

Nina Katchadourian

The New York Times

Nina Katchadourian's Eccentric Existentialism

In her first show at Pace, an artist driven by curiosity and a penchant for the absurd tries to understand the world. The results are touching and sometimes hilarious.

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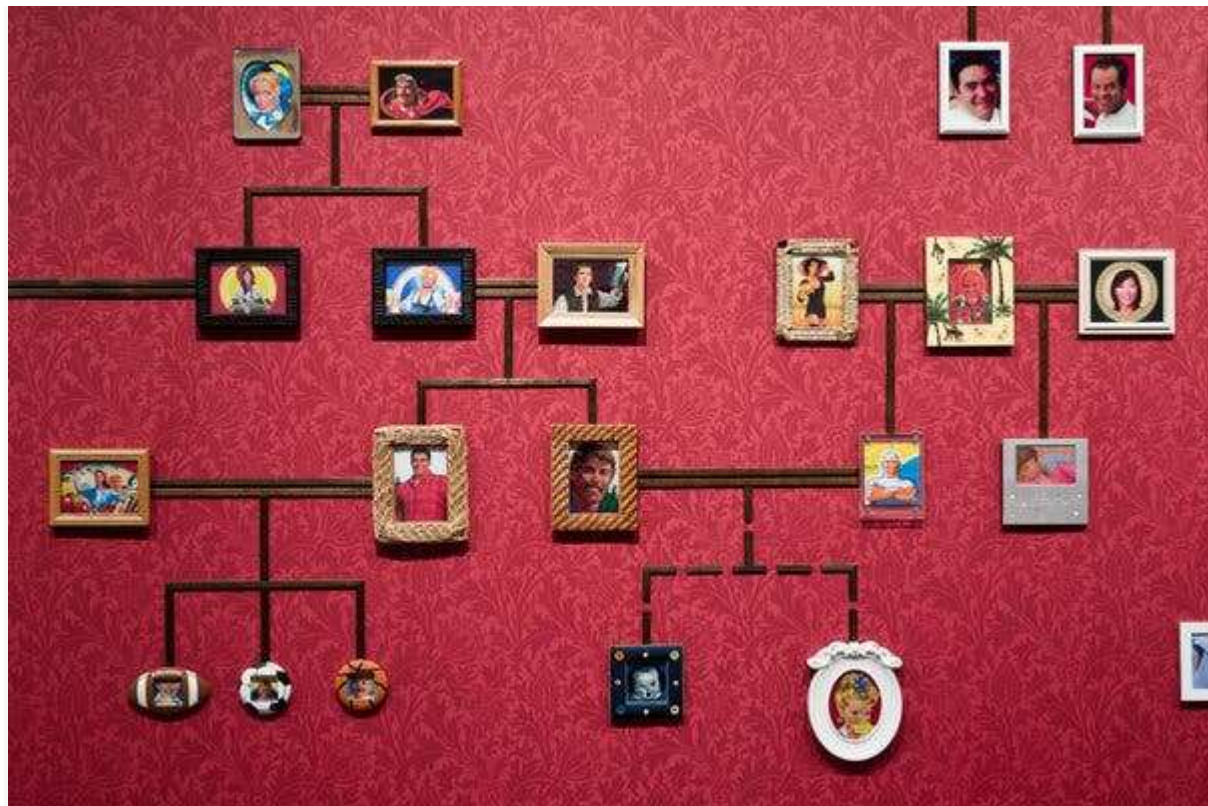
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Detail from Nina Katchadourian's "The Genealogy of the Supermarket" (2005). Framed like thrift-store photographs, the work connects the Gerber Baby to its family tree from product

design and commerce, in new home groupings. Credit...Nina Katchadourian and Pace Gallery

