

# The New York Times

## ART & DESIGN

### Nicole Eisenman, Fluidly Merging Past, Present and Future

By **ROBERTA SMITH** JUNE 2, 2016



"The Triumph of Poverty," left, and "Inhaling Object Symbol Guy," at the New Museum.  
Jake Naughton for The New York Times

Few figurative painters are doing what Nicole Eisenman is, jumping back and forth among starkly different styles while inviting us to consider an equally broad range of urgent themes.

Her constant movement may be more familiar in male painters inclined to the abstract. So it's not surprising that in her interview for the catalog for "Nicole Eisenman: Al-ugh-ories," her exhibition at the New Museum, she mentions her admiration for two stylistic gadflies, Sigmar Polke and Julian Schnabel.

Ms. Eisenman, an American who was born in Verdun, France, in 1965 and grew up in Westchester County, is similarly ambitious in her refusal to cultivate a signature style. Her refusal may also be more explicitly autobiographical; she is a lesbian who said in a recent interview in *The New York Times* that she is "gender fluid," and that she uses the "she" pronoun. In neither art nor life is a single identity desirable or even possible.

Unlike Polke and Mr. Schnabel, Ms. Eisenman is also committed to accessible narratives about life and its challenges. Her themes include hot-button issues like gender, race, economic inequality and guns, as well as timeless subjects like dread of the future, our relationship to technology and the comic-torturous life of the artist. At the same time, her works rarely fail to delight with surprising colors, lush paint passages, inventive textures and telling details. Her paintings are, in short, time-consuming in the best way: You want to study, enjoy and find comfort from them.

The New Museum show is a small survey that traces Ms. Eisenman's steady development in 22 paintings, from 1996 to 2014, and three recent sculptures. It is rounded out by a triumphal display of new paintings — as well as one sculpture and 32 drawings — at the

Anton Kern Gallery. At both locations, you may notice people giving these paintings the kind of time that is expended more frequently on contemporary works in video, performance and installation, which require it.

Ms. Eisenman's paintings declare open season on painting, borrowing from past and present, possibly to build a new kind of future. She makes both the history and craft of representation painting seem remarkably underused.

Her imagery ranges from cartoon figures, indebted to Philip Guston, to nearly academic rendering, and cover many of the points in between, including German Expressionism, Neue Sachlichkeit and several kinds of portraiture, while making surgical asides to photo-realist exactitude. In big, mural-like, multifigure scenes that entail wildly varied casts of characters, she regularly covers all these bases at once.

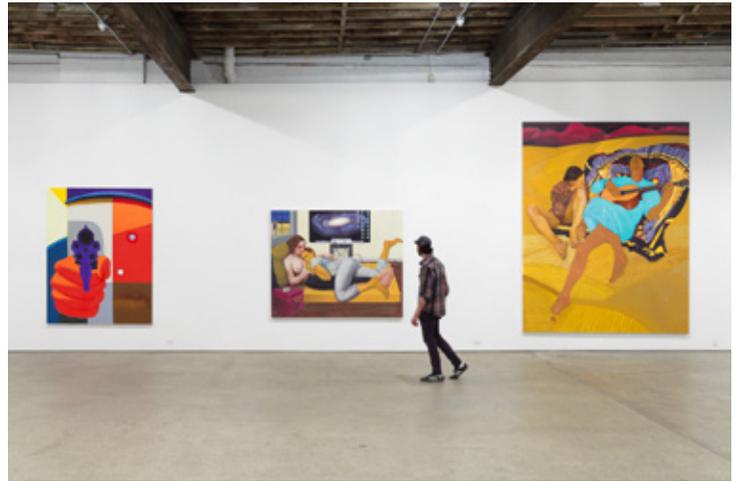
The most biting of the big works in either show is "The Triumph of Poverty" (2009), at the New Museum, which may be Ms. Eisenman's most creepily "al-ugh-orical." It shows a diverse group of people progressing, a bit like the walking dead, past a nude woman in a junk car whose rusting body is rendered in beautiful patches of muted reds and oranges, and a man standing next to her, in disheveled evening wear, whose anatomy embodies an insulting phrase. In case we miss the point, the hapless creatures from Bruegel's "The Blind Leading the Blind" cavort, in miniature, along the painting's bottom edge. Above them, on another tack, some anxious faces glimpsed in the back seat of the car are rendered in seductively thick paint that nonetheless can evoke the fragility of children.

More benign is the largest work at Kern, the crowded drinking/hook-up party of "Another Green World" (2015). It features around 20 figures in several painting styles, with skin colors ranging from ghost white to bright blue to various browns, and a variety of sexual preferences regarding dress, identity and partner. And for a crash course in Ms. Eisenman's technical varieties, track the ways hands are rendered here or, across the bottom, the shifting indications of denim jeans.

The title of "Another Green World" comes from the Brian Eno album that you'll find close to its center, being studied by one partygoer. But all is not groovy: High in the upper left corner, a woman in red has an anguished look on her cubistically angled face and her hands thrust between her legs, as if she had been sexually assaulted. Behind her a man leans back on a bed or couch, looking unconcerned.

