

Nina Katchadourian

HYPERALLERGIC

Nina Katchadourian's Playful, Persistent Questioning

By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

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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

A survey of the artist's work at the Blanton Museum of Art argues that there's a seriousness behind her irrepressible pluckiness.



Installation view, Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser at the Blanton Museum of Art, showing Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style from the series Seat Assignment (2010–ongoing), C-prints (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

AUSTIN, Tex. — Nina Katchadourian performs curiosity.

Such is the takeaway of the artist's first midcareer museum survey, *Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser*, organized by the University of Texas's Blanton Museum of Art.

The Brooklyn-based Katchadourian engages in very self-conscious play, obsessively creating congruencies out of quotidian situations, whether an audio tour about dust in the Museum of Modern Art or filling the lawn of a historic house with campaign signs for every unsuccessful US presidential candidate since John Adams's 1796 bid. Presented in isolation or experienced project by project, Katchadourian's work often veers close to the kind of preciousness so prevalent in contemporary conceptual practice.

At the Blanton, curator Veronica Roberts offers a capacious look at the artist's creative trajectory, assembling 10 of her bodies of work. By doing so, Roberts argues that there's a seriousness behind Katchadourian's dry wit and irrepressible pluckiness — that she plays with the mundane in an effort to impose order on inherently illogical circumstances. The curatorial strategy works.

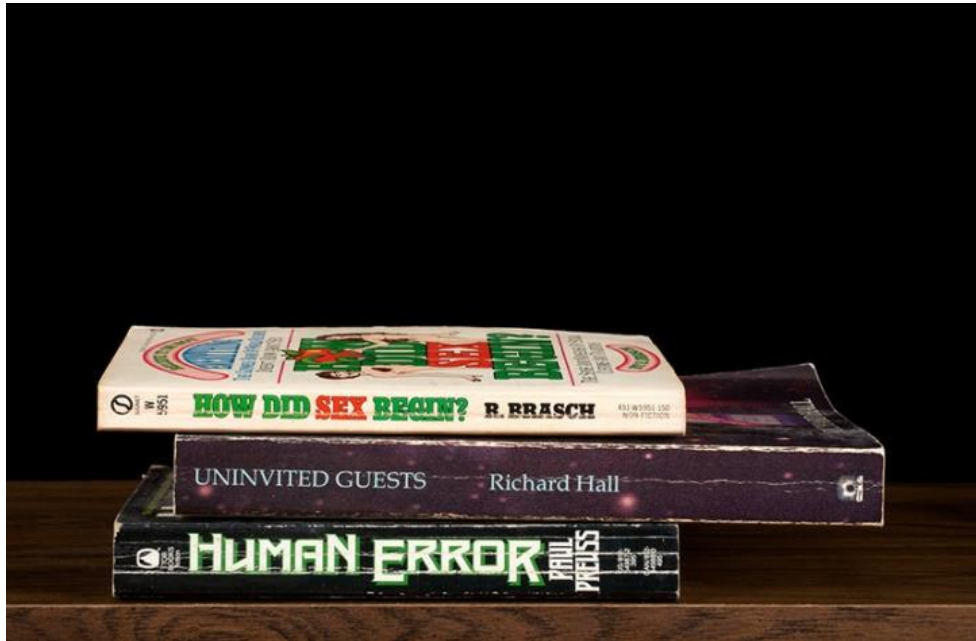


Nina Katchadourian, "Austin, Texas (Town Lake)" from Paranormal Postcards (2001–ongoing), postcard and red sewing thread (courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco; photo by Shelby Lakins for the Blanton Museum of Art)

The show begins outside the museum with "Please, Please, Pleased to Meet'cha" (2006), a sound installation featuring the voices of United Nations translators interpreting bird songs. Speakers are nestled inconspicuously in the cedar elms of the Blanton's plaza, at the end of which Ellsworth Kelly's elegant, chapel-like "Austin" is under construction. Mixed with the whoosh of traffic from a nearby street and the occasional rumble from the Kelly monument, the artificiality of the human-voiced birdsong makes for a wily intervention.

