

ALIZA NISENBAUM with Yasi Alipour

ANTON KERN GALLERY | Coreografías September 13 – November 2, 2019

Aliza Nisenbaum entered the radar of many as a participant of the 2017 Whitney Biennial. In a corner, one would find colorful large paintings consisting of beautiful and intimate portraits. These were an homage to mainly a community of undocumented immigrants of New York that Nisenbaum had gotten close to over the years. Since then, the Mexican American artist, has repeatedly found ways to grow her practice and challenged herself to consider the many forms of community in a variety of contexts. Throughout, two things have remained constant: her love for painting and her ethical politics of care.

For me, Aliza remains my former teacher. As a faculty of Columbia University's MFA program, I got to know her through her patience and presence as we went through the turbulence of the 2016 election as a community. This interview began as I visited her cozy studio in Washington Heights and continued in a follow up meeting at Aliza's apartment near Columbia's campus. I sat on her comfy couch as our photographer took her portrait. She asked me if she should put her hair up. They discussed the vulnerability of portraiture. And lost in my thoughts and staring at her coffee table, I found a beautiful catalogue of Kerry James Marshall. So, thinking about the legacy of that generation of incredible artists of color, the weight of what has become of Identity Politics since, and our troubled contemporary time, we began our conversation. Aliza's work became our guide as a proof of the existence of what José Esteban Muñoz calls "a relational and collective modality of endurance and support."

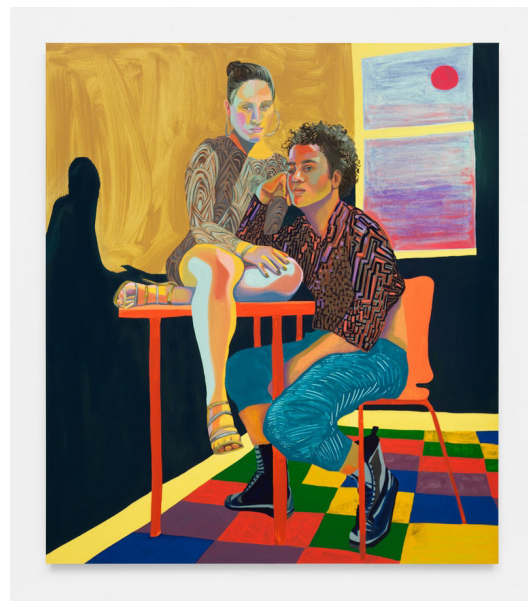
Yasi Alipour (Rail): Since we are meeting on the occasion of your upcoming exhibition at Anton Kern Gallery, let's start there. First, please tell us more about the show. By the way, what is the expected title?

Aliza Nisenbaum: I'm just on the last stretch of figuring out the title. I'm thinking either "Coreografías," which is "Choreographies" in Spanish, or to base it off a quote by the poet Alice Walker that has influenced my new body of work, "Hard times require furious dancing." I was thinking of changing that to "furious times require hard dancing." [Laughter] Because these aren't just hard times, they're more like infuriating times.

Rail: Yeah, it's heavy to think that for many "hard times" has become the status quo and still much is getting worse.



Portrait of Aliza Nisenbaum, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Ximena and Randy, Sunrise*, 2018. Oil on linen, 64 x 57 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery.

Nisenbaum: I was thinking of the word "choreography" as a term used to position dancers and orchestrate a sense of unity. But then I've also been thinking about it in terms of labor relations and how different people come together in social configurations, like in the workplace. There is roleplaying in these settings as well. This show has three different elements to it: the first part is the salsa dancers. I've been going out to salsa dance clubs since I was a teenager, and this past year, I've been frequenting clubs in New York. So, I began to think about the space of dance and how liberating it is. Initially the whole show was going to be about dancers but, then, I got interested in thinking about how different people assemble in their particular work spaces. I was recently commissioned to do a project in Brixton, London and I did a large painting that was photographically translated into a mural. The idea of assembly brought this work back. So now the exhibition is going to be the Brixton painting and the dancers and then the last painting is one I'm doing thinking about the site-specificity of the gallery itself. I'm painting every single person who works at the gallery at Anton Kern. I'm painting them all from life as well.

Rail: Salsa and the clubs are such an interesting space to think about your whole practice. Your paintings are so intimate, all grounded on the time you spend with your sitters. But while they start from this very personal encounter, your work grows to become deeply social and political. For me, Salsa echoes the same dynamic. It begins with the pure attraction of two dancers. But if one considers the clubs, many social complexities unravel, power dynamics, gender roles, cultural norms, class structures, politics that are carried as people come together.

Nisenbaum: Exactly. There are different dynamics when it's a single portrait, when it's three, when it's a whole group. Couples signify relationships, but once you have a group of people there might be a common interest, or work cohesion at play. I've increasingly become aware of the fact that the compositional space in my work is almost like theatre tableaux. In some ways you're orchestrating the relationships and positioning people next to each other depending on the social cues I'm observing—like which ones are friends. I'm guiding the poses in the painting to have the gazes in between the subjects move the viewer's gaze around the canvas, you know? There is always a tension in groups between how much you belong to the whole and how you stand apart as an individual.

Rail: I think that really shows in the painting from Brixton. In that group painting, there're so many nuanced moments between the sitters, from the way they look at each other, to the way they present themselves among the group. Can you tell us more about this project?

Nisenbaum: I was invited to live in Brixton, London for three months and make this portrait on site. We—the



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Mis Cuatro Gracias (Brendan, Camilo, Carlos, Jorge)*, 2018. Oil on linen, 75 x 95 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery.



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Anya's Dancers*, 2018. Oil on linen, 68 x 88 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery.

curator, and I—started working on this about six months beforehand. We sent an open call to everyone who works on the Victoria Line in London's subway system: "Who wants to be painted?" We explained the project and just asked what their connection to Brixton was. We got all these amazing responses. Many of their families had come to live in London as part of the Windrush generation of West Indian immigrants. They told us why they wanted to be depicted in this mural and what it would mean for them to be part of the neighborhood's history of murals. Then I met with each of them once I arrived to Brixton. We had coffee and got to know each other. And then they each came and sat for me individually. It was quite curious because my studio was located in the back of the station. It had transparent glass doors. The public couldn't see me paint, but everyone that worked in the station had access to see the whole process. The sitters and their community oftentimes visited me over the two months and gave me their feedback.

Rail: That's amazing. So, there was this organic process where they continued their conversation with you and the

painting?

Nisenbaum: Yes. There is an element of collaboration in my work. Because obviously I'm authoring the whole composition, arranging where each person will be ahead of time, but then a person's presence derails my plan sometimes. It's quite an intimate encounter to sit with somebody and stare at them for so long. And oftentimes they have not had this experience before. They're witnessing the work's creation. And each person is a new experience for me too, I keep thinking "okay I've done this quite a few times, I can do this." But every time I sit with somebody—I don't talk about this often—it's very anxiety provoking, you know, like how responsive can you be to someone in real time.

Rail: As luck had it, today I entered your place while you were having your portrait taken. You and the photographer were talking about the mutual vulnerability that the process demands. It was illuminating. You had mentioned in another interview that with each new sitting, it is as if you are learning how to paint all anew. Maybe that's related to all the years you worked in abstraction and how it still remains a big part of your work. But also, this "forgetting" or the "anxiety" makes you more vulnerable. I don't think your work transcends power relations—I'm not sure if anything does. But maybe as you let go of your technical mastery, power can be momentarily sustained between you and your sitter.

Nisenbaum: That's at its core, I think. Maybe it is part of my training as an artist, and the things I did before becoming one. I studied psychology in Mexico. I was going into mental institutions in my twenties, and I was interested in working with people as a facilitator. But then I got frustrated with the way institutions place codes on people and how those codes come to define those people. It ended up not being for me. So, I quit that career path and moved to the US. I went to the Art Institute of Chicago and I was trained to be a figurative painter there with people like Susanna Coffey. Later, in grad school I became obsessed with Barnett Newman and how he talked about the encounter between the viewer and a work. The verticality of his zips as stand-ins for the verticality of a person. And then I got interested in philosophy since my sister was studying that and ethics at the University of Chicago around the same time. Through her, I came to know of the philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas. He talks about ethics starting from this phenomenological encounter with another person. For him, this experience of "otherness" elicits an ethical demand. Then I started teaching—and I've been doing so for around 15 years—as a way to give something back to particular communities I work with.

These interests are somewhere at the back of my mind now, not too self-consciously though. I'm mostly experiencing what occurs when somebody comes to my studio to be



Aliza Nisenbaum *London Underground: Brixton Station and Victoria Line Staff*, 2019. Oil on polyester, 74 3/4 x 142 1/8 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery.

Painted from life. I don't start with the eyes or the nose or the mouth. You can't really put your finger on what color skin is, it's all these relationships between cool and warm. And so I mix the tones of colors before my sitters arrive, and then when they come, I'm remixing all my colors to try to understand what their skin tone is. It's not a matter of scrutiny either, like a medical examination. It's more like, how to show a document of sorts through the slow medium of painting. I'm really looking with minutia and attention, mixed with the kind of chemistry I have with the person before me.

Rail: As we are discussing these key elements in your work, I want to momentarily look back at your early iconic work, what came to be known as your intimate portraits of members of New York's undocumented community. It started through your collaboration with Tania Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International* (IMI) (realized through Queens Museum), where you signed up to offer an English course there that you structured as a Feminist Art History class. In my research, I was shocked to see that writers mostly left it at that. But as we both know in certain structures, Feminist discourse itself can be deeply Eurocentric, whitewashed, and exclusionary. So, I want to begin with a selfish question. What was the content of Feminist Art History class and how did you structure it to serve this community of immigrants?

Nisenbaum: At that time, I was teaching at LaGuardia Community College, the first place I taught in New York. They gave me a drawing class that started at 6 am! In that class I had mostly first-generation students. Some of them were night porters and then they would come in after their shift to draw at 6 am. I took my students to the Met and for many of them that was the first time they had ever been in a museum. So, to answer your question, I was thinking about that class, and adapted it to the needs of the group I met at IMI.

I saw Tania Bruguera give a lecture on her work. I had never considered how my work might relate to Social Practice, or Performance art really, but I was so moved by her project and it made me rethink a lot of things. Performance art is so

much about the stakes involved with bodies in actual spaces. So I approached her and she said: "propose a class, what this community needs are basic English language skills" and I was like "ok, I'm not a translator, but we'll just go to the Museum and we'll look at paintings and whichever paintings they like, we will discuss." I remember that a group of women signed up at first, so I shifted the class towards their interests. The class became Feminist Art History through the subjects that arose from the group's desires basically; not because I had a top down agenda of things that I wanted them to learn, I'm not into that way of teaching. For example, a lot of them really loved Mary Cassatt and we talked about Impressionism and how she was one of the first women to be included in the group. So, I would pick up different texts from her and we'd translate them. Or they really wanted learn about Frida Kahlo, and she somehow led to a conversation about Ana Mendieta. I remember one day I was talking about the male gaze and Nochlin's ideas and Tania joined us and co-taught that class with me. As the class progressed and we kept meeting, issues some had experienced with domestic violence arose. There were lawyers coming into the space at the same time and I started to translate for one of my sitters. I joined her later on to advocate on her behalf before the Council Member of Queens at the time.

After all that intense engagement with the women, I was just really taken with all their stories. I asked Tania if I could set up a studio where I could paint their portraits at IMI. So we set up a makeshift studio. I kept all my canvases there and would paint while all the other activities were going on. There would be music lessons, lawyer's meetings, all in a narrow storefront space. And simultaneously, I would be painting, one person at a time. It was only natural that my paintings were on display there for the first time, at a party we organized for the community. I got further engaged with a few of the families that I was teaching and painting, and started painting their extended families. Then I invited them to my home, to my studio, and eventually one family—that I started painting six years ago—joined me at the opening of the Whitney Biennial in 2017. Veronica, the mother of this family, led a youth group at the Whitney to talk about her own activism.

Rail: I'm so glad I asked.

Nisenbaum: Yes me too. I keep thinking about Gregg Bordowitz, who was my teacher in Chicago. He would say "the only politics that count are the ones in this room, right now." We experienced that very vividly at IMI. And still when I'm painting someone one on one, I think about how you negotiate power relations and political beliefs.

Rail: I can really feel the influence of those words in your work. It is true that the politics of your paintings become very complicated when they enter the art world, especially in this project and how it is often boxed under politics of representation, visibility, and empowerment. In our time and all its urgency, it is hard to come to terms with viewers who

are content with the mere act of witnessing. It is the kind of politics that has become bitterly depoliticized. Meanwhile, the viewers are oftentimes citizens who have the political agency to initiate actual political action and demand the kind of change needed for the painting's subjects.

But then, in their creation, your portraits are not simple documentations. The subjects are not stand-ins to represent a group or category. The paintings are reminiscence of a unique time as you were brought into this community, where politics was part of daily life, urgent and personal. Can you tell us how painting enters into this conversation?

Nisenbaum: Of course. In the first instance, painting operates on the symbolic register of representation. But then it's interesting how simply the act of painting can sometimes make new relationships possible or bring people together that might not have otherwise. How it can actually create new social situations or at least reimagining how these might be.

What I'm most engaged with is the process of my work; meeting new people, seeing if we can be open to each other, losing control then regaining control, and making an image somehow from the different situations I'm placed in. And also, to think of remuneration; how I pay my sitters, how do they get involved in the exhibition of the works at times. And to think of new paradigms in art that seem to be emerging more and more, a politics of care.

Rail: That's very interesting. Here, the politics are part of the process, not a one-liner statement.

Nisenbaum: Yes, maybe it's simply the physicality of bodies in relation to the materiality of the painting. Painting is so hard. *[Laughter]* People don't realize how hard it is, how surprising it is. It's not an illustration. From the moment of sitting with somebody you start to notice, they may be great conversationalists who are curious to see you work, or they might be tired, or sometimes impatient while you work with them. Ideology breaks down. You can no longer easily reduce them to ideological stances. That's literally the experience I have when I'm painting someone from life: to see them as clearly as I can, to see them literally being vulnerable and it's me trying to translate that experience into paint. I feel like there is an opening when you have gentleness with people. Of course, politics happen mostly at the level of rights, lawyers, and structural institutions. But there's also more.

In a recent interview in *South magazine* with Sharon P. Holland, Fred Moten references a conversation he had with a man named Manolo about "renewing our habits of assembly" and how members of a community support each other by this renewal. It's amazing how you find agency in creative problem solving when forced to find ways of supporting one another.

Rail: That's beautiful. To return to your recent work and the Brexit Mural project, I wanted to better understand

your relationship with a history that is often brought up in discussions of your work, the Mexican Muralism Movement. I've been thinking about a famous quote from Diego Rivera—in response to one of the many controversies around the political content of his work, "I paint what I see." And of course, he was speaking through the Marxist lens of labor and class struggle. But it becomes a very interesting statement to then compare and contrast that movement with your work.

Nisenbaum: You know, I like how Marx would talk about how our senses carry our class history. He said "the history of the world is the history of the five senses." Rivera had a very particular ideology he wanted to convey. He was making images of Mexican indigenous bodies as part of the movement of an ethnicized social history. A contemporary of the muralists that interests me more is Maria Izquierdo. Mostly, she painted these small-scale still lifes of objects like "retablos", which are devotional paintings made for private worship. She also painted circus performers. She was commissioned to make a public mural at some point, but the great Mexican male muralists vetoed her. They went to the Minister of Education and said she can't do that "because all she paints are these small works."

