

Mexican pays colorful tribute to hospital workers in Liverpool

• The Tate museum in that English city houses a sample of canvases by the artist Aliza Nisenbaum

ALONDRA FLORES SOTO

La Jornada newspaper
Sunday, January 17, 2021, p. 3

Health personnel who fight COVID-19 on a daily basis were portrayed on large-format canvases, with colorful and lively intimacy, by Aliza Nisenbaum for an exhibition at the Tate Liverpool museum in the United Kingdom, as a tribute to those who face the disease and save lives in strenuous labor.

In an interview, the Mexican artist recounts that her intention was to put them with an optimistic view, in a happy place with sunshine, instead of the rain of that port city. Color is what attracts you the most in pictorial art, because “it assails you in your emotions before you have a more intellectual idea”.

Nurses, doctors, the doorman and other workers at the Alder Hey children's hospital were captured in a series of works, after conversations from a distance via Zoom to express their feelings during these months in which the area was transformed to provide intensive care.

The watercolors were placed next to the flowers that Nisenbaum observed in California during the three months of intense work: “It was a way to bring them a bouquet”.

The result, “brilliance and color of the culture of hope”, is recounted on the page of the solo exhibition commissioned by the British National Gallery. It is a combination of the tones that the artist saw in Los Angeles, with the images that were sent to her from Liverpool. “Not being afraid of color is something very Mexican”, he accepts. “An infinite puzzle”.

Ryan, a doctor specializing in respiratory diseases, was pictured with his newborn son in his arms, wrapped in sunflowers. “Inspired by the dedication of essential workers, who have worked tirelessly for their community during the pandemic”, the museum explains about Aliza Nisenbaum's exhibition, which opened last December. At the moment, the important venue dedicated to contemporary art is closed, as part of the new sanitary measures that have the country on high alert.

On a couple of wall-sized canvases, the ER team was placed spending time together again, sharing space and chatting in the garden. The idea also arose from the *team time* practice that they develop in a virtual space to talk about the emotional impact of their work, shed their protective shield and let vulnerability flow about what it means to be in the first line of action attending sick.

“We are not heroes. We just do our job”, Kevin, the doorman, who carries the stretchers from one place to another, speaks in a video. Ann, a nurse with a long career, says that it does not matter if it is the prime minister they serve or someone who lives on the street, while Naveena, traditionally studies nursing,

because her sisters and her mother have dedicated themselves to the same with a sense of the duty that urges them to take care of people.

Stories strokes

At the time of painting, Aliza says, she “remembers the conversations we had, I think about what they are going through in the first line of health and in their fears” , this is how the images appear with elements that reflect their personal history, how their lives have changed. and the things that have helped them through these difficult times, like their pets or music.



▲ Above, *Team Time Storytelling*, Steven Gerrard Garden, Alder Hey Hospital Emergency Department, Covid Pandemic, 2020. Below, *Emily*, Critical Care Nurse, and *Datura*, 2020.
● Photo courtesy of the artist

Alan lost his mother during the pandemic, so he has taken a lock of his hair and hung it as a charm inside a locket. Rose appears releasing soap bubbles, as she did in the hospital to cheer up the children, and help them bravely face their stay.

“Best known for her brilliant large-scale portraits of group communities” , this is how Tate describes Nisenbaum, who was born in Mexico City in 1977.

She has lived in the United States for two decades. “His work mainly shows historically underrepresented groups and individuals, due to their gender, nationality, race, class or sexual preference” .

In New York, he began teaching English to a community of Latin American immigrants and decided to paint them. Then he did it with museum workers, silent and invisible characters. In 2019 she was invited to do the same with employees of the London Underground.

Aliza says that the idea of portraying those who sometimes have no visibility arose from wanting to enter certain communities, in which the heritage of the Mexican muralist movement, as well as Frida Kahlo and María Izquierdo, is felt. “I’ve also painted people who dance in salsa clubs in New York, a fairly democratic space” , he considers.

“The history of painting had to do with the upper classes, such as monarchs. In the United States there is a recent discussion about who is represented and that interests me: thinking about taking a medium related to something privileged.”

Long conversations accompanied the face-to-face sessions, which allowed a personal approach to achieve an intimate portrait. Sometimes they would cry or feel sorry for them, then they would mix colors to make them feel identified.

Faced with the situation caused by Covid-19, Nisenbaum used the power of technology to meet who would occupy the paintings for Tate Liverpool.

An hour per Zoom and many email exchanges preceded the brushes. “I feel that I was able to know the environment in which they live, to enter their house” . The result was to the liking of those who work at the hospital, “they were very moved. They took their families and colleagues to see the exhibition. The hospitals were very proud to have their people represented” .

The show ends in June, so Nisenbaum hopes to visit it and meet in person those he saw on a screen. “It was a dream for me to have an exhibition at the Tate, but I couldn’t attend my own opening. Another great dream is to return to Mexico and do work, but I have not had any invitation until now” .