

Nina Katchadourian



Curiouser and curiouser Nina Katchadourian returns to her roots for show at Cantor Arts Center

By Sheryl Nonnenberg
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Nina Katchadourian's "Lavatory Self-Portrait in the Flemish Style #12" is part of her ongoing "Seat Assignment" project. Image courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery

How did you while away the hours during your last long-haul flight? Odds are you read, watched a few movies and hoped for a long, uncomfortable nap. Multimedia artist Nina Katchadourian finds other ways to use her time, making art out of the most ordinary, mundane things at hand.

While on a flight from San Francisco to New Zealand, the Stanford-born, Brooklyn-based artist decided to take some self-portraits in the lavatory, using her cell phone camera and objects such as tissues, seat protectors and napkins as props. Covering the mirror with a black shawl, Katchadourian fashioned the various papers to create head coverings and collars in the style of 17th century Flemish portraits. The resulting pictures are part of an ongoing series, "Seat Assignment," that's included in a mid-career survey of the artist's work at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University from September to January.

"Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser" includes video, photography, sculpture and sound art. The exhibition was organized by the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas.

"When we learned about the exhibition we were so delighted to bring this expansive presentation of her work to the Cantor. Not only is Katchadourian an incredibly talented, innovative and insightful artist, but Stanford is also her hometown, which made the Cantor an ideal fit for the exhibition," Assistant Curator Jennifer Carty said.

As the title of the exhibition implies, Katchadourian is an astute observer of life and all of its minutiae. Early in her career, her series "Sorted Books" examined what would happen if books on a shelf were reconfigured and stacked to create sentences. For example, "How Did Sex Begin?" placed on top of "Uninvited Guests" placed on top of "Human Error." Was she trying to be humorous, whimsical? Katchadourian explained that it is more about how artists are motivated to communicate something about what they see and the way they see it.

"What I pay attention to often has its roots in situations and subject matter that has to do with the everyday or the mundane, and that often orients my work toward situations and subject matter we often discount as worthy of attention."

Take for example a spider's web; for some, an unwanted nuisance. Under Katchadourian's gaze, it becomes a reclamation project. "Mended Spiderwebs" (1998) is a series of color Cibachrome prints taken in Finland during a family vacation. Katchadourian noticed that the webs were broken and torn and so, using red thread, she repaired them. The next morning, she observed that the spiders had completely removed the red thread and restored the web to its original state. True to the nature of conceptual art, the process (and resulting documentation) is more important than the finished product.

While visiting the supermarket, the artist began to tally how many fictional people are used to sell products. This was the starting point for "The Genealogy of the Supermarket" (2005), in which a family tree is created from the likenesses of Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben and the Gerber baby, to name a few. Joined together, they create a tongue-in-cheek statement about how advertisers manipulate consumers into buying. But there is also a serious undertone about the changing face of America as it becomes a more pluralistic society. "Something can be very funny and still be very meaningful. If you want to cast the funny against the serious, the challenge for me is to get both those experiences to happen within the same piece," Katchadourian said.

Sometimes the subject matter just reflects her personal interests. She has long been fascinated by Morse Code and decided to hook up a hidden computer to a commercial popcorn machine in order

to decode the sounds of the kernels popping. The piece, titled "Talking Popcorn" (2001), allows us to "hear" what the popcorn is "saying."

Katchadourian's work has been displayed in prestigious museums in this country and internationally, including the 2015 Venice Biennale. The artist joked that returning to her former hometown of Stanford feels like a childhood piano recital, with so many family members and friends still in the area.

The Cantor has planned an evening with the artist on Oct. 19. It will include a lecture, followed by "The On Hold Music Dance Party," which consists of music and other sounds recorded entirely from phone calls when the artist was placed on hold. Katchadourian said that she was inspired to create the piece because, "When we listen to on hold music, we are typically impatient, passive, and inactive, both mentally and physically." By looping together the various pieces and fragments of music and sound, the artist feels that she is activating the music in such a way that the listener ceases to be "stuck in place."

She explained, "It literally makes the body move. As our physical relationship to the music changes, maybe our mental relationship does too."

Other series include "Natural Car Alarms," in which the sounds of bird calls replace the alarm sounds, and "Dust Gathering," an examination of dust found on art and windowsills at the Museum of Modern Art.

When asked if the secret to her success is partially due to the fact that, in this distracted age, people just don't pay close attention, Katchadourian replied, "I do like to put my attention to things that are generally familiar to a fairly wide audience, so that there might be some initial moment where a viewer thinks, 'I know what that is.' But it's also important to me, in almost every case, to undermine that or second guess it so that something I bring to the situation prompts a reconsideration or a double take."

Freelance writer Sheryl Nonnenberg can be emailed at nonnenberg@aol.com.

What: "Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser."

Where: Cantor Arts Center, 328 Lomita Drive at Museum, Way, Stanford.

When: Through Jan. 7, 2018, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. (museum closed Tuesdays and open until 8 p.m. Thursdays).

Cost: Free.

Info: Go to Cantor Arts Center.