

STAGE & ARTS

What does 'community' look like? That challenge brought a N.Y. artist to Minnesota

By Alicia Eler (<http://www.startribune.com/alicia-eler/424327523/>) | OCTOBER 6, 2017 — 12:49PM

New York-based, Mexico City-born painter [Aliza Nisenbaum](https://new.artsmia.org/exhibition/aliza-nisenbaum/) (<https://new.artsmia.org/exhibition/aliza-nisenbaum/>) had never been in Minneapolis. But this summer it became her second home.

The Minneapolis Institute of Art brought Nisenbaum to town to paint portraits representing the diverse communities around the museum. Three large-scale paintings were the result — a trio of Somali women at the Hope Community Garden, Latino elders taking a drawing class at Centro Tyrone Guzman, and even a group of guards at the institute.

Nisenbaum paints in a realism style, carefully rendering each person with the utmost sensitivity. Bright, bold colors end up in the backgrounds of the groups she arranges. But rather than have everyone there at once, she has each person sit for her individually. The process is like putting together a puzzle.

“A Place We Share,” on display through Feb. 4, is her first solo museum show, but she’s worked in this style for several years. The [2017 Whitney Biennial](http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2017Biennial#artists-39) (<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2017Biennial#artists-39>) included several of her painted-from-life portraits of undocumented immigrants.

Gabriel Ritter, the museum’s new curator of contemporary art, first noticed her artwork at the [Liste Art Fair](https://www.liste.ch/) (<https://www.liste.ch/>) in Basel, Switzerland, two years ago. He began organizing this project shortly after he was [hired in March 2016](http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-institute-of-art-hires-contemporary-curator-from-dallas/371540981/) (<http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-institute-of-art-hires-contemporary-curator-from-dallas/371540981/>).

The challenge for her three-month residency was to quickly, but genuinely, engage with communities she didn’t know. But it proved to be an experience she was up for.

“Each portrait takes three to six hours sitting,” she explained. “I was working nonstop.” But did that mean she was also not sleeping? “I definitely slept very well,” she said shortly before returning to New York following the opening of her show last weekend.

Q: How did you connect with the different communities here?

A: Mia’s education department connected me to various groups they have alliances with. Centro Tyrone Guzman is one of the oldest Latin American community centers in Minneapolis. Hope is kind of a strength-based community center run by a very inspirational leader, Chaka Mkali [aka rapper I Self Devine].

I did feel like there was a lot of caution at first, even from the museum — “How is she going to come from elsewhere and work with communities here? How is it going to be sincere and natural?” I had a walking meeting with Chaka where he wanted to see my intentions. I learned so much from him. He was like, “well, start to get to know the community.”

I went quite a few times to have a tea ceremony where you drink Somali tea full of spices and cinnamon and very sugary and delicious. It’s like a listening circle. Then I started to go to the gardens and talked to one young woman, Nimo, whose family are Somali immigrants, and they were talking about nutrition. They all tend to the community garden and it’s free. If you work the garden you can take part in the vegetables.

Q: How did your project come to involve the security guards?



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/AX035_11E7_9.JPG)
MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART

Aliza Nisenbaum teaches a portrait drawing class at Centro Tyrone Guzman.
Aliza Nisenbaum: A Place We Share

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Wed & Sat.; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thu.-Fri.; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sun. Ends Feb. 4.

Where: Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2400 3rd Av. S.

Admission: Free. • Info: [new.artsmia.org](https://new.artsmia.org/exhibition/aliza-nisenbaum/) (<https://new.artsmia.org/exhibition/aliza-nisenbaum/>)

A: I went to the museum and saw this Alice Neel painting, and one of the guards was this very Minnesotan-looking girl. She was talking to a mom and her daughter about Alice Neel, and I was like: Well, if they want me to work with community, then community starts here. Usually guards in museums are super-interesting because they are artists oftentimes themselves. So I started to talk to the guard, and she said, "I'm a painter."

Q: I could see Mia not being thrilled about the security-guards community. Sounds like institutional critique.

A: I was thinking about institutional critique. If you want to think about community, look at yourself first. And the museum is the extension of me in some ways, you know? At the Whitney I did this piece out of my work with immigrant communities. Before that, I was always working with something that reflected a close relationship I had with somebody.

Q: How did you connect with the elders at Centro Guzman?

A: I started hanging out there, and they were so welcoming. The center is decorated with a ton of art, and they said, "We'd love you to participate." Eight people signed up to take a portraiture class with me. I taught a class about measuring and drawing — one of the women was already a pretty experienced draftsman — and then they would hang the work in the gallery. It's a classroom about farm labor and immigrant labor coming to Minnesota, to the Midwest. And they talked my ear off, they were so sweet.

Q: I was thinking about how portraiture is usually done for the wealthy. So your work is an intervention into art history.

A: I think of my work very much like that. Portraiture was always about the ruling class, especially Spanish portraiture. It is not necessarily my job to give people visibility, but definitely the paintings become a marking and witnessing of the lives of people that might not otherwise be seen.

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