

Nina Katchadourian

BOMB

Nina Katchadourian

Published by Mónica de la Torre on September 2017

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248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

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Pink Volcano, 2014, (*Seat Assignment* project, 2010–ongoing), 53 C-prints, dimensions variable. Images courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

I first eyed the transcript of my conversation with Nina Katchadourian on a crammed flight to Mexico City earlier this summer. That it was jam-packed with screeching children is not

irrelevant, given that it put me in the mindset of Katchadourian's astonishingly inventive constraint-based project series *Seat Assignment* (2010–ongoing), which includes *Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style* (2011). These works—the first, consisting mainly of rephotography, and the latter, a suite of self-portraits and riffs on music videos—were executed on planes, exclusively with materials at hand. In-flight magazines, snack foods, belt buckles, napkins, trash, and even toilet seat covers are mined and subsequently transformed, and by the time Nina reaches her destination, she has new artwork in tow. Often it is to be shown in precisely the place to which she has traveled. This production model's efficiency startles the mind. If only I could strike on a formula that could turn whining into sound poetry, cramped body movements into a choreography!

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Katchadourian's work often reclaims the mundane, that with which we can't be bothered—commercial jingles, dust, boredom, daily chaos—and turns it into something lively, contemplation worthy, and full of possibilities. The absurd becomes a celebration of play's potential to subvert the ordinariness of ordinary life. A poignant piece in this regard is the multichannel video *Accent Elimination* (2005), which traces the sources of Nina's and her parents' eclectic accents, as the three of them attempt to emulate each other's peculiar enunciations with the help of a professional accent coach. The work's register oscillates from the nonsensical to the moving—it is, after all, a meditation on displacement. It elicits earnest chuckles, but before we know it, we feel an undertow of sadness tugging at us.

The same can be said of *The Recarcassing Ceremony* (2016), a new video included in *Curiouser*, her mid-career survey show I had the luck to see at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, and which is scheduled to travel to Stanford, California, this fall. Let the show's title be a self-fulfilling prophecy for all things Katchadourian. I, for one, remain ever more curious about where Nina's restless imagination might take us next.

—Monica de la Torre

Nina Katchadourian We are rolling.

Mónica de la Torre We're here. You were telling me about this piece that was not in your exhibition at the Blanton this past spring.

NK Right, a recent project that ties into my ongoing interest in boredom. The people at Temple Contemporary in Philadelphia came to me two summers ago and said, "We're doing an entire season of programming on boredom, and we thought of you!" Which I felt was a compliment. They asked me to pitch an idea to them. So I thought, and I thought, nothing was coming to mind. It was—

MT —boring! Don't get me wrong, I'm into mining boredom, too, but following a *truly* boring premise might put you in a bind.

NK The problem was actually coming up with an idea on command. Sometimes that just stops you in your tracks. After months of thinking, I was at home one day and Sina [Najafi] had his cell phone on speaker, waiting to talk to his doctor. I heard the on-hold music and thought, Oh, that's funny, I know that music because my doctor uses it, too. Then there was a lightning bolt moment of remembering that, for a year at least, I had casually collected on-hold music. I would use various apps on my phone to figure out, What is this music? Is it a song I can download?

So I already had this kind of horrible, yet interesting playlist, and I thought, This is the raw material for something having to do with boredom. Usually, listening to that stuff, we're waiting, stuck physically in place and mentally in a bit of a loop. I wondered if there was a way to change the physical response to the music, and then the idea came to me: I want to make an on-hold music party, where people could dance to this stuff.

