“Queered in Every Sense of the Word”¹: Sexual Multiplicity in Nicole Eisenman’s Beer Gardens

NONFICTION | WILLIAM SIMMONS

Despair and Desire

“Last year, when I painted my first beer-garden scene, I immediately wanted to keep painting them, to paint them for the rest of my life. There’s a whole genre of paintings, particularly French ones, of people eating and drinking, and the beer garden seems to be the equivalent for certain residents of twenty-first-century Brooklyn...It’s where we go to socialize, to commiserate about how the world is a f*cked-up place...”²

“I’m a dyke and I love being gay and I love women, but I was born to be an artist, not a female or lesbian artist.”³

Someone who is familiar with Nicole Eisenman’s past artistic practice, exemplified by her seminal work in ink, Castrating Amazons (Figure 1), might be surprised by the sorrow that she presents in a new series of oil-on-canvas beer gardens. On one hand, Eisenman is known for her triumphant, vociferous works that present both a foil to the perceived safeness of her contemporaries and a lesbian voice in an environment that was hostile to such a contribution. Eisenman’s art has also been seen as a pessimistic backlash to the gung-ho rallying cry of second-wave feminists, whose attempt at unity left many marginalized groups to fend for themselves on the fringe.⁴ However, in her more recent work, Eisenman proclaims a distinct appeal to a common human condition of sorrow. For a moment, Eisenman steps back...
from ideals of difference to an assertion of a universal - the oppressive conditions that bring about human misery. In this short investigation, I examine the implications of the shifts within these complex registers of emotion. This is an exploratory venture to present an evocative portrait of an artist and her relationship to paint and issues of identity.

The Beer Gardens: A New Medium, A New Sexuality

“Something has got to give, so drink up people; we’re all going down together.”

Gone are Eisenman’s triumphant female warriors, and in their place is an odd amalgamation of characters who occupy a queer space, rather than a definably lesbian one. To begin, there is a deafening otherworldliness, and Eisenman’s crowd of Amazons becomes a group in flux, captured momentarily in a state of in-between-ness:

“My groups used to be more ‘mob-like.’ Now they are people having a good time, but they have reached that tipping point. It’s that moment in the night when the party is at its apex, where you are drunk but you are not going downhill yet. It’s a magical little bubble that only lasts a while before things go south…”

A shift in temporality begets Beer Garden with Ash (Figure 3), which encloses the drunken action within a fence that visually reminds us of the cold world that exists beyond this refuge. Central are the trees with party lights that divide the composition into three parts; one cannot help but think of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ strands of light bulbs that are festive, but ultimately short-lived, as is this itinerant moment that Eisenman describes in paint. The party will die out; everyone will return home to their respective lives, and the beer garden will become empty. The people who occupy it constitute this sacred space, this sanctuary. Without them, without their willingness to shed the trials of the day and engage in this painterly dance, the beer garden is nothing more than a plot of land. The revelers thus bring life, even as Eisenman suggests that that this beer garden is perched on the thinnest of precipices. To this end, the artist once again presents a canvas that is certain only in its uncertainty. Immediately, the viewer encounters an emotionally indeterminate figure (or bouncer?) who guards the visual gateway, much like Manet’s waitress in A Bar at the Folies-Bergère (1882), a direct reference to the tradition of public revelry that Eisenman cites. With his piercing blue eyes and sharp features, the person in the foreground is juxtaposed with the entirely featureless shadow to his right. Eisenman’s refusal to situate identity confuses the onlooker who happens upon this party, but it is exactly this effacement that allows for a free, unassuming setting for camaraderie. Moreover, the formal elements of the painting contribute to the paradoxical space. Eisenman illustrates her German Expressionist influence in the “figures [that] simply dissolve into the paint,” thereby emphasizing “how abstraction and figuration can work together” in search of a sensual and transcendent experience. Color accordingly functions as both the delineator of distinct bodies and the twine that holds people together, epitomized by the couple to the left of the canvas that seems to become one body.

We therefore arrive at a vital shift in Eisenman’s career and painterly sensibilities. Her renewed focus on paint is certainly apparent inasmuch as paint is shown in its full capacity as an interdependent medium of representation and the destruction thereof, joy and loss, difference and sameness. The beer gardens embody an indeterminate state: “Death is at once feared and embraced, terrifying and erotic. No one seems to notice His presence, as if Death is a frequent guest at the beer garden. It is the newcomer that one must scrutinize, as the wailer does to the viewer by confronting the all-seeing intruder who dares step foot in this sacred space. We see the kind of sadness that does not involve screams and tears, a sorrow that produces resignation, eternal stasis, a head slumped back in despair, and deadened eyes that stare blankly into a frothy stein. Nameless faces suffer nameless trials. Yet even in this space, eroticized by Death, there is pleasure of all kinds, such as the tender caress of feet under a table, the confirmation of another human being’s presence, as well as the beauty of a shared final moment at the edge of a precipice, right before the end of days. The use of paint is brutal and tender at the same time; it creates hyperrealism, sparing no one from the staining, at times disfiguring, painterly mark that nonetheless unifies the figures in a whirlwind of passionate despondence and play.

