

# BEYOND

THE ST. REGIS MAGAZINE

Art

## UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Words by SOPHIE HASTINGS

MEXICAN-BORN ARTIST ALIZA NISENBAUM'S PORTRAITS  
ARE PROFOUNDLY INTIMATE YET STRANGELY ENIGMATIC,  
LEAVING VIEWERS WANTING TO KNOW MORE



Aliza Nisenbaum believes that “paying attention can be a political act”, and she’s certainly an artist who knows how to make you concentrate. The subjects of her portraits are so richly contextualized by textiles, plants, flowers, newsprint and photographs that the viewer’s gaze is drawn deep inside the painting, searching for clues. Who are these people, so intensely present yet distant too; absorbed, self-contained, with such palpable interior lives? What is their relationship to one another, to the artist, to us?

Born in Mexico City, Nisenbaum is known for her portraits of migrants and people living in marginalized communities. She studied psychology and worked at schools and women’s welfare institutions before moving to the US to enroll at SAIC (the School of the Art Institute of Chicago). “I was very interested in social justice but I had always wanted to make art,” she says, citing Mexico’s radical art tradition as an early influence.

She worked in abstraction for 10 years before turning to figurative painting, inspired by the work of Alice Neel and the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, “who said that all ethics come from face-to-face encounters: we have a responsibility towards the person we are looking at.” Like Neel, she moved to

Harlem, New York, and began volunteering at Tania Bruguera’s community art project in Queens, teaching English to female migrants who became her friends and subjects. “I didn’t intend that to happen,” she says, “but I was so moved by their immigration stories that I had to paint them.” She created a studio in the corner of the classroom, “because I wanted to paint from life. I started to get very involved in their lives. Whole families would sit for me and then we’d all go out to lunch.”

Most recently, Nisenbaum has been making portraits of workers on the London subway, commissioned by Art on the Underground, for a residency at London’s Brixton Station until 16 September 2019. Some of the work from this project will be shown at the Anton Kern Gallery in New York City, which will also exhibit a series of portraits of dancers that the artist discovered on the New York salsa scene. “I’ve loved salsa since I was a kid in Mexico, and they all wear such fantastic, exuberant costumes.” Her inspiration, she says, was Alice Walker’s poem, *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*. Amen to that.

*Aliza Nisenbaum, Anton Kern Gallery, NY, from 12 September 2019, for two months. Your address: The St. Regis New York*



*KAYHAN READING THE NEW YORK TIMES (RESISTANCE BEGINS AT HOME)*  
2017, oil on linen

Kayhan was one of the first women Nisenbaum painted during her artist's residency at the New York City Mayor's Office. "Her family were Iranians who first went to India, then she came to New York to work for Obama." Kayhan's relaxed position on the rug and her physical grace create a sense of ease and calm; a happy vulnerability. But the diagonal streak of acid yellow that runs across the canvas, through her pants and into the leaves of the plant, is full of dynamism and, possibly, danger.





*2 YEARS OF CORRESPONDENCE FROM INMATE 39807*  
2016, oil on linen

"The snakes and ladders refers to the way our luck goes up and down at random," Nisenbaum says of this painting depicting the letters and artworks sent by a friend who had been wrongly incarcerated. Pale papers filled with words and flowers, layered on top of sturdy brown envelopes painted in skin-like tones with jagged, torn edges evoke mind and body, while the tilted head at the center expresses a profound grief that belongs to the subject, the artist – and ultimately the viewer.





*NIMO, SUMIYA AND BISHARO HARVESTING FLOWERS AND VEGETABLES AT HOPE COMMUNITY GARDEN*  
2017, oil on linen

"Of all mediums, portraiture is the one that really consolidates power. I am lucky to be able to put different kinds of people in collections so that they are suddenly seen in the public realm." These Somali women were painted during Nisenbaum's 2017 residency at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA), where they spent time gardening at the nearby Hope Center, "an incredible place that helps people become leaders." This work clearly references both French Intimist artists such as Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard and the vibrancy of her own Mexican childhood.





MORNING SECURITY BRIEFING AT THE MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART,  
BASEMENT DOOR OPEN ONTO GUARD LOUNGE PET WALL  
2017, oil on linen

The jaunty title is an indication of how much Nisenbaum enjoyed spending time with the guards at MIA, who had a wall in their lounge covered in photographs of them with their pets, including a cow. "I was asked to paint communities near the museum and I said, 'We'll start here with your own workers.'" The painting's resemblance to a documentary photograph is no mistake: "Photography is seen as the medium of truth," she explains, "but there's a real truth in sitting with subjects for so long."





*VERONICA READING THE NEW YORK TIMES*  
2018, oil on linen

"Skin tone is so nuanced... you even become aware of the change in temperature of someone's skin as you paint them." Nisenbaum's relationship to the individuality of the sitter is crucial to her practice. "I feel like there's no cheating in painting. You can't phone it in, people can tell. You want it to be an authentic response to that person." Nisenbaum has been painting Veronica for six years, and here the artist — who often uses textiles to signal her subject's origins — has painted her with cushions made by Veronica's sister.