

Nina Katchadourian

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Nina Katchadourian comes home to Stanford with home run show

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Nina Katchadourian made "Pink Volcano" by putting upholstery fuzz on a magazine photo.

Before you enter the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, before you see even a single object in the museum's current highlight exhibition, you will hear the art in the trees out front.

"Phoebe," a voice calls out, weakly. "Very, very, very pleased to meet'cha!" comes the answer. "Sweet, sweet, sweet, Canada, Canada, Canada," another interjects. They are the sounds of men and women lamely, sweetly trying to imitate the calls of birds.

Listen for just a few minutes, and core precepts of the art and philosophy of Nina Katchadourian — a Stanford-born artist who lives in New York and Berlin — will have wormed their way into your consciousness. Katchadourian, whose winning retrospective exhibition "Curiouser" is on view at the Cantor through Jan. 7, is deeply interested in how we communicate, in the structure of language itself. She embraces the everyday illusions our senses present to us, the startling tricks our eyes and ears can play.

Above all, she has the confidence and wit not to take perception, art, life or herself all that seriously. Curiosity and humor, bound together in the exhibition's title, are at the core of the show itself.

For the work "Please, Please, Pleased to Meet'cha!" (2006), to create the recorded voices in the trees, Katchadourian recruited U.N. interpreters who had little prior knowledge of birds. She handed them an old birdwatchers' guidebook and asked them to vocalize the mnemonic word phrases birders used to identify species in the days before audio recordings.

The readers' varied national accents add further layers of nuance and nonsense. A nonsectarian parable of Babel, it doesn't make a point. Instead, it finds glee in our animal nature, revels in the diversity of the world, marvels at our ability to make any sense at all of one another.

Another sound work in the exhibition, also outside the show's primary galleries but not to be missed, is the 2001 installation "Indecision on the Moon." In a pitch-dark room we experience something of the disorientation Apollo 11 astronauts must have felt when they landed on the moon in 1969. From overhead, we hear a recording of their communications, edited to remove meaningful sentences. Fits and starts of orders and observations, technical hisses and squawks combine unsettlingly: We have entered a territory we cannot understand.

At the entrance to the main exhibition space, the language theme is reintroduced by "Talking Popcorn" (2001), an ordinary glass box like the ones in movie theaters, hooked up to a computer that translates the sounds of corn popping as if they were Morse code signals.

And that leads us, in due course, to the extraordinary "Accent Elimination" (2005). For that work, she enlisted her parents, whose complicated backstories mix Armenian, Finnish, Lebanese, Swedish and Turkish elements into lives spent in the U.S. for more than 40 years. A series of short videos traces the family's efforts, with the guidance of a professional speech improvement coach, to adopt one another's accents.

The piece touches on aspects of identity and authenticity, with a warmth and caring that is a blessing in this moment of righteous self-defense. To that, add humor, in short supply at any time in the self-serious art world, yet the balm we might most need in this scary time of nuclear threats and racist thuggery.

For the most part, Katchadourian mostly avoids canned laughs, thank goodness. A lot of space in the exhibition is taken up by an exception, "The Genealogy of the Supermarket" (2005-ongoing), a fabricated family tree of branded characters from cereal boxes and food-tin labels. The piece falls flat among subtler, richer ideas.

I prefer the "Sorted Books" project, which has occupied her, on and off, since 1993. Photographs of book spines in provocative piles, they are found texts with the forceful efficiency of the best poetry. "What Is Art?" is pictured on a shelf atop "Close Observation." A particularly cringe-inducing stack of seven tomes reads, from top down, "A Day at the Beach / The Bathers / Shark 1 / Shark 2 / Shark 3 / Sudden Violence / Silence."

The exhibition catalog offers descriptions and pictures of many works not included in the Stanford presentation, and the artist's exceptionally good website (www.ninakatchadourian.com) goes into even greater detail on her lively and productive career, with numerous links to videos and sound files. Clearly, curator Veronica Roberts decided to go for depth by project rather than the breadth these sources provide.

There are few artists who analyze their own work with such incisive understanding of what their fans might want or need. I hesitate to recommend the website only because some viewers might conclude they don't need to see the show. If they did, they would be making a mistake.

The presentation in the exhibition of Katchadourian's best-known work benefits from that vertical drilling down. "Seat Assignment" is a large series of photographs and videos, shot with a smartphone, that the artist has been making since 2010 while in flight on commercial airlines.

Made with only the materials at hand, the works fall into two main groups. The first comprises pictures taken on the seat tray combining images and objects from in-flight magazines, seat-pocket printed materials and what comes along with meal service. A magazine image of a mountain is transformed with a bit of upholstery fuzz into a "Pink Volcano" spewing a black cloud; a sprinkle from a packet of sweetener turns another image into a magical "Sugar Fox."

The second group consists of selfies made in airplane toilets, often incorporating the paper goods dispensed there. I won't be a spoiler or a boor by describing works you should see for yourself. Better to simply point out that an entire exhibition of "Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style," with their ruffled collars and headdresses simulated out of toilet seat covers and paper towels, was made on a single trip to New Zealand. That such limited means could produce so rich a variety of surreal, knowing and flat-out funny art is a testament to Nina Katchadourian's rare conceptual ingenuity.

Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Monday, 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday. Closed Tuesday. Through Jan. 7. Free. Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, 328 Lomita Drive at Museum Way, Stanford. (650) 723-4177. <http://museum.stanford.edu>