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Art

Interview

Bagpipes v Covid: Aliza Nisenbaum's glowing tributes to the pandemic frontline

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Is there still hope? You would always think so, looking at the work of Mexican-born artist Aliza Nisenbaum. Known for her vibrant and intimate portraits of overlooked communities, she has spent her career making the marginalised visible. Her new show at Tate Liverpool pays tribute to Merseyside healthcare workers, whom she has painted remotely, dividing them into two large-scale group portraits and 11 individual ones. This is the result of extended video calls with 26 hospital staff, including student nurses, a pulmonologist and a porter.



Team Time Storytelling, Steven Gerrard Garden, Alder Hey Children's Hospital Emergency Department, Covid Pandemic, 2020

"It's a huge task to do my sitters justice," Nisenbaum tells me on a Zoom call from her temporary studio in Los Angeles, where she's spent the greatest part of the year (she normally resides in New York). "But in this case even more so, because they're putting their lives on the line." This new commission is exhibited alongside existing works, including another group portrait – of tube workers made during Nisenbaum's residency at Brixton underground station in 2019.

She was born in Mexico City to a Russian Jewish father and a Scandinavian-American mother. Growing up, when visiting her grandparents near the city centre, she remembers catching glimpses of social-realist painter David Alfaro Siqueiros' 1960s work *The March of Humanity*, believed to be the world's largest mural. She later became equally interested in the dreamlike, diaristic paintings of María Izquierdo, who in 1930 became the first Mexican woman to receive an exhibition in the US.

"My work is between the two poles of private and public," she says. It was her sister Karin, now an acclaimed professor of philosophy, who first introduced her to the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. He believed face-to-face encounters were at the heart of human compassion. "In front of the face," he wrote in 1963, "I always demand more of myself."



Nimo, Sumiya, and Bisharo Harvesting Flowers and Vegetables at Hope Community Garden, 2017

These words, which have an added significance in a time of masks and isolation, inspired Nisenbaum, who takes it upon herself to inject some humanity into the sacrosanct tradition of portraiture. She gained international prominence when her domestic portraits of undocumented Latin American immigrants – to whom she taught English at artist Tania Bruguera's community centre in New York – graced the walls of the 2017 Whitney Biennial in the city.

For her first big solo exhibition in the UK, the 43-year-old artist had originally planned to take up residence at Liverpool's Sefton Park allotment gardens. But as the pandemic hit and travel restrictions ensued, she turned her attention to those on the frontline, sending out an open call, then selecting a diverse group of sitters from three hospitals in Merseyside (participants received a flat fee and hospital trusts will receive 10% of future sales of the works).

On top of a dozen individual candidates, the artist picked a group application from the emergency department at Alder Hey children's hospital, which also treated adults at the peak of the pandemic. "I was like, 'I can't not do this', right?" she says.

The workers are now immortalised across two vast, brightly patterned canvases, the largest nearly four metres wide. They are portrayed in scrubs of all shapes and colours, including a hazmat suit, lounging on the timber planters and wavy benches that grace the hospital's gardens. Proportions and depth hardly add up, giving the works a disjointed quality.

While co-workers were painted separately, based on pictures taken at their homes, the team spirit is palpable: they gaze towards one another, smiling, almost talking. Some are seen holding paper sheets covered in doodles. These derive from a therapeutic exercise of sorts, in which Nisenbaum – who studied psychology in the late 1990s before transferring to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago – asked her subjects to draw a picture reflecting their own experience, which they would discuss.

"This was special," says Lalith Wijedoru, a paediatric consultant who appears in one group. "It really showed the artist wanting to know and represent her subject."

The large canvases are complemented by individual watercolour portraits. They feature a student nurse lying in bed reading, a chaplain pensively standing by stained-glass windows and a professor of outbreak medicine vigorously blowing bagpipes in his garden. They have been paired with half a dozen still lifes of luxuriant flowers, ranging from cup-shaped California poppies, drooping yellow Daturas, dark fleshy succulents and drumstick-headed agapanthus (one of Claude Monet's favourites).

They were all encountered during the artist's regular walks around LA. It's a symbolic gesture towards her sitters, says Nisenbaum: "Like sending them flowers."

Aliza Nisenbaum is at Tate Liverpool until 27 June.