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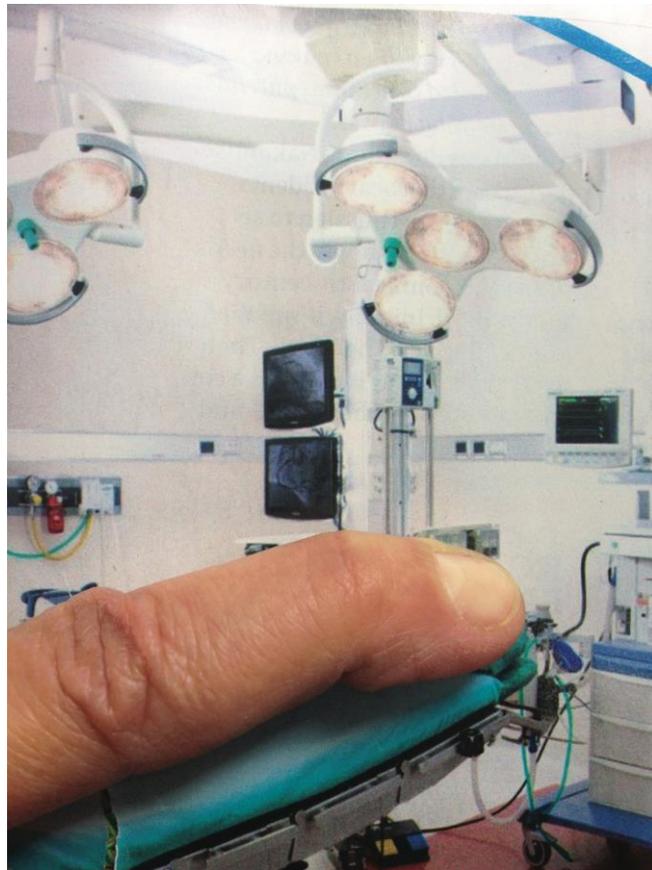
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Sick Finger, 2014, (*Seat Assignment* project, 2010–ongoing), 53 C-prints, dimensions variable.

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MT That's so good.

NK I pitched the idea to Temple Contemporary, and they loved it. We worked for about a year, and they helped a lot with an assistant who'd call various phone numbers just to wait on hold. Bit by bit, I collected more music and prerecorded language like: "To speak to an agent, press zero." That's also in the mix. I then worked with two DJs—DJ Stylus and DJ Shakey—and I decided to be DJ Dusty, because of my interest in boring things. We got this music prepped and into a program called Ableton Live and we DJed this party twice. It's been so fun.

MT Music has been a part of your creative output for a long time.

NK I'd never DJed though, and I developed a whole new respect for people who compose in this way. We dressed like customer service people, with button-down shirts, ties, headsets, and name tags.

MT That's hilarious. It's everything but boring. The irony is that you betray boredom the minute you make it exciting. Your work, which is so often constraintbased, pushes these paradoxes. The more limited your parameters, the more you can focus on the seemingly endless variety of things that can happen within them.

NK Have you ever used Arcibo Car Service?

MT No, that doesn't ring a bell.

NK Arcibo has been our neighborhood car service for a long time. It has the best on-hold music. It's this jazzy music with a complicated guitar solo. You can sing that to anyone in this neighborhood, and they'd immediately recognize it. Another favorite is the very peppy up-tempo song for car2go—it's a car sharing company.

MT Any insight into what kind of music each business thinks is appropriate for the service they're providing?

NK I got interested in figuring out the genres of this stuff. Is the attempt to pacify people? To amuse them? To lift their mood?

Our mix, because the raw material was mostly collected in New York, also speaks to the specificity of businesses in this city. I was really fond of car services in particular, where you often get a bilingual Spanish-English voiceover. There's also the New Age music that my ob-gyn uses.

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MT Dentists always play classical music, don't they? So tell me, would the next step consist of inserting your mix into the systems from which you were borrowing?

NK Yes. Early on, I thought I should form a cover band, where we actually play the on-hold music live, outside the businesses that play this music on the phone lines. This may yet happen, who knows. But in the end, there was something about the project for Temple Contemporary that transformed the music in a way that was more productive. People were moving around in space and engaging as actively as one could imagine: they were dancing to it.

MT Tell me about your musical training.

NK I started playing music long before I started making art. I studied instruments and have been in bands on and off over the years. The music stuff waxes and wanes. But I love the collaborative, generative aspect of it.

MT Did you study music as an undergrad at Brown?

