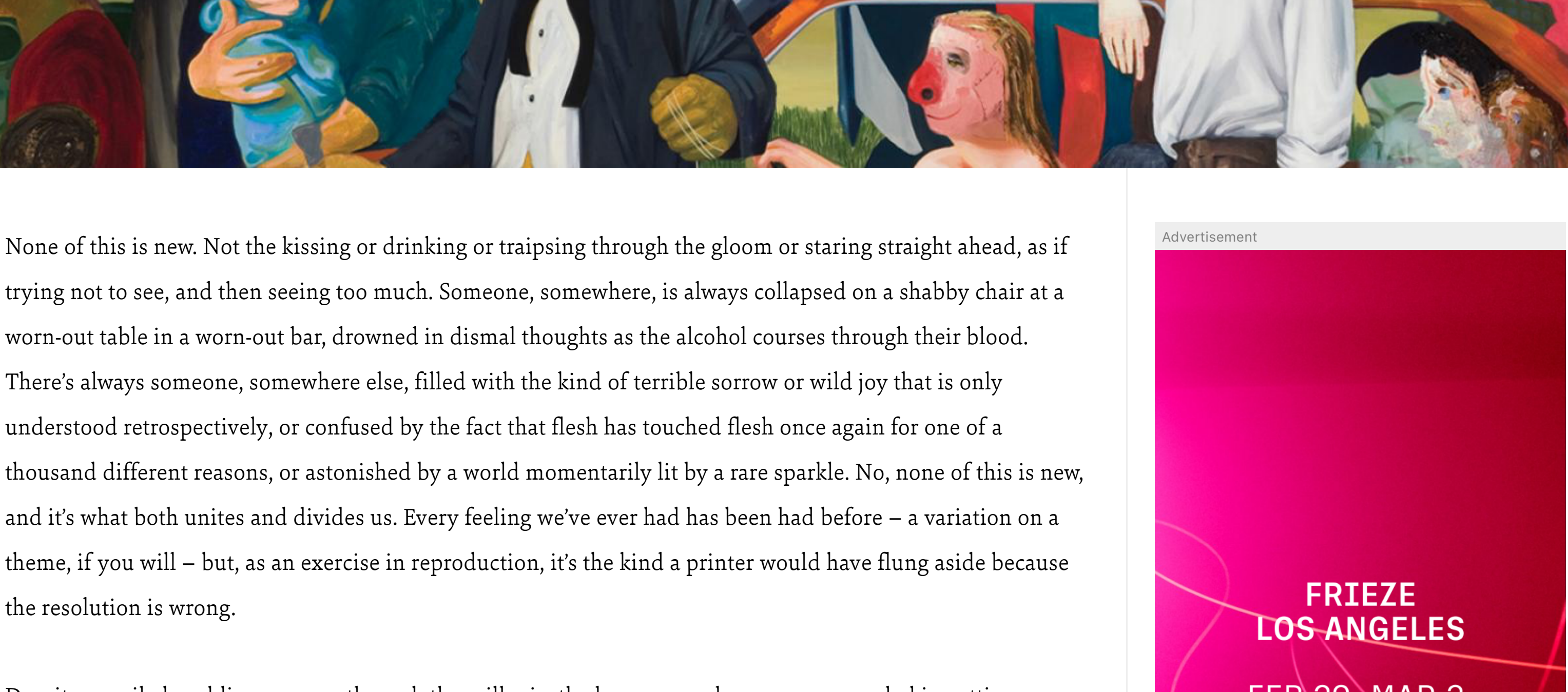


# In Your Head

The surreal, oddly familiar world of Nicole Eisenman

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN FEATURES | 24 MAY 13



None of this is new. Not the kissing or drinking or traipsing through the gloom or staring straight ahead, as if trying not to see, and then seeing too much. Someone, somewhere, is always collapsed on a shabby chair at a worn-out table in a worn-out bar, drowned in dismal thoughts as the alcohol courses through their blood. There's always someone, somewhere else, filled with the kind of terrible sorrow or wild joy that is only understood retrospectively, or confused by the fact that flesh has touched flesh once again for one of a thousand different reasons, or astonished by a world momentarily lit by a rare sparkle. No, none of this is new, and it's what both unites and divides us. Every feeling we've ever had has been had before – a variation on a theme, if you will – but, as an exercise in reproduction, it's the kind a printer would have flung aside because the resolution is wrong.

