



Aliza Nisenbaum,
Atanacio at Rest,
2013, oil on linen,
16 inches square.

Aliza Nisenbaum

by William S. Smith

FACES STAND OUT in Aliza Nisenbaum's paintings. *Atanacio at Rest* (2013) is a small oil-on-linen portrait of a man in a green track jacket. As is typical of Nisenbaum's work, which also includes still lifes of floral bouquets and depictions of tabletops strewn with letters and printed matter, the space here is shallow. The background, such as it is, ripples slightly with a decorative pattern of stripes in graduated hues from white to dark blue. The green jacket appears sketchy, defined in places by a few loose brushstrokes.

The face, however, is highly specific. Atanacio is not only at rest but exhausted. He holds his chin in his hand. His drooping eyes contribute to the sense that his pose is one of involuntary resignation rather than the product of calculation. His face, marked by the activity that preceded the rest, also suggests a narrative. What else besides hard physical work could have prompted the ashen streaks around Atanacio's eyes and left cheek, or the purplish hue that marks his forehead, signaling a state of tension even in a moment of repose?

Nisenbaum, who grew up in Mexico City and studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, painted Atanacio last year as part of a series of portraits she produced while

collaborating with artist Tania Bruguera on "Immigrant Movement International," a project supported by the Queens Museum, New York. Bruguera describes the long-running effort as "an artist-initiated sociopolitical movement" that combines art, education and community organizing. Atanacio, like Nisenbaum's other subjects, is an undocumented immigrant living in Queens.

Some of the larger paintings in the series, like the group portrait *Veronica, MARRISA, and Gustavo* (2013), could be described as monumental, and to the extent that this bold work makes visible individuals who are effectively invisible within American society, it aligns with Bruguera's interest in the political representation of immigrants. Yet however polemical Nisenbaum's works may be, they always allow for visual pleasure. Her portraits, like her still lifes, follow in the tradition of modernist painting devoted to the lush decorative possibilities of the canvas surface. This approach complicates the nature of any political stance suggested by a painting; the illegal status of Nisenbaum's subjects is but the subtext for works concerned with far richer areas of human experience—sadness, desire, exile and heartbreak—than can be summarized by bureaucratic designations. ○

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
Solo exhibition at
White Columns,
New York, through
Dec. 20.