

Nina Katchadourian

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For This Show, the Artist Went Overboard

In 38 days, with sculptures, drawings, videos and ingenuity, Nina Katchadourian revisited the shipwreck from “Survive the Savage Sea.”

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The artist Nina Katchadourian in a life-size outline of the dinghy Ednamair that held six resourceful people in “Survive the Savage Sea.”Credit...Nina Katchadourian and Catharine Clark Gallery

By Jori Finkel

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When the artist Nina Katchadourian was seven, in 1975, her mother read her the true-life shipwreck story of a family that survived 38 days adrift in the Pacific, near the Galapagos. The tale, Dougal Robertson's best seller "Survive the Savage Sea," was full of suspense, starting when a pod of Orcas destroys the hull of their sailboat and forces them onto an inflatable boat. It also held lessons in resourcefulness for a would-be artist, as the Robertsons learned to survive on a tiny boat with minimal supplies — crafting a sail, spearing turtles and hooking fish — while inventing ways to stay alert during their ordeal.

Katchadourian, who grew up in Stanford, Calif., and spent summers with her mother's family on a tiny "speck of an island" off Finland, says she is not much of a sailor. Still, she reread the book nearly every year and later read the expanded, more colorful version by Dougal's son Douglas. She visited a maritime museum in Cornwall to see the family's nine-and-a-half foot dinghy. She watched a [maudlin movie about the events](#) starring Robert Urich and Ali MacGraw. And this past summer, the pandemic gave her the impetus and time to create her own version of the story: an art project made over a 38-day stretch to mirror the Robertsons' journey — over the same period — in 1972. The show, "[To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World,](#)" fills the Catharine Clark Gallery in San Francisco, through Feb. 20.



Nina Katchadourian's "Dorado Family, Flying Fish #1-9" and "Turtle," all 2020, from "To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World" in San Francisco. Credit...Nina Katchadourian and Catharine Clark Gallery; John Janca

During that time, she created sculptures, paintings, videos, audio tracks and a series of rhythmic sketches of ocean waves “trying to understand the sea and how it changes,” the artist said by phone. “It was a bit like a daily journal — a repetitive drawing of the sea surface starts to feel a lot like writing on the page.” She was speaking from San Francisco, her first trip from her current home in Berlin since the pandemic started. “The Robertson story bears some resemblance to how we’ve all been living this year, isolated from each other in our own little shipwrecks,” she said. “But it’s also about the incredible invention, resourcefulness and creativity they bring to their predicament. They have an optimism I find striking — they just keep at it.”



“Savaging the Sea #20,” 2020. The project mirrors the Robertsons’ 38-day journey. Credit...Nina Katchadourian and Catharine Clark Gallery

“That for me has had a lot of traction artistically,” she added. “What can I do with almost nothing? What can I do when art seems almost impossible?”

Katchadourian is known for quirky ingenuity. In her popular series [“Seat Assignment”](#) she created art on airplanes out of objects at hand, including bathroom selfies in which she dressed like a Flemish portrait sitter, fashioning toilet seat covers into austere dress collars.

Her new exhibition includes mementos like the bottle of turtle oil (here, sunflower oil) that Lyn Robertson, Dougal’s wife, put to great use on board, as well as an array of sea creatures. A 22-foot-long, to-scale paper Orca covers one wall, while wire sculptures of the dorados that provided the family with some food and water (horribly dehydrated, they sucked the eyeballs) hang from the ceiling. A painted

outline of the dinghy on the gallery floor underscores how painfully cramped it would have been.



"Turtle Oil Bottle Replica" (2020) at the Catharine Clark Gallery. Credit... Nina Katchadourian and Catharine Clark Gallery

Early on, she reached out to Douglas Robertson, who was 18 at the time of the shipwreck, to see if he'd be willing to speak with her a few times about his experience. (There were six on board, including his younger twin brothers and a college graduate accompanying the family; all survived.)

Now 66 and an accountant in London after a career in the Merchant Navy, Robertson offered to speak with her each of the 38 days. "I nearly fell out of my chair with happiness," she said, recalling it as her dream structure for the project.

Reached in London by phone, Robertson explained that his motivation was actually practical: short calls would fit his schedule better than a few marathons. "But we ended up with 38 very long conversations," he said, laughing. "She asked very good questions I haven't been asked before."



The artist Nina Katchadourian at San Gregorio State Beach in the South Bay area. Credit... Carlos Chavarria for The New York Times

In the [audio clips, now online](#), the artist asks where they got the wood for their spear (a boat seat) or who drank the turtle blood first (Dougal). Later, she wonders how they resisted drinking seawater. (Calling it “brine” helped, he said.) But by the end they sound more like old friends, laughing and crying together while Robertson read passages from his own book.

“The challenge of this show was that I was an odd combination of journalist, archivist, anthropologist, historian, museum curator, biographer and fact checker — with artist being the umbrella term that allows you to do all of these things,” she said. “I’m not bound to the same final destination as a journalist or historian would be, but there is a sort of ethics to this project for me.”

Veronica Roberts, a curator at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, who organized Katchadourian’s 2017 show [“Curiouser,”](#) pointed out that “being curious is her job as an artist.” She continued, “I love the way she follows these irrational ideas rather rationally, all the way to the end.”



Nina Katchadourian, "Paper Orca," 2020, from "To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World." Credit...Nina Katchadourian and Catharine Clark Gallery; John Janca

One result is that Katchadourian went overboard researching details. After she made the paper Orca, she mailed it to Robertson for his input. "It made me shiver when I opened it — that exact color gray, just forward of the dorsal fin, is what hit our boat," he said. She consulted biologists to deduce the species of turtle the family ate (olive ridleys or hawksbills). He said she was the first person to figure out they were rescued on July 22 and not 23.

Some of Katchadourian's other projects, like "Seat Assignment," are ongoing, and she doesn't think this one is finished, either. She's still trying to track down the high school students in Miramar, Fla., who made the dinghy as a school project before it was sold to the Robertsons. And she's also trying to locate photographs of the Toka Maru, the Japanese fishing boat that rescued the family. She is determined to show the project again in London in 2022, the 50th anniversary of the shipwreck, "so the Robertsons can come and see it."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/arts/design/Nina-Katchadourian-savage-sea.html>