



NICOLE EISENMAN

SELECTED WORKS:
1994 - 2004

LEO KOENIG INC.

HOW TO LOOK AT NICOLE EISENMAN

An Essay by Amy Sillman

"The rules and structures sank under a tidal wave of crude forces... producing in everything the opposite of what the rules prescribed. Monstrous couplings were formed, and there was no longer anything that wasn't an occasion for offensive behavior."

Georges Bataille, *The History of Eroticism*, 1961

"Luca Signorelli, an excellent painter, of whom we must now speak... representing all the scenes of the end of the world with curious and fanciful invention, with angels, demons, ruins, earthquakes, fires, miracles of Antichrist, and many other such things, in addition to nudes, foreshortenings, and a number of fine figures, and their terror on that great and awful day."

Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 1536

"Eroticism is, in essence, a form of bodily excess (to borrow a key term from Bataille), in which the integrity of selfhood is inherently endangered. For the sake of fulfillment, transcendence, consummation, the intrinsic "discontinuity" of the human body is put at risk."

Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres Catalog*, 1995

Nicole Eisenman hit New York City

in 1987, a cute, lanky punk fresh out of art school, with a wandering eye and an omnivorous appetite. She had grown up an angry suburban teenager, daughter of a psychoanalyst, getting into mosh pits and physical fights, listening to alternative radio, and drawing obsessively in her bedroom. Now in 1987 she roamed the streets of Alphabet City alongside a veritable herd of other young rockers, queers, politicians, performers and art schoolers who swelled and swarmed into the East Village in search of fun and danger. This exploding social life was set against the backdrop of the Reagan era and its repressive politics, and in response, college students everywhere were absorbing critical theories about spectacle, commodity, social control, transgression, excess, flow, abjection, kitsch, feminism, queerness and performativity. And these were all things that pertained to Eisenman's daily life.



But Eisenman was looking at the work of the Old Masters. As she puts it, she was killing the father, but not the grandfather. The father in this case was French painting and cultural theory, and all of modernist painting from Pollock to post-minimalism. Eisenman was schooled in the art of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque. She had studied Michelangelo, Rubens, and Titian. "I knew Italian painting from the dark ages to the Baroque, but

I was blurry on Rococo and not interested in modernism." I asked her if she read a lot of feminist writing in school. She said emphatically "NO! I didn't even know it existed yet!" Evidently the credo that painting was dead hadn't bonked her over the head, nor the common idea at the time that painting was a dead white male language, a form that you were either supposed to denounce or to ignore. For a woman to say she enjoyed heroic painting would have been like wearing a button that said, "I love the phallocracy."

Opposite:

Cunt Hell of The Searing Heat

2004 Ink on Paper 40" X 60"

In the early 90s I heard the paintbrush described as a 'hairy-ended stick' thrust into the goo of the paint. If you were a female and for some reason felt the urge to paint, you might as well just pour the paint onto the floor, allowing the release and flow of "female" process to overcome the traditional hierarchies of narrative and composition.

But this was not for Eisenman. For her, figure painting was a touchstone. She was first turned on by the Italian painters she saw in art history classes, and then moved on to looked earnestly and excitedly at various discredited streams of contemporary art: the hacked figures of German Neo-Expressionists, the underground cartooniness of graphic artists in the East Village, the force field of large-scale male-dominated heroics. She wasn't much into the cooler stuff like the "Pictures" artists (Jack Goldstein, Troy Brauntuch, Robert Longo, and others) or the work at Metro Pictures or Pat Hearn, though there were exceptions: Cindy Sherman for her viscera, Haim Steinbach for his laconic humor, and Jeff Koons (with Cicciolina) for raw sex appeal. But mostly she found the conceptual art of the day much too dry.