Rail: Damn, that shows a lot. That also makes me think of your relationship to Alice Neel. She really played with the vulnerability demanded by portraiture and live figurative painting. She was also a white woman who lived and worked from Harlem for years. A daring single mother who truly loved the neighborhood and painted many of her neighbors. Hilton Als writes beautifully on the African American bodies that are depicted in her work. I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on her since the politics of race in both of your practices carry similar levels of complexity.

Nisenbaum: I live in West Harlem as well since I teach at Columbia University and walking around that area, I am amazed at how she captured the specific architecture and streets of Harlem. The way she paints a whole family, lets you sense that those are her neighbors. You really start to like her characters, just as she shows you all their flaws. There's a true humanism there. She's just very perceptive to character.

Rail: Very true. This is an interesting moment to then think about the invitation to work in London, a political situation where you are an outsider. The history of murals in Brixton is pretty loaded. As an aftermath to the neighborhood's riots in the '80s, the government invited artists to create murals to reunite the community and bring "peace." England in those years is of course defined by Thatcher, her anti-immigrant politics, her demand for assimilations, and the police brutality that set fire to the uprising. The parallels to our times are terrifying. I want to understand how you respond to such invitations and how you enter and engage with this history and Brixton. Nisenbaum: I try to do as much research ahead of time and have the people I paint be

my guides in terms of what is necessary to depict. In the end, it is important to allow myself to think on my feet and be as responsive as I possibly can.

Rail: Shall we return to Levinas and his influence on your work? His take on the "other" in the context of contemporary art seems really unique to me. I feel like today we tend to mostly think of the "other" either through the likes of Sartre—where the other and their gaze is "hell"—or through Edward Said—the other as a historic, social, and political category constructed through colonial and hegemonic powers. Levinas offers such a different take. I keep thinking that the care he placed in approaching the "other" is influenced not only by being a phenomenologist, but a Jewish European intellectual of the WWII era.

Nisenbaum: He was a prisoner of war during WWII. He and Hannah Arendt talk about revolutions being about solidarity between different factions coming together.

Rail: Do you find echoes of Jewish philosophy in the ethics and politics of Levinas and Arendt?

Nisenbaum: Yes! I also think that my work maybe has roots in a kind of Jewish perspective too. I was not brought up religious, but my family was always interested in studying Jewish philosophy. The way it is cultural more than religious, in how you relate to people. It's more about the contingencies of the world, and not so much about the afterlife or anything like that. There are hundreds of commandments regarding direct actions towards people—very practical ones. That's exactly what Levinas says, that another's face is supposed to be the starting point of ethics.

Rail: Oh, that really resonates in your work. I think it is time to move our focus to your recent project on Salsa dancers. Thinking about the Walker quote—our hard times and furious dancing—I am fascinated by how your work celebrates the daily survival. And points to what Moten puts as, "the complicated relationship of struggle and joy." It's no simple matter. It is brave and defiant. Salsa is such an interesting subject. Not just as a dance but in relation to the Latinx identity, and in many levels its stereotypes.

Nisenbaum: You get on the other side, hopefully, cause there is a cliché, obviously, of the Latin American salsa dancer. And salsa didn't even originate in Cuba or Mexico, but it was invented in New York. I started going to these clubs with my friends, Camillo and Jorge. If you know the basic structure of the dance, you can go at it with anyone. You might do a little small talk with the partner that you're dancing with, but overall either you can do it or you can't, and they disqualify you like, "Sorry, you're not good enough to dance with me" [*Laughter*] and then you have to go back to your seat or ask someone else to dance. But it's so interesting how it really is a very democratizing space in other ways: once you've paid the entrance fee, there can be quite a mixture of class and race, and it's about just

losing yourself, literally, it's so exhausting, so physical that you don't have time for much talk, but responding to their movements instead. Some people dance on "one" or on "two" and I'm still not quite sure which I do, I think I do weird mixture of both. *[Laughter]*

Rail: In your work you focus, not on the act of dancing and the cliché image of two dancers intertwined. You look at it as a community and show moments shared among the members that are filled with care and completely invisible to outsiders. Rather than bringing the viewers in, you give them echoes of what it feels to belong to that space. In some ways it makes me think of your early paintings of the flower bouquets and how they point to your visceral memories of Mexico City. Or your iconic painting of a pile of letters and drawings that you received from an incarcerated friend. The letters in that painting are filled with indicators of language and words but when one looks closer, it's all illegible scribbles. Language becomes fully private.

