

**CATHARINE
CLARK
GALLERY**

Nina Katchadourian

San Francisco

magazine

Artist Nina Katchadourian Has a Keen Eye for the Overlooked

By Sheryl Nonnenberg
September 8, 2017

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



Lavatory Self-Portrait in the Flemish Style #12, from the series Seat Assignment (2010–ongoing)



Nina Katchadourian's *Sugar Fox* (2011)



Under Pressure (2014), from *Seat Assignment*

Nina Katchadourian sees art in the least likely of places. And the least likely of those places, it can be assumed, was in an airplane bathroom.

It was there, during a 2011 flight from San Francisco to New Zealand, that Katchadourian, the Stanford-born artist, started messing around with the paper towel dispenser. She draped facial tissues, paper towels, and toilet seat covers over her head, and fashioned them into a sort of Tudor-style collar. Then she covered the bathroom mirror with a black shawl and posed for a series of cell phