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Liebert, Emily. "Aliza Nisenbaum." *Artforum* (October 2017) [ill.] [online]

ARTFORUM

ALIZA NISENBAUM

OPENINGS

By Emily Liebert



Aliza Nisenbaum, *2 Years of Correspondence from Inmate 39807*, 2016, oil on linen, 43 x 47.

PERSPECTIVE OFTEN doesn't add up in Aliza Nisenbaum's paintings: A window juts out of the wall that frames it; a coffee table refuses to recede, instead tilting up off the floor; sometimes depth is missing entirely so that the people in a portrait or the elements of a still life appear as if they might spill right out of a picture. This is true, for example, of *2 Years of Correspondence from Inmate 39807*, 2016, which depicts a heap of drawings and letters that the Mexican-born, New York-based artist received from someone she was close to throughout their incarceration. The accumulated pages are filled with lines upon lines of painted handwriting, while the words remain mostly illegible—*2 Years* foregrounds not the letters' content but an act of exchange over time. The resulting image fills the canvas and lies

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flat against its picture plane, pressing toward the viewer and allowing her to share in the intimate encounter that the painting narrates. Such proximity is vital to Nisenbaum's practice as a whole.

From 2012 to 2016 the artist focused on making portraits of undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America, whom she met when she was in residence at Tania Bruguera's community space Immigrant Movement International in Queens, New York. In that setting, Nisenbaum taught English by way of feminist art history, using the politics of representation as a frame for language instruction. In order to get to know her students outside the context of the class, she asked if she could paint their portraits. The paintings give form to the evolving relationships between the artist and her subjects and among the subjects themselves: Individuals are shown in quiet states of interiority and imagination, and in portraits of two or more people, bodies typically support each other. *Veronica, Marissa, and Gustavo*, 2013, represents three members of a family variously touching, leaning against, and slinging their arms over one another—and since they are rendered almost without contour, it takes a moment to discern which limbs belong to whom. In keeping with the feminist starting point of her project, Nisenbaum's work celebrates interdependent ways of being, as opposed to a defensive posture of self-sufficiency and sovereignty. Indeed, the understanding of the subject in relational terms implicit in her practice brings to mind Judith Butler's positive concept of vulnerability: Emphasizing its foundation in receptivity and responsiveness, Butler posits that it is a precondition for mobilization and resistance.

First exhibited in 2014 at Lulu, Mexico City, and White Columns, New York, the body of work that Nisenbaum began at IM International has gained increasing attention since. Selections from the series were recently shown in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, where they helped establish the exhibition's emphasis on politically engaged figurative painting (also represented by Henry Taylor's examinations of racial tensions in America today and, of course, by the widely debated work of Dana Schutz). The growing interest in artists who make politics visible through the figure was reflected in several other high-profile shows in New York this year, among them Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's show at the New Museum, the group exhibition "Regarding the Figure" at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and, forging connections to an earlier era, the Alice Neel exhibition at David Zwirner gallery. Disavowing the traditional politics of portraiture, the work in these shows challenges rather than affirms social and representational hierarchies, instead putting on view productive models for imagining, encountering, and witnessing others.

Nisenbaum began painting her IM International students in the organization's classrooms and outdoor spaces during sittings that lasted from four to six hours (for which she offered to compensate her subjects in art classes, money, or artworks). As the time passed, she and her sitters would talk, often sharing their experiences of migration. Soon the artist met her students' partners, siblings, and children, and began painting them, too. The painting sessions moved into the artist's and sitters' homes, and Nisenbaum widened her compositional frames, often using real or invented details and patterns from domestic interiors to make her paintings more personal. *La Talaverita, Sunday Morning NY Times*, 2016, shows a father and his daughter starting their day together, lounging on a couch as they read the newspaper. This quiet moment is set off by the vibrant patterning on the wall behind them, which Nisenbaum added, conjuring the Talavera tiles from the pair's native city of Puebla, Mexico.

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Aliza Nisenbaum, *Evelyn age 12*, 2012, oil on linen, 16 x 20".

Taking inspiration from the French Intimist painters Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard, Nisenbaum often uses backgrounds and decor to create a larger context or narrative for her portraits. In the summer of 2016, she collaborated with James Cohan Gallery in New York to organize an exhibition, titled "Intimisms," that explored the legacy of these artists and their circle in recent and contemporary art. Nisenbaum's own *MOIA's NYC Women's Cabinet*, 2016, was part of the show; this group portrait depicts the fifteen women (including Nisenbaum herself) who participated in the inaugural Immigrant Women Leaders Fellowship program at the New York Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA). While their individuality is emphasized through a range of styles, postures, countenances, and skin colors, their bodies are layered one upon the other, forming a single solid mass of color and pattern that evokes their political unity. The work most evidently pays homage to Sylvia Sleigh's iconic *A.I.R. Group Portrait*, 1977–78, which shows the members of the all-women cooperative Artists in Residence Gallery in New York. At the same time, Nisenbaum places her painting within a longer lineage of art concerned with political and artistic solidarity: She sets the MOIA fellows against the backdrop of a frieze-like rendering of a 1938 book illustration by Mexican printmaker Rafael López Vasquez showing a group of women marching to a trade-union office to advocate for their rights. Vasquez's print is cropped; its clipped edges point not only to the remainder of the image we can't see, but to the many other fights for justice that lie beyond the frame.

The Vasquez quotation also nods to the legacy of Mexican social realism, whose history of figuration in the service of political advocacy and public engagement has clearly informed Nisenbaum's work. But she diverges from this tradition on one key point: In place of its focus on overarching ideals, she gives

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primacy to the individuality of the lives that she represents, and to her sustained relationships with her subjects. This exemplifies a different kind of politics, one that stands in opposition to the xenophobia targeting the communities Nisenbaum has painted. The political context of her work has only become more urgent since Trump took office, even as the heightened risk of deportation faced by undocumented populations has cast her portraiture in a different light: If its purpose had been in part to pay attention and bring visibility to her subjects, this has now come to seem potentially dangerous. Indeed, Nisenbaum has since shifted her focus. Last summer, she began a new body of work grounded in burgeoning relationships with communities in the Whittier and Phillips neighborhoods surrounding the Minneapolis Institute of Art, where she was an artist-in-residence. Three large-scale group portraits, now on view there as part of her first solo museum exhibition, depict the museum's guards, members of a local community garden, and the students in a portraiture class that Nisenbaum taught at Centro Tyrone Guzman, one of Minneapolis's largest Latino service organizations.

Countering portraiture's roots in affirming existing hegemonic social conditions, Nisenbaum's practice occupies a place from which we can start to challenge the many injustices of our current moment: With their intimacy, their reciprocity, and even their vulnerability, the relationships that drive her process and appear on her canvases propose above all an ethical mode of engaging with others. This is at the heart of her work—and ours, too, as its viewers.

"Aliza Nisenbaum" is on view at the Minneapolis Institute of Art through February 4, 2018.

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