Nisenbaum: You're right, a lot of what I paint here is the preparing, being lost in your own thoughts, looking in the mirror. Moments of reprieve before an action. And yes, they do somehow relate to the contemplative nature of the still lives I made a few years ago. When I made a portrait of someone through the letters they sent me for two years while being incarcerated.

I think we're all kind of made of our relationships and how people influence us. I was making these big abstract paintings in Chicago in which I was thinking about tactility, how touch is a sense that is always about being relational. Then, I was thinking about the small bouquets of flowers sold by peddlers on the streets in Mexico, oftentimes gardenias, flowers my father would buy for the family and my mother would paint.

Rail: There's something truly moving about that. I wanted to consider this body of work in relationship to Cindy García's illuminating book, *Salsa Crossings*, which focuses on three Salsa clubs in California. Two key elements that I found in her study is how latin-ness is performed to match a Hollywood ideal. And then of course the power dynamics and gender relations! Did you find similarities in your experience?

Nisenbaum: Yeah, it's inescapable. It's so interesting how these power codes get reechoed, how you might wear a certain amount of makeup, or gesture with your hand—called "styling"—that may show you're too professional a dancer. Or that there are certain ways that Mexicans or Senegalese dance, sometimes even a style, can be stigmatized. And what it means to be a white woman that goes into those clubs. Because oftentimes I don't get asked to dance until they see that I can dance well, then they're like "Ok, she passes, after all!"

This has been the story of my life: I went to a Jewish

Montessori school, and I didn't fully fit in. I was Jewish in Mexico, and we'd go on field trips and we'd be given certain codes of behavior. And then I moved to the US for art school, and sometimes still miss out on a lot of American cultural cues. And so, entering these clubs is like, "Ok, here it goes again, I'm the white Latina that doesn't get asked to dance until I ask them, and I prove myself."

Rail: Until you perform the expectation, and perform it perfectly.

Nisenbaum: It's funny you leave Mexico and 20 years later, you're interested again in finding a community that speaks your language, you know? A poet I like, Glissant, talks about how we should refuse to be a single being, and how mixed some of our identities are.

I feel that a Latin American identity is often simplified. Latinx bodies are still very much seen in terms of labor, not culture. And as a result, people don't engage in the culture. And, there's what, like 10–12 million Spanish-speaking people in the United States? We're mostly bilingual. I sometimes don't know if I think in English or in Spanish, and that's how a lot of us operate. It's a Fascist tendency to simplify identities—with no gray-zone—and pit them against each other.

Rail: That's so true. Garcia also takes a close look at how gender is structured and performed in these clubs around an abstract and hyper masculine gaze. But she also studies the nuanced interactions that she calls "homo-relationality." She reaches for instances that shake and momentarily challenge the normative power structure—like gentle conversations shared in the women's bathroom. I really appreciate how many of your paintings seem to be dedicated to exactly such interactions. I want to know more about your decision to focus on a subject that has been as exotified as Salsa but then to complicate that by painting what is often disregarded. To put it in Moten's terms, I wonder if what you focus on is the "Undercommons" of these clubs.

Nisenbaum: That's a lovely way of putting it. They are often the banal moments. It was so cool to be allowed into the backstage of these professional dancers' settings. It's the same process as what my other work has taken: at first, you enter a community, maybe as an outsider. I got to know a few of the dancers, and one of them who teaches kids in Washington Heights, Ximena, invited me to her class to show me how these kids are indoctrinated into the dance atmosphere, introduced to the music. I made a painting of these kids. Ximena invited me to her home and I met her roommate and painted them in their domestic setting too. Ximena will also kick off the dance party after the opening of my show and teach people the basics for this dance!

