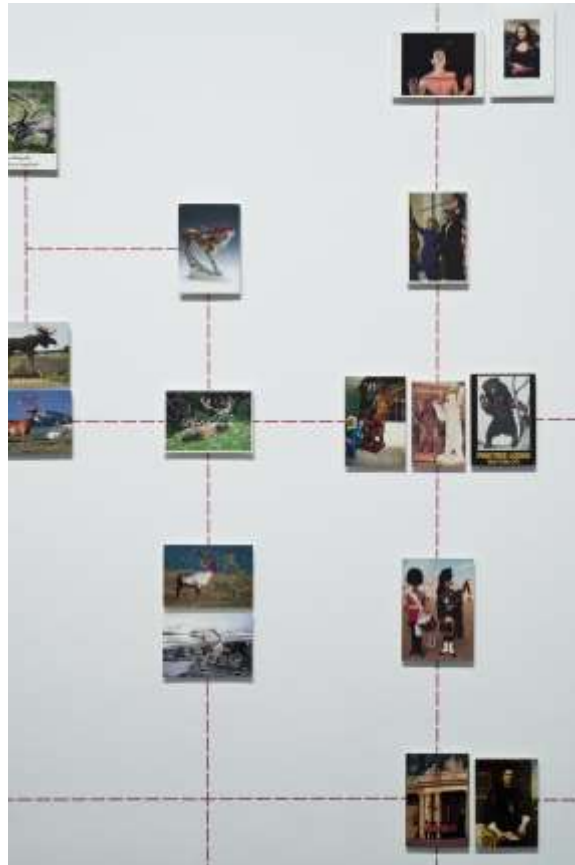


## BROOKLYN RAIL

### Nina Katchadourian: *Cumulus*

By [Marcia E. Vetrocq](#)  
Published: June 10, 2021



Nina Katchadourian, *Paranormal Postcards* (detail), 2001—ongoing. Mounted postcards, red sewing thread, red graphic tape on wall, dimensions variable. © Nina Katchadourian. Courtesy Pace Gallery.

## Pace Gallery

May 13 – June 26, 2021

New York

Nina Katchadourian’s first solo exhibition at Pace is housed within the spare and spacious volume of the third-floor gallery. The presentation—two chart-like wall installations; photographs and prints, many arrayed in grids; and a video work presented on six chunky monitors set atop blocky rectangular pedestals—likewise obeys a clean regime of straight edges and right angles. Yet for all the orderly resolution of the exhibition, the works on view were engendered by the kind of open-ended propositions that tend to begin with “what if,” “let’s see,” or “why not.” Katchadourian’s art arises from an assertive subjectivity and an inquisitiveness, laced with cheerful skepticism, about the multiple and contingent ways the world might be understood. Extensive research, improvisation guided by self-imposed rules, and an abiding sense of humor figure in the mix.

Commanding the space is *Paranormal Postcards* (2001–ongoing), a wall-colonizing installation of hundreds of souvenir postcards from around the globe. She’s stitched each one with lines of red thread that sometimes suggest clandestine activities or uncanny forces (surveillance, telekinesis, interspecies communication) and sometimes function as cartoon captions or graffiti (Queen Elizabeth ogles her consort’s medals; a quartet of Balinese dancers, David Bowie, and the frescoed Pantocrater from a Romanesque church all enjoy playing cat’s cradle). Lines of red tape situate the postcards in an enigmatic network that begins just inside the entry, runs the length of the gallery, turns a corner, jumps a door, and continues around three more walls. With each iteration, Katchadourian incorporates fresh postcards, repositions subsections, and discerns new affinities within her ever-burgeoning archive. Visit the show and you’ll likely encounter a group of avid codebreakers seeking *the* organizing principle, but the installation’s axial ramification is more akin to the outcome of a game of Scrabble played by a formalist, a conspiracy theorist, and a comedian, with an unrestricted number of letter tiles.

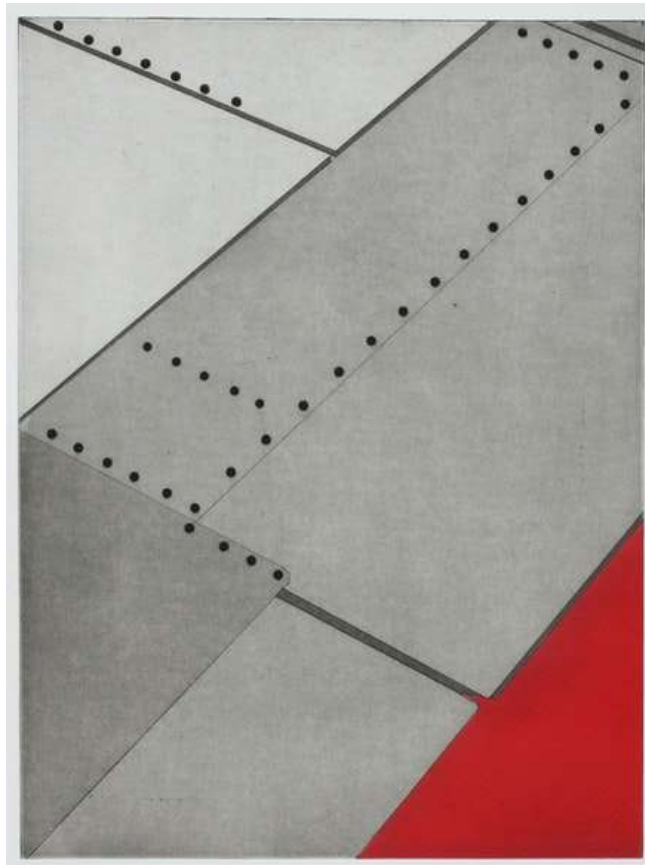


Nina Katchadourian, *Whisker Print (2A)*, 2013. Whisker stencil monotype on Sunray Satin paper, 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches. © Nina Katchadourian. Courtesy Pace Gallery.