By Aruna D'Souza

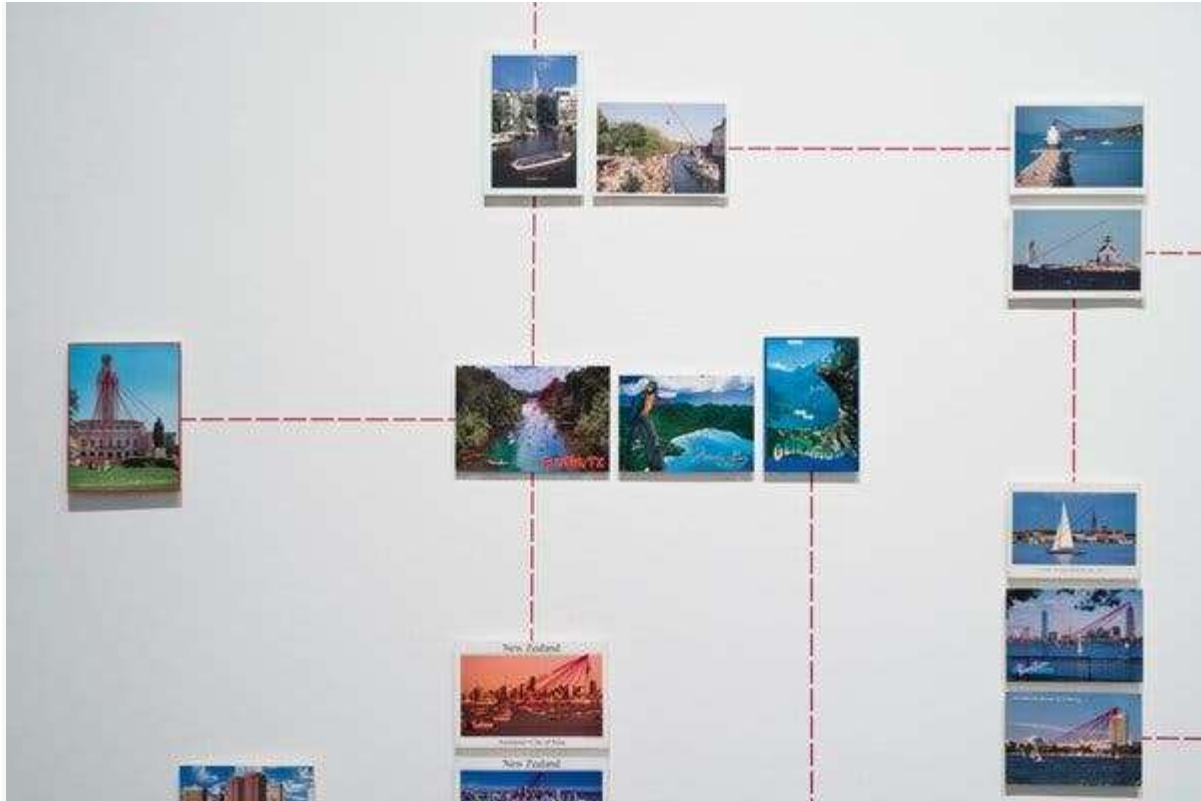
May 27, 2021

[Nina Katchadourian](#) is a sculptor, a printmaker, a photographer, a performance artist, a video artist, a sound artist — but more than any of those things she is an artist with a voracious curiosity and a marathoner's stamina when it comes to running with an idea. In her first show at Pace Gallery, "Cumulus," she offers up seven projects that are witty, sometimes even guffaw-inducing. But don't let that fool you: Underneath the playfulness lurk some pretty fundamental questions about how we organize knowledge to make sense of our past and present.

The New York- and Berlin-based artist is a Conceptualist at heart, but in the imaginative vein of [Eleanor Antin](#), with whom she studied at the [University of California San Diego](#) in the early '90s, rather than the dry seriousness of a Sol LeWitt. But like LeWitt, she is a fan of setting up a proposition and carrying it through endlessly. Some of the works at Pace were begun in the earliest days of her 30-odd-year career. Many haven't been shown in New York since their first iterations; others are having their New York debuts.

"Paranormal Postcards" was conceived 20 years ago when, on an airport layover in Oslo, Katchadourian decided to sew a red thread on a postcard, connecting the hands of a person pictured on a fjord to each of the cruise ships sailing in the water below, in a way that created a mysterious empathy among them. Since then, the artist has been gathering postcards from her travels and repeating the gesture to where she now has hundreds of embellished images.

Every time the piece is installed she reorganizes her collection, with dotted red lines connecting the cards on the gallery walls, creating a taxonomy that seems straight out of a Borges short story.



Image

“Paranormal Postcards” (2001-ongoing). Mounted postcards, red sewing thread, red graphic tape on wall. “The complicated webs hint at strange, sometimes inscrutable undercurrents in otherwise anodyne images,” says the critic. Credit...Nina Katchadourian and Pace Gallery

In one group, lighthouses and towers and the Statue of Liberty’s torch are connected to boats; in another, hot-air balloons are tethered to the ground with red embroidery floss.

