Nicole Eisenman  

**MATRIX 248**

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

Late 2007 marked the beginning of a grim period in United States history, dominated by the Great Recession, the world’s largest and most complicated financial crisis since the Great Depression. By October 2009 the unemployment rate in the United States had spiked to 10%, and many Americans lost their retirement savings while their mortgages dissolved into foreclosures. Moreover, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were still grinding on, and the end of George W. Bush’s second term was coming to a close.

This is the cultural and political backdrop for the paintings and works on paper by Nicole Eisenman (b. 1965), featured in this exhibition, all of which coalesce around the theme of social and economic hardship. The artist’s initial response to this social upheaval was to make a series of colorful, shape-shifting, expressive montages of people drinking. Eisenman says this was a kind of momentary catharsis, “an act of healing.”2 Over the next several years, she continued to channel this melancholy (for her inexorably linked to Bush’s terms in office) into psychologically charged works, and to revisit montage portrayals on several occasions.

The subject of the economic depression is perhaps most pronounced in her history painting, The Triumph of Poverty (2009), a contemporary rendering of Hans Holbein the Younger’s (c. 1497–1543) lost painting of the same title.1 Eisenman consulted the Holbein composition via copies made after the destroyed work. In her iconic reinterpretation, a dilapidated, made-in-the-U.S.A. sedan replaces Holbein’s mule-drawn cart, foregrounding the ruinous state of the American automobile industry, which was notoriously bailed out by the government in 2009. The anonymous allegorical narratives and transforms them by linking them to the present day, rendering a biting visual anecdote:

To mitigate the feeling of desperation pervasive during the Bush era and the Great Recession, Eisenman began painting beer gardens. She first had the idea while looking at French Impressionist paintings, Auguste Renoir’s (1841–1919) Luncheon of the Boating Party (1880–81) in particular, but she later also honed in on Northern European Expressionists such as Edvard Munch (1863–1944) and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938). In these boozy Edens we see these art-historical styles swirling around, literally melting together at the bottom of a pint in Eisenman’s beer gardens. Her latest beer garden painting, Sloppy Bar Room Kiss (2011), depicts a fractious four-person duel among 21st-century Brooklynites, who have turned their backs on Bush’s terms in office, and who remember a time when the world’s largest and most complicated financial crisis since the Great Depression was just beginning.

For Eisenman the beer garden conjures an important universal space of play and human connection; this is a sentiment she likens to the San Francisco–based conceptual artist Tom Marioni’s dictum: “The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art.”4 For Eisenman the beer garden is an idyllic haven from the present day, distilling the bittersweet paradox of finding joy in the midst of hardship. It is a space of respite from the political and economic turmoil of the Bush era, and it is a space of escape from the political and economic turmoil of the Great Recession.

Apsara DiQuinzio  

CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR
Checklist

PAINTINGS

Beer Garden with Ulrike and Celeste
2009
Oil on canvas
65 × 82 in.
Hall Collection

Sunday Night Dinner
2009
Oil on canvas
42 × 51 in.
Collection of Arlene Shechet

The Triumph of Poverty
2009
Oil on canvas
65 × 82 in.
Collection of Dr. Thomas J. Huerter

Guy Capitalist
2010
Oil and mixed media on canvas
76 × 60 in.
Collection of Noel Kirnon

Sloppy Bar Room Kiss
2011
Oil on canvas
39 × 48 in.
Collection of Cathy and Jonathan Miller

Tea Party
2011
Oil on canvas
82 × 65 in.
Hort Family Collection

WORKS ON PAPER

Drummer
2011
Two-color lithograph
Paper size: 22 × 16¾ in.
B.A.T., edition of 30 plus 6 artist’s proofs
Published by Jungle Press Editions
Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York

Man Holding his Shadow
2011
Two-color lithograph
Paper size: 22¼ × 18 in.
B.A.T., edition of 30 plus 6 artist’s proofs
Published by Jungle Press Editions
Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York

Beer Garden with Big Hand
2012
Etching and graphite on paper
Paper size: 455/8 × 531/8 in.
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; museum purchase: bequest of Phoebe Apperson Hearst, by exchange 2012.28

Drinking with Death Kiss
2012
Drypoint with chine-collé
Paper size: 10¼ × 11¾ in.
Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York

Drinks at Julius
2012
Etching
Paper size: 10 ¼ × 11¾ in.
State proof, edition of 20
Published by Harlan & Weaver, New York

Drinks With Possible Spirit Type Entity
2012
Etching
Paper size: 10 ¼ × 11 ¾ in.
State proof, edition of 20
Published by Harlan & Weaver, New York

Ouija
2012
Six-color lithograph
Paper size: 37½ × 273/8 in.
B.A.T., edition of 30 plus 6 artist’s proofs
Published by Jungle Press Editions
Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York

Tea Party
2012
Two-color lithograph
Paper size: 48¾ × 371/8 in.
W.P., edition of 30 plus 6 artist’s proofs
Published by Jungle Press Editions
Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York

The Met
2012
Etching
Paper size: 20¾ × 16½ in.
Hors commerce, edition of 30
Published by Harlan & Weaver, New York

Threesome
2012
Two-color lithograph
Paper size: 373/8  × 30 in.
B.A.T., edition of 30 plus 6 artist’s proofs
Published by Jungle Press Editions
Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York

Untitled
2012
Etching
Paper size: 13 ½ × 105/8 in.
State proof, edition of 20
Published by Harlan & Weaver, New York

Twenty-six untitled monotypes on paper
2011
Paper size: 24 × 18¾ in., frame size: 28½ × 23½ in.
Collection of Dr. Thomas J. Huerter

Biography
Nicole Eisenman was born in 1965 in Verdun, France; she lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She has had solo exhibitions at Studio Voltaire, London; Le Hang, Inc., New York; Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Culver City, Le Male, Paris; Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, Kunschale Zürich, Zürich; the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca; and the Central Museum Utrecht, Utrecht, among others. She has participated in many group exhibitions at institutions including the New Museum, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Jewish Museum, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Reina Sofia, Madrid; and Ludwig Museum, Cologne.

8. Tom Marioni first performed The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends at the highest form of Art in 1970 at the Oakland Museum of California, and since then it has been done weekly in his studio.

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