It's no wonder, really, because like other punk and delinquent youth of the time, Nicole was also reading underground comics, watching horror films, and looking at

folk art, kitsch, porn, and other forms of low culture in all its resplendent terrible-ness. In fact, for all her love of old painting, Eisenman didn't attempt to become a more masterful kind of technician like Jenny Saville. As the person she was—among other



things, someone with a wicked good sense of humor—Eisenman looked not only to original Italian sources but to its grotesque outgrowths, however half-baked, goofy or second-hand, loving the lowly mutations of fine art as much as its more glorious original forms. She was thrilled to discover places between high and low, for example in the work of American artists like Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh and Grant Wood. Eisenman located a place that both derived

from and twisted the conventions of Italian Renaissance painting into an American vernacular. Taking it one step further, she perverted it. What is perversion? Deviation, diversion, misdirection, corruption, distortion, debauchery. A kind of fascinated love/hate thing. Where theory went in other people, into new content, new subject matter, new media, in Eisenman went straight to the heart of painting's form. Her warped renderings of bodies were queered in every sense of the word, were depicted with riotous unpredictability, anti-Puritanically taking delight in misbehavior on every level, straying as they did from good modernist painting and good modern politics.

Maybe part of Eisenman's fascination with old-fashioned painting is exactly its collapse. Like an unfamiliar, tottering zombie come back to haunt your neighborhood, here comes Painting History with its visions of frenzy and excess. Tribulations, punishments and scourging, lamentations, hallucinations, unspeakable acts, and the great and terrible workings of crowds and power. Nicole picked through culture like a thrift-store shopper, digging out all sorts of pictures of disaster and maelstrom. The result were her immersive wall works, done at first to make money (for Coach leather company) and later site-specific murals done for The Drawing Center in 1992 and The Whitney

Biennial 1995. Swashbuckling scenes of orgiastic enjoyment, or of brutality and danger, were painted on the walls in ink. Part of the thrill was the exhilaration and surprise of seeing these scenes of female bravado and risk rendered by and about women. And part of the thrill was the rock-star performance of it all, the challenge of scale, and the vanishing act that would happen when the show was over and the walls painted out again with white latex. These paintings were ephemeral, temporary—after all, they were just ink drawn on the wall.

I bring up this issue of the drawing because it is at the intimate heart of Eisenman's work. Beneath the grand scale of her installations, drawing is the mother lode, the soil from which everything springs, a forge in which the molten material of her own psychological forces are investigated and shaped. Her drawings run a gamut of craftsmanship from crude to sumptuous, and along a continuum of feelings from giddy to morbid. Often Eisenman's work on paper is just stunningly sad. Drawing is a lens, a process, through which Eisenman projects her raw emotional material. In the form of ink on paper, feeling becomes form in situations of humor or shame. We find her characters enacting narratives, anecdotes, predicaments of sex, longing, melancholy or embarrassment.

In these drawings the gaze is crucial. We look at someone as they look at someone or something, creating instant shame at the self-consciousness involved in being seen, being judged, being aware of the moment, a moment perhaps before punishment, certainly



after the fall. Some examples: a baby gazes stupidly at its own pee or shit while Dad takes an bong hit and Mom opens her legs pruriently to us, an audience peers judgmentally over the shoulders of an artist struggling to work, we gaze at a pretty girl with her hands hacked off, a figure watches impassively as she is driven through the desert by a band of toiling slaves, we watch the inspection of a big ass bent over for a

judge. Vision exerts a controlling function in relation to fear and desire, dialectic to the mayhem going on elsewhere in Eisenman's work.

If vision creates ordering, Eisenman portrays every kind of social order from the simple line-up to anarchic masses of humanity. In her work, more is more, the reductive need not apply. Occasions range from the simple blur to the stack to the picnic, and on to the riot, the clusterfuck, the cataclysm. Eisenman is emphatic about the meaning of the crowd: crowd is god, crowd is other. Crowd is transformation from other to self and back again. The crowd is also unpredictable. All of Eisenman's structures imply the possibility of collapse, even a chain one collapse after another. For example, the empowered societies of females who appear in her work have clearly just incited revolution and are busy forging a tentative new order. Though individual experience is effaced by the blur of noisy rhythms and activities of the masses, individual appetites are still being aroused. Her crowds arrive at lush places of reverie and idyll, among branches with a million cherries, or on endless snow banks, or surrounded by dots, bees, limbs or marks. Or they rise out of smoke clouds or smog in arcs of urban light emanating from gas lamps, chandeliers or glowing televisions. They appear in noble

