

PARADE TO NOWHERE

Eli Diner on Nicole Eisenman at The Contemporary Austin



"Nicole Eisenman: Sturm und Drang," The Contemporary Austin, 2020, installation view

At least since her "Sketch for a Fountain" (2017) for Skulptur Projekte Münster, the painter and sculptor Nicole Eisenman should be familiar to the German-speaking art public. With the help of pictorial composition and material aesthetics, her partly humorous, partly aggressive figures – whether on canvas or in bronze – are both a commentary on current political and queer-feminist themes and an account of states of ambiguity. Eli Diner was lucky enough to see her latest works in person in Texas.

Even at the risk of sounding nostalgic, let me say that when I look back on this show, all I see is a crowd. A congregation of heaving, slobbering, belching humanoids. Bodies bumping bodies. O heart in a heartless world. That can't just be the quarantine talking. After all, Nicole Eisenman is a great painter of crowds – teeming parties and beer gardens, allegorical scenes and mock-heroic history painting – though you wouldn't really know it from this exhibition, "Sturm und Drang", which highlights the artist's recent sculptural work. I scroll through a series of cockeyed shots on my phone (some so mind-bogglingly unhelpful as to make me wonder whether the photographer wasn't spiteful rather than just incompetent)

and then through a more edifying photographic record of the exhibition provided by the museum. Even as the documentation reveals many more solitary figures and faces than I remembered – both among the sculptures and the supplement of mostly newish paintings – it all still insists on combining into a carnal mass.

Just such a movement, the ingathering of disparate entities, is there in the centerpiece of “Sturm und Drang”: a collection of a dozen or so individual works that come together to make a super-sculpture called *Procession* (2019). Last seen in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, in a slightly different arrangement with mostly the same constituent parts, *Procession* – just as it did on a balcony overlooking the High Line – here overflows with cartoonish abjection and diffuse sociopolitical satire. The mutilated subject of a dully painted bronze bust called *The General* (2018) is blinded, wearing a tinfoil hat. Another bust, the jagged aluminum *Eagle* (2018), has a cuckoo clock thrust into an oozing cavity in the back of its head: a riotous makeover for hoary symbols of the state and an equally hoary sculptural genre. There is, by contrast, a kind of unexpected grandeur to the oversized plaster figure in *Museum Piece con Gas* (2019), even as it sits facedown on all fours in nothing but New York Giants socks, sprouting patches of wool and debris and regularly issuing a foggy fart.

With its scathing sentiments, naughty humor, and grotesqueries, *Procession* marches under the banner of Ensor, a touchstone for Eisenman over the years. The difference of a century: one can’t imagine Eisenman’s work giving offense as Ensor’s did. Her paintings have long enjoyed a universally warm reception in collections, public and private. Writing about Eisenman and her cohort

of feminist artists who came up in the early 1990s, Eileen Myles remarked that they “were absolutely in the art world, not outside of it.”¹ Far from being scandalous, Eisenman’s parodies are right at home. Imbued with playfulness, they take aim at targets far afield, who probably wouldn’t recognize themselves in these.

As caricature, *Procession* is scattershot, generally evoking the intensities and exhaustion of American political life under Trump. The ambulatory figures (as opposed to the severed heads of the general and the eagle) all seem to lumber; they have burdens to bear along this Via Dolorosa and encounter obstacles to their progress. They’ve stepped in gum or some other slop. The wheels are square on the cart carrying the farter, which is pulled by a nine-foot-tall bronze giant (*Perpetual Motion Machine*, 2019) whose other hand is rigged with a mechanized pole that raises and lowers a dozen dangling cans of tuna in a goofy Sisyphean recital.

Some have taken this parade going nowhere to be a symbol of protest, or of the growing feeling of the futility of protest.² But the efforts of these straining figures speak as well to physicality itself. This is a pageant of wild corporeality: the raging inflammation, the secretion and flatulence. Struggling nudes with indistinct or in-between genitalia. In *Man at the Center of Men* (2019) a plaster sunbather rides on the back of another figure down on hands and knees; his legs are scaly, his feet clumpy, and he angles toward his face a pair of mirrors enclosed in garbage can lids – a little more light upon his mangled skin. Beneath the crags, fissures, and crosshatches of the face, his chest hair is a tangle of engorged viscera.

That title – *Man at the Center of Men* – is borrowed from Wallace Stevens’s 1940 “Man and

Bottle,” a poem that intends, more or less explicitly, to revise his “Snow Man” of two decades earlier. Stevens transfigures the famed “mind of winter” into the “great poem of winter,” and in place of the reduction to *nothing* of the earlier poem, he now urges a poetics of destruction that assumes the logic of war. Without ascribing too much to Eisenman’s choice of titles, one of the questions that comes out of “Sturm und Drang” similarly has to do with the relationship between her earlier and more recent work, how to read her sculptural turn.

On the one hand, those themes in *Procession* just enumerated have all been there in her painting going back to the 1990s, and we see it in the selection of paintings here. Abjection in *The Work of Labor and Care* (2004), where a couple of jaundiced men in sweaters gently mold a mound of shit. Clumsy physicality in *Support Systems for Women, No. 1* (1998), where a plump Picassoesque nude is awkwardly held up in a languid pose by vast and convoluted scaffolding. Parodic faux-allegory in *Heading Down River on the USS J-Bone of an Ass* (2017), in which a trio of guys – one of them playing the fife – ride beneath a tattered sail flying from the mandible made famous by Samson, seemingly indifferent to the fact that they are about go over the edge of a waterfall.

On the other hand, we look at those square wheels and know we are meant to think of Eisenman reinventing the wheel, especially with that bumper sticker on the back of the cart: *How’s My Sculpting?* Her move into sculpture comes against the backdrop of a fad for figurative painting among collectors and curators. While she shares little with the wave of zombie figuration, say the graphic formulae of Julie Curtiss or the staid academicism of TM Davy, questions of style hover

around her adoption of the new medium. One of the defining characteristics of Eisenman’s painting is her multiplicity of styles, her omnivorous borrowing from the storehouse of painting’s histories – Guston and Gainsborough, photorealism and illustration, and a hundred other things besides – all of which she blends apparently effortlessly: a style of a thousand styles, suspended between pastiche and parody, greased by a great facility with paint.

Those dense ambitious crowd scenes and crazed dreamscapes – even when they depict violence and aberration – are precise and masterful. The sculptures, by contrast, trade on disjunction, clumsiness, and raw tactility. They look effortful, even provisional. They conjure a fantasy of improvisation in the studio: coarse, goopy, worked-on and worked-over, giddy with jury-rigging. In place of easy excellence, Eisenman offers crude textures, excretions, and bulk. She translates a vision of social antagonisms – and agonism – into agitated materiality. Mirroring the laboring figures of her *Procession*, she enacts a style of labor.

“Nicole Eisenman: Sturm und Drang,” *The Contemporary Austin*, February 27–November 15, 2020.

Notes

- 1 Eileen Myles, “It’s a Wonderful Wave: Nicole Eisenman,” in *The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), p. 62.
- 2 See, for example, Aruna D’Souza, “Time to Use Our Outside Voices: On Protest in Art,” in *Other Words* (blog), Art Agency, Partners, July 3, 2019, <https://www.artagencypartners.com/i-protest-therefore-i-am-american/>.



Nicole Eisenman, "Heading Down River on the USS J-Bone of an Ass," 2017