

Aliza Nisenbaum on Why Her Intimate Portraits of Immigrants Aren't about Empathy

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Aliza Nisenbaum, *Nimo, Sumiya and Bisharo Harvesting Flowers and Vegetables at Hope Community Garden*, 2017. Photo by Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis. Courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

When is a painting not enough? For [Aliza Nisenbaum](#)—best known for her tender portraits of immigrants, several of which were on view at this year's [Whitney Biennial](#)—an artwork is simply a way to access a deeper sense of community and interpersonal exchange.

Her latest exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, which opens on

September 28th, finds her venturing into new territory, embedding with disparate groups, from the museum's own security guards to Somali women affiliated with a nearby public garden. The show includes a public space that will allow local groups to host their own programming, from union meetings to Dia de Los Muertos activities and, possibly, the occasional museum-guard jam session.

It's a somewhat logical progression for the artist, who initially planned to pursue social work rather than art. She studied psychology in Mexico City—where she was born and raised, the child of a Norwegian-American mother and a Russian-Mexican father—before changing course and applying to art school in Chicago. There, abstraction initially compelled her, but she says that she always felt a strong pull toward real-world engagement and philosophy, working alongside professors like former Whitney Biennial curator Michelle Grabner and Gregg Bordowitz (of ACT UP fame). “It was frustrating,” she recalls. “I was making paintings that wanted to have all these *ideas*, but they were abstract.”

Nisenbaum relocated to New York, where she was influenced by her friend, the painter Josephine Halvorson, known for hyper-detailed depictions of ordinary things: weathered walls, windows, fireplaces. Nisenbaum found a new subject in flowers, which she would purchase around her neighborhood and then render at scale. That might sound impersonal, but for the artist, it was a way to “think about how to paint objects that represented trade between Mexico and the U.S. in some way.” She thought of the small bundles of gardenias that street vendors sell in Mexico City, as well as her mother—an amateur painter with a floral fixation.





Aliza Nisenbaum, *Morning Security Briefing at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Basement Door open onto the Guard Lounge Pet Wall*, 2017. Photo by Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis. Courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

A series of encounters with the Cuban activist-artist Tania Bruguera would prove even more formative. In 2011, Bruguera was in the process of launching Immigrant Movement International (IMI), a self-described “artist-initiated socio-political movement” commissioned by Creative Time and the Queens Museum. IMI became a resource center for immigrants, hosting everything from music lessons to info sessions on OSHA labor regulations. Nisenbaum wanted to assist, and—since she had a teaching background—was put in charge of a language class at IMI’s small headquarters.

“I taught a group of mostly grown women, and it was basically ‘English through feminist art history,’” Nisenbaum says. “We translated texts of awesome female artists, or I’d take them to the Metropolitan Museum. Part of the class was just chatting and hanging out, and I was so impressed by the stories of how these women got to the United States—they blew my mind. I thought: *How can I spend more time just talking to them?*”

And so Nisenbaum converted a small section of IMI’s Queens location into a pop-up portrait studio, where she began painting the women (and, occasionally, their husbands). Of course, a certain relational groundwork had to exist before a portrait could begin. “It’s something very vulnerable,” Nisenbaum says. “There has to be mutual trust. It can’t happen if they’re closed off, nervous, or shy.”

She would pay her subjects for their time, and take them out for meals; occasionally, in the early days, she might gift a painting to a regular sitter. As the work evolved, Nisenbaum grew as concerned with the process—the unspoken relationship between artist and subject—as she was with the

finished canvases.

“How does one not end up with a capitalist economy of ‘I’m paying you for your time,’ which is the way a lot of undocumented immigrants are exploited for their labor?” she wonders, imagining “an economy that exceeds this monetary exchange; going back to what it means to sit for someone. It’s about care.”



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Latin Runners Club*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist, and Mary Mary, Glasgow.

Eventually, the portrait sessions migrated to Nisenbaum’s own apartment, where she treats the encounter as an additional educational opportunity. She would leave out relevant books on the work of Kerry James Marshall or David Hockney. “For the first hour, I mix color,” she says. “It’s a preamble—casual, getting acquainted. I’ll ask if they want to listen to music or watch a *telenovela*. It becomes very much a back-and-forth conversation, but there are moments of total silence, which can be intense

conversation, but there are moments of total silence, which can be intense. It's really *looking*.”

She'd also be invited to visit the homes of the people she painted, which provided further insight into their lives, and details that could be incorporated into the works' backgrounds. “I started to point to the traditions of where they're from,” she says, “how to round out their personality and give a full sense of who they are.” That, Nisenbaum explains, was partly a response to the Mexican muralists she admires, who “would form a narrative of the indigenous Mexican body, but not really show an individual—they're kind of anonymous figures,” she explains. “I'm interested in giving a backstory or a dreamspace to the subjects that I'm depicting.”

Nisenbaum also began painting sitters beyond the IMI community, including members of the Immigrant Women Leaders Fellowship (a city-sponsored group the artist herself served on), and a handful of marathon aficionados who called themselves the Latin Runner's Club. Throughout, she continued a parallel body of work that explored a very different sort of portraiture: a series in which she intricately reproduced letters from a friend who spent two years in prison.

When the Minneapolis Institute of Art invited Nisenbaum to spend time in the city as a resident artist earlier this year, they hoped she would continue to explore the social component of her painting practice. While MIA pointed her toward two of the three groups she ended up collaborating with, it was her own decision to depict the museum's guards in their work environment.





Aliza Nisenbaum, *Yessi*, 2014. Photo by Bill Orcutt. Courtesy of the artist, and Mary Mary, Glasgow.



Aliza Nisenbaum
Aquí está tu terroncito de azúcar, 2014
Lulu

One of the first people she encountered at MIA, she recalls, was a guard named Kath, who was describing the work of [Alice Neel](#)—one of Nisenbaum’s favorite painters, and an obvious influence—to a visiting family. When she broached the possibility of making a portrait of the guards, the institution wasn’t immediately on board, though they came around to the concept. “I got a little bit of pushback, but I was thinking of the history of institutional critique: If a museum asks you to engage with community, how do you reflect on the museum itself, first?”

Nisenbaum began sitting in on the guards’ 9:45 a.m. morning meetings, held in a small lounge in which they had lovingly assembled a wall of photographs of themselves taken with their pets (including a cow, a snake, and many cats). She ended up using the meeting room as the backdrop for her painting of six members of the staff. Like most of Nisenbaum’s portraits, it’s a marvel of detail, capturing the guards’ bright blue ties and blazers; a Cheeto-orange baseball cap turned backwards; the granular detail of notices pinned to a staff message board; pens tucked into a shirt pocket; an oddly hypnotic pale-green-and-black tiling pattern on the floor.

Concurrently, Nisenbaum was also getting to know two distinct groups beyond the museum’s walls that would inform additional paintings for her MIA show. At the community center Centro Tyrone Guzman, she worked with seniors, leading them in a class on portrait-drawing before painting their group portrait herself. The sitters are depicted holding drawings they had made of their peers, posed against a monumental mural that graces the Centro’s walls. (Nisenbaum is always eager to embed a picture within a picture within a picture.)

For the final canvas of the MIA trio, the artist spent time with women at

Hope Community, a multifaceted organizing group that bills itself as “an alternative to gentrification.” Here, she met a number of Muslim immigrants from Somalia, three of whom appear in Nisenbaum’s portrait, the bright colors of their hijabs jangling against the vibrant palette of flowers from the community garden.



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Angel*, 2013. Photo by Bill Orcutt. Courtesy of the artist, and Mary Mary, Glasgow.

“It’s amazing, and super tightknit,” Nisenbaum says of the group. “These centers are things we’ll have to rely on more, in the crazy times we’re living in—how people find resources and agency with creative, empowering communities. That’s also a model for how I’m interested in thinking about the relationships I build with people.”

Nisenbaum doesn’t, however, think of those relationships in terms of empathy, which she considers a fraught term. Instead, she says, “I think of

care. Not in terms of caretaking, but what it means to have that materiality, something as simple as a person's physical presence right in front of you. There's an ethics in that, in paying attention."

"The idea of empathy is putting oneself in another's experience," she continues, "but you can never really do that. I'm much more interested in how another person is totally unknowable, totally opaque to your supposed understanding of them. My work starts from looking and attention, and what can come from that. It's what it means to look carefully, rather than coming with all kinds of ideological baggage. It's just sitting with people."

—Scott Indrisek