Both because Katchadourian often works in series that span decades and because she continually adds to certain projects each time they're installed, the Blanton exhibit is only vaguely chronological. Nevertheless, Curiouser opens indoors with "World Map" (1989), a piece she made

while still an undergraduate at Brown University. A map with countries and continents reconfigured according to a whimsical methodology (i.e. conjoining continents because they are printed with the same border color), the piece is immature, yet it foreshadows her career-long questioning of societal certainties and her desire to create imaginative networks and matrices.

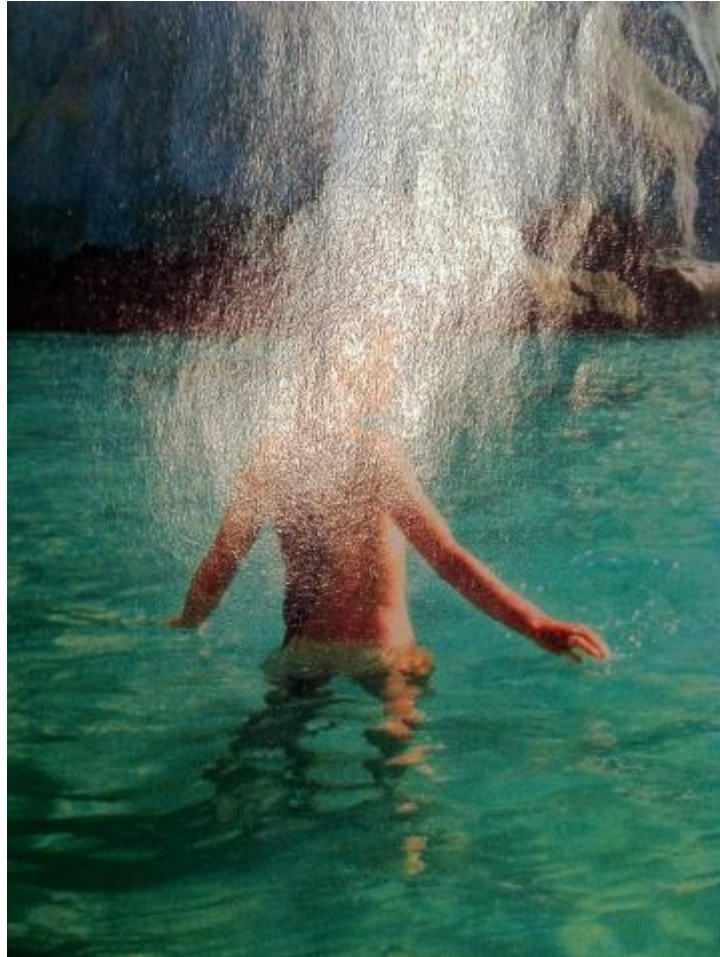


Nina Katchadourian, "How Did Sex Begin?" (2014) from the series Sorted Books, C-print (courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery; photo by Shelby Lakins for the Blanton Museum of Art)

Two of her best-known series — Sorted Books (1993–ongoing) and Seat Assignment (2010–ongoing) — together operate as the exhibit’s organizational and thematic nexus, around which the other works orbit. (They also feature prominently in the exhibit’s catalogue, which is less a conventional companion text than its own conceptual work, a busy compilation that includes 15 short essays by artist Ann Hamilton and psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster, among others.)

For Sorted Books, Katchadourian mines people’s personal libraries, selecting volumes and stacking them so that the spines produce enigmatic or coy phrases. The resulting photographs — shot against deep, black backgrounds and printed in exquisite resolution — impersonate formal portraits. But of course, Katchadourian contradicts that formality with her irrepressible urge to play. Reads one stack culled from the shelves of Beat poet William S. Burroughs: “How did sex begin? / Uninvited guests / Human error.” (Chronicle Books published a monograph of Sorted Books in 2013.)

Two galleries are devoted to Seat Assignment, the artist’s most expansive and popular series. It’s comprised of dozens of photographs and several multichannel music videos that she made while traveling on more than 200 commercial flights. The Blanton spotlights 58 photos, hanging them salon style.



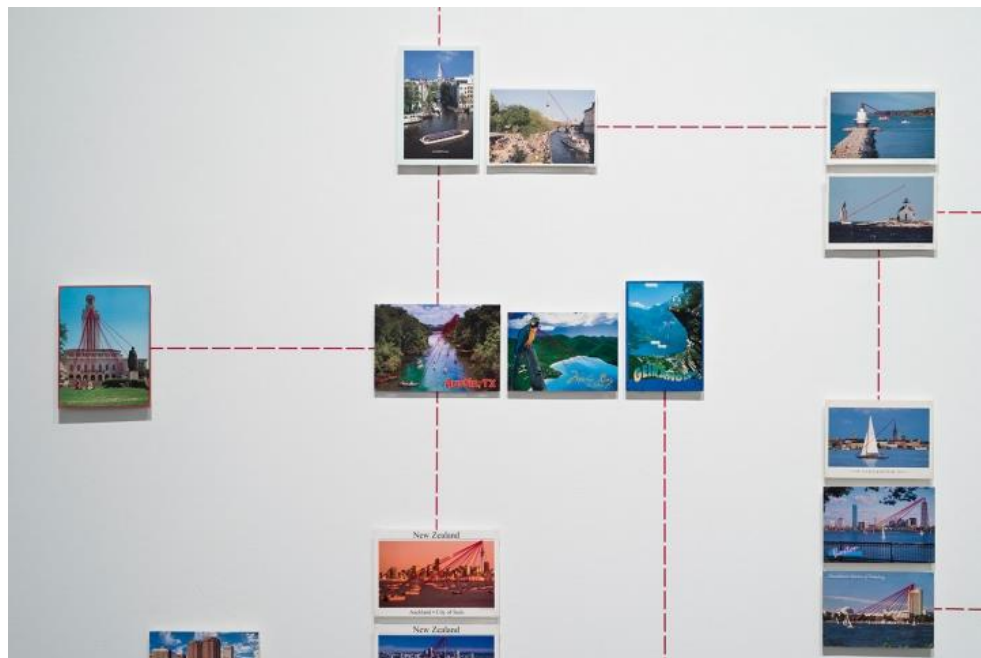
Nina Katchadourian, "Bather" from the series Seat Assignment (2010– ongoing), C-print (collection of the Blanton Museum of Art; photo by Shelby Lakins for the Blanton Museum of Art)

Katchadourian started the series by retreating to an airplane lavatory to snap cellphone images of herself posing as if she were a figure in a Flemish portrait. She costumed herself with whatever materials were at hand: toilet seat covers, hand towels, her own scarf. Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style, a sub-series of Seat Assignment, went viral on several occasions. Yet, as easily humorous as they are, the "Self-Portraits" are not just clever selfies. Rather, they're a renegade performance — skillful improvisations, at high altitude — of 15th-century Flemish portraiture.

More unsettling and complex are the Seat Assignment photographs made when the artist limits herself to whatever materials she has access to while confined to her seat: in-flight magazines, the seat belt, snacks offered by flight attendants. When Katchadourian plops a lemon wedge on an image of a baseball field, scale becomes jarringly inverted and the fruit slice becomes an enormous abstract sculpture. Even the glare cast by the overhead reading light transforms a typical travel magazine photo of woman swimming into something ethereal.

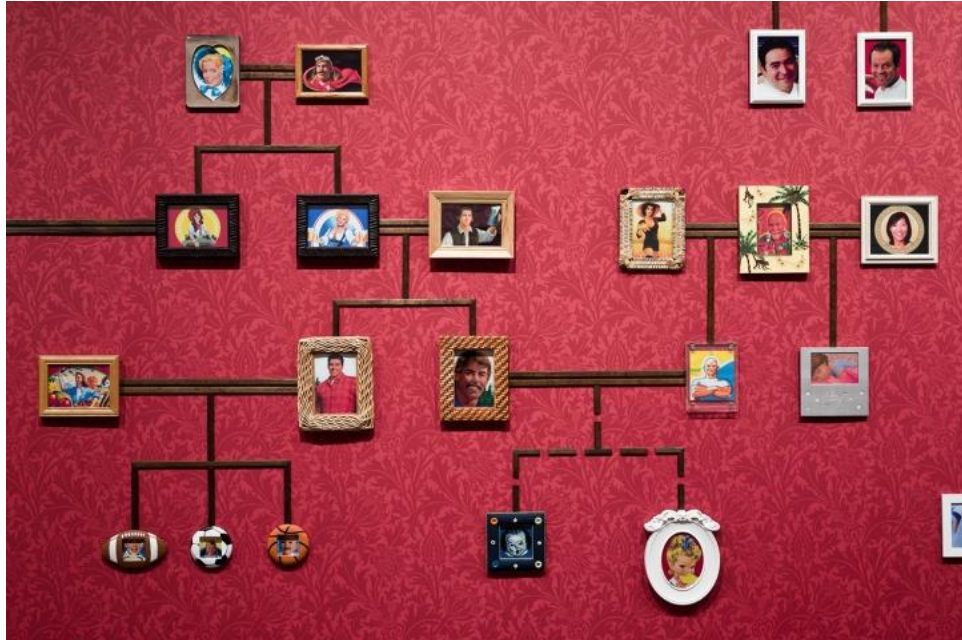
Like *Sorted Books*, two other series illuminate Katchadourian's fascination with using humor to destabilize conventional notions of mapping, taxonomy, and data organization.

For *Paranormal Postcards* (2001–ongoing), which now totals 353 pieces, Katchadourian alters postcards by stitching together various elements in each one with red thread. They're then grouped together in arbitrary categories (plazas with flagpoles, bridges at sunset), and Katchadourian connects the groups with an elaborate network of dotted red lines on the wall. Hers is a zealously mapped-out worldview of farcical interconnectedness.



Nina Katchadourian, Paranormal Postcards (2001–ongoing), 353 mounted postcards, red sewing thread, red graphic tape on wall (courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco; photo by Shelby Lakins for the Blanton Museum of Art)

A similar logic is at work in *The Genealogy of the Supermarket* (2005–ongoing), a bizarre family tree comprised of product icons displayed in kitschy frames and splayed across fussy red wallpaper, as if in some supermarket-size living room. Aunt Jemima and the Quaker Oats man are parents to the Cream of Wheat chef, while the Gerber Baby is the adopted child of same-sex couple Mr. Clean and the Brawny Towels man. Katchadourian takes the advertising emblems at face value and a fantasy of lineage to an oddly logical conclusion. We're supposed to believe these characters are real, so why wouldn't they be related?



Nina Katchadourian, The Genealogy of the Supermarket (2005–ongoing), framed photographs and wood on wallpapered wall (courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco; photo by Shelby Lakins for the Blanton Museum of Art)

Heritage and family connections get a considerably more nuanced treatment in “Accent Elimination” (2005), Katchadourian’s six-channel video installation included at the 2015 Venice Biennale in the Armenian pavilion, which won the Golden Lion for Best National Participation. The work centers on Katchadourian’s parents, each of whom has a hard-to-place accent that invariably provokes questions in social situations. Unable to imitate them, Katchadourian enlisted an accent coach, and for several weeks, she and her parents took intensive lessons. While the artist learned to speak in her mother’s and father’s accents, the couple learned to talk with a standard American accent.

The videos show all three struggling to erase their natural manner of speaking. Watching them try to perform new identities highlights the complex layers of cultural identity and drives home how often we assign “otherness” with only the most cursory of first impressions.



Nina Katchadourian, "Accent Elimination" (2005), six-channel video with sound, six televisions, three pedestals, 13:26 min, 60 x 65 x 50 in (collection of the Blanton Museum of Art; photo by Shelby Lakins for the Blanton Museum of Art)

The most poetic work in the exhibit is, not surprisingly, also the least self-consciously clever one. "Indecision on the Moon" (2001) is a 31-minute re-edit of the footage of Neil Armstrong's historic 1969 lunar landing. Katchadourian eliminated all coherent language, leaving only inconsequential words like "um" and "uh" and the scratchy sound of radio static. Still, the beeps and scratchy bursts are unmistakably recognizable to anyone who's heard the audio of Armstrong's "one giant leap for mankind," pushing into the present from the past. That "Indecision" is experienced in a small, pitch-black gallery only heightens the lovely disorientation of the piece. With its details erased, Armstrong's extraordinary moonwalk becomes a dream-like abstraction, a reflection of the uncertainty of language that's both comforting and unsettling. With her playfulness intact but in quiet mode, Katchadourian uses small moments and inconsequential details to upend history.

Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser continues at the Blanton Museum of Art (University of Texas at Austin, 200 E Martin Luther King Jr Blvd) through June 11.