Above:

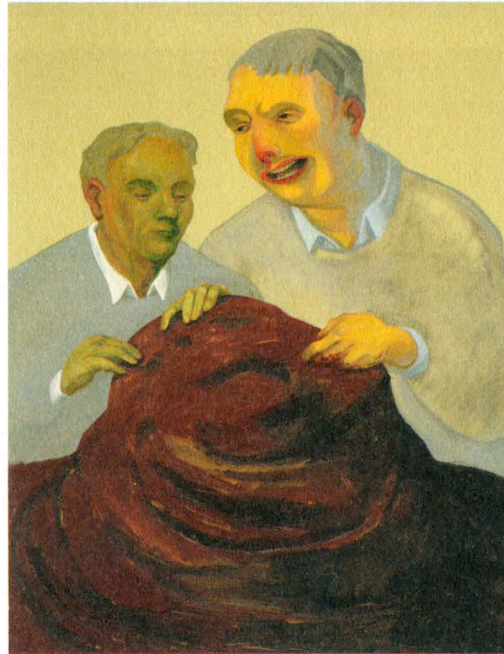
Dysfunctional Family

2000 Oil on Canvas 19" X 22"

public spaces of commerce and industry like academies, museums, or forums. Whether in the city or the country, these crowds and their ravenous desires are being satisfied by events, food, or nature that oozes from gutters, clings like filth or flows like lava. Ids, egos and superegos swirl together in a miasmatic blur, either a Freudian's field day or his worst nightmare.

As Eisenman modestly says of her enterprise, "I was playing with humor and sex, and mixing that with poor craftsmanship." The do-it-yourself craftsmanship so crucial to punk rock appears in Eisenman's work in the form of the sculptural. Spinning outward from the walls, literally pushing away from the craft of her paintings and into a more confrontational space, Eisenman's 3D moves outward and downward into the nether reaches of her narratives with impoverished materials found at Staples or Home Depot. In 1994 she created a shipwreck scene at Jack Tilton Gallery that culminated in tidal waves made of plaster, wood and doomed cardboard boats set near postcards of the sea. A 1996 show at Shoshana Wayne Gallery in LA recounted a war between the flowers and the bees with materials as diverse as cereal and sprinkler heads. A 1998 installation at Entwistle Gallery in London told a tale of unrequited love in the form of a swamp made of plastic cups, spray paint

caps with googly eyes, a pile of dirt and a TV set. We wander through these environments like stoned teenagers visiting B-movie sets, homemade spook houses, or the high school science fair. The third dimension makes



Eisenman's stories both more believable than the paintings, and also the opposite: more implausible, more of a goof. The sculptural both reinforces and sabotages the painstaking effort of Eisenman's painting process. Her objects are a slap in the face, a kick in the ass, a monkey wrench thrown by the artist herself into the master plan.

Eisenman says that in every mosh pit there's always a spoiler, someone going against the grain, someone who is running around the

periphery clockwise when everyone else is going counter-clockwise. This is the kind of double proposition that fuels Eisenman's work as an artist. Her work pits the performative against the purely material. Her exhibitions are physical manifestations of the carefully built up vs. the radically torn apart. To see an Eisenman show is to some extent to participate in it. Her audience is immersed in shifts of scale and a physicality that cannot be captured in reproduction. Seduced, even overwhelmed, by her curious stories, we are drawn into Eisenman's territory in a state of altered consciousness, with emotions ranging from titillation to sorrow to excitement to rapture. Eisenman choreographs, interrogates, and then stands back and watches the action. The ideal vs. the slapstick! The awesome vs. the stupid! Form vs. formlessness! Privacy vs. spectacle! Control vs. chaos! The fucker vs. the fucked! Choreography vs. hypnosis! Remembering vs. forgetting! And like rock concerts and mosh pits, and great art, the point of all this is transformation, transcendence of the present moment through momentary forgetting, the rapturous dissolution of self, entering a new realm where escapism and invention are both a procedure and an attraction.

Above:

The Work of Labor and Care

2004 Oil on Canvas 59" X 39 1/2"