

Nicole Eisenman and Keith Boadwee

By **Maddie Klett**



Nicole Eisenman, *Keith*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 43 x 46 inches. Collection of Eleanor Heyman Propp.

I first saw Keith Boadwee's work in 2018 at the project space City Limits in Oakland, California. The artist's drawings were piled on a card table in the center of the gallery, and with sweaty hands my friends and I leafed through hundreds of perforated papers. Some had obviously been stepped on and proffered dusty footprints, but this set-up seemed appropriate for Boadwee's abject subjects: fisting frogs, feces-eating fish, and long trails of excreta. *Caca*—the orifice it comes from, and its range of burnished hues—is the star here. So is Boadwee, and his cartoonish rendering of himself as a naked, bearded man gleefully co-existing with his stool (in his art studio, kitchen table, etc.).

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The display of Boadwee's drawings at The FLAG Art Foundation is far more polished than the card table configuration, but just as true to the work. Hung unframed, in a grid covering the perimeters of two galleries, it felt like stepping into an Instagram feed (the primary platform where I've followed Boadwee's practice). Despite his presence on social media, his drawings are lo-fi, outlined in black charcoal and colored with pastels. Drawn on paper from, what I imagine, he rips out of those ubiquitous yellow Strathmore pads. I got excited when I learned that the more than 250 drawings were pinned to the wall with magnets. Seamlessly tethered via nails made flush and obscured with paint, the display resembled a giant refrigerator door.



Installation view: *Nicole Eisenman and Keith Boadwee*, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, 2020. Courtesy FLAG Art Foundation. Photo: Steven Probert.

A fridge door also brings to mind the bricolage aesthetic common to that household space—magnets, flyers, and kid art—and so does the mixed symbology in Boadwee's drawings. Spiderman, a jack-o-lantern, a smiley face, all make their way into his scatological universe. A favorite is *Patriot Act* (2016) in which the pervasive, naked man wipes his bum with an American flag. The drawing is easy fodder for accusations of desecration. But if you've ever traveled abroad, you know there is perhaps nothing more American than toilet paper (especially when you can't find it). In this light, could this act be understood as cultural celebration? Maybe not. But it's fun to think about.



Installation view: Nicole Eisenman and Keith Boadwee, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York. 2020. Courtesy FLAG Art Foundation. Photo: Steven Probert.

I dwell on Boadwee's work even though *Nicole Eisenman and Keith Boadwee* at FLAG is, as the title states, a two-person show. Eisenman is the more well known of the duo, and a whole review could be written about her paintings, sculptures, and drawings that dot FLAG's first floor (Boadwee's "refrigerator door" occupies the second). On view are comical figurative drawings from the 1990s (featuring the StarKist brand tuna mascot, and muted faces in the style of Charlie Brown characters), a sculpture of a large reclining figure made of plaster and dotted with candles that resembles a quirky menorah (*Slouching Guy (Sun)*, 2012), and an over 10-foot-tall scene made in the style and scale of 19th-century history paintings à la Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851). Compared to Leutze's scene, *Heading Down River on the USS J-Bone of an Ass* (2017) is more slapstick than epic, with sailors maneuvering a jaw-shaped vessel about to traverse some very precarious falls. The show is not hung chronologically or thematically, and while there isn't much context provided for how works tie together, it is enough that this range of output came from one artist. It feels like walking inside Eisenman's head.

An oil portrait of Boadwee painted by Eisenman (*Keith*, 2020) lying naked except for a pair of red socks, hangs on the exhibition's titular wall. The artists have been friends for over 30 years and the origin story of the exhibition is a touching one: after being awarded the 2020 Suzanne Deal Booth / FLAG Art Foundation Prize, Eisenman decided to share the celebratory exhibition with her pal, who had never had an institutional solo exhibition in New York. Programmatically, I wonder where else this kind of exhibition could take place? The artists are at very different ends of the commercial spectrum, with Eisenman represented by the blue-chip powerhouse Hauser & Wirth. Boadwee's work is also, understandably, controversial, and he often deals with censorship over his Instagram posts. Other than scrappy project spaces (bless them) and now FLAG, the answer seems to be *nowhere*.



Installation view: *Nicole Eisenman and Keith Boadwee*, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York. 2020. Courtesy FLAG Art Foundation. Photo: Steven Probert.

Nicole Eisenman and Keith Boadwee is an unexpected pairing and exhibition format. There is a lot of work on view. As a result, there are many opportunities to find both affinities and issues with what's there—a quality that straddles both artists' practices and that recalls the troubling, yet self-aware, late figurative work of Philip Guston. FLAG offers a rare opportunity to see art by two makers who chose to be in a show together. Within that framework, it affords ample opportunity to play.