Despite wearily bumbling our way through the millenia, the human race has never succeeded in getting over the brute fact that, despite our protestations, we're never going to get a moment's peace, and – if you believe in the afterlife – then death's no picnic either. To make art about all of this is risky – too many artists have tried and failed, their efforts defeated by the clichés that intense feelings of futility, elation or injustice tend to spawn. This is not a problem for Nicole Eisenman, who makes paintings and sculptures and prints about familiar things – drinking and eating, fighting and kissing, empathy and estrangement, poverty and wealth – but filters them through what could best be termed a kind of benevolent surrealism that, weirdly, makes the often frankly lunatic situations she describes all the more recognizable. Eisenman is an artist for whom intensity is just another medium, like clay or paint, and who sidesteps cliché with the mental nimbleness of someone blessed with a restless imagination and a trusted instinct, an intolerance of convention and a deep sense of moral outrage about the wrongs simply being alive can engender. Her work flows from a fusion of autobiography, queer politics, art history, feminism, popular culture and more; she's also fascinated with poetry, bars and Egyptian mummies – and she's obsessed with beer gardens. In an interview, she once said:

'When I painted my first beer garden scene, I immediately wanted to keep painting them, to paint them for the rest of my life.'<sup>1</sup> In another, she explained: 'On a visit to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, I found painting after painting of people eating and drinking. One-hundred-and-fifty-year-old paintings felt familiar. If I attempt to reflect my life, my community, often the gathering takes place around a table.'<sup>2</sup> Eisenman understands the importance of laughter, however dark, although in recent years it's something she's consciously scaled back. In an interview in 2010, for instance, she declared that 'at some point around 2001–02 I got tired of jokes, of trying to be funny. I wanted to focus on painting. Painting isn't a great medium for jokes.'<sup>3</sup>



Untitled, 2012, woodcut, 60 × 45 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Leo Koenig Inc., New York



Let me back-track. A few years ago, I was sitting in a friend's house in New York having dinner, but a large painting by Eisenman on the wall kept distracting me; it's titled, with a beautiful deadpan directness, *Coping* (2008). It depicts a scene that is as dreadful as it is apparently, bizarrely, OK. A group of people wade through a river of waist-high mud that courses through what appears to be a Mittel-European village, solid beneath a sickly yellow sky: there's a nice brick house with Tudorish details, a bland high-rise on the outskirts, green hills in the distance and a woman leaning out of a window, watching the torrents below. A small green parrot sits on the head of a large grey cat calmly swimming through the deluge. In the background, two people chat beneath a cheerful awning; one woman lifts a small dog above the mud as she attempts to navigate it, whilst another – naked, with cold marbled flesh and elegant hair – carves a swathe in the opposite direction. No-one seems disturbed by a mummy, swaddled in pinkish bandages, who is striding purposefully on her (or his)? way; in fact, a man in a bowler hat, close enough to recoil, ignores him as he thoughtfully puffs on a cigarette – he could be sitting comfortably in his favourite chair by the fire. In the foreground, a man in a beret, as pale as milk, clutches a coffee, in the way that someone else in his position might clutch at a life-line. Everyone is quiet and orderly and self-absorbed; even the cat. Apocalypse, it would seem, has become so familiar that no-one has turned a hair at its appearance.

As a metaphor for everyday life, *Coping* could so easily have failed; it's not hard, after all, to understand in a flash what the artist is getting at (and, in case you didn't, the title makes sure that you do). It's a blunt illustration that life is, on so many levels, absurd and – forgive my literalness – that we journey through it numb and alienated and too-accepting of our fate. But such a description is like saying *Anna Karenina* is about a woman who throws herself under a train. In certain passages, Eisenman wrestles with her medium until she abandons it, exhausted (the filthy river, as weary as old rope); at others, she wings her way through description like a bird carving its way merrily through a sunny cloud. Witness, for example, the crisp, white, soft-coloured shirt of the cigarette-smoker – you can almost *smell* the laundry fresheener! Yet, beside him, a tired old woman, her coat and scarf as drained as her jaundiced face, is painted with an economy that privileges mood over detail. This is a painting that rewards endless scrutiny; I have looked at it many times since that first meeting and, like an enigmatic friend, am still getting to know it.

