear the same story over and over again, you know the outcome. Eisenman wants an alternate conclusion.

The most recent works in "Al-ugh-gories" are overtly queer

and feminist, and wildly beautiful, too. *Is it So* (2014) is a tender love scene shared by two women, one of whom goes down on the other. Next to them is a stack of books—Homer’s *Iliad*, Anne Carson’s red doc, a Dürer monograph—piled on an upside-down crate. Their relationship is allegorized by two blooming roses; a happy ending for these two isn’t far off.

At Anton Kern Gallery, a new body of work is more understated, though no less interesting. The show is called “Magnificent Delusion,” a perfect name for these paintings and sculptures about enjoying being an outsider.

Here, Eisenman interrupts her own narrative with a few abstract works that appropriate and subvert modernist styles. Three “Shooter” paintings, in which a squarish person holds a gun up to the viewer, are exciting for their assault on painting itself, but *One Eye* (2016), a cyclopean figure rendered in Picassoesque reductive forms, isn’t nearly as gripping.

Overall, Eisenman’s figural painting is more effective, and it helps that the style allows her to focus on a more cohesive topic: the way technology has affected communication. These new works are not groundbreaking—they feature images everyone knows—but they’re sweet and intimate, almost like Vermeer interiors for the iPhone age. One painting shows a man doodling on his phone as a G train pulls into the station; another depicts a woman and a cat on a train, with the human engrossed in something on her laptop.

The most effective paintings in this show are two-person scenes. In *Long Distance* (2015), two androgynous people have a conversation via webcam. Eisenman collapses any sense of space, so that it feels as if the yellow person inside the screen and the plaid-shirted, Nikes-wearing one outside of it are together—their heads appear to be one. It’s obvious that Eisenman did a lot of thinking about how *Long Distance* would look, but it feels spontaneous, even effortless. It reminded me of something the artist says in the “Al-Ugh-Gories” catalogue: “The painting forms itself. The idea forms itself as you go.”



Nicole Eisenman, *TM and Lee*, 2016, oil on canvas, 128 x 104 inches. Anton Kern.

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