NK I had piano lessons for fifteen years growing up. And I played soprano recorder. Then, in my junior year of college, a friend who had just spent a semester in Bali studying gamelan roped me into being a part of an ensemble. He needed bodies behind the instruments. I was doing him a favor, but then I discovered I loved this music and decided to do the same program in Bali. It was a huge experience to go over there and study this instrument called the gender, which is pronounced with a hard *g* and the accent on the second syllable.

MT I can see how playing music is related to your art practice. Both have an improvisatory quality.

NK Writing a song involves feeling your way through it, that's true. The strongest connection between my art- and music-making has always been *Sorted Books* (1993—ongoing), a project in which I work in a book collection—usually a private library, but sometimes a public one—and arrange books into groups so that when you read the titles in sequence, they create short phrases, like stories or poems. Writing lyrics feels a lot like the process of arranging books because you're basically fitting different things together and trying to let the language find its own way. You're trying to see it, but not looking too hard. Some of my favorite *Sorted Books* arrangements feel like they made themselves.

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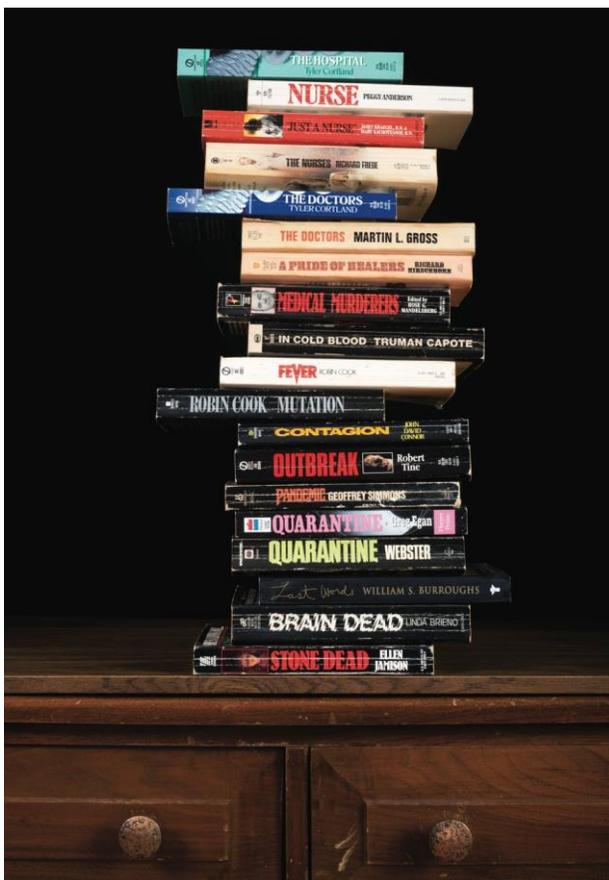
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The Hospital, from the series *Kansas Cut-Up*, 2014, (*Sorted Books* project, 1993–ongoing), C-print, 19 × 12.5 inches.

MT You just get out of the way.

NK Probably writing poetry is similar.

MT When a poem works, it's almost because I tapped into something already there.

NK It appears before you. It sounds cheesy or mystical, but that's how it feels with lyrics, too. I love that.

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MT I saw a video of you speaking about *Sorted Books* for PBS and realized it's so much more involved than the completed work leads us to believe. You really get your hands on those books, keeping index cards and lists, trying out different configurations. You're also invested in the physical appearance of the books and balance them compositionally as objects. But in the photographs the arrangements look casual, almost spontaneous.

NK There's a lot of spontaneity in the process. It's improvisational—I'll try this and that—which is ultimately my method for getting acquainted with the books. I have to handle them, and I really believe in note-taking. I have crazy archives for each of the sortings and lists that evolved with each project.

MT I like to think of *Sorted Books* as cut-up poems in which the process reveals latent connections, but in order for them to manifest, you first have to pore over the contents of a person's library thoroughly. The result is a portrait of the person through his or her books.

NK At the Blanton, the education team set up a *Sorted Books* activity in the show where you could try it yourself, and one of my favorite things to observe was the book groupings arranged by museum visitors.

MT How accurately do you want to portray the subject?

