

NICOLE EISENMAN: SHOW BORN OF FEAR

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LOS ANGELES PROJECTS

Nicole Eisenman isn't one to hide behind pretence. She's called her most recent exhibition *A Show Born of Fear*, and that's precisely what it is: a candid, comprehensive, splendidly awkward investigation of anxiety and dread (personal, artistic, political and otherwise), albeit tempered by her characteristic humour. For those in need of further clarification, the press release includes a handwritten Venn diagram labelled 'This Explains Everything', consisting of four intersecting circles – 'European History / (Family History) / Germany', 'Heroes', 'Los Angeles History' and 'Midlife Crisis' – with names of the show's major paintings inscribed in the overlapping portions. Just below is a pie chart titled 'State of Mind 10/07', in which the largest segments are given over to 'Tired' and 'Global Warming & Political Turmoil', with only a small fraction devoted to 'Food', 'Drink' and 'Art'.

The dearth of artspeak is almost disconcerting. Is she being earnest? Ironic? Satirical? The brilliance of her humour – and her work – is that it seems to be all three, often simultaneously. Most of the pieces (40 paintings and 18 monoprints) are portraits, and a glance around the gallery at this peculiar cast of characters reveals them each to be balancing some ratio of absurdity and pathos: a deep-sea diver; Hamlet; a 'Were-artist' at his easel; a thuggish sort referred to in the title as a 'Man Wolfie'; and, in a piece titled *Conscious Mind of the Artist (Subconscious Decision and Actions in Progress)* (all work 2007), a green-skinned ogre in an undershirt who pulls a cart piled high with what looks like rainbow-tinted manure, atop which a monkey sits at an easel which is about to be pummelled by a sailing can of tuna fish. If there's anything these unfortunate figures share, it is a robust, even burdensome physicality, accentuated by Eisenman's muscular application of pigment and pointedly graceless technique. She can paint like a master but usually doesn't, opting instead to indulge every bad painterly habit she manages to churn up; whether in an act of parody or confession (or both) isn't clear.

By any reasonable aesthetic standard, the show is a mess: visually chaotic, conceptually garbled, formally uneven and stylistically schizophrenic, with moments of revelatory beauty (the face of the deep-sea diver, for instance) scattered among nuggets of truly impressive ugliness, such as *Thickest Painting*, a portrait made from sloppy coils of what looks like dingy, dust-coated toothpaste (actually foam). There are so many things wrong, in fact, that the effect is downright exhilarating. The only thing holding it all together is the only thing that really matters: that ineffable quality – whether intelligence, determination or mad conviction – that makes it clear Eisenman knows what she's doing, so grounded in her identity as an artist that she can wrestle with her fears, not in some back corner of her studio, but on the very surface of the canvas. *Holly Myers*



Untitled (Portrait of a Man Wolfie), 2007, oil on board, 122 x 99 cm. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects