

Arts



tion and the lively wall of tiles, no two alike, that suggests a vibrant culture.

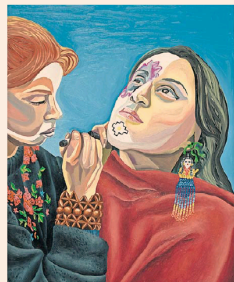
Nisenbaum paints directly from life, and the time she spends with her sitters produces an intense communion. She's not the sort of ruthless analyst who lingers on unsuspected flaws. Instead, she brings out the nobility of people who we might otherwise encounter only in brief impersonal transactions. Andra, a member of the Queens Museum's facilities staff, could be a splendid monarch, enthroned in his office. Moments of his reign (a US Open poster from 1993, a picture of the Jackson 5) adorn the walls, and his checked trousers and glossy shoes hum against the geometric pattern of the carpet.

Most of Nisenbaum's subjects come from Mexico and Central America, a community she got to know while volunteering for Immigrant Movement International, an art project-cum-social/political movement. Craving a deeper connection, she began asking members to pose. Over the hours and days they sit for her, they narrate lives they led, places they've left behind, and ordeals of dislocation.

She has her own history of displacement to share. Her father's Jewish family fled to Mexico from what is now Belarus; her Scandinavian-American mother converted to Judaism when they married. That relationship ended when Aliza was 14, and she joined her mother in the US when she attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. There she developed a style of politically infused realism inspired by the strong hues, bold planes and leftward thrust of Diego Rivera and Gabriel Orozco.

But her admiration for the Mexican muralists did not extend to their habit of reducing humans to generic symbols. She tempered their influence with the furious grace of Alice Neel, who built unique faces out of splashes of pigment. Need uncovered weaknesses, though, while Nisenbaum paints with more generosity and a sharp eye for the pride and aspirations encoded in decor.

Marissa, the girl with the newspaper, crows up again in a more recent painting titled "Pedacito de Sol" ("Strip of Sunshine"). Older, now, but still capable of an adolescent's sprawl, she's home from college (Ivy League, we're told), slumped against her mother Veronica, as if the world outside had left her exhausted. The two cuddle in a cosy



arrangement of arms and legs, and the room glows with delight. Sunshine streams in from one side, illuminating their faces and irradiating the striped couch, blooming plant and embroidered pillows. Nisenbaum lingers on the fiesta flags festooning the ceiling and on Veronica's green cowboy boots, which practically pulsate in the glare.

Her approach is informed by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who reasoned that responsibility towards others — "the wisdom of love" rather than "the love of wisdom" — lays the groundwork for knowledge. "Levinas says that ethics comes from the face-to-face relationship," Nisenbaum has said, and she puts the principle into practice in her studio. The current of affection that passes between artist and model animates her canvases. She makes mutual trust visible to all, asserting its importance in a time dominated by rage and suspicion. These group portraits of friends and family just hanging out resonate with the work of Jordan Casteel, who treats under-represented subjects with a similarly luminous compassion.

The term "political art" usually comes bundled with confrontation and critique. But there are alternatives. Nisenbaum cites Goya's "Third of May 1808" and Picasso's "Guernica" as examples of engage works that also have powerful aesthetic appeal. Trauma and beauty are not mutually exclusive. Neither are activism and everyday pleasures.

"Eloina, Angie, Emma, Abril y Marley", Despensa de Alimentos, Queens Museum" (2023) embodies Nisenbaum's technique of examining the mundane with a sympathetic eye. She depicts the panorama beneath her studio on Wednesdays, when the museum runs a food pantry that feeds 400 families. The oblique view from above flips the relationships in a Renaissance ceiling fresco, foreshortening bodies and focusing on volunteers' brows, baseball caps and shoulders, rather than on the upward view of gods' sinuous thighs.

The painting is epic but also literally down-to-earth, a mixture of group portrait and still life. Instead of fuchsia clouds, she gives us polychrome produce, a cornucopia of avocados, pineapples, peppers and more. Furnishing food is a political and moral act, and the intertwining of theme and treatment gives this view from the artist's window a startling mythic weight.

Starting 10, queensmuseum.org

Paintings that pay attention

Visual arts | Aliza Nisenbaum's portraits of people who have crossed continents reveal their trust in family and travails in the city. By Ariella Budick

who have crossed continents to make homes in unfamiliar places. With skill, in portraits that quiver with empathy, she binds stranger to stranger and subject to viewer. She clocks the distances her largely invisible neighbours have travelled and presents them as protagonists in a wondrous urban spectacle. Recent immigrants may be disoriented and struggling in an indifferent city but they seem at home in Nisenbaum's joyous and tender canvases. Simply paying attention is a political act.

One masterpiece, "La Talaverita, Sunday Morning NY Times" (2016), apprehends the loving rapport between father and daughter. Marissa and Gustavo share a sofa, a paper and a moment of quiet intimacy. The teenager in T-shirt and torn jeans stretches out languidly, her hair falling to the floor. Dad is sitting up, legs crossed, one hand gripping the newspaper while the other prevents the girl's ankle from sliding off his lap. Their minds may be on separate tracks but their bodies betray a gentle harmony. It's up to us to notice the trust they have placed in the woman behind the easel, the presence outside the frame who registers every detail of their silent interac-

Clockwise from main: "Pedacito de Sol" (Vero y Marissa) (2022); "The Face Painter" (2021); "Eloina, Angie, Emma, Abril y Marley, Despensa de Alimentos, Queens Museum" (2023); "Gianna" "Gia" (2022) — Thomas Bertel

Were you under the impression that the purest political art must channel virtuous wrath? Does only darkness move us to action or violence arouse outrage? For Aliza Nisenbaum, whose paintings enliven the walls of the Queens Museum, warmth and colour have an even sharper edge. Beauty is a powerful tool for leading viewers to care about individuals before they are stirred by causes. Politics is not just about what you believe; it's about who you really see.

Nisenbaum was born in Mexico City in 1977, lives in New York and is in residence at the museum, so she has a lot in common with the people she paints,