NK I have to be careful with the intimacy of a person's book collection and what it reveals. I've been witness to all kinds of things: people's anxieties, addictions, past problems, marriage issues, worries about their children. Often, it's all there in their libraries. I want to be sensitive and fair about what to include. The goal never ever is to make fun of anybody.

Kansas Cut-Up (2014), the *Sorted Books* project I did in William S. Burroughs's personal library in Lawrence, Kansas, was interesting because, of course, the dead aren't around to tell you not to do something. I had an unbelievable book collection to work with: from goofy cat stuff to guns to very disturbing topics like physical interrogation and shark attacks.

MT How many photographs did you generate from Burroughs's books? If I remember correctly, there are seven or eight groupings at the museum.

NK Many more! In the Burroughs series, I probably made about forty-five groups and twenty-five of them made the final cut. There's a lot of winnowing down, even once the pictures are taken.

MT That's fascinating. If you did a portrait of me, you'd probably come up with about ten different people, because of the range of books in my library. You might find Spanish

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Golden Age poetry, Mac Wellman plays, and books on modernist architecture on adjacent shelves.

NK Well, then I would try to tease out that you are someone interested in very different things.

MT What does working in series do for your practice?

NK *Sorted Books* did not begin as a serial project. I never thought it would be photography-based either. The series hasn't ended and neither has *Seat Assignment*. I'm about to fly this afternoon, and once again I'll be with cell phone in hand, seeing what happens. Seven years into that project, I've got certain tricks up my sleeve that are tried and true, but I don't want to repeat myself. On the other hand, there are also things I've done a bunch of times, but now that I've started a taxonomy of the project, I want to add more to specific categories.

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Lemon Arch, 2015, (*Seat Assignment* project, 2010–ongoing), 53 C-prints, dimensions variable.

MT What categories need more material in them?

NK One series within *Seat Assignment* is called *Proposals for Public Sculpture* (2010–ongoing). I really enjoy making these because I've done a lot of public work, and there's always that moment when you have to mock up your proposal. You can make something bombastic-looking with a Life Savers or a lemon wedge peel arranged on an in-flight magazine page.

MT The lemon piece looks like a Brancusi sculpture to me. And the one with the Life Savers recalls Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*.

NK There's obviously a lot of playfulness and humor in them, but there are also the more anxiety-ridden ones that speak to the current state of paranoia, anxiety, fear, and racial profiling around air travel and crossing borders.

MT In the exhibition catalog, it says that from the moment you began the series, you've been on 188 flights.

NK I'll rot in hell for my carbon footprint. I'm now up to flight number 211 since the project started seven years ago.

MT Oh my God! Why do you travel so much?

NK Ninety percent is for projects or to teach or lecture about my work. *Seat Assignment* started when I was doing a lot of visiting artist travel. I really like visiting other schools and seeing how art is taught in other places. I feel it's made me a better teacher. But I've cut back on that, in part because it got exhausting, but also because it's environmentally problematic. So I do more of those things on Skype now, if possible, and try to chain trips together, so I'm doing more of a loop rather a bunch of round-trips.

MT Has there ever been a flight on which you did not make anything?

NK There've been many. I've decided that waxing and waning at this point of the project is okay. Having created this taxonomy—which I've organized into a slideshow I call the *Flight Log*—is a classic case of once you invent a category, it exists as a category to be filled. A possible next move might be a video around the safety announcement. I've been recording them on my phone for a while. I want to perform them somehow.

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Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style, #6, #16, and #5, 2011, (*Seat Assignment* project, 2010–ongoing), 58 C-prints, dimensions variable.

MT Are the photographic lavatory works complete now?

NK The *Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style* are complete. You might be asking, "How do you know when a series is done?" They are done in part because they basically all happened on one flight to New Zealand. That's part of their story.

MT The music videos happened on a different flight, right?

NK One happened on that same New Zealand flight, one happened on the return trip, and a third happened three years later.

MT The last video is David Bowie and Freddie Mercury's "Under Pressure." You enact a lover's quarrel that is very convincing.

