

Nina Katchadourian

KQED

## Nina Katchadourian Takes an Adventure Story into Deeper Emotional Waters

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Nina Katchadourian, installation view of 'To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World,' 2021 at Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco. *(John Janca)*

How close can we get to understanding someone else's experience? This is likely not the question Nina Katchadourian asked herself when she began working on her show [To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World](#), now on view at San Francisco's Catharine Clark Gallery. But it's the question I've been asking myself while tracing her various approaches to the story at the center of this exhibition.

That story is an adventure story, but only because we didn't live through it ourselves. It starts optimistically in 1971, with the Robertson family selling their farm in Staffordshire, England to buy a 43-foot schooner and a chance to sail the world. But their high-seas life only lasted about one-and-a-half years. In June 1972, a pod of orcas rammed into the ship's hull in the Pacific Ocean, sinking it in around one minute. The passengers—parents Dougal and Lyn; sons Douglas, Neil and Sandy; and new crew member Robin Williams—escaped to an inflatable raft with minimal tools and supplies and one small dinghy.

They survived adrift for 38 days.



Nina Katchadourian, 'Paper Orca,' 2020. (*John Janca*)

Katchadourian first came across their story when she was seven, when her mother read her the 1973 book [Survive the Savage Sea](#), Dougal Robertson's account of the family's experience drawn from his detailed logbook. At the time, the tale was pure adventure to Katchadourian, like the fictional escapades of another (Swiss) family.

Almost 50 years later, the Robertsons' story remained a touchstone. Katchadourian reread the book nearly every year; in 2011 she visited the National Maritime Museum of Cornwall to see their dinghy. But it wasn't until spring 2020 that she wrote a letter to Douglas, now 66, tentatively reaching out to see if he might talk to her for what would become *To Feel Something*. Katchadourian was planning to work on the project for the duration of the family's time at sea, June 15 to July 22; Douglas generously suggested they speak every one of those days.

By the end of that 38-day period, Katchadourian's understanding of the Robertson family's experience shifted profoundly. There was no more remove. Passages from *Survive the Savage Sea*, read aloud by Douglas in a voice often breaking with emotion, were firsthand accounts of his own family's ordeal, a series of harrowing setbacks and life-saving accomplishments punctuated by moments of otherworldly natural beauty.

In *To Feel Something*, Katchadourian creates a dynamic timeline of the Robertsons adrift through life-sized paper replicas of sea life, physical props and audio accessed through QR codes. Her own text messages and conversations with Douglas narrating viewers' way around the gallery, starting with a six-minute [orientation video](#) that sketches out the sequence of events and Katchadourian's relationship to the material. It all feels very museum-y, but in no way stuffy. The National Maritime Museum of Cornwall may have the family's dingy, but do they have a 22-foot-long two-dimensional rendering of an orca?

Like the best exhibition designers, Katchadourian employs various methods of drawing viewers physically and emotionally into the material. For each flying fish, sea turtle, dorado or shark the family managed to bring aboard first an inflatable raft and then their fiberglass dinghy, Katchadourian made a corresponding paper fish drawing. To demonstrate the size of the dinghy (which held four adults, two children and all their worldly possessions for the final 20 days), she painted its shape on the concrete floor. Diagrams depicting the cramped sleeping, bailing and inflating arrangements hang nearby.



Nina Katchadourian, 'Dorado Family, Flying Fish #1-9,' and 'Turtle,' all 2020; Florist's wire and monofilament, dimensions variable. *(John Janca)*

Against ultramarine blue walls (color chosen by Douglas) some of Katchadourian's approaches are playful, like a video that lives out Douglas'

dream of a fresh fruit salad, or the Playmobil figures that represent the stranded seafarers. Other items in the exhibition draw ties between the Robertsons and Katchadourian's own family. A photo of her family in a little sailboat eerily resembles the picture taken of the Robertsons as they boarded their rescuer, a Japanese fishing boat. A print of a sampler made by Katchadourian's "bonus grandmother," an orphan of the Armenian genocide, underlines the many narratives missing from the historical record, unlike Dougal's much-published words.

### [An Artist Chuckles and the Audience Follows in Cantor's 'Curiouser'](#)

All these objects, videos and cellphone screenshots, combined with around 75 audio clips, varying in length from less than a minute to several, make *To Feel Something* epic in scope, and nearly impossible to absorb all at once. But this is, to me, the show's most effective tactic. Caught up in the drama of nabbing a sea turtle, the loss of rainwater, the time they signaled a ship that didn't see them, I wanted only to know everything about the Robertsons and their time at sea, even if that meant buying *Survive the Savage Sea* and reading it myself.

We consume real-life adventure stories to live vicariously through someone else's experience, to learn how they survived. We want those hard-won revelations without the hardness of winning them ourselves. We want to glimpse the "pinnacle of contentment," as Dougal described their rescue, and what it feels like to save yourself from death. Well removed from those extremes, we attempt to absorb their lessons into our more ordinary existences.

In times where even the ordinary is extreme, the Robertson family's learnings become newly valuable, whether they're lessons in patience ("You only have to slay the dragon that you've got to deal with today") or visions of a future to come, one in which we've escaped our homes and returned to a wider world. In that vein, the exhibition's title comes from a description of their rescue, which Douglas didn't believe in until the fishing boat's rope fell across their own

prow. “To feel something that was not of our world,” Douglas says, “it was so good.”

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*‘To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World’ is on view at Catharine Clark Gallery (248 Utah St., San Francisco) through Feb. 20. [Details here.](#)*

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