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Nicole Eisenman Has Both Style and Substance

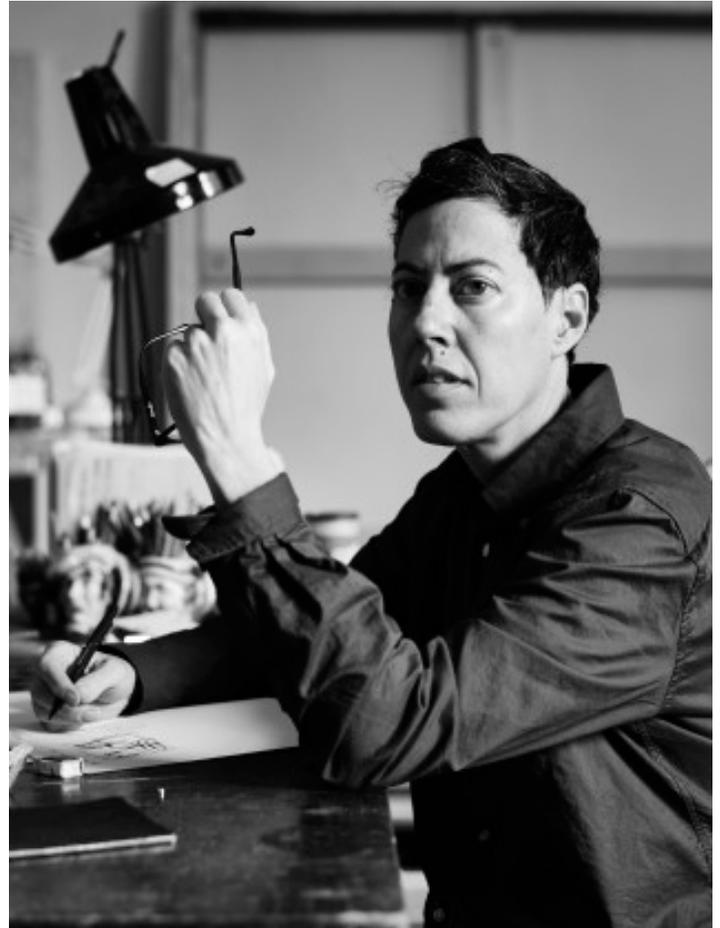
With a wildly eclectic body of work that draws on art history, autobiography, queer politics, and popular culture, Nicole Eisenman has become an artist to reckon with.

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Nicole Eisenman was buying bacon at the Pines Pantry on New York's Fire Island last September when a number she didn't know popped up on her iPhone. The caller informed her that she had won a MacArthur Fellowship, aka the "genius grant," which guarantees a stipend of \$625,000 over five years—no strings attached. Like just about everyone who gets the call, Eisenman thought it was a joke. "I kept walking around the supermarket, saying, 'Really? Are you sure?'" she tells me as we're sitting in her studio in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn. "And then I just dropped my shopping and went to lie down on the dock. I heard these words about why I got it: 'American artist' and that I was 'central to how art is progressing forward,' and I was just weeping. It's hard to shake those feelings that you're not quite part of the club, especially as a queer woman artist and a figurative painter. Maybe I've been around long enough that people are like, 'All right, you hung on—you can be part of the cultural conversation now.'"

When Eisenman came into her own in New York in the early 1990s, she was on its fringes. It was the height of the AIDS epidemic and the culture wars—a time ripe for the emergence of what the Hammer Museum's director, Ann Philbin, calls "Nicole's fierce, nasty queer-girl voice." Painting and figuration were just starting to regain art world acceptance, via the works of John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, and [Elizabeth Peyton](#), but Eisenman had yet to see her own desires reflected in anything she was looking at. Then, during a studio visit in early 1992, Philbin, at the time the director of the Drawing Center, fished an ink drawing out of a trash bin that Eisenman had done of Wilma Flintstone and Betty Rubble having sex. "She said, 'This is what you should be doing,'" Eisenman recalls. "She meant that I needed to speak personally. I was throwing away that point of view, because I thought there was no place for it. So the floodgates opened."

What poured out were collages, drawings, and paintings inspired by comics, pornography, and art history that challenged sexism and pop culture and celebrated female utopias. There were images of a lesbian-recruitment booth, packs of women taking men captive, horse-riding Amazons, all rendered with virtuosic panache. "She owned



Nicole Eisenman, in her Brooklyn studio. Photography by Adrian Gaut

that territory in a way that no one else did," Philbin says, pointing to a 1992 Drawing Center commission that was "like a WPA mural with sneaky dark humor and feminist politics. Even now, Nicole has this extraordinary ability to cut to the core of the toughest subjects with diabolical finesse and searing humor." Her breakout moment came during the 1995 Whitney Biennial: One of Eisenman's contributions was *Self-Portrait With Exploded Whitney*, a massive mural depicting herself painting the only remaining wall of a collapsed Breuer building as dozens of men flee from the wreckage. "Her subversion," says the painter [Amy Sillman](#), a longtime friend of Eisenman's, "really beamed out."

These days, Eisenman's ability to absorb art history and recast it as her own is so prodigious that looking at her output over her 25-year career, you might not fathom it as the work of a single artist. "I've never been able to home in on one way of doing things," she says. "For years, it caused me a lot of anxiety, but I'm finally okay with it." Renaissance, Baroque, social realism, German Expressionism? She's

been there, done that. But, as **Massimiliano Gioni**, the artistic director of New York's New Museum, notes, "she doesn't passively genuflect in front of art history; she resurrects it and camouflages it into our present." In one of her best-known series, of beer gardens, Eisenman updated French Impressionist café scenes, replacing 19th-century characters with the Brooklyn hipsters and queer artists who populate her Williamsburg crowd. In the past several years, she's been painting even more deeply autobiographical group tableaux that call to mind the haunted worlds of James Ensor or Edvard Munch. And then there are her monolithic faux-primitive heads, which were among the standouts of the 2014 "The Forever Now" exhibition at the **Museum of Modern Art**, the institution's first contemporary painting survey in 30 years.

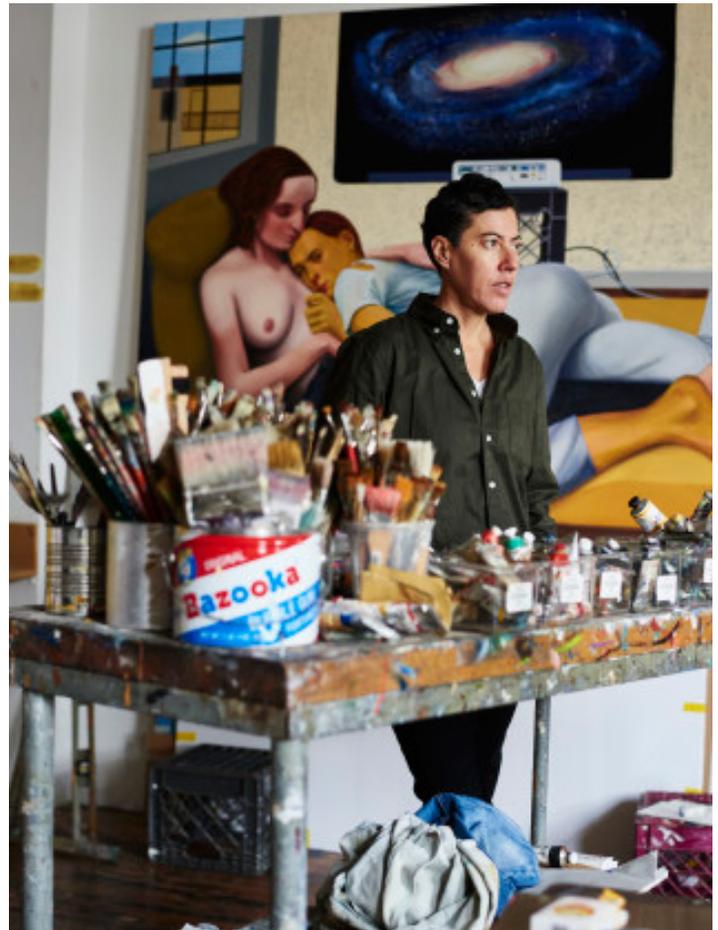
Finally at the center of the cultural conversation, Eisenman is the subject of two shows opening in May that explore her range. "Al-ugh-ories," co-curated by Gioni at the New Museum (May 4 through June 26), looks at her allegorical, narrative works; and at Anton Kern Gallery, beginning May 19, she will unveil recent paintings exploring her New York life. What connects the two is the artist's consistent focus on the figure. "How I understand the culture ultimately comes down to what I feel through my body," Eisenman says.