NK That's good to hear. The challenge with that one, having already made two, and seeing that people responded to them by laughing and cracking up, was to add something more complicated. Of course the piece is absurd, but the question was: How could I make something under these absurd working circumstances that could also be genuinely moving? I love the drama of that song. It has such an amazing arc—it begins very low-key and controlled, bursts open, and then reins itself back in. It was method acting, in a way. I tried to think about the worst fights I've ever had in my life with someone I care about—that was what I was channeling.

MT For me the poignancy also came from what seemed to be an inner battle. It's like a part of you wanted to transcend your own selfhood and the limits of your body.

NK I like that reading. Of course it does take a certain "I'm gonna go for it" feeling to do that in the plane's lavatory.

MT You're so brave.

NK Well, the performance is usually very private. But when I made that piece I felt so emotional that, illogically, I thought people outside the bathroom door would sense that. I kept thinking, This is going to leak out somehow.

MT Have passengers asked you what you're doing with any of these *Seat Assignment* projects?

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NK Once I was on a flight back from London with very small seats, and I sat between two large people. Working on my tray table was especially stressful because they could totally see what I was doing. At one point the woman on one side gave me this horrified look when she saw me trying to make something using sugar and a picture from an airline magazine. Then the guy on the other side, once I'd finished working on one thing and started on the next, said, "I think the first was turning out better."

MT Do you know Fischli and Weiss's *800 Views of Airports*?

NK No. I can't believe I don't know it.

MT It's an amazing series. They documented their passing through airports for about twenty-five years. It's symptomatic of the condition of the contemporary artist who's always traveling and has to carve out time for a "post-studio practice."

NK That's exactly how *Seat Assignment* happened, too. I started to have this alarming feeling of, My God, I'm never in the studio! So the plane became my studio.

MT I want to talk about your interest in having the process behind a work be transparent to your viewers. That's a strong component of your exhibition at the Blanton. Every piece has a very generous description of the process or premise behind it.

NK You mean the wall text?

MT Yes. I very much like that it's in your own words.

NK A question I get asked a lot is, How did you think of that? So I decided to preempt the question by telling the viewer or reader where my original idea came from. It would be interesting to know how people would understand some of my work if those labels weren't **there**.

MT There's an investment in the narrative behind the work, in storytelling almost. For instance, *Mended Spiderwebs* (1998) might be incomplete if we didn't know the spiders actually discarded the red thread with which you mended their webs.

NK I'm much happier being able to provide a bit of context for the work.

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Mended Spiderweb #19 (Laundry Line), 1998, C-print, 20 × 30 inches.

MT Is this also, in a way, a pedagogical impulse? There's something exemplary about your work: it prompts the viewer to think like you about how to transform the everyday through minimal interventions.

NK That makes me happy to hear. I hope the show has a sort of instructive quality. I would like people to leave and try some of the projects themselves. If there's any sort of pedagogical message, it's: Look carefully! Look again. Look twice. Look harder. Think about why you're looking at the thing you're looking at. Do not assume things are as uninteresting as you think. *(laughter)*

There are so many moments in my life now when I have the impulse to check my email, as there's always something to respond to—say, while sitting at a restaurant, waiting for a friend—whereas previously, in the same situation, I would have been looking around or daydreaming. The open, unstructured time that boredom produces is very important, and we have less and less of it now. Ironically, at the same time, we can all be totally bored while on our phones.

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MT We think we're entertaining ourselves. Constraints are interesting. I've had my best ideas when trapped on a train or in the doctor's waiting room—precisely because I can't do anything but wait.

NK Two words I often talk about together are *freedom* and *constraint*. The constraint produces a potential opening, because you have to find your way out of it—you really don't want to sit there feeling that way.

I love attending lectures that I don't entirely understand. I have a funny habit, where I'll be taking notes on the lecture, but then, when I have an idea of my own, I draw a bubble and write my stuff inside of it. It's a way of quickly being able to find my personal notes within notes on an external topic. Sometimes, with certain lectures, it's all bubbles.

MT Do you go back to these bubbles?

