

frieze

Aliza Nisenbaum: Can Painting Be a Form of Social Practice?

The artist's new Art on the Underground commission and the politics of paying attention

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Aliza Nisenbaum, *London Underground: Brixton Station and Victoria Line Staff*, 2019. Courtesy: Art on the Underground

It's a strange thing to go to an opening at an Underground station. On a cold, bright morning last Wednesday, there was nothing at the entrance to the Victoria Line at Brixton to announce that the 4.7 x 9-metre mural greeting commuters at the top of the stairs was a new Art on the Underground commission by the Mexican artist Aliza Nisenbaum. No ribbon to be cut nor speeches to be made: nothing to impede the flow of commuters streaming into and out of the Tube below. I lingered for a while in the entrance, watching people pass, wondering if it might be too much to ask for anyone to notice the walls of a station over the infinite portable attractions of our screen-stuck age. Most didn't. But one young girl stopped and pointed 'Look' to her mother; I heard them talking about the painting as their backpacks disappeared from sight. And a guy in a pair of Beats kept his eyes glued on the mural as he skittered down the steps, never breaking his stride but studying the image as if reading it, from left to right.

Down a hidden corridor next to the entrance, in a one-time tearoom that served as Nisenbaum's studio for the three months that she was working on the piece, there was a small celebratory gathering over coffee and croissants. It was relaxed, convivial. Nisenbaum's father had flown in from Mexico and her mother from the US. The 15 members of Victoria Line staff whom the artist has painted for the work were all there, some in their uniforms, before being ushered outside to have a group photo taken in front of their painted likenesses. They had brought family and friends. I kept glimpsing them in the group, with the flicker of false familiarity that you feel seeing someone you know from TV.



Aliza Nisenbaum, *London Underground: Brixton Station and Victoria Line Staff*, 2019.
Courtesy: Art on the Underground; photograph: Angus Mill

for that because it proved 'art can be everywhere'. She applied, partly, because she wanted to see herself in paint – and because she was curious about the way that other people saw her. As women, she pointed out, we are often told that the desire to look at ourselves is narcissistic; but, really, everyone is interested in images of themselves.

In the painting – titled straightforwardly, as with most of Nisenbaum's works, *London Underground: Brixton Station and Victoria Line Staff* (2019) – some sitters stare out at us directly. Others look to the floor or avert their eyes. One woman fiddles with the inside of her jacket; some hold cups of tea. All wear their uniforms, different items denoting different roles in a code that, from the outside, is difficult to parse, but which is presumably immediately identifiable to other members of staff. (Likewise the blue and white fleck of the floor, the enlarged swatches of train-seat fabric that appear in the background of the image and a hovering formation of red bricks – all of which those in the know would recognize as being specific to the Victoria Line.) The collective impression is one of serene self-possession; the painting itself has an almost guileless directness, like the 1970s portraiture of Sylvia Sleigh, whose group portraits Nisenbaum cites as an influence: you believe that it captures something of the sitters as they are.

For the sitters this was a second unveiling. They had been, in early March, to celebrate the finishing of the painting that has been reproduced and enlarged to create the wall piece. As Nisenbaum told me in the studio: 'they [the sitters] are always the first to see the work'. And, of course, they see it throughout the process – sometimes commenting; occasionally requesting changes. Nisenbaum always paints from life: in an instance such as this, where she depicts a group, she arranges them collectively and photographs this, but paints each sitter individually. (In Brixton, the photographic stage is slyly captured in the finished work: a small image of the artist herself, phone in hand, appears in a convex mirror in the top right corner of the work – a selfie that nods to masterworks by Jan van Eyck and Parmigianino.)

The group was chosen via an open call to all Victoria Line employees asking applicants to detail why they wanted to be painted. Of 19 respondents, 15 were chosen; their reasons for applying were various: connections to the local area, wanting to represent particular communities, an interest in the artistic process. One of the sitters told me, good-humouredly, that the process hadn't been what she initially expected ('I was imagining an attic studio in Paris, and "Draw me like your French girls"!') but that she'd come to appreciate it more



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Morning Security Briefing at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, basement door open onto the Guard Lounge Pet Wall*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Mary Mary, Glasgow

Nisenbaum has spoken about the work in terms of wanting to put faces to a large, impersonal (and sometimes unlovely) organization. It makes visible, larger than life, those whose labour – essential to the smooth running of tens of thousands of daily routines – is often overlooked or taken for granted. In this, *London Underground* continues a form of painting-as-institutional-critique that the artist explored in her 2017–18 show at Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA). It also expresses the idea, underlying Nisenbaum's entire artistic output since the very first portraits she painted, while volunteering at Tania Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International in Queens, that painting can be a form of social practice. (It's hard to believe but, up to that point, seven years ago, she had been an abstract painter.) In Minneapolis, Nisenbaum painted museum security staff at their morning briefing against a wall filled with images of their pets. She spent time in two community organizations based in the neighbourhoods surrounding the museum, painting Latino elders at the Centro Tyrone Guzman and young Somali women at Hope Community Garden. Both organizations were given a space within the museum to programme as they wanted for the duration of the show (which was called 'A Space We Share').