On this cold, rainy afternoon in February, bodies are in various states of repose in the huge canvases propped against her studio walls. She's been painting all day and is happy with her progress. Brushes, paints, and notebooks cover every available surface in the small room crammed with clamp lights, ladders, and a bookshelf. "It's the most tender work I've done," she says as she settles into an old sofa and plants her hiking boots on a low table strewn with catalogs. "These are me and my life. They're homey paintings, not born of complaint."

Many paintings feature members of the tight circle of artists and curators with whom she's shared a house on Fire Island for the past three summers. They call their community the Tamplex, a name coined by the artist **K8 Hardy** to describe one of the few mostly lesbian houses in the largely upscale gay-male community of the Pines. Eisenman likes to bring her sketch pad and water-colors to the beach. "She's constantly creating," says the artist **Ryan McNamara**, one of her housemates, referring to her endless doodling, as well as the chess set she made last summer. Eisenman pulls out the clay chess pieces when I ask about them, showing off a voluptuous queen and a king with a drooping ball sack. "He's kind of the dummy, and she's got some attitude," she says.

Eisenman, 51, is warm and direct, with cropped dark hair that accentuates her large, searching eyes. On the day of my visit, she is dressed in black pants, a boyish blazer, and a T-shirt with a red heart drawn on it, but a cold snap is in the forecast, and she tells me that she plans to put on three sweaters and long underwear because the studio doesn't have any heat. When I suggest that with her prize money she can surely afford a new space, she laughs. "I hadn't really thought about it. I like the confines of this studio. The only thing I've allowed myself is an assistant."

One unfinished painting depicts figures lying on the beach in a style reminiscent of Paul Gauguin's; another is a portrait of **Grace Dunham** (Lena's younger sister) and her girlfriend, Willa Nasatir, wrapped in an embrace. The couple posed for Eisenman, though she also works from drawings and found photographs or whatever's in her head. "It's



Eisenman, with works in progress in her studio. Adrian Gaut

the first time in, like, 15 years that I've painted a realistic portrait and used Italian glaze techniques," Eisenman says. "Maybe this is what getting the MacArthur does: I don't feel I have anything to prove, so I can do whatever the fuck I want."

Another new canvas offers a scene of friends at a party in Williamsburg—"an ideal moment of togetherness and community," she says. But disrupting the reverie are her so-called "Shooter Paintings," in which enormous abstracted faces, with the graphic pop punch of a Tom Wesselmann work, point a gun straight at the viewer. "They're like the crasher at the party," she says. "These terrible news stories that come crashing through in close-up. I'm fascinated by that contrast between tenderness and the intrusion of the real world." She's convinced that aggression and empathy—or "whatever the active feeling is"—get transcribed into paint by the artist. "To me, what carries the emotional content in paint is not the image; it's really the texture. Texture is sculptural, and it's a very primal experience."

Eisenman's father is a Freudian psychiatrist. As a kid growing up in suburban Scarsdale, New York, she loved listening to him interpret dreams. Often, she recalls, they'd go for walks and talk about what he was reading. But when she came out during her freshman year at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), he took it hard, she says, and they endured "a few rough years." In *The Session*, 2008, she painted what she deems was her worst nightmare for much of her career: "Ending up homeless, without shoes, on my father's psychiatric

couch. My way of coping with fear is to tame it with humor. Here's this person whom I love who is also my nemesis. It's not one thing or the other—it's all at the same time."

