

Coinciding with her large presentation of five over-life-size bathers at Skulptur Projekte Münster in Germany this summer, New York artist Nicole Eisenman presents a concise group of painted reliefs at Anton Kern Gallery. These surprising explorations of improbably shaped forms and color underscore the artist's aptitude to fluidly move between painting, drawing, printmaking and the making of sculptures.

The painted reliefs presented are unique aluminum casts of found object assemblages, which Eisenman has tweaked and carved to resemble human heads and faces. To amalgamate the often ephemeral and incongruent materials, the artist cast the objects in aluminum, thereby giving a voice to these casual materials and transforming them into legible forms. Finally, Eisenman painted the surface, disregarding naturalistic coloration, in favor of accentuating the expressive qualities of color, line and gesture. The metal surfaces add reflective light and a certain immaterial appearance to the objects.

Eisenman's painted reliefs occupy a space between the two and three-dimensional, the portrait and the mask, between illusionistic representation and concrete presentness of the object. In their peculiar material roughness and connection to the supporting wall, her reliefs seem to have moved just past the threshold of the implied space of painting into the actual realm of sculpture, physically entering the viewer's sphere of existence.

Of course, the significance and function of portrait reliefs and masks can be traced back to various periods and cultures when magic carried a clear communicative purpose; from the presence of the omnipotent emperor in Roman portrait medallions, to the power to converse with the spirit world imbued onto the bearers of ceremonial masks. Perhaps, Nicole Eisenman's reliefs faintly reflect some of these forgotten virtues. However, clearly positioned in the present these faces possess enough character, personality and individuality to develop affinities with each other and to engage with the worldly viewer.

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