

## The Delightfully Debased Art of Nicole Eisenman and Keith Boadwee

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Installation view of Keith Boadwee's work in *Nicole Eisenman and Keith Boadwee* at the FLAG Art Foundation, 2020–2021 (all images courtesy FLAG Art Foundation, unless otherwise stated; photo by Steven Probert)

*Nicole Eisenman and Keith Boadwee*, currently on view at the Flag Art Foundation, is a testament to the three-decade long friendship between these two queer artists. Having established an impressive career that includes winning the MacArthur Genius Grant in 2015, Eisenman found herself surprised that Boadwee's work, which similarly imbues figurative painting with humorously perverted queer imagery, has yet to receive its due recognition. So, as the recipient of the Contemporary Austin's 2020 Suzanne Deal Booth/Flag Art Foundation Prize, Eisenman invited Boadwee to join her in what was initially envisioned as a solo project.

Spanning two floors, occupied by one artist each, the exhibition begins with Eisenman — undoubtedly the main draw for many seeking out this show, myself included. Yet the presentation is hardly satisfying; a rather random selection of works dating from 1993 to 2020, it lacks a clear angle or visual dialogue, and appears somewhat disjointed. For those familiar with Eisenman's practice, it adds little more than the welcome chuckle at the slapstick humor for which she is known. The highlight, surely, is a tender portrait of an almost nude Boadwee, who kept his red socks on, reclined on a yellow couch. Standing in front of it, I can almost hear Kate Winslet whispering: "Draw me like one of your French girls."



Any feeling of unfulfillment, however, dissipates once you climb the stairs to Boadwee's floor. Upon further thought, it might've been a clever strategy by Eisenman to consciously underwhelm the viewer, in her desire to truly highlight her friend. An impressive installation of Boadwee's drawings from 2016–2020, most of them directly ripped from the sketchbook, fill the walls and vitrines across several rooms. Contrary to the laconic distance experienced on Eisenman's floor, Boadwee's radiates a frenetic energy that stimulates the senses. The drawings depict a variety of cartoon-like figures (many of them self-portraits) engaging in a variety of activities involving shit: Spiderman shits a spiderweb, chefs shit into sushi rolls, artists smear shit onto canvas, shit is molded into fresh tortillas and donuts, numerous people eat each other's ass, and a few times shitting even takes place into a toilet. The dirty content of the drawings is heightened by their slightly dirty physical appearance, with fingerprints and other ambiguous stains left behind on the paper surface. A true shit show, of the finest quality, if there ever was one — and what better metaphor for the year we just waved goodbye.

This is certainly not the first time that feces have entered the realm of art history; think of Piero Manzoni's cans of shit, or Mike Kelley's and Paul McCarthy's fascination with excrement and feces. The latter artist was Boadwee's teacher, and his legacy is certainly palpable. McCarthy and Boadwee share a misanthropic quality with George Grosz, whose politically informed caricatures were highly controversial during his lifetime. Building on this tradition, Boadwee tackles debased humor as a valid political strategy, easily dismissed in our contemporary moment as being oblivious or lighthearted, unless it meets the SNL standard.



This is likely why Boadwee's work is not more well known in New York, which sadly has a history of prioritizing theoretically informed art, contrary to the embrace of color and humor on the West Coast, where Boadwee resides. Having been based on the East Coast for the majority of her life, Eisenman's accomplishments are therefore to be even more admired, as few lesbian figurative painters have matched her success. It speaks volumes that the artist is not hesitant to share the spotlight, or even to step out of it. At the Flag Art Foundation, the main attraction isn't Nicole Eisenman; it's Keith Boadwee's shit show.

Nicole Eisenman and Keith Boadwee *continues through March 13 at the Flag Art Foundation (545 West 25th Street, 9th Floor, Chelsea, Manhattan).*