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Nicole Eisenman's Prints and People

by [Faye Hirsch](#)

Eight months ago, Nicole Eisenman locked her paints away and turned exclusively to prints. Operating feverishly in four different workshops, both alone and in collaboration, the Brooklyn-based artist has produced a trove of works in various mediums—etching, lithography, monotype and woodcut. Her large, inventive monotypes—colorful works focusing a big head, or on a single figure or two in playful combinations—were her contribution to the most recent Whitney Biennial, often singled out for praise in reviews of the show. Eisenman is currently exhibiting her prints in all mediums at Leo Koenig Gallery in New York, through June 30.

Eisenman first achieved notoriety in the early 1990s for her graphic brilliance, as demonstrated in drawings that she produced in profusion, at small and grand scale. The irreverence of her content—what was newly being called “queer” art—was at that time something unprecedented. Drawings ranged from one-off sight gags on tiny scraps of paper to giant murals depicting all-female scenes—shipwrecks, desert islands, an under-water film shoot—replete with sex and violence. In a wall drawing at the 1996 Whitney Biennial, she depicted the destruction of the Whitney Museum itself. While over the years she has tempered the excesses of her subject matter, Eisenman has returned to graphic exuberance in her recent prints. Her tone has darkened in these works, but she is no less experimental in her exploration of form and content.

With one of her collaborators, Andrew Mockler of Jungle Press, Eisenman took a trip to the Metropolitan Museum and looked at dozens of historical prints. One senses the ghostly presence of printmaking artists from the past—Beckmann and Picasso, Goya and Munch—in the works on view. But, as Mockler observes, “she’s just able to digest all that stuff and make it an Eisenman.”

A.i.A. caught up with Eisenman on the heels of her Koenig opening.

FAYE HIRSCH: I remember a conversation you and I had a few years ago about prints. You were getting ready for a collaboration at Yale—Rochelle Feinstein's program of getting an artist and a master printer to collaborate.

NICOLE EISENMAN: Yeah, I was asked to pull some prints out of the Yale University Art Gallery's collection and talk about them to the students. Then there was a separate visit—they invite artists to make a print in the print shop, and then the printer gets one, the artist gets one and Yale gets one, which is a brilliant idea. I don't know why every school doesn't do that. And they got [master printer] Craig Zammiello to come do the etching.

I'd toyed around with etching here and there. I learned how to do it in college when I was in Rome—really basic cross-hatching techniques and stuff like that. But it takes a concentrated effort to get to know a material as complicated as any of these processes are.

Especially lithography: still after nine months of doing it, I am as at much of a loss as I was when I first started. Etching I get. You throw acid on the metal and it burns the metal. But try to explain to me how water and oil etch a rock. I don't get it. I can't even frame my questions about it.

HIRSCH: I am very struck by how, with each of those processes, you do something completely different. And also by how historically savvy they are. Do you think about Beckmann or Munch?

EISENMAN: I do. As I started this project I read a lot of books and made trips to museums. Andrew took me to the print collection at the Met. I was getting a crash course in the history of printmaking. Munch is someone I looked at a lot, and Picasso was absolutely the number one man for etching. I can't get enough of Picasso's etchings. You don't really understand how fucking brilliant they are until you try to do it yourself. It's a little bit of the frustrating thing about printmaking—it kind of looks easy, and it's really not. The level of density he gets—it came as a beautiful surprise.

HIRSCH: You really made a decision to concentrate on printmaking for a period of time.

EISENMAN: I've been working in my studio for seven years painting, but in August I packed up my oil paints in a big strong box with a lock. I whitewashed the walls and the floor. And I scrubbed and disinfected every inch of it. So I had this beautiful white cube, and I started a yearlong works on paper and prints project.

HIRSCH: Why did you decide to do that?

EISENMAN: I don't know. I think I went to the [IFPDA] print fair [in New York], I don't know. I'm trying to remember where it came from.

HIRSCH: It seems like such a natural fit.

EISENMAN: That's what it is. I like works on paper. My origins, back in the '90s, were in works on paper. I was going back to that place, but not directly. I would have these processes sort of mediate the drawing.