NK Yeah, I have two shelves of my calendars and diaries and notebooks. I'm a pretty compulsive recorder of things via handwriting. My mother's parents really exemplified this behavior. My maternal grandfather used this crazy device called a barograph to take daily recordings of the air pressure, and also of the water levels and weather. We have a box of slides at our family place in Finland that documents all the flowers that bloomed in a particular year with a list of where they were growing, and their Latin names are written on the slides in perfect handwriting.

MT That's incredible. Did this collection serve any particular purpose?

NK My grandfather was a serious amateur naturalist and wanted to track these things. There's a beautiful chart he made of all of the birdhouses on our property—which birds nested in each, how many eggs, how many fledglings. I've taken it upon myself to be the one who maintains the birdhouses now. So I empty them out at the end of every year. You have to take the old nests out or a new bird won't build in it. I clean them and nail them back up if they've gotten blown around in a storm. So, for my family, it was a responsibility to know, to be aware.

On the other hand, my father has said one of the reasons he documented me and my siblings so much growing up is that he doesn't have any of that stuff from his own childhood, because of all the displacement in his family. For him, a recorded interview with me as a seven-year-old is a lot about his wanting me to have the record he never had.

MT It's fascinating that he did audio recordings instead of films.

NK We have a lot of three-minute Super 8 film reels too. But my video *The Recarcassing Ceremony* would not exist had my parents not made an audio recording of a critical moment in a very important game that my brother and I played as kids. The game centered around two large families of Playmobil figures, two of which had gone missing in a plastic boat we lost

control of in some rough water. To bring the two men back, we invented what we called a "Recarcassing Ceremony," which took the souls of the lost men and implanted them back into two new bodies. It was a ritual, with a lot of incantation and speech-giving and chanting. My parents were invited to this ceremony, and they made an audio recording I rediscovered three years ago.

The thing about an audio recording is that it forces you to imagine—you have to provide the visual information yourself from your deep-brain past; or, if you are a stranger to the event, you have to picture it to begin with. It's a much more active kind of engagement.

Growing up, I wanted to be a radio journalist. All my work with sound, my engagement with music and DJs, comes from a displaced "I wanted to be in radio" desire.

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Still from *The Recarcassing Ceremony*, 2016, video with sound, 24 minutes 24 seconds.

MT It makes perfect sense given the audio recordings your family produced obsessively.

NK And my mom is a radio journalist by training.

MT By the way, I love that scene in *Accent Elimination* in which you describe being with your family, and your father is talking to his mother in—

NK —Turkish. Or Armenian. (*laughter*)

MT And your Finnish mother is talking to you in Swedish, and you are speaking English with your brother.

NK My mom was like the central switchboard operator. She was the only one who could understand almost every language. Growing up, this flow of people from scrambled places speaking different things with each other was typical for me.

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I was going to tell you that one of the people I was lucky to overlap with in grad school at UC San Diego was the poet David Antin.

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MT I was about to ask you about him. His work is genius.

NK He became really important for me. I was starting to work with these family home movies, and I remember him saying very clearly, "One thing that's great about immigrants is that they talk really funny English." He meant the language changes through their use of it. He came from a big immigrant family himself, and English getting messed up was such a good thing in his mind. It's also one reason why I love living in New York. I love seeing English being warped. My grandmother used to call the freezer the "frison." Like freezer and prison at the same time—as if the food were incarcerated in there.

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MT That's so funny.

NK David also had this amazing method of note-keeping. He carried around classic black unruled sketchbooks, and he would use one for a couple of years or maybe months or weeks, and then he'd put it back on the shelf and take out a different one. He'd use that one for a while, and then he'd put that one back on the shelf. He had twenty or thirty of these. He said, "The great thing about this is that you can look back in the notebook and be surprised by something you thought in 1978 that you don't even remember writing down, and now it's 1994 and you're writing something else down next to it."

MT Amazing. It's very consistent with his interest in discontinuity. Who else was there?

NK Eleanor Antin, of course. I didn't work directly with her, which now I regret a bit. I probably thought, quite narrowly, I don't do performance art, therefore she's not the right mentor for me.

