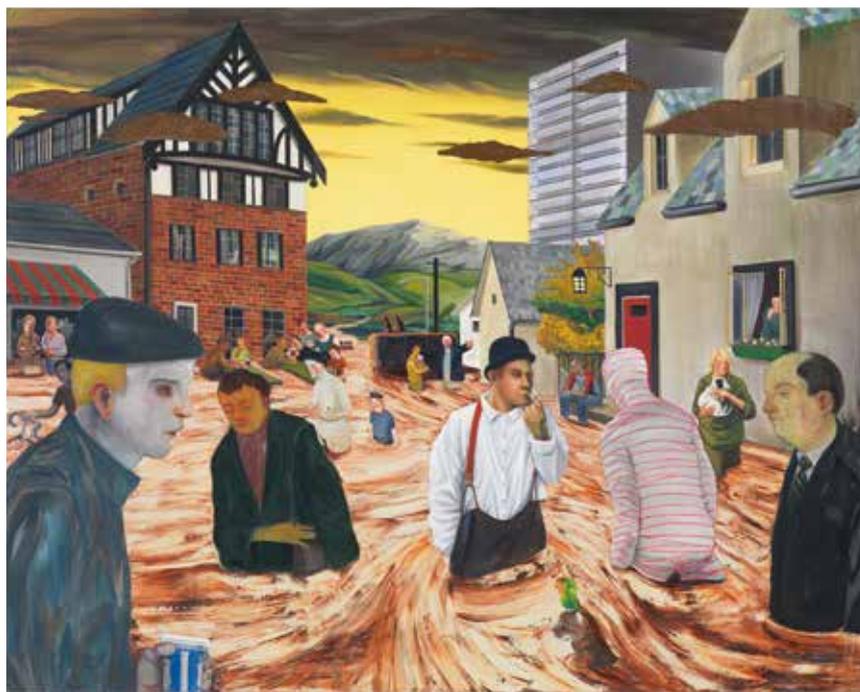


Nicole Eisenman's Green World

Eileen Myles on being the artist's subject

Words by Eileen Myles
Portrait by Jody Rogac

One of the most celebrated painters of her generation, Nicole Eisenman has known poet and novelist Eileen Myles for two decades. On the eve of Eisenman's first New York survey at the New Museum, Myles reflects on her friend's "messy Zen."



In her studio, Nicole Eisenman and I are looking at a painting of her friends Grace Dunham and Willa Nasatir, in which the two are embracing in a tender, shared, casual moment of love under a swirling galaxy shot on the wall by a projector atop a milk crate. You don't get this level of comfort except among friends; the love is shared with each other but radiating across to the painter, who is certainly part of the embrace. Grace's gaze is informing, divulging, quietly butch. It's a knowable heaven of distance, proximity, and imperfection.

The exact way of knowing the world that you do with a friend is the theme of much of Eisenman's new work. In May, she has two shows: Anton Kern Gallery will exhibit

these new, relational, mostly lesbian works, and then there's a larger survey of Eisenmania at the New Museum called "Al-ugh-ories." (When they proposed "Allegory" as the title of the show, Eisenman added the "ugh" as her kind of assent. Like an anti-formalist kind of acceptance. Her messy Zen.)

Weirdly, I had bumped into Grace, who is a writer, the week before I visited Eisenman, as we were boarding a plane. "Hey, I want to write you about sitting for Nicole!" I called to her. Moving ahead of me into the hole of the plane, Grace yelled back: "She gave me a big ass!" Grace wrote to me later that she's been painted twice by Eisenman. In the other, she and Willa are kissing; Willa is gorgeous and Grace is a big cartoon.

Which is part of the blaring, radiant, inside-outness of the Eisenman universe. You could be "real" or Betty Boop. If "allegory" encompasses the travel between these two states, then that is exactly the mode of her work. Because intimacy, even with oneself, is unsettling.

Above
Nicole Eisenman
Coping, 2008
Courtesy the artist and Susanne Vielmetter
Los Angeles Projects, and Galerie Barbara Weiss
Photograph © Carnegie Museum of Art



*“The time we spent
looking and being looked at
deepened our friendship”*



Opposite
Eisenman in her studio, New York
Photograph: Jody Rogac

Left
Nicole Eisenman
Portrait of Eileen Myles as a Man,
2015
Courtesy the artist and
Anton Kern Gallery, New York

With portraits, perhaps, this is magnified by the ever-shifting self-apprehension of the subject.

“Maybe everyone feels that way,” Grace wrote of her sitting, “seeing myself as goofy not sexy, a creature not a person ... but Nicole gets that (we talk about it all the time). I feel like Nicole has this whole big way of seeing into people: not just gender, but color (like blue or green), texture (maybe they’re snake skin haha) and like cartoon v. human. If she paints you, you don’t know if you’re gonna be a beautiful boy or a lumpy boulder.”

Eisenman loves literature and writers. In her studio, looking at a portrait of the writer Laurie Weeks on a train gets a laugh from the artist. “I did that one,” Eisenman tells me, “because of this funny story Weeks once told me about getting thrown off the train in San Diego.” The setting is cartoonish. The writer’s human sweetness is sedate, but the world around her is profoundly, even threateningly, carnivalesque. The world is going to have to do something to her. To unbalance her certain grace.

Eisenman shows me a party scene entitled *Another Green World*. I proudly yell “Eno!” and she confirms that that’s the record she was listening to for days. The title also comes from the critic Northrop Frye, who contended that, in Shakespeare’s work, the characters were always going off into the woods to find another mode of knowing or being—the green place that, in Eisenman’s sentiment, is where the poet or artist’s always gotta go.

Historically, the source of so much of the stability in her work, and also its lift-off, is William Blake. He’s the

ultimate seeing artist, the cartoonist who renders and tells and ties the world up in a separate green meaning. The succinct escape even from the room you’re standing in—an actual party—to another celebration, permanent and turning, in your head.

Eisenman painted me one day earlier this year. I’ve known her for twenty years, and have written about her half as many times, but to enter her subjectivity whole and entire was green as it gets. The time we spent looking and being looked at deepened our friendship. When I got home, she texted me a cell phone pic of the painting and asked if I could sit like this and take my own pic. My orange pit bull Honey lunged into the frame wanting to be part of the fun. The painting, which was commissioned for my selected poems, befuddled my publisher, but the portrait’s such a gift between old friends swapping worlds. Because that is the gig.

Eileen Myles’s latest poetry collection, *I Must Be Living Twice: New and Selected Poems*, is published by Ecco.

“Nicole Eisenman,” Anton Kern Gallery, May 19 – June 25, 2016
“Nicole Eisenman: Al-ugh-ories,” New Museum, May 4 – June 26, 2016

FW Eileen Myles will be speaking at Frieze Talks at 4pm, Thursday May 5, Frieze New York Auditorium. For details see www.frieze.com