Rail: That sounds like a blast, and once again, you are honoring your collaboration with the subjects by inviting them to have their own performance. "Indoctrinate" is

such an interesting word here. Salsa clubs become a space where structures dictate how bodies are supposed to behave, perform, and exist. But also, as you mentioned, it is literally the physicality of the dance, the exhaustion of the body. The act of dancing itself and moving together precedes it all.

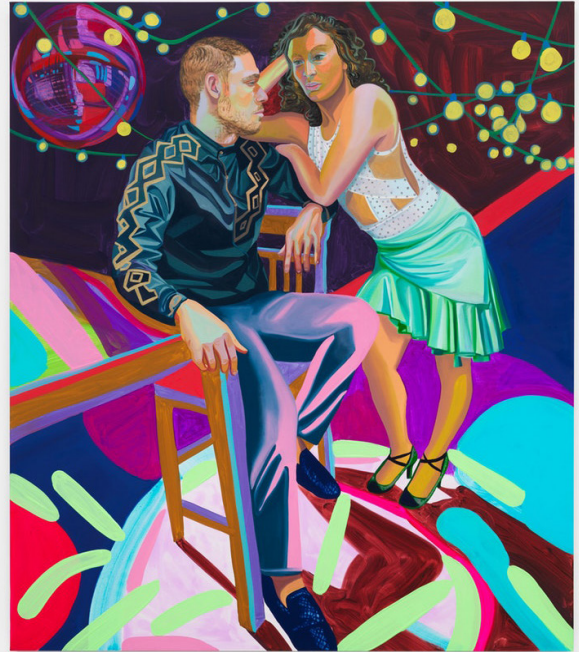
Nisenbaum: In the *Undercommons*, Fred Moten talks about how communities come together and the tactical strategies they use to form coalitions. I'm seeing all these immigrant communities that I'm still engaged with on Facebook and how they're coalescing, how neighbors find support, and alliances. There's moments of extreme situations, like revolution, but mostly in hard times people resist by helping each other out. They make due in their daily life.

Rail: And that kind of care is what your work aims to reach. Before we finish, I would like to pause for a second on the portrait that you are going to make of the full Anton Kern team. This piece reminds me of a group painting you did as part of your exhibition with the Minneapolis Institute of Art that focused on the museum's security guards. Of course, that piece is often discussed as Institutional Criticism but I remember reading you somewhere that even there it was mainly based on your love for painting.

Nisenbaum: Painting is so endless, seriously. It's an obsession that can take over your whole life! It's like a puzzle wanting to be solved.

Rail: I'm interested in how your critical politics of care come to play in the Anton Kern painting. This one can't be

simplified as either solely of the politics of representation—like IMI portraits—or as Institutional Criticism—as MIA. But in it all, you aim to understand politics and power through a commitment to really see people. This time you start with the context that grounds your exhibition. Can you tell us more



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Jenna and Moises*, 2018. Oil on linen, 64 x 57 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery.

about the decision to make this painting?