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Queerness, Painting, and the Beer Gardens

“It’s interesting to differentiate between paintings that have a roadmap and paintings that don’t. What happens when you try to create space without being architectural, only emotional? You get a space that’s really queer, for lack of a better word, a fucked-up kind of space.”

Both Sillman and Eisenman use the term “queer” instead of “lesbian” to describe the effects of paint in the Beer Gardens. One would certainly not characterize the Amazons as a form of coming out, as coming out connotes a sense of trepidation and inwardness that is exposed, a defiant secret.
that is brought to light. What the Amazons represent is a blatant assertion of female/lesbian power, completely freed of societal conventions that necessitate the public profession of a previously safeguarded identity. Neither the Amazons, despite their violent assertions of lesbian power, nor the party-goers at the beer gardens present their “sexuality” in traditional ways. Terminiology is thus central, as queerness is an umbrella term; it does not limit the interpretation to any specific identity or form of desire. Queer defies categorization; it is itself the act of undoing of the category of not-queer, and it represents a space wherein binaries have been deconstructed and rejected on their own terms. The new use of the word queer presents a more nuanced story than the purely lesbian mythology surrounding Eisenman’s work.12

Indeed, in the discourse that surrounds it, painting has never been subject to stable binaries, thereby legitimizing the use of the term “queer.” For instance, T.J. Clark goes as far as to say that the advent of modernist painting “means [that gender is] generalized to the point of disappearing, or not being relevant.”13 Where binaries break down and uncertainty outweighs surety, what results is a queer space: “The ‘unthinkable’ (meaning queerness) is thus fully within culture, but fully excluded from dominant culture” when binaries of gender remain in place.14 Indeed, without the distinction between gendered spaces, the need for categories of heterosexual and homosexual breaks down. Judith Butler notes that the production of gender binaries at once creates multiple sexualities and makes them culturally untenable, unless, of course, they are allowed to exist independently of the chokehold of normative gender relations.15 Hidden and explicit within culture, queerness recognizes and denies the frameworks that contain it, as do the beer gardens. If painting is a place where no binaries hold, queerness, then, is at its core. When combined with Eisenman’s interest in collective fear, sorrow, and joy, paint becomes a vehicle for unity in difference and difference in unity, an all-accepting solidarity that welcomes anyone with the interest (or desperation) to step foot into the beer garden. United in their exclusion from society and consummated in paint, Eisenman’s revelers channel the sexual expression of her earlier works into a melancholic, yet still defiant, reminder of the need for refuge from society’s impulse toward happiness, that is, the monolithic vision of happiness often predicated upon masculinist norms.16

Looking Forward

“Yeah, I wanted to talk about painting.”17

Eisenman continues her critical practice to this day. Even a cursory glance at her works in the 2012 Whitney Biennial could produce a wide variety of reactions, ranging from disgust to laughter to poignancy. Ever changing, ever reflecting, ever critical, Nicole Eisenman’s work has not only brought to light questions of gender and sexuality, but also the nature of paint itself. It is impossible to conclude with any satisfying answers; in her defiance of explanation, Eisenman poses questions that are impossible to answer, yet essential to ask. What is the role of the intention of the artist, and, more importantly, the artist’s self-definition? How are historical circumstances inscribed in art, and how do varying media illustrate those circumstances? Where is identity in the medium, and should we even look for it? Is doing so reductive? In this case, these queries open up the possibility for many more, without limiting these works to any single, identity-based interpretation. It is my hope that I have inspired discussion of Eisenman’s work beyond its “lesbian” roots, and that I have problematized any readings of art that are based purely upon identity politics. It seems that Eisenman completes this in her newest work by striving for coalitions in difference, as well as defiance in the face of perfunctory joy. In ink and in paint, one can find resistance, unity, individuality, and pain.

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Notes


6Ibid. 10


8My use of the gender neutral is not to impose a transsexual identity upon the figure, but rather to evoke the indeterminacy of the scene I describe.

9Berry and Eisenman 15

10Ibid. 9

14Ibid. 8

12For an example of the totalizing narrative that has been applied to Eisenman, see Harmony Hammond, Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. 355-6.


16Ibid. 104-5

17Berry and Eisenman 13
Biergarten at Night, 2007
Nicole Eisenman
Oil on canvas
65 x 82 in (165 x 208.3 cm)
Image courtesy the artist and Leo Koenig Inc., New York
Beer Garden with Ash, 2009
Nicole Eisenman
Oil on canvas
65 x 82 in (165.1 x 208.3 cm)
Image courtesy the artist and Leo Koenig Inc., New York