HIRSCH: You've also been working at workshops—in lithography with Andrew Mockler at Jungle Press in Brooklyn, and in etching with Felix Harlan and Carol Weaver at Harlan & Weaver on Canal Street. Those are really high-end collaborators. What about the monotypes?

EISENMAN: I did those myself at the amazing Women's Studio Workshop in Rosendale, in upstate New York. I rented time on their press. It's a women's collective, just beautiful. Anyone can go there, and they give grants to some people so they don't have to pay anything. It's a good old-fashioned women's collective, really well run, with really good equipment. I made the monotypes I'm showing at the gallery there. The ones at the Whitney I did in Brooklyn on a press I rented from [artist and master printer] Lothar Osterburg.

And there's another press I've been working with in Brooklyn on the woodcuts, called Ten Grand Press, which is Marina Ancona's—she's kind of a new kid on the block. She has a great little shop.

HIRSCH: Those woodcuts are incredible. I've never seen anything quite like them.

EISENMAN: Really? That's so nice.

HIRSCH: How did you and Marina get those strange colors? The values are close, but the hues so unexpected.

EISENMAN: All this stuff is so much a result of collaboration.

HIRSCH: Did that draw you to prints specifically?

EISENMAN: Part of the appeal of prints for me was getting out of the solitude of my studio. I was going through a difficult breakup. Being able to go to a shop—having standing appointments with three different shops and three different sets of people three times a week—really kept me going through the fall and winter. Having that company, that distraction and camaraderie, was kind of a life-saver.

HIRSCH: Technically those prints are amazing, and you have always just known how to draw. But I did find the subject matter to be rather dark—even though there's still all this clowning around and playfulness, especially in the monotypes. It seems a lot about loneliness, about going out to bars and crying.

EISENMAN: Part of this came from looking at Picasso's prints. He was able to siphon raw feeling—his reactions to a drama he created, really, between his mistress and his wife. He poured it all into his Suite 156 etchings. They're so gorgeous and heartfelt and heart-wrenching. And looking at those I felt free, like permission had been granted to let it be as personal as I needed it to be.

HIRSCH: Well it definitely works. Have you found you work very differently in the different studios?

EISENMAN: The personalities definitely affect what's going on. When I work alone, or with Marina, it's easier for me to open up the queer and sexual subject matter. But what all three have in common, which is so much fun, is the willingness to experiment, to push the limits. Harlan and Weaver were just incredibly patient; there's such a learning curve in etching. The stuff I did at the beginning was pretty straightforward, but the last—that beer garden—there are a lot of complex, different processes going on in that print.

All the shops present different atmospheres. Each is really a reflection of its [proprietors'] hearts and brains, and you're walking right in and making yourself at home. Harlan and Weaver have a really beautiful, almost gentle, old-world style—so gorgeous and civilized. We have lunch everyday at noon, and all the interns, everyone working there—we all eat together. They touch a different era. Andrew is just a nut, he's really fucking hilarious, he sings a lot, and the atmosphere at Jungle Press is fun and goofy.

The tough part is that you're working in front of people; there's an awkwardness of having to think on the spot. That's why there are a lot of scenes of people drinking.

HIRSCH: What do you mean?

EISENMAN: When you don't know what to do, draw people drinking.[Laughs] It's become a never-ending subject matter for me, with all sorts of variations—something I've been doing for a long time. There used to be a little more violence than there is now. People are not cutting and stringing each other up as much as they used to, but they're drinking together, which is nicer. Though it's the same idea.

HIRSCH: When I see your bar and dinner scenes, I think about the “Café Deutschland” paintings by Jörg Immedorff. I think of your beer gardens, which have portraits of your friends in them, as a latter-day society of creative people that you're a part of, an homage to that queer, bohemian culture.

EISENMAN: The pictures of people drinking together show an aspect of a community I feel part of, but it's also a fantasy showing the best of times. There is something that already seems past tense about those scenes—they are a nostalgic fantasy, which is a feeling I get sometimes even in those moments [when we're together].

I was looking at Bonnard a few years ago. All those beautiful paintings where the centerpiece of the painting is this big white dinner table. That was a big inspiration.

HIRSCH: You've also mentioned—much to my surprise—Renoir.

EISENMAN: He was my favorite Impressionist by far, if I had to pick a favorite. His paintings are really gorgeous. There's just something joyful about showing people celebrating together.