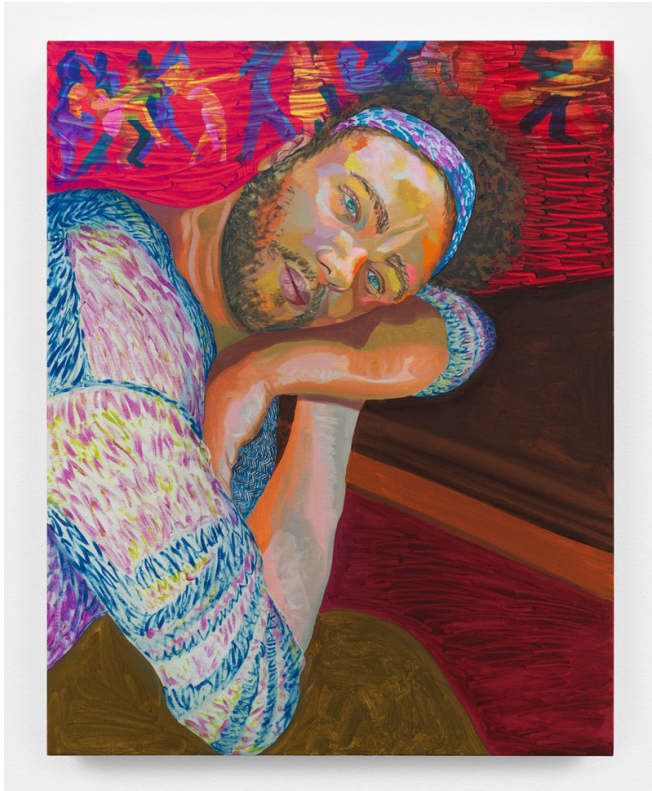
Nisenbaum: I began by looking at a painting by Maurice Denis, *Homage to Cézanne* (1900). Redon, Vuillard, Bonnard, Denis, are all converging around the Cézanne painting. On one side is Denis's wife, the only female, looking at the viewer. I was thinking about how communities assemble around different structures. In a gallery, it's around art objects. So, I asked some of the other artists at the gallery, "Is it okay if I make a copy of your painting in my painting?" They graciously said yes. And I was thinking about the structures of that workplace, from Anton Kern himself, Christoph Gerozissis, the director I work with, and all the people that are there full-time, along with the cleaning staff that come in a couple of days a week. I want to shed light on the labor that happens to make a gallery, a gallery.

Rail: It is so fascinating the way you take in and go beyond the old school criticism of the White Cube and look at this as another community that surrounds the life of your work. Not to disregard its inner power dynamics, not to romanticize or fetishize it, but to put forth community in its many forms.

Nisenbaum: Exactly, I was interested to learn that in this gallery they try to not be too hierarchical. As I was working, I came to realize how each person is essential to the workings of the whole.



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Puro Teatro (Jorge, Carlos and Brendan)*, 2018. Oil on linen, 77 x 63 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery.



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Randy*, 2018. Oil on linen, 32 x 26 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery.

To go back to the MIA work, when I was invited to work there, they were like, "Why don't you paint the community that surrounds the museum?" and I thought, "Well, first let's paint this community that work inside the museum." It was a similar way of disclosing something of myself. There the institution stood for me. And so, I was thinking of the Anton Kern painting in a very similar way. If I'm painting other communities, this is the one that has helped me realize my work for the past year. It's important to depict them as well.

Also, it's about being transparent to the fact that these works are sold. The economy of sales enters into that and all the complexities that come with making that happen. The people that work in galleries are fascinating. They have my deepest respect. I've enjoyed getting to know them further as they sit for me. And then again, it's also a tribute to some of the other artists of the gallery, whose work I admire.

Rail: It all comes together. I want to close our interview with a very different question. Can you tell us about your relationship to color? I feel like it is deeply important in your work, and we haven't discussed it enough.

Nisenbaum: Color is my favorite thing about painting! Color relationships almost define the affect of a painting. You can't cheat with it. Like sometimes you are calculating and planning color by making a drawing ahead of time, but then as you put it down on canvas you have to change it. At least I do. It's impossible to plan ahead of time. It's also hugely

cultural and historical. It's really what keeps me going in terms of resolving a painting. I do have this set of skills where I feel I can mix any color. No two people see color the same way. It's somewhat subjective but we try to find a common language.

Rail: Wow, you are truly passionate about this subject! What a great place to end. Language falls short, ideologies falter, and you remain a painter, moving through the world with an ethical and political commitment to look, with care.

Contributor

Yasi Alipour (MFA Columbia 2018) is an Iranian artist/ writer/folder who currently lives in Brooklyn and wonders about paper, politics, performance, and her daydreams of the Civil Society. For further information, please visit yasamanalipour.com.