Katchadourian collects the postcards on her own—no flea market cheating allowed—and she likens the installation to a travel journal. This insistence on direct engagement is fundamental to her multidisciplinary practice, notably in projects inspired by her own childhood experience, and never more explicitly than in the meticulously edited and affectionately satirical *Accent Elimination* (2005). Facing the viewer on three separate monitors are Katchadourian and her parents, identically framed against a blue background and wearing similar round-necked black shirts. The artist, in her late 30s at the time, individually quizzes her Turkish-born Armenian father and Finnish mother, whose first language was Swedish, about the peculiarities of their accents, the story of their meeting in Beirut, and the several languages they mastered before moving to the US. The formal, often stilted dialogues were scripted by the parents. Filming followed weeks of training with a professional coach who endeavored to Americanize the parents' pronunciation and teach Katchadourian to speak with the accent of each parent. (Three monitors, back-to-back with the familial trio, present excerpts from the training sessions.) Sandwiched between her parents, Katchadourian plays an impersonal yet determined inquisitor, while

her parents dutifully respond to their daughter's queries as they probably have over the previous three decades: the father solemn and deliberate, the mother cooler and bemused.

The enlistment of cooperating parents in *Accent Elimination* brings to mind the work of Ragnar Kjartansson, with whom Katchadourian also shares an irreverent view of endurance performance. In the video *Endurance* (2002), viewable on Vimeo, she struggles mightily and messily to maintain a broad smile for nearly 10 minutes while archival footage from Shackleton's calamitous expedition to Antarctica on a ship—wait for it—named "Endurance" is projected on her front tooth. Irreverence and the absurd are abundant in Katchadourian's work. With the insertion of food into the cheerfully preposterous iPhone photographs of *Seat Assignment* (2010—ongoing), Katchadourian entered the ludic territory of Erwin Wurm and Fischli/Weiss. She paid tribute to Duchamp and Man Ray in the title of her 2016 audio work, *Dust Gathering*, at MoMA, and cites John Cage for opening her thinking to the creative potential of indeterminacy. To make the small and frankly beautiful "Whisker Prints" (2013) shown at Pace, Katchadourian gathered 17 of the hair-like sensors shed by her three cats and swiftly positioned them in a series of improvised compositions on a printing plate that was repeatedly inked, wiped, and inked again. The 17 fragile and irregular white lines of the whiskers in each monoprint suggest a marine creature in a sea of rich blue, which itself has been made to seem porous by the fine white dots of the paper's texture rising from the deep.



Nina Katchadourian, *Window Seat Suprematism 4*, 2013. Etching and aquatint, 19 1/2 x 15 inches. © Nina Katchadourian. Courtesy Pace Gallery.

There's an elemental kindness throughout Katchadourian's art, a clear aversion to capitalizing on controversy, and no hint of censure when she plumbs the quirks of human behavior and perception. *Accent Elimination* is a winkingly comic twist on communication between foreign-born parents and their first-generation American child. Left unexamined in Katchadourian's otherwise thorough interrogation are the circumstances of her Armenian paternal family's migration from Turkey to Lebanon and why Finland has a prominent Swedish-speaking minority. In the 2015 Venice Biennale, *Accent Elimination* came to be explicitly contextualized in the pavilion of the Republic of Armenia, where it appeared in the group show "Armenity," a survey of diasporic identity that marked the centennial of the start of the Armenian Genocide. Five years later, in *Lucy's Sampler* (2020), a singular and modest print at Pace, Katchadourian does matter-of-factly cite the genocide while remaining within the framework of her family's story. She reproduces the dainty patterns stitched on a time-yellowed cloth by the child, orphaned in the genocide, who joined the household of Katchadourian's paternal grandparents as a

teenager and eventually became the artist’s “bonus grandmother.” With that intimate connection established, Katchadourian moves on to dedicate the print to all those, like Lucy, whose lives have been devoted to domestic labor and caring for others.

A comparable moderation is more difficult to achieve in *The Genealogy of the Supermarket* (2005–ongoing), the second large wall installation. In a well-researched yet perfectly offbeat riff on kinship, Katchadourian invents a family tree that unites 121 real and invented “people” who are represented on commercial packaging. Scanned from labels and cleansed of text, the “portraits” hang in found frames on a wall that hides its white-cube pallor behind the domestic warmth of red William Morris wallpaper. Launched 16 years ago, Katchadourian’s lighthearted project of discerning spouses, siblings, and offspring among product emblems now returns at a time of profound racial and economic reckoning. The landing is not entirely smooth. Four racist representations recently purged by corporate decree have become disgraced family members, obscured though legible beneath foggy Plexiglas and filters. It’s one way of denying the wish of big business that the public simply forget past offenses. But following the decisions of corporations means that the Indigenous “Mia” of Land O’Lakes butter is blurred while Argo’s “corn maiden,” still found on grocery shelves, is not. The younger generations added to the bottom of the chart are populated by more racially diverse brand representations. The reasons are many, from the marketing effort to woo consumers of color to corporate whitewashing, minority entrepreneurship, and Katchadourian’s own diligence in seeking local brands in ethnically diverse neighborhoods each time the installation travels to a new locale. Still, there’s no reversing our loss of innocence about the competitive aims and desire-inducing strategies of identity branding overall. *Genealogy* begs the question, when does the conceptual and humorous momentum of a long-running project, however wittily realized and thoughtfully updated, run its course?

## Contributor

**Marcia E. Vetrocq** is a writer, editor, and educator based in New York.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2021/06/artseen/Nina-Katchadourian-Cumulus>