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MT I'm sure there are students whom you've taught who now go, "I wish I'd taken every class offered by Nina Katchadourian!" You obviously take a lot of pleasure in teaching.

NK The class I enjoy teaching the most right now is a graduate seminar called Why Do You Want to Make It, and How Can You Make It Better? I wish I knew the answer to that question.

It's meant for first-year grad students who are unsure of what they are doing, but at the same time are prepared to explain what they are doing in a routine sort of way. So the class throws a wrench in their usual methods. It's very intimate; everyone gets to know each other really well, and some actually end up collaborating—that's such a cool thing to see.

MT What are the exercises you have them do? I might steal some from you.

NK Yeah, steal them. I stole one assignment from my friend Nayland Blake. Each student has to make a list of fifty things they always do in their work and fifty things they would never do in their work. Fifty is a lot—

MT —I was about to say that.

NK You run out of obvious things after about the tenth or fifteenth, then you really have to dig. That's where it gets interesting. I tell the students this is not a list where you're allowed to shame yourself. It's not about "I never work hard enough." Then I invent a dastardly customized assignment for each person based on each person's "I never do it" list. Sometimes I take away their favorite tool, their default mode. Sometimes I give them a theme or a subject they deliberately avoid. For a lot of people it opens up something pretty new.

MT If you did that for yourself, what would your assignment be?

NK I think about this a lot right now. I rarely make work that's directly political. What would it mean if I decided to make a piece about people trying to reach land in boats that are sinking? What if I tried to make a headon work dealing with the refugee crisis? It may not be something I do well, so maybe that's why I don't try.

MT Is that a criterion for you?

NK If I want to talk about immigration or displacement of people, it tends to come out in a different way. So that might be one of my "I never do it" assignments.

MT Maybe you don't believe that making art directly about any one of these topics is doing justice to the subject.

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NK Some people do it well, but I can think of a lot of problematic ways of doing it too. I tend to want to come at the big things via the details or its smaller portions.

MT You also don't seem to do very personal work. I mean, the way you tackle personal stuff is through systems that depersonalize it. For instance, *Accent Elimination*, or *The Recarcassing Ceremony*.

NK I think *The Recarcassing Ceremony* is super personal.

MT But it's the story of these characters you and your brother invented. So there's a form of mediation there, like in other works of yours.

NK I've had conversations about the piece where people ask, "Why aren't you in it?" And I'm like, "What do you mean I'm not in it? My voice is in it—I'm in it asking questions, interviewing my parents, conversing with my brother, talking about a very intimate thing. I'm in it!" But I didn't want to have a first-person narrative. I didn't want to say, "My brother and I used to play this game." I decided to displace that and make one of the characters in the game be the narrator. So yes, I see what you're saying. There are systems that sometimes displace me a bit.

The Recarcassing Ceremony ends up being very personal by the end, but people don't always see that coming. It's very rewarding to hear that many people leave the room in tears. I haven't made a lot of things that work that way. Strangers have written to tell me they're laughing in the beginning, and then by the end they're weeping. It's really a piece about people dying, and not just the little plastic people, you know.

MT So true. I had a moment of misapprehension at the museum—I actually thought someone had died.

NK That's purposeful. I'm trying to make you worried in the beginning that I've lost a dear family relative or friend, which we sort of felt like we did.

I talk a lot about the personal with my students: How do you make work that's personal where there's still a way in for the viewer? It's not just about spilling your guts. There's a great essay by Meghan Daum that I assign called "The Joni Mitchell Problem." It's a funny and wonderfully written essay in which she makes the distinction between putting it out there and letting it all hang out. To her the former is generous and open, it gets people involved, and the latter is self-indulgent. It appears to be generous, but in the end, it isn't really—the audience is just there for somebody's personal moment.

MT I love how that manifests in *Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style*.

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NK I'm not really me in them.

MT It's not you, exactly.

NK This sounds far-fetched, but I don't entirely recognize myself in them. I have this weird feeling of detachment. I talk about them as "those Flemish people."

MT (*laughter*) "Those people." So refreshing. Nothing could be further away from people's selfie obsession.

SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

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www.cclarkgallery.com