On one level, there is a fairly straightforward politics of representation at play here: bringing people into spaces – the symbolic realm of the canvas; the literal site of the museum – in which they might not typically be (or historically have been) visible. Similarly, in Brixton, the luminous, minutely nuanced skin tones of the sitters affirms a narrative of diversity and inclusivity that is key to the way the area – and London as a whole – conceives of itself. (It's worth noting that the Art on the Underground commissions in this station are in the tradition of the Brixton murals, the first of which were funded by the local authority and the Greater London

Council in the wake of the violent 1981 riots that pitted the majority-white Metropolitan Police against the majority-black local community.)



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Gloria, Angelica, Jessica*, 2014, oil on linen, 130 × 84 cm. Courtesy: the artist, White Columns, New York and Mary Mary, Glasgow

But Nisenbaum's politics are smaller; they occur on an interpersonal level, in the one-on-one encounter. She is wary of turning people into symbols – especially when the figure of the immigrant is already so vociferously over-determined. She admires the work of the great Mexican muralists – José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros – but retreats from their ideological commitments. In Siqueiros's immense, allegorical *The March of Humanity* (1971), Nisenbaum points out, the people rise and fall as an undifferentiated mass.

At Immigrant Movement International, Nisenbaum led a workshop on feminist art history as a way of teaching her mostly Hispanic students English. Her students were her first sitters. She asked to paint them, initially, as a way to spend more time with them, to learn more about their lives. She quips: 'Someone joked to me recently that being painted is like a very extended haircut [...] But how often do you spend hours with a person, looking at every detail?' It feels almost incidental that the results are so very beautiful: concise, radiant scenes, often in pattern-dense interiors, and with occasional odd twists of perspective. She painted

them in the community centre, over the chatter of immigration lawyers, then in their homes as they watched telenovelas, read, embraced. She has returned to some subjects many times; she's documented them grow up. Veronica, who appeared as a girl in some of Nisenbaum's first portraits, around 2013, has just filled out her college applications.

Nisenbaum's pictures tell stories. This is even, or perhaps especially, true when they communicate in a semi-private language, whose symbolism is only fully apparent to their sitters: a Mauritius pin on the jacket of one of the Tube workers; a Yankees logo pinned to a noticeboard in the MIA staff lounge; the Virgin of Guadeloupe, star of a popular *telenovela*, on a calendar in someone's front room. Sometimes – as with the ziggurat-like formation of bricks that hovers in the background of the Brixton mural – these appear with the strange, unexpected inevitability of the best Latin American magical realist traditions. They are ways of



Aliza Nisenbaum, *MOIA NYC Womens Cabinet*, 2016, oil and linen, 173 × 216 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Mary Mary, Glasgow

saying: 'I have been watching and listening closely. I am paying attention.'

Attention – as the word 'pay' suggests – is an economy of exchange. But who has enough to give, these days? And what are the returns? Nisenbaum's sitters attain a certain kind of immortality, but the painting itself enters into a different economy. In the beginning, Nisenbaum gifted her portraits to their subject. She doesn't do that anymore, although she always pays for their time. She's thinking about how to exceed that transaction; how, perhaps, to stem some of the flow of value away into the dizzy collector-echelons of the art world. It's complicated. The relationship between sitter and the one holding the brush is always unequal. But then, our relationships with other people often are. Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher who wrote extensively about the face-to-face encounter, which underpins all portraiture, thought that this asymmetry was the basis for an ethics. Vulnerability calls for responsibility, a mode of being-with that is about taking care.

In *London Underground*, the 15 figures abut one another, touch, overlap. There is a sense of easy collectivity. But there is also space around and intervals between people. You could say that all of Nisenbaum's work is about how we navigate that gap: what we can do to shorten it and what is a respectful distance to maintain.

Aliza Nisenbaum is an artist based in New York, USA. In 2018, she had a solo exhibition at Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, USA. In 2019, she will have a solo exhibition at Anton Kern Gallery, New York (opening September), and her work will be included in group shows at ICA Boston, and Phillips Collection, Washington D.C. (organized in conjunction with the New Museum). Her Art on the Underground commission is on show at Brixton Underground station, London, UK, until 16 September.