Then there are the museum postcards, in which the hands of the shipwrecked in a reproduction of Géricault’s “Raft of the Medusa” are all tied to the white flag of one of their lot, who waves to a tiny ship on the horizon. The hands of Balinese dancers, Ganesh statues, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Giacometti sculptures play games of cat’s cradle. The complicated webs hint at strange, sometimes inscrutable undercurrents in otherwise anodyne images.

“Paranormal Postcards” is part travel log, part investigation into the often arbitrary ways we classify and categorize information. The idea is at the heart of another project in the show, “Sorted Books,” that Katchadourian has been working on since 1993. It involves creating found poetry from the titles of books she finds in people’s personal libraries. The version at Pace was made this year, at the invitation of the Isamu Noguchi Museum.

“What Is Modern Sculpture?/Brancusi/Noguchi/Marcel Duchamp/Why Duchamp/The Third Dimension” reads one stack — perhaps appropriate for a collection of the famed modernist sculptor. “This Time of Morning/Oh, My Aching Back/Your Prostate”/The Unfashionable Human Body,” on the other hand, offers a bit too much insight into how Noguchi dealt with the travails of aging.

Editors’ Picks



Rehabilitating Nero, an Emperor With a Bad Rap



At His Moment of Triumph, Arthur Jafa Is Looking for Trouble



MoMA Built a House. Then It Disappeared. Now It's Found.

“The Genealogy of the Supermarket” (2005-) is part taxonomy, part family tree. The ever-expanding piece is composed of the faces that grace grocery store products, from the Hair for Men guy to the Red Baron of deep dish pizza fame to the stoical grandmother featured on the label of Lao Gan Ma Spicy Chili Crisp.

