

Nicole Eisenman

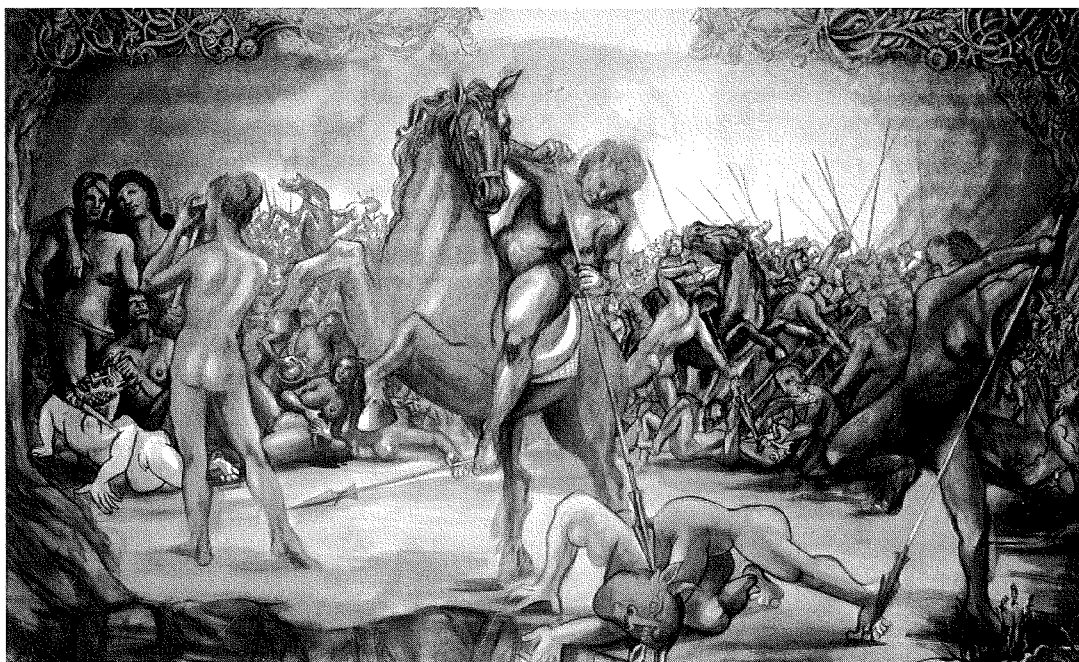
Liz Kotz

Nicole Eisenman's figures cavort across page and wall with raunchy perversity. In her stream of recent drawings, gouaches, quick cartoons, and large-scale murals, diverse genres and art-historical references collide with ferocious energy: comic books, history painting, Ash Can School, Pablo Picasso, linear perspective, Saturday-morning cartoons, the hybrid musings of Saul Steinberg. These deadpan samplings populate a Rabelaisian dystopia of the comic, the grotesque, and the orgiastically violent. Yet this fancifully excessive sensibility veers from gritty urban realism to bubblegum. The exuberance of Eisenman's execution makes her morbid hallucinations light-hearted and cartoony: part William Burroughs, part Betty Boop.

In Eisenman's *Minotaur Hunt*, a mural presented as an installation at New York's Trial Balloon Gallery earlier this year, bulky Amazons hunted down virile Cubist icons amid a throng of spectators who grappled and shoved with spears and swords, as if in a war scene by Uccello. All the tricks of academic illusionism were in play: chiaroscuro, foreshortening, compositional geometry, detail, the depth perspective of Renaissance history painting. The densely modeled figures intertwined and merged in the shadows; a horse reared up among them. Yet a collapsing of spatial depth, and superimpositions of imagery in a kind of cross-historical collage, gave the mural a postapocalyptic quality of sensual overload that jarred as it seduced. Animated by a wry humor and a perverse passion, the barrage of images and juxtapositions was less the product of art-historical critique than the appropriations of a fan.

In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists early in their careers.

However densely worked, however large in scale, Eisenman's murals are ephemeral: *Minotaur Hunt*, and a linked scene titled *Penelope in the Pit*, were temporary affairs, to be painted over for the gallery's next show. But Eisenman has also made a series of expansively detailed ink drawings that replay her handling of the figure on a more contained scale. In



Nicole Eisenman, *The Minotaur Hunt*, 1993, ink on wall, 10 x 15'. Installation view at Trial Balloon Gallery, New York.

Captured Pirates on the Island of Lesbos, 1992, a gleeful horde of brawny women enact a ritual of mass castration. As in the murals, the weighty figures sprawl and pulsate, modeled with ink washes that evoke old-fashioned magazine illustration; despite the murky palette, a pop sensibility persists in the cartoony line, underground content, and ribald humor. In *Trash's Dance*, 1992, for example, a performer poses aggressively on the stage of a rough-and-tum-

ble lesbian bar, in a scene that recalls some of Reginald Marsh's bawdier works.

Other, smaller works on paper are loosely gestural in style, closer to caricature or cartoon. The subjects—nutty, sweet, wickedly funny—are playful restagings of pop icons, replete with ragged undertones of sex and aggression. In one gouache, a young girl (reminiscent of the Morton's Salt girl) lifts her skirt to pee; her loyal dog laps up the puddle happily. In another, a house-shaped tea ball dreams (in a cartoon balloon) of its own front lawn. Elsewhere, in a meld of the TV commercial and medieval reli-

gion, a suburban mom preparing the family meal lifts her blouse to squirt milk (or blood) into her son's cereal bowl.

Such mixing of visual sources is hardly new; Eisenman pulls it off through her technical skill, and the fluidity of her style. The execution is restless, speedy. Eclectic in her borrowing, Eisenman lifts from Picasso and Norman Rockwell, *The Flintstones* and *The New Yorker*. While she may refer to European canons of high art, her work actually comes out of a deeply American tradition of urban realism, which she transfers to a whimsically twisted lesbian fantasy world. Unlike her

New York regionalist forbears, Eisenman doesn't paint street scenes, but she harnesses the street's seamy energy in her work. It's an art hatched in the dark avenues of the Lower East Side, colored by grime, random violence, trashy pop culture, and drug-induced mania. Eisenman's work is muscular and macho. It sweats, evoking the acrid smell of the city—its bars and dark corners. □

Liz Kotz is a writer who lives in New York.