

**Aliza Nisenbaum**  
*Portraits, Letters, Books  
and Flowers*

## Aliza Nisenbaum

Mexican, New York-based painter Aliza Nisenbaum makes figurative paintings. In order to attempt to understand what she does, I am going to call it, at least provisionally, symbolic intimism. What is symbolic intimism? And how does it differ from historical intimism?<sup>1</sup> Well, while both are dominated by depictions of the personal lives of the artists, they take place in different ways, and one could say, different places. The two painters most associated with intimism, Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, as well as their American successors, Fairfield Porter and Jane Freilicher, tend toward mood-laden and voluptuous portrayals of their personal interiors. Additionally, their sitters were also either their family or close circle of friends. Nisenbaum, on the other hand, paints flowers, hand-written letters, books and portraits (more on that soon). Whatever she paints tends to fill up the entire frame, as in a close-up, blocking out or isolating it from the interior in which it logically exists, such that the interior is so reduced as to become virtually anonymous or,

1 For those unfamiliar with the term, it was coined around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe a genre of painting (and writing), practiced most prominently by Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard. Highly ornate and decorative, it tended to depict the domestic interior and everyday life at home.

even virtual. In other words, there is no interior. This could be due to the fact that, as is well known, the interior has disappeared, in the sense that there is no longer any division between public and private, at least not in the way it was in the work of Bonnard and Vuillard (and subsequently, Fairfield Porter and Jane Freilicher). For them, the private was represented by the domestic interior, which was sealed off and totally separate from the public world. The interior was a world, nay a universe complete and whole unto itself (consider the 'decorative' constellations that populated them), which is perhaps why it could be represented as such, and which is probably why it has no place, at least up until now, in the paintings of Aliza Nisenbaum. There is, however, intimacy. Or at least some kind of attempt to recover it. Which in turn accounts, at least in part, for the symbolic nature of her intimism. For it is indeed symbolic, as opposed to real.

That is a tricky claim, so let me try back it up by stating that it is not as pessimistic as it sounds. For Nisenbaum, intimacy is inscribed in the encounter— with the other, with writing, and with paint itself. These multiple forms of inscription are the byproducts of different attempts at intimacy— an intimacy that is obviously less about the romantic encounter than about completely

occupying a given space and time, with another, a book, a letter, or even a bouquet of flowers. In other words, and more than ever in a time when distraction is the rule for whatever technological reasons, it is a mode of ethics, it is about paying attention, to what you're reading, to your surroundings, to the person right in front of you. Take Nisenbaum's portraits, for instance, what they represent and how they are made. The subjects are generally undocumented "illegal" immigrants from Latin American that the artist met while giving art classes to a group of women in Tania Bruguera's "Immigrant Movement International" space in Queens. The portraits were made in long sittings, from life, tête-à-tête. They feature single women, men, the occasional family, or small group of people of predominantly indigenous characteristics. When they are not sitting (posing) for the portrait, they are reading a book. Otherwise bereft of legitimate visibility in their adopted home country (and sometimes even in the countries they come from), they become the subjects of a rare and unique attention and subsequent visibility here: the painted portrait. So is social engagement in the artist's work literally enacted by something so simple and crucial as paying attention, which is ultimately a question of ethics.

Nisenbaum also has a thing for language, either contained in books or visible in handwritten letters. Two very different forms of intimacy, but nonetheless related. Where the book becomes an intimate object by virtue of the stillness, presence and absorption of the reader, the hand-written letter could be considered the intimate object par excellence (one thinks, for instance, of Vermeer's letter reader / writers, redolent with intimacy). The library, or a fragment of it, as featured in *Reading List* (2013) also functions as a metonym of the interior, the home, or possibly, in the case of the artist, the studio. Incidentally, this accounts for another facet on the diamond of Nisenbaum's symbolic intimacy, in so far as the intimacy of the interior is rarely represented, but rather evoked through metonym (this happens with the bouquets as well). Meanwhile, letters, that recent anachronism of hand-written communication and the postal-service, abound in her paintings. At times covered with drawings and spread out, they are, at other times, piled up on one another, barely legible, with luxuriant grounds of patterned Mexican textiles beneath them. What is of particular interest here is the repetition of intimacy that takes place through the double act of inscription. Not only are the letters inscribed, and as such, cause for encounter, but the artist also re-inscribes

them with paint into the picture. At the risk of sounding sentimental, this in turn speaks to another form of inscribed intimacy: paint.

As an act of inscription (like a letter) paint as analogue to intimacy, even to the singular tête-à-tête encounter. And what timeless subject better embodies the nature of paint than flowers? The very stuff of form and color, flowers, or rather bouquets of flowers, betoken interiors where they tend to be seen. What with their lavish palette, which is liable to bring to mind Matisse as much as Alice Neel they too, like Nisenbaum's books, possess a metonymic quality, locating but never disclosing the interior in which they exist. Whether this is because there is no interior or because it is impossible to currently represent, is debatable. But the intimacy that came along with it, it would be hard to argue against, seems hard-won— especially considering that romantic intimacy has been reduced to a staccato volley of SMS messages. Thus if I claim that intimacy in Nisenbaum's paintings is no longer real, it is because it is no longer a given, not quite the condition of everyday reality it used to be, it, the painter gently reminds us, is something that must be earned through attention.

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