

Nina Katchadourian

my Statesman
from Austin American-Statesman

Laughter and magic fill this must-see Blanton Museum of Art exhibit

By Michael Barnes

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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



Paula Benavides traces the fictional family tree, comprised of individuals who appear on grocery store products, as part of "The Genealogy of the Supermarket" by Nina Katchadourian. Tamir Kalifa/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Nina Katchadourian uses her unending curiosity about the world to inspire her art.

"Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English). "Now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!"

It is tempting to attribute the title of Nina Katchadourian's delightfully off-kilter show "Curiouser" to Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." In fact, the ingenious Brooklyn-based artist says the name of her big Blanton Museum of Art show is a close fit to her profession.

Constantly in a state of wonder about the mundane world, Katchadourian feels like a "curious-er," not unlike a "farm-er" or "build-er."

Still, there's an "Alice"-like appeal to this large exhibition spread out over several rooms downstairs at the Blanton.

Two wall-sized projects, constructed or reconstructed at the museum by the artist, look like oversized genealogical charts. One is made up of postcards from around the world, including Austin. Katchadourian has altered some of the familiar images with delicate red threads that appear to connect key elements.

She did similar thread work with real, broken spider webs, which she then photographed. The sheer audacity, patience and skill required of this web-mending procedure is enough to tell you that Katchadourian is no ordinary conceptual artist. Too often, conceptual art goes no further than an obscure visual joke that, and once the trigger is pulled, fades from the mind quickly. Not so with Katchadourian, whose humor sticks in the mind for days or weeks.

"You hear people laughing in the galleries," says Blanton curator Veronica Roberts. "I've never experienced a show where people connect to the work and take pleasure in it to this extent."

The other big chart is "The Genealogy of the Supermarket." Katchadourian aligns the images of personalities used in food branding and packaging into familial groups. Each time she re-creates the project, she adds local samples, such as Earl Campbell sausages in Austin.

Among the groupings, the mustached cartoon hunk from the Brawny paper towels packages is linked by marriage with a grinning Mr. Clean. Their offspring is the blonde Sunbeam bread girl, dressed in old-fashioned gingham as she bites into a buttered slice.

We should back up and say that Katchadourian does little of her work in a studio.

"She makes art in libraries, in trees, on airplanes and in parking lots," the handy exhibit catalog reads. "She has enlisted help from both far afield and close to home; her collaborators have included sports announcers, museum maintenance staff, ornithologists, musicians, translators at the United Nations ... an accent elimination coach, snakes, spiders, rates, ants, caterpillars, and also her own parents."

In many of the “Seat Assignment” pieces, put together while on airplanes, she juxtaposes a three-dimensional object with an image discovered in an airline magazine. In “Mountain Climbers (Apple),” for instance, she photographs a real apple placed — wildly out of scale — atop a magazine picture of a dark figure on a snowy track. As in other works from this series, the accidental light and shadows play crucial roles in the surreal humor.

For somebody so much in the moment, Katchadourian makes frequent references to art history. For “St. Edward,” a twisted straw forms a Renaissance halo around a grainy shot of Edward Snowden, his eyes lowered as if in stoic humility. More famously, she created a series of “Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style,” photographs staged in airplane restrooms with available objects forming the layered historical-looking attire.

The “Seat Assignment” series culminates in intense paired videos of the artist lip-syncing to pop and rock recordings. The museum visitor listens on headphones to the original David Bowie/Queen take on “Under Pressure,” for instance, while looking at two framed screens. The videos, taken in airplane restrooms, are edited so that the artist appears to be reacting mysteriously to the other image of herself.

You gotta see it.

Katchadourian, whose multiethnic family lives all over the place, loves maps. “Finland’s Unnamed Islands” was inspired by her family’s summers there. As reproduced in the catalog, they look unremarkable, but on the Blanton’s walls, they appear to be executed with the greatest delicacy on microscope slides.

In “Talking Popcorn,” she translates the sound of kernels popping in a commercial machine into Morse code by using a hidden computer. She then turns the results into absurdist language. In the large-form, 10-minute video “The Recarcassing Ceremony,” she re-creates a childhood game that climaxed in an elaborate ritual for two lost Playmobil toys, using an audio recording from the original ceremony.

For the “Sorted Books” series, she arranges volumes so that the titles on the binding form a little narrative. Sounds simple, but Katchadourian produces them elegantly and amusingly.

“Accent Elimination” is perhaps her most complex work on display at the Blanton. Six video screens reveal a staged performance of talking heads creating “language biographies.” It was inspired by Katchadourian’s own experience of hiring a professional coach to teach her to speak with her parents’ hybrid accents and to teach them a standard American accent. It was shown in a diaspora-themed exhibit in the Armenian Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale.

One anecdote gives a sense of the family life that created this altogether singular artist, whose well of inspiration seems limitless.

“We were sitting around a table, and my father was there speaking Armenian to his mother and his adopted older sister, who were speaking Turkish to one another,” she told interviewer Stuart Horodner. “My dad was speaking English to my mom, and to me and my brother. My mom was speaking Swedish to my brother and me, Finnish to a Finnish student who was living with us, and Spanish to Fernando, a kid from Mexico we were hosting for a few weeks while he was getting a glass eye. My mom was acting like the central switchboard operator.”

‘Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser’
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Blanton Museum of Art

200 E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

blantonmuseum.org, 512-471-5482