

Nina Katchadourian

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Nina Katchadourian Gets Lost at Sea

'To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World' interprets one family's harrowing journey.

by [Jonathan Curiel](#)

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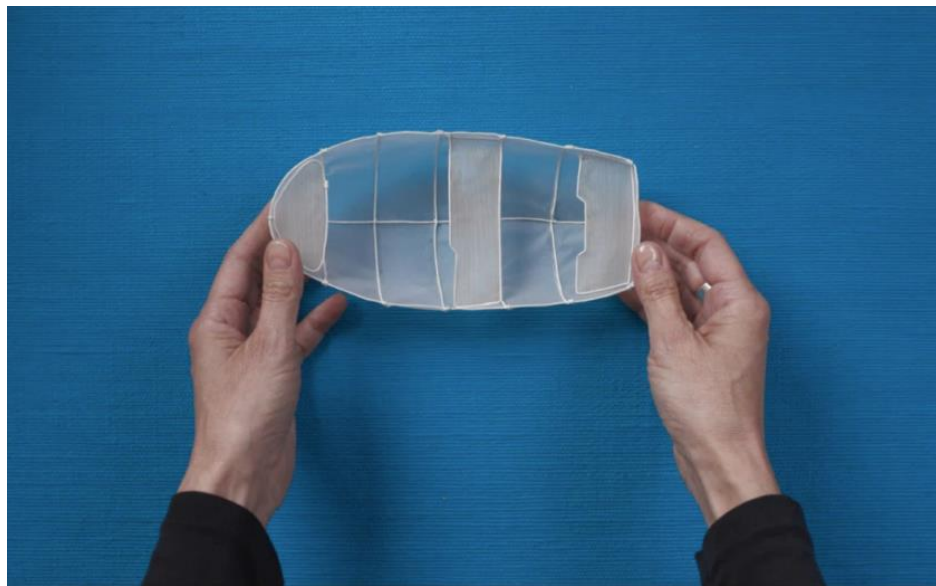
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A still from 'Orientation Video, 2020'; single-channel video with sound. Art by Nina Katchadourian

In her widely acclaimed art projects of the past 30 years, Nina Katchadourian has always integrated some kind of humor into her work — including a video study of her parents' European- and Middle East-inflected accents that involved “neutralizing” those accents and passing them on to Katchadourian (“Accent Elimination”); her photographic look at different people’s book holdings that, when rearranged, produce funny sequences of titles (“Sorted Books”); and her video and photographic self-portraits in airplane bathrooms, where she reworked tissue toilet-seat covers into hats and neckwear so she resembled 15th-century Flemish royalty — while also lip-syncing to such songs as the Bee Gees’ “Nights on Broadway” (“Seat Assignment”). To take in a Nina Katchadourian exhibit is to hear other art-goers laughing out loud. You can’t help it. You really can’t.

That's why Katchadourian's new exhibit at Catharine Clark Gallery, "To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World," is both familiar in tone but also a major divergence. The exhibit narrates one of sailing history's most famous survival stories: The 38-day period in 1972, when an English family of five and another passenger drifted on a tiny inflatable raft and then a tiny dinghy in the Pacific Ocean south of Central America — all the while struggling to keep afloat, battle waves and storms, hunt for food, treat their boiled skin, stay hydrated, and then stay sane amid all their fears and anxieties. Their story has been told thousands of times, most notably in the 1973 book, *Survive the Savage Sea*, which was written by Dougal Robertson, the father who orchestrated the family's once-in-a-lifetime, around-the-world trip. Until a group of killer whales smashed and sank the family's wooden sailboat, the trip was going well. Really well. And then in an instant, it wasn't — and became a living hell.

A centerpiece of "To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World" is Katchadourian's 38-day series of audio interviews with Douglas Robertson, one of Dougal Robertson's sons, who was a teenager on that 1972 adventure-turned-nightmare — and who talks to Katchadourian about everything that went on in those 38 days. Now in late middle age, Douglas Robertson also reads passages of *Survive the Savage Sea* — doing it with such emotion and engagement that it seems he's back adrift in the Pacific Ocean, and that we're adrift with him. Several times in the exhibit's audio segments, Robertson is bordering on tears or all-but sobbing. Katchadourian also reaches that state in the segment where Douglas Robertson recounts the moments when a Japanese boat finally rescued the family from the Pacific Ocean.

"That was the one day where I cried, too," Katchadourian tells *SF Weekly* in a phone interview. "Hearing him read that rescue was very emotional for him — and at that point, we had also been through this 38-day-long experience together, and it felt like this relief to be rescued. It was a very emotional day."