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Eisenman is an artist who, I suspect, welcomes ghosts with open arms. In one interview she declared that: 'The over abundance of disposable and meaningless images gives oil painting more value. It's shocking to go to a museum now and be reminded of the power a painting can have after surfing the Internet all day [...] It's the realization that you're not just looking at a painting, say, by Van Gogh, but that one can actually commune with his spirit, just by looking, and time collapses.'<sup>4</sup> In *Coping*, it's definitely not just the living who plough through this muddy street. I'm sure the brilliant, tormented Otto Dix and his brittle, depleted women are lurking somewhere in the shadows, arguing, perhaps, with a corrupt burgher from one of George Grosz's paintings who was swept into Eisenman's painting in a crowd of Max Beckmann's sad, glamorous drunks. (One of the joys of looking at Eisenman's paintings is that they reiterate, unequivocally, that old paintings have always influenced new ones and new ones always change the way we look at old ones.)

In the same way that these earlier painters created unique visions of general despair and political satire, Eisenman, too, employs her idiosyncratic language to reflect upon contemporary realities. *The Triumph of Poverty* (2009), for example, is Eisenman's response to the collapse of the US motor industry, via a reworking of Hans Holbein the Younger's painting of the same title (c.1533), which was originally commissioned for a 16th-century residence of Hanseatic merchants in London and is now lost. Eisenman studied the Holbein composition via copies made after the original work. In her interpretation, a battered, rusty wreck of a car stands in for Holbein's carriage; it's driven by a naked woman, whose bloated red nose might lead one to suspect that she's not averse to a drink. The car is surrounded by a hallucinogenic rag-taggle of men, women and children rendered in various states of realism: a woman with a skewbald face holding a mottled baby; a shabby, cerulean-and-liver-red super-hero; and a tiny, emaciated black child, its belly swollen and floating above its stick-thin legs. A parody of leadership is to be found in the central, dishevelled man, who is dressed in what remains of a top hat and a tuxedo. Struggling to maintain his dignity in the face of booze and disintegration, he holds a piece of string that is attached to six tiny Holbein-esque figures that look like they could be refugees from the original painting. They trip over a swarm of fleeing rats, but their leader is oblivious to their distress and gazes into the distance, as if attempting to summon the energy to move. His trousers have fallen around his ankles, but all they reveal is his crazy, forward-facing backside – he guides his charges arse-first, so to speak. The group also face forward, out of the frame, into the unknown, but the black trees and apocalyptic sun don't bode well.

"'Tis but a scratch" "A scratch?! Your arm's off!" "No, it isn't", 2012, installation view at Studio Voltaire, London. Courtesy: the artist, Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin, Leo Koenig Inc., New York, and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

Eisenman once said: 'When you can't think of what to draw; draw a head.'<sup>5</sup> In recent years, she's painted, etched, drawn and sculpted what must amount to hundreds of heads: a staggering study in idiosyncrasy and personality (45 monotypes of heads were included in last year's Whitney Biennial). Often androgynous, they talk, drink, eat or just look out at us looking at them; they're also often crowned, or in top hats or bowler hats or sailor caps or swimming caps or bandages. Some are rendered as crudely and as brightly as a child's drawing, while others appear to be forged from the imagination of a long-dead cartoonist or the skilled hand of an Old Master. In an interview with Faye Hirsch about learning printmaking, Eisenman said: 'I read a lot of books and made trips to museums. Andrew [Mockler] took me to the print collection at the Met. [...] Munch is someone I looked at a lot, and Picasso was absolutely the number one man in etchings.'<sup>6</sup> The latter's restless virtuosity is apparent especially in the etching and aquatint *Twelve Heads* (2012): each head is not only stylistically unique but was created using a different printing process.

Eisenman draws and paints skin in every colour, including blotchy pink, virulent green, sick yellow, earth brown, sky blue and ash white. Every head she paints is both dignified and pathetic, but it's a pathos tempered by tenderness; flesh is often fluorescent, as if lit up by the power of someone's scrutiny – or love, even. Eyes, of course, are important. (After all, what is a work of art without looking?) They are glazed or glittering or dilated or squinting or staring or blinded or closed or out-of-focus or looking into the distance, over your own head, or staring at you, too intently, like a crazy person on a bus. Bodies pile up beneath the heads, but they're alive and full of everyday cravings; everyone – although deeply inside themselves – is lonely because, it would seem, they need each other so badly. A kiss in Eisenman's world is never far off; one head touches another, and the act of touching dissolves borders between two people – this is the closest she gets to abstraction. But, of course, a kiss can be as destructive as it is ennobling. Compare the etching *Drinking with Death Kiss* (2012) – an image filled with death skulls, desperate inebriation, isolation and despair – to, say, the painting *Sloppy Bar Room Kiss* (2011) – a delirious, drunken study in togetherness, in which two androgynous people, kissing on a table, create the wonky shape of a heart.