Her parents' home is still filled with folkloric paintings by her Polish-born maternal great-grandmother, a self-taught artist. As a teen, Eisenman took private art lessons with an inspiring teacher who had given up painting ("because she had been kind of cock-blocked from being part of the art world," Eisenman says). Most weekends, Eisenman would escape to the punk scene in the East Village, where the world she encountered "matched the way I felt. It was such a relief from Scarsdale." She moved to the city the day after she graduated from RISD, in 1987, and for the next five years took on a series of "excruciatingly shitty jobs," painting faux-marble finishes in hotel lobbies and patinas on headboards at a bed factory. At night, she would occasionally paint murals on her bedroom wall.

Finally, in 1992, Eisenman devoted herself full-time to making art, after she sold most of her drawings in her first group show, at Trial Balloon, a loft space in SoHo run by the artist Nicola Tyson. A year later, she was included in "Coming to Power," curated by the artist Ellen Cantor, at David Zwirner gallery. That survey of sexually explicit work made by and for women also presented pieces by Marilyn Minter, Cindy Sherman, Lutz Bacher, and Louise Bourgeois. Eisenman admits that at the time she had no idea who any of them were but recalls it as a heady period in which she felt "alive with pleasure" at being empowered for the first time. Critics quickly took notice. In the ensuing years, she took part in an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, in London, that she liked—and another at the New Museum that she didn't. Both shows, though entirely independent of each other, used the same title, "Bad Girls," and explored feminist ideas in works by female artists. By the early aughts, however, Eisenman felt stuck, tired of her tightly rendered crowd scenes and political jokes. What followed was a period of wild experimentation—in paintings, prints, and sculpture—as she sought to loosen up her style with color and texture. She began looking more closely at the 20th-century masters. The figures in paintings like *The Breakup*, 2011, and *Guy Capitalist*, 2011, with their squeezed-from-the-tube red mouths, shows her toying with color, form, and abstraction. But she remained politically engaged too: *The Triumph of Poverty*, 2009, portrays a downtrodden crowd following a leader who moves, literally, ass-backwards, while a child holds out an empty bowl.

Eisenman lives not far from her studio with her daughter, George, 9, and son, Freddy, 7. She shares custody with her ex-partner Victoria Robinson, a producer who still lives nearby, in the house that the couple restored and where Eisenman painted a mural in the kids' bedroom. Though Eisenman's apartment is in a stylishly converted warehouse at the epicenter of hipsterdom, its decor is decidedly home-spun, with a living room that doubles as a workspace. In the entry is a painting of a rugby match by her great-grandmother; above the sofa hang "trades" from friends: drawings by Dana Schutz and Jason Fox, a woodblock print by Tal R, and a drawing of Eisenman that Marlene Dumas made while the two sat in a bar in Amsterdam. Laid out on the living room floor are her children's fantasy worlds constructed in Legos. Freddy's is a Lower East Side tire shop; George's is an ocean-front house in the Pines. "I really like the gay-rainbow tree house she made with a pool in the front yard," Eisenman says.

When the kids were younger, Eisenman's nostalgia for a way of life



It Is So, 2014. Courtesy the artist, Anton Kern Gallery, Susanne Vielmetter.



Fishing, 2000. Collection of Craig Robbins.

she felt she was losing to parenthood found its way into her paintings of people out celebrating, she recalls. "But then I realized that wasn't true. That kind of life wasn't over." For her 50th birthday, last year, artist friends Leidy Churchman and A.K. Burns threw Eisenman what she describes as a giant "rager" in a local garage, with the transgender poet and model Juliana Huxtable playing the role of DJ. "It might be the last night in my life that I will ever party like that," she says.

In the wake of her breakup with Robinson in 2011, after 12 years together, Eisenman experienced a period of turmoil. "I was literally weeping when I was making these," she says, pointing to images of the monotype portraits of heads that were shown to great critical acclaim at the 2012 Whitney Biennial. "Everything is dripping and underwater. You know, sadness is very fruitful for me." She paused. "My emotional life and my work are so interconnected, but I have always felt embarrassed to talk about my art that way. It's not cool. But what are you going to do? I'm stuck with it."