Ms. Eisenman is forthright about her inspirations and sources. In the 2009 "Night Studio" (the title is from Guston), at the New Museum, the scene of two scantily clad women on a chaise is flanked by stacks of monographs, rendered with trompe l'oeil accuracy, on Picasso, Goya, Bruegel, Kirchner and Rousseau, along with Peter Doig and Nicola Tyson, who are Ms. Eisenman's contemporaries. The painting is a lively mix of references and techniques. One of the women is voluptuous, pink and Rubenesque; the other is distinctly yellow (Gauguin's Tahitians, but also "The Simpsons") and wears a cap and a chest-flattening bodice. In both cases, the skin colors have been scraped down to something not unlike skin, and they contrast wonderfully with fabric covering the large chaise: a series of tiny grids scratched into wet green paint.

The New Museum show is handicapped because, at least as seen here, Ms. Eisenman doesn't start working at full strength until around 2007. The exception is the bleak but beautiful 2004 "Beasley Street," which covers a panoply of neediness and degradation, from prostitution to begging. Gainsborough's "Blue Boy" is among the beggars. (He returns



Nicole Eisenman Thomas Müller/Anton Kern Gallery



Nicole Eisenman's "Another Green World" (2015).  
Nicole Eisenman and Anton Kern Gallery

in "The Triumph of Poverty" but is rendered in pea-soup green.) At far left, a woman with immense werewolf hands is being led into the scene by three little boys. This could be the artist herself, going by a nearby painting titled "Were-artist" (2007), where a more masculine painter has the same hands and wryly enacts the bouts of monstrousness that hard creative work can bring on.

Some of the strongest paintings at the New Museum are in Guston's late mode, enlisting his one-eyed roundheads in depictions of the object

moments of art-making or of youth. The sweaty, unshaven figure of “Selfie,” whose one eye is doubled by the screen of his cellphone, is having a dark night of the soul, with a thick mound of paint for a pillow. In “Under the Table 2,” a group of soused youths fix their single eyes on a giant stuffed olive and a sliced sausage whose luminous reds glow like the entrance to another world.

At Kern, the same sausage and olive figure in “Another Green World,” which could easily be the star, except Ms. Eisenman goes from strength to strength everywhere else. In “Subway 2,” a one-eyed brown roundhead turns to his cellphone as the train he has just missed trundles out of sight. In “One Eye,” Ms. Eisenman flirts, as she sometimes can, with abstraction. Here it’s with a hieroglyphic figure out of early Abstract Expressionism, rendered in blue against a beautiful field of browns loosely applied, this way and that.

In “Shooter 1” and “Shooter 2,” Ms. Eisenman gives guns to the large, planar, nearly abstract faces that she has made before. These bear down on us like police officers or terrorists, but with single eyes that suggest surveillance cameras. In the extraordinary “Morning Studio,” two cuddling women are the occasion for several styles of representation, various paint textures and an amazing summoning of light.

Relationships hover in the extremely realistic but weirdly foreshortened “TM and Lee,” in which two figures, who may be giants, sit on an expanse of sand of indeterminate size, and in “Long Distance,” a further elaboration of late Guston, in which two people who are Skyping form a totemic stack of spheres. The poignant “Weeks on the Train” brings together delicate rendering and Gustonian roughness from a giddy overhead view that could be called bird’s-eye or concerned parent. It centers on a college student engrossed in a laptop, her cat and two fellow travelers, while, out the window, passing landscape forms a wide vertical band that dominates the painting’s right side.

What does Ms. Eisenman make us see in her paintings? I would propose two well-worn words: difference and diversity, and the privileges they bestow or deny. She does this with a new force by building these terms implacably into the very making of her paintings, reminding us that they are as necessary to art as they are inevitable in life.

**Correction: June 7, 2016**

An art review on Friday about “Nicole Eisenman: Al-ugh-ories” at the New Museum in Manhattan and “Nicole Eisenman” at the Anton Kern Gallery in Manhattan, using information from the museum, misidentified a painting that depicts a panoply of neediness and degradation. It is “Beasley Street,” not “The Work of Labor and Care.” The review also misstated the number of paintings in the exhibition. It is 22, not 20. And the review described incorrectly one of the two people who appear in the painting “TM and Lee” at the gallery. According to the artist, one figure is intended to be of indeterminate gender; the work does not depict two women.

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“Nicole Eisenman: Al-ugh-ories” is on view through June 26 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, Manhattan; 212-219-1222, [newmuseum.org](http://newmuseum.org). “Nicole Eisenman” is on view through June 25 at Anton Kern Gallery, 532 West 20th Street, Manhattan; 212-367-9663, [antonkerngallery.com](http://antonkerngallery.com).

A version of this review appears in print on June 3, 2016, on page C17 of the New York edition with the headline: Fluidly Merging Past, Present and Her Future.



“Shooter 2” (2016), at Anton Kern Gallery.  
Nicole Eisenman and Anton Kern Gallery



Nicole Eisenman’s “Morning Studio” (2016), at Anton Kern Gallery.  
Nicole Eisenman and Anton Kern Gallery