*Sloppy Bar Room Kiss*, 2011, oil on canvas, 1 × 1.2 m. Courtesy: Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects; photograph: Robert Wedemeyer

Eisenman has long been interested and inspired by words, although over the years her relationship to language has undergone a shift. Around 2000, she began reading William Blake and became interested in his allegorical figures, such as Orc (a positive figure of rebellion) and Urizen (the embodiment of tradition). This inspired her to create her own demonic characters, some of which are evident in her paintings, including *Commerce Feeds Creativity*, *The Work of Labor and Care* (both 2004) and *Ambition Distracted from Achievement by a Clique of Bitchy Sluts* (2002). Eisenman reads a lot, especially poetry, which, she says, 'feeds her ideas';<sup>7</sup> at the moment, she's absorbed with Homer's *Iliad* and 'everything by Lisa Robertson' and *The Collected Poems of Joseph Ceravolo* (2013). She told me: 'I'll go to readings and let the stream of images wash over me, and when something jumps out I'll make a note of it. And often this is the basis of a work'. In recent years, she's become more and more interested in creating characters from plaster – her first sculpture exhibition, "'Tis but a scratch" "A scratch?! Your arm's off!" "No, it isn't" (a quote from the 1975 film *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*) was held late last year at Studio Voltaire in London, and included enormous figures – reclining, kissing, texting – that the artist made in the gallery space over a frenzied month-long residency. She likes the medium, she says, because 'it can interact with my body in a way painting can't. There is a distance with painting, an annoying stick between me and the material. With sculpture, it's my body touching the body of the material. It's visceral, where painting is more cerebral or, dare I say, spiritual.' In terms of contemporary artists who currently inspire her, she cites Huma Bhabha ('insanely good!'), Isa Genzken and Phyllida Barlow, all of whom have never allowed the constraints of the world to inhibit their considerable imaginative take on it.

When asked a couple of years ago about whether she believes in the idea of a masterpiece, Eisenman answered: 'There are lots of different elements that make a masterpiece in various combinations, like humour, touch/texture, pattern, conception, colour, passion – for starters. Painting is an intellectual pursuit; it's also an emotional and spiritual pursuit, a kind of reckoning with the infinite possibilities of the universe [...] The payoff is the moment when you bring something to life that has never existed before anywhere else.'<sup>8</sup> I agree with every point she makes here; it's what she herself has achieved – and it's why I love her work.

1 Nicole Eisenman interview with Brian Sholis, [artforum.com](#), September 6, 2008

2 25 Questions for Witty Expressionist and Biennial Star Nicole Eisenman, [artinfo.com](#), 19 June 2012

3 Butt Johnson interviews Nicole Eisenman, August 2010, [revelal.com](#)

4 Ibid

5 Faye Hirsch, 'Nicole Eisenman's Year of Printing Prolifically', *Art in Print*, Vol. 2, No. 5, January–February 2013, p. 6

6 Ibid, p.7

7 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from an email to the author, March 2013

8 Op cit., Butt Johnson interview

Nicole Eisenman lives in Brooklyn, USA. Her solo exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum, USA, runs from 3 May – 14 July; and her work is included in the 2013 Carnegie International at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, USA (5 October 2013 – 16 March 2014). In January 2014, her work will be the subject of a travelling survey opening at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, USA. Eisenman's work is currently included in 'NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star' at the New Museum, New York, USA; last year, it was included in the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Recent solo shows include Studio Voltaire, London, UK; Leo Koenig Inc., New York (both 2012); Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles, USA; the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York; and the Katzen Arts Centre, Washington DC, USA (all 2011).

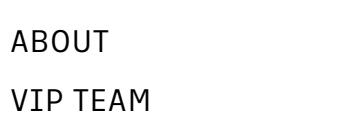
JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

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