



Nicole Eisenman

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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.¹ Moreover, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were still grinding on, and the end of George W. Bush's second term as president 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 MATRIX 248, 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 monotypes of people weeping. Eisenman says this was a kind of momentary catharsis, "an act of healing."² Over the next several years, she continued to channel this melancholia (for her inextricably linked to Bush's terms in office) into psychologically charged works, and to revisit monotype portraits on several occasions.

The subject of the economic depression is perhaps most pronounced in her history painting *The Triumph of Poverty* (2009), a contemporary reworking of Hans Holbein the Younger's (c. 1497–1543) lost painting of the same title (c. 1533). Eisenman consulted the Holbein composition via copies made after the destroyed work. In her ironic reinterpretation, a dilapidated, made-in-the-U.S.A. sedan replaces Holbein's mule-drawn cart, foregrounding the ruinous state of the American auto industry, which was notoriously bailed out by the government in 2009. The anonymous allegorical figures in Eisenman's painting are led by a surly capitalist whose haggard tuxedo trousers slide off to reveal his "ass-backward" model of leadership. A string tethered to a procession of miniature figures situated in the foreground of the painting falls from his left hand. The tiny motley crew derives from Pieter Breughel the Elder's (c. 1525–1569) painting of *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1568) in which six visionless men tumble into a ditch, a reenactment of a biblical allegory. Eisenman shrewdly fuses these narratives and transforms them by linking them to the present day, rendering a biting visual anecdote: the corrupt capitalist who, left to his own devices, guides his country into a crevasse of poverty.

This motif is resumed in *Guy Capitalist* (2010), a monumentalized, abstract painting of a phallic-shaped head with bulbous purple eyes blocked by two silver dollars applied to the surface of the canvas. African masks, floating ominously in indeterminate space, swirl around the head in a subtle allusion to the relation between first- and third-world economies. The masks also evoke the appropriation of African artifacts by Modernist painters and refer to Pablo Picasso (1881–1973); in fact the finely combed side-part and bulging ears of the head recall the likeness of the young painter of *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907).

The year 2009 is, moreover, distinct for the rise of the right-wing movement identified as the Tea Party, a nebulous political entity characterized by its opposition to market regulation and government in general, in addition to its social conservatism. Hearing of a notable New York art critic's comment that there had been no good paintings of the Tea Party, Eisenman was inspired to accept the challenge. A work that incisively captures the absurdity of that time, *Tea Party* (2011) depicts a fractious four-some holed up in a bunker, cut off from reality, preparing for their imminent apocalypse. Rifle in hand, a woman sleeps in a rocking chair while her compatriots—one of whom is a hunched-over, defeated Uncle Sam (no longer the triumphant leader)—sit around drinking and furling sticks of dynamite. Quintessential survivalist supplies stock their shelves: a five-gallon water jug, cans of Bumble Bee tuna, luggage, and stacked bullions of gold (made with real gold leaf applied to the surface of the canvas).

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 *Beer Garden with Big Hand* (2012); yet the contemporary moment remains paramount, underscored by the smartphones that lie on the table in *Beer Garden with Ulrike and Celeste* (2009)—a portrait of her two friends who are partners and commonly appear in her work. Eisenman has explained her interest in the beer gardens:

There's a whole genre of paintings, particularly French ones, of people eating and drinking, and the beer garden seems to be the equivalent, for certain residents of twenty-first-century Brooklyn, of the grand public promenades and social spaces of the nineteenth century. It's where we go to socialize, to commiserate about how the world is a fucked-up place and about our culture's obsession with happiness. It is healthy to look at sadness in the world and in yourself, and to dwell on it for a little while.³

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 *Sloppy Bar Room Kiss* (2011) is perhaps the culmination of this unconscious yearning for human connection in the face of cultural calamity. In this painting two androgynous heads meld together in a half-passed-out, drunken embrace; here desire supersedes anguish, and pure emotion knows no normative codes for behavior, no fear mongering, and no gender barriers. This is a territory Eisenman has been exploring for decades, yet in the works in this exhibition, she pushes her interests in political satire and flouting misguided authority to a new level, wherein the figure—in all of its expressive and stylistic versatility—remains her representational lodestar.

Apsara DiQuinzio

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



ABOVE
Beer Garden with Big Hand, 2012.

Sloppy Bar Room Kiss, 2011.

Photo: Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Culver City.

OPPOSITE *The Triumph of Poverty*, 2009.

FRONT *Tea Party*, 2011.

Photo: Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Culver City.



1. See "The Recession of 2007–2009," Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 2012, accessed March 14, 2013, bls.gov/spotlight/2012/recession/pdf/recession_bls_spotlight.pdf.

2. Conversation with the author, March 14, 2013.

3. Brian Sholis, "500 Words: Nicole Eisenman," *Artforum.com*, September 6, 2008, accessed September 18, 2012, artforum.com/words/id=21064.

4. Tom Marioni first performed *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art* in 1970 at the Oakland Museum of California, and since 1973 he has been doing it weekly in his studio.

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ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE
SUPPORT OF THE BAMPFA TRUSTEES.

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; Leo Koenig Inc., New York; Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Culver City; Le Plateau, Paris; Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs; Kunsthalle Zürich, Zürich; the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca; and the Centraal 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.

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 × 16 ¾ 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: 22 ¼ × 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: 45 ⅝ × 53 ⅙ 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: 10 ¼ × 11 ¾ in.

Courtesy Leo Koenig Inc., New York

Drinks at Julius

2012

Etching

Paper size: 10 ¼ × 11 ¾ 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: 37 ½ × 27 3/8 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: 48 ¾ × 37 ⅞ 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: 20 ¾ × 16 ½ in.

Hors commerce, edition of 30

Published by Harlan & Weaver, New York

Threesome

2012

Two-color lithograph

Paper size: 37 ⅜ × 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 × 10 ⅝ in.

State proof, edition of 20

Published by Harlan & Weaver, New York

Twenty-six untyped monotypes on paper

2011

Paper size: 24 × 18 ¾ in., frame size: 28 ½ × 23 ½ in.

Hall Collection