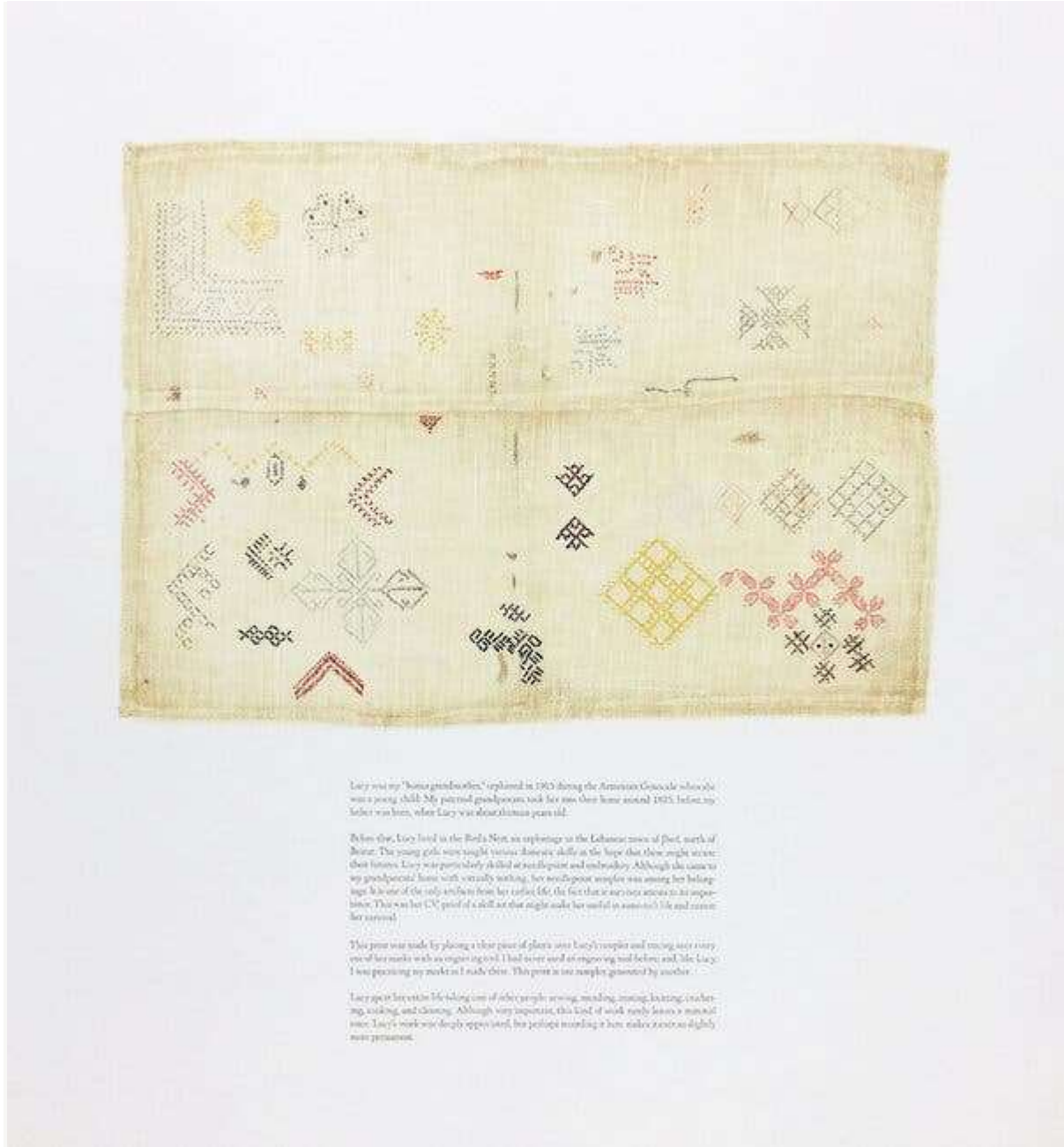


Image

Mapping the faces that grace grocery store products, from the Hair for Men guy to the Red Baron of deep dish pizza fame. Credit...Nina Katchadourian and Pace Gallery

Again, Katchadourian takes advantage of the apparent authority of data visualization — it's in a chart, so it must be true — to create putative relationships between figures whose origins span time, space and culture. (At each installation on its tour, Katchadourian scours local markets to add to the clan.) By displaying these portraits in thrift shop picture frames and hanging them on ornate, faux-flocked red wallpaper, she takes them out of the realm of product design and commerce and lodges them tenderly but firmly in our own families and homes.

Uncle Ben, Aunt Jemima, and the kneeling Native American woman on Land O'Lakes butter appear, though their images are mounted behind semi-opaque plexiglass to indicate their "passing" — their respective companies have retired them because of changing sensitivities about racist stereotypes. Babies go from blond-haired and blue-eyed to more racially ambiguous — advertising's attempts to appeal to an increasingly diverse customer base. "The Genealogy of the Supermarket" may start as a one-liner but ends up functioning as a snapshot of contemporary attitudes.



Image

“Lucy’s Sampler” (2020). Credit...Nina Katchadourian and Pace Gallery

Elsewhere, an intaglio print titled “Lucy’s Sampler” (2020), suggests how complicated the notion of family can be, especially in the wake of war. The image is an exact translation into printmaking techniques of an embroidery sampler made by a young girl orphaned in the Armenian genocide. She was adopted by the artist’s grandparents and became, as Katchadourian explains in a text below the image, her “bonus grandmother.” Katchadourian’s reverent duplication of Lucy’s gestures becomes a touching recognition of her ancestry.



Image

Installation view of “Accent Elimination” (2005), with the artist and her parents swapping accents. Credit...Pace Gallery

The poignancy of “Accent Elimination” sneaks up on you. The six-channel video was included in the award winning [Armenian Pavilion](#) at the 2015 Venice Biennale and is being exhibited in New

York for the first time since then. On one side, three monitors show the artist, her mother and her father, each speaking from scripts written by her parents that recount their origins and how they ended up meeting.

But here's the twist: everyone speaks in the accent of another. Katchadourian emulates by turn the Swedish-inflected Finnish accent of her mother and the Armenian-by-way-of-Turkey-and-Beirut accent of her father, while her parents attempt to master the flat American intonation of their daughter. On another side, three monitors show the three working with an accent coach to perfect the subtleties of the varied pronunciations.

Their efforts are sincere — every artist should have parents as game as Katchadourian's. But even they crack up occasionally during filming. Their laughter leavens everything that hovers in the background of their accounts, including the generational consequences of genocide and flight.

Like all the works in the show, the good-natured charm of "Accent Elimination" opens onto deeper lessons about the ways in which the simple act of mapping even the most personal or fanciful histories can illuminate our shared culture, including the incomprehensible parts of it.

Nina Katchadourian: Cumulus

Through June 26, Pace Gallery, 540 West 25th Street, Manhattan; pacegallery.com.

Correction: May 27, 2021

An earlier version of this story misstated the origin of an installation in Nina Katchadourian's show at Pace Gallery. She created the original postcard connecting images with red thread; she did not find the postcard in a thrift shop. The story also misstated the exhibition history of "Accent Elimination." This is not its first showing in New York; it is its first showing since 2015.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/arts/design/nina-katchadourian-pace-artist.html>