

Lenka Clayton, Nina Katchadourian



Snap chat: ‘Talking Pictures’ at the Met, New York

By Ariella Budick
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The smartphone has had a bad rap in the art world. Selfie sticks proliferate in museums, turning paintings and sculpture into backdrops for the theatre of narcissism. Insta-images glut the visual environment with photographic debris, making it harder than ever to sift the inventive from the trite. Only a few museums have winnowed technology’s dross for flecks of gold. Mia Fineman, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum, wanted to see what talented people could do with a tool that has become banal, so she enlisted a dozen artists to spend five months swapping images by phone with partners of their choosing. No words allowed.

With thoroughness and flair, the Met has assembled more than 1,800 images across various media, styles and sensibilities. Dialogues take place in printed books and on screens, walls and tablets. The results of this virtual meet-up range from charming to dazzlingly eloquent. Ubiquitous smartphones have turned photography from an instrument of memory to an agent of expressive urgency — “a fluid, instantaneous, ephemeral medium, closer to speaking than to writing,” Fineman writes — and the appeal of Talking Pictures lies in its spontaneity and diamond-edged repartee. And just as the world can be divided between lecturers, listeners and conversationalists, so some artists here embrace the back-and-forth while others deal out their own thoughts like cards, without paying much heed to what their inbox brings.

Last November’s presidential election seeped into almost every discussion in America, including these smartphone exchanges. Sometimes it ended them. Novelist, critic and photographer Teju Cole and documentary-maker Laura Poitras got a jump on the project last September and at first it went swimmingly. They traded shots of slept-in beds, TSA checkpoints and military research stations. But after Donald Trump’s victory, Poitras went silent, not answering Cole’s communiqués or acknowledging delivery of the bunch of flower images he sent.

Other pairs emulate the nation’s political obsessions, passing on the latest updates or justifications for heightened emotional states. Apparently feeling that silence has become impossible in an age of loudness, Nicole Eisenman and AL Steiner got around the no-words rule

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by tossing back and forth pictures of protest signs and screenshots of headlines and outraged texts. Their collaboration typifies a new, all-too-common digital obsession with news that comes at us at 20-minute intervals, in bursts of partial information that we lack the willpower to ignore.

Some versions of what Fineman calls a “game of pictorial ping-pong” acknowledge political reality but push it to the periphery. Manjari Sharma and Irina Rozovsky’s alliance produced an evocative meditation on the poetry of pregnancy. As they began the commission, both discovered they were due to give birth within three weeks of one another. They homed in on the changes in their bodies — bellies sprout, then bulge — but also on metaphors and analogies found in nature. A stomach swells beside a watermelon, which we next see cut open to expose its red flesh. In between, an arm holds up a giant beet spurting purple juice. By the end, both women have given birth and their relationship has entered a new, more complicated phase.

Another pair of women seems even more stunningly in sync: Nina Katchadourian and Lenka Clayton regale each other with buoyant visual puns and zingy rejoinders. Katchadourian sends her friend a selfie in a dark shirt with white stripes. Clayton bats back a picture of her own arm in a white shirt with dark stripes, hand reaching toward the striated keys of a piano. Katchadourian pops off a picture of a pink rubber eraser in a corner of the frame; Clayton parries with a pink wad of chewed-up bubblegum. And, for the game, Katchadourian photographs a shiny pink tongue ballooning against a row of small teeth. The joy of friendly one-upwomanship crackles from the screen.

In every large gathering, there are those who would rather listen to themselves than make room in their brains for anyone else’s contributions. Sanford Biggers and Shawn Peters make a good match, engaged in mutual monologues and talking at (but not to) each other with self-involved abandon. Their expertly produced photographs of unpeopled streets and lonely buildings around the world hide more than they reveal. The two share a taste for dramatic shadows, visual irony and an atmosphere of suggestive mystery, but neither has much obvious interest in reacting to the other’s prompt.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Nontsikelelo Mutiti, both born in Africa, also speak to each other in crossing declarations. Mutiti transmits a round of winter scenes and books; Crosby dispatches her own set of African textiles. They are discussing similar subjects, but in separate languages. There’s no spark of communion.

In one sense, the show missed an opportunity. Social media and the worldwide chatroom have made the smartphone a tool for connecting and arguing with — or sometimes menacing — people radically different from ourselves. But Fineman allowed artists to select their interlocutors, which, since people often self-segregate, yielded a succession of two-person clubs. Instead of presiding over rich dialogues, she effectively designed a hive of echo chambers, and then invited viewers to listen in.

To December 17, metmuseum.org