

The New York Times

The Year 2019, as Seen by Five Artists

December 3, 2019



"London Underground: Brixton Station and Victoria Line Staff" (2019) by Aliza Nisenbaum. Courtesy of the artist and Art on the Underground, London; Anton Kern Gallery, New York; Mary Mary, Glasgow. Copyright 2019 Aliza Nisenbaum

Aliza Nisenbaum

"London Underground: Brixton Station and Victoria Line Staff" (2019)

A former professor of mine, Gregg Bordowitz, used to ask, "What are the politics of the room you are currently in?" His intention was to make us aware of how we negotiate relationships and power structures in our daily interactions.

My process entails sitting with someone whom I often don't know very well while I spend a few hours painting the person's portrait. The sitters observe and chat with me as I paint, and they're the first witnesses to the work's creation. (Sometimes they watch movies on my laptop or fall asleep.) I try to do their characters justice, perhaps get a likeness. Most of the time these sittings are fun, but other times difficult political conversations arise. It's a vulnerable moment for each of us.

This past winter I was commissioned by Art on the Underground in London to make a work on-site at the Brixton tube station, where I eventually painted 15 staff members of the Victoria line. Among them were cleaning staff members, train conductors and station managers. Every sitter eventually told me their opinion on Brexit — whether they said it out loud or not.

Even if you disagree with other people's opinions, you might find yourself being sympathetic because you sense their discomfort or apprehension. If they're blushing or furrowing their brows, you might detect this vulnerability in their body language and intuit what Brexit might forebode for them.

While we're chatting and I'm mixing oils to match the hues of the sitter's skin, it's as if the sitter and I are calibrating our relationship to each other, how open we can allow ourselves to be. The painting becomes a document of fealty recorded through this slow, cumulative register of time.

There is an openness that comes from being gentle with others. Politics usually gets discussed at a macro level of structural institutions, the way the United States and Britain have been living through very similar political realities this past year. But politics also occurs in the way we pay close attention — subtly, patiently — to another's viewpoints, in these private moments of one-on-one interaction.

Aliza Nisenbaum makes portraits of undocumented Latin American immigrants, and of people in other distinct communities, using the focused attention of observational painting to mark those who are socially unmarked in society.