

Nina Katchadourian

Nina Katchadourian Rethinks the Consensus on Commonplace Meanings

At Pace Gallery, New York, a small survey of the artist's *oeuvre* presents new and existing works which re-analyse both mass media iconography and her own family history

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BY WILL FENSTERMAKER IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 08 JUN 21



'Cumulus', Nina Katchadourian's first survey at Pace since joining the gallery's roster, is a pithy exhibition of new work and additions to long-running series. Katchadourian, who's known for making art within self-imposed constraints and restrictions, finds wonder in commonplace situations, lending the exhibition a picaresque spirit.

Take, for example, the artist's series 'Paranormal Postcards' (2001–ongoing). For 20 years, Katchadourian has collected postcards from gift shops, museums and tourist sites, and arranged them within a vast and seemingly superficial typology. Here, a dotted red line connects portraits of the British monarchy

to statues erected in public squares, while a snapshot of two seagulls appears next to an image of a crowd clambering over the Berlin Wall. In red thread, Katchadourian stitches lines on each postcard that indicate every scene's locus of power. In one instance, she connects a photo of the peak of Tanah Lot temple in Indonesia – a place of worship for Hindus – to the raised hands of several dozen people performing the Balinese Hindu dance *kecak*.



Nina Katchadourian, 'Paranormal Postcards' (detail), 2001–ongoing, mounted postcards, red sewing thread, red graphic tape on wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Pace Gallery, New York

Katchadourian often works with images that are designed not to be analyzed or are so commonplace we've reached mass consensus on their meaning. I've always understood her practice as sitting between 1970s California conceptualism and the

Pictures Generation of the 1970s and '80s: like Louise Lawler, Katchadourian is preternaturally attuned to how an image operates in the world and, like William Wegman, able to fold those mechanics humorously back into the image itself.

Katchadourian's 'The Genealogy of the Supermarket' (2005–ongoing) dominates the main gallery. Its conceit is simple, if a little absurd: the artist arranges food brands into a sprawling family tree. The genealogy identifies, for example, the niece and nephew of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima as the Ojibwe woman from Land O'Lake's butter and a Black chef Nabisco once used to promote Cream of Wheat semolina. These food labels function as a blunt market stand-in for cultural lineage and several of the most racist stereotypes have been retired – at least three in response to last year's social justice protests – which Katchadourian has greyed-out with semi-translucent panes.



Nina Katchadourian, *Accent Elimination*, 2005, installation view, Pace Gallery, New York. Courtesy: the artist and Pace Gallery, New York

Katchadourian's family tree is clearly a parody and a provocation. What are we to make of the proximity between, say, Native American mascots and anthropomorphic husks of corn? Or of the salt-of-the-earth American farmer's family who, over generations, becomes increasingly bourgeois (Pioneer Valley syrup)? Katchadourian's tongue-in-cheek typology lures you into rehashing the mythologies on which these mass-produced semiotics function.

Cynicism would be easy. Katchadourian's work may be many things – effervescent, quotidian, often cheery – but it isn't facile. In her six-channel film *Accent Elimination* (2005), the artist attempts to replicate her parents' unplaceable accents – her mother belongs to a Swedish-speaking minority in Finland and her father is Armenian by way of Turkey and Lebanon – while they try to adopt a standard American enunciation. During one scene, she grows frustrated with her father, who, off-camera, obstinately tells her she's not getting his accent right. It's touching to watch the family take on such an intimate aspect of each other's identities, but there's something extraordinary about watching them work with a language coach to mimic their speech. Gathered in a dim office – a ministerial nonplace decorated with actors' headshots and article clippings – the coach corrects the artist as she pronounces her own name: 'Kahtch-uh-*door*-ian'. Watching him parse out the common sounds that, placed in unique succession, can be held as markers of individual humanity, it occurred to me that here was yet another metaphor for the artist's own practice.

'Nina Katchadourian: Cumulus' is on view at the Pace Gallery, New York, through 26 June.

<https://www.frieze.com/article/nina-katchadourian-cumulus-2021-review>

*Main image: Nina Katchadourian, 'The Genealogy of the Supermarket', 2005-ongoing, installation view, Pace Gallery, New York.
Courtesy: the artist and Pace Gallery, New York*