

Nina Katchadourian



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Curioser and Curioser: Blanton Museum Hosts Artist Nina Katchadourian

By Kat Sampson
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SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

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

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



Mounted on the first wall visitors see upon entering the Blanton Museum of Art's "Nina Katchadourian: Curioser" exhibit is a line of popcorn-filled canisters. From afar, the piece looks like an ode to the favorite movie theater treat. With a closer look, there are pieces of paper adjacent to each container. Lines of jumbled words printed on the page reflect the Morse code translation of the popping popcorn.

The piece is characteristic of Katchadourian's cleverly artistic charm: She forces us to pay attention. In fact, it's what Katchadourian does best, says Blanton's contemporary and modern art curator Veronica Roberts.

“These are works that have humor and life in them. They’re funny, resonant and rich, but also incredibly thought-provoking,” Roberts says. “I think her work is a great fit for Austin — there’s a curiosity in this town and an openness to new perspectives and unorthodox ways of making things.”

The exhibition, on display until June 11, is Katchadourian’s first major mid-career survey and includes 10 photography, videography, sculpture, and sound installations spanning the almost three decades of the 49-year-old’s career. Visitors can expect to laugh—Katchadourian’s subtle and outlandish attempts to make viewers think about their place in the world are full of surprises.

Katchadourian spoke with the Alcalde about capturing the endless unexpected joys of life.

The exhibit covers your almost 30-year career. How’d you feel about revisiting older work?

It’s a strange and interesting experience to see all your work in one place, especially ones I haven’t laid eyes on in a very long time. The oldest one is called “World Map” and I made it as a senior in college. It’s also the first piece I ever sold. Seeing it was like an encounter with my 30-years-younger self. I sat there revisiting all these old jokes and decisions I had made. If my 20-year-old self had been told I was going to one day have a survey show at the Blanton and this piece is going to be included, I wouldn’t have believed it.



What was your journey to this moment like?

I didn’t grow up wanting to be an artist. I actually thought I was going to be a radio journalist, that’s what I came to college wanting to study. But by the time college ended, I got really interested in making art. I also realized something very crucial: Art was this very capacious, inclusive term that could basically contain all the things I was interested in. It felt like I had discovered this trick, like if I call myself an artist I get to do all these different things. So I went to graduate school right

out of college as a way to really figure out if I wanted to be an artist and I finished much more committed to that.

How did you come up with the idea to put toilet seat covers on your head for the “Lavatory Self-Portraits in Flemish Style” series?

That first time I was in the bathroom, it wasn't even something I thought about in my seat. I went to the bathroom, used the bathroom, then looked at the toilet seat covers and thought “Maybe I could make a hat.” I did and then went back to my seat and thought, “That was weird. I'm not what just happened? I should try to make some more of those.” It was utterly spontaneous. The spirit of the project is that you have to try everything. I tried not to plan them that much. I had certain photos or modes in mind but I didn't sit there and try to mock up a Hans Memling Flemish painting.

Is spontaneity a big part of your practice?

It's a very, very common circumstance for me to start with what's in front of me and try to work with it. I often think “What else can happen here? What else can be said?” There's an economy to that. It means you're often working with what's already there. “Sorted Books” is a great example of that. These are books that are already in someone's library, I'm not bringing anything new. “Seat Assignment” is made in much of the same way.

Your work is also very witty.



people have a hard time reconciling that something can be funny and talking about something serious. My favorite way of saying this is “Funny is not the same thing as frivolous.” Sometimes you can only talk about the most serious things through humor. Humor is useful because it brings people in in a welcoming, immediate way. It’s a good hook. But it’s not enough that the piece is just funny. I never start off making a piece thinking, “How do I make this funny?” That’s never the entire point.

How do you want people leaving your show to feel?

Certainly “curiouser,” to give you the obvious answer. I want people to go back into the world and be more engaged with it. One of the things that makes me happiest is when people say “I saw your show and the next day I noticed x, y, and z.” This may be very specific to 2017 at this moment, but the world is going crazy and it feels like this country is going crazy to me. I’m very appreciative of when people tell me my work made them feel hopeful and happy. I feel very moved by that response and I feel incredibly privileged if I can provide that for people right now, too. I hope they feel joy.

From top, Nina Katchadourian’s “Town Lake (Austin, Texas)” from “Paranormal Postcards” ; “Lavatory Self-Portrait in the Flemish Style #12” ; “Under Pressure” from “Seat Assignment” ; “Mended Spiderweb #14.” Photos courtesy of Caroline Barnett.