Katchadourian, who became obsessed with *Survive the Savage Sea* as a 7-year-old child, after her mother read it to her, wanted for years to do an art project on the book — and decided to pursue it last year because of the coronavirus pandemic, and the way the pandemic has unmoored and isolated people, both physically and socially, from their normal routines. Katchadourian sees almost metaphoric parallels to *Survive the Savage Sea* — and did the project without ever seeing Douglas Robertson. They talked on the phone and texted but never did a video chat to see each other's faces. "We've all, in the past year, had a strange version of a shipwreck, collectively and individually,"

Katchadourian says, "and it made sense to do a project that could be done at a distance and might even benefit from being done this way, where I was remote from my subject and we were sending these dispatches back and forth and speaking over a distance in which we were each isolated from the other."



'Flying Fish #1. Art by Nina Katchadourian

In the excerpts of conversations and the narration from “To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World,” Katchadourian conveys a wrenching experience of survival that — at times — contains moments of utter beauty and, yes, laughter. Among the exhibit’s funny audio segments, Katchadourian and Douglas Robertson joke about the turtle oil that the Robertson family used to salve their skin boils (Robertson said he smelled the left-over oil years later — and it stunk like crazy); about the turtle eggs that, Robertson says, tasted almost like fancy chocolate filled with a sweet liquid center; and about turning the trip’s non-family member, Robin Williams, into a human radio that, Robertson says, “we could switch on and off... . We’d say, ‘It’s *Gardeners’ Question Time* now,’ and he would have to host *Gardeners’ Question Time*. It was a way of occupying our minds... We’d talk about things we had no business talking about because we didn’t know anything about it, but we talked about them anyway.”

Each audio segment corresponds to the 38 days that the raft and dinghy were adrift, and each day in the exhibit features a visual element that relays that day’s doings — whether it’s the life-sized killer whale that Katchadourian made from paper for Day 1, or the life-sized replicas of turtles and flying fish that the family and Robin Williams would eat to survive. Typical of the precision that Katchadourian brings to each project, she mailed the artworks of animals and other objects to Douglas Robertson for him to vet so that the exhibit’s paper killer whale, dinghy replica, and other analogue representations would be *just* right. Seeing photos of Robertson at his British home almost toying with the paper representations, having unfolded them from the packages that Katchadourian sent

through the postal service, adds a layer of levity to the exhibit — and is also a reminder of the intense scrutiny that Robertson and Katchadourian gave to the project.

In one exhibit segment, Katchadourian relates *Survive the Savage Sea* to the experience of Katchadourian's adopted grandmother on her dad's side — an Armenian woman named Lucy who somehow survived Turkey's early-20th-century genocide of Armenians. On display: copies of stitching that Lucy made as a girl learning a potential trade. Caregivers thought Lucy could carry the skill into her adult life, which would help her survive the memories of mass killings.

"In my own family, Lucy is a survivor — and a survival story that has been close at hand my entire life," Katchadourian says while also adding this: "Is a story ever complete, or is your memory of something complete or reliable? What does it mean to remember something traumatic? And that's where the Lucy story comes up again, and what it meant for her to remember her trauma."

Robertson tells Katchadourian that he dreamed of the 1972 saga for two decades but then managed to let it go — to let go during sleep of all the close calls that almost killed his family and Robin Williams, and to let go during sleep of the trip's myriad other experiences that are packed into *Survive the Savage Sea* and a follow-up book that Robertson wrote himself. But "To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World" is a reminder that the past is never *really* forgotten, and that it takes just a few words — reading them from a book, or uttering them in conversation — to be back in the maw, back in an emotional state where tears are a natural outlet for the pain and relief that can arise from revisiting a past trauma. Yes, Douglas Robertson survived the savage sea. But in his conversations with Katchadourian, we meet someone who — almost 50 years later — is still coming to terms with what happened. Visitors to "To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World" also have to confront their reactions to what happened. How much time art-goers choose to spend on each audio segment is up to them. But Katchadourian has given the art world a space to recall *every* important detail of the Robertson family's 1972 trip, with Katchadourian as a kind of exhibit shepherd whose presence — yes, humorously at many times — steadies the emotional swings that Robertson re-experiences and that visitors will also experience as they hear and see the moments where life and death were in the balance for 38 straight days.

"To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World"

Through Feb. 20 at Catharine Clark Gallery, 248 Utah, S.F. Free with online appointment, 415-399-1439, cclarkgallery.com.

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