

Nina Katchadourian

KQED Arts

An Artist Chuckles and the Audience Follows in Cantor's 'Curiouser'

By Roula Seikaly
September 21, 2017

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



What makes Nina Katchadourian laugh?

This is the question that has occupied my mind since viewing *Curiouser*, Katchadourian's mid-career retrospective now on view at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for the Visual Arts. Curated by Veronica Roberts for the Blanton Museum in Austin, the Cantor Center is the only West Coast stop this charming installation will make. For Katchadourian, who was born and raised in Stanford, it is a sort homecoming. For audiences, it is an opportunity to, as the artist does, appreciate the magic that can be found in the mundane.

Katchadourian's wide ranging interests — mapping, translation and public space — are framed by opposing concepts: expanse and limitation. Expanse is the artist's fertile imagination, the beginnings of which are exposed in the video installation *The Recarcassing Ceremony*.



Nina Katchadourian, 'Mended Spiderweb #14 (Spoon Patch),' 1998. (Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery)

Originally commissioned by the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, the 24-minute single-channel video recounts a childhood game gone astray. The artist and her brother Kai once lost a toy boat and two Playmobil figures to unpredictable surf. The film, assembled from family interviews and historical audio recordings, re-enacts a ceremony in which the souls of the lost figurines were transplanted into the bodies of two other plastic figurines.

While voicing with all the maturity she can muster the “family members” who help to revive the Lazarus-like characters, Katchadourian’s voice breaks into unrestrained giggles. Those of us in the theater also laughed, because how could we not? By itself, the playfully re-staged ceremony and nostalgic conversations with her parents about ritualistic adolescent play is absorbing. When it pivots unexpectedly to capture a stark existential truth — change, or loss — as her adult sibling recalls the moment when he knew that the days of imaginative adventures with his sister were numbered, the honesty is heart-rending.

Limitation in Katchadourian’s work is evident throughout her projects. Photographing titles for the series *Sorted Books*, she works only with what’s made accessible by a given collector or institution, and always to poetic and hilarious ends.

Staging photographic or video tableaus for *Seat Assignment* — a multimedia series she initiated as an exercise in disciplined time management and productivity during long domestic and international flights — the artist uses only those props that are immediately available, such as in-flight magazines and snack foods, blankets, and personal items she brings on board. The resulting photographs of magazine pages modified by added food items or mirrored in seatbelt buckle reflections represent what, in Katchadourian’s practice, comes of sustained experimentation within constraints.



Nina Katchadourian, 'Mountain Climbers (Apple),' 2011. From 'Seat Assignment,' 2010-ongoing. (Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery)

Seat Assignment includes three music videos and Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style, which lit up the internet in 2012 after a short Huffington Post piece was published.



Nina Katchadourian, 'Lavatory Self-Portrait in the Flemish Style #12.' From 'Seat Assignment,' 2010-ongoing. (Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery)

The videos elicited smiles if not a hearty laugh from everyone who watched them — and had me marveling at the artist's concentration amidst such absurdity. With these and still photographs, Katchadourian imagines what interactions sitters in pendant Flemish portraits may have had if AC/DC's "You Shook Me" or the Bowie/Queen gem "Under Pressure" was the music of their day.

By far Katchadourian's most well-known work, the self-portraits in which she substitutes paper toilet seat covers for the stiff lace collars worn by wealthy medieval sitters capture the grinding, endurance-test aspect of airline travel, and mass-media's pervasive influence in identity formation over time.

While placing restrictions on creative output could choke if not kill an artist's practice, Katchadourian treats it as an opportunity to think deeply about and act on ideas that might never come to fruition under more fluid terms. Out of that discipline emerges work that advances close observation of life's small details and humor as concepts both worthy of sustained artistic exploration. The bodies of work that comprise *Curiouser* suggest that though Katchadourian could be satisfied in making herself laugh, the personal and professional triumph comes from helping audiences see joy in even its most subtle forms.

'Curiouser' is on view at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for the Visual Arts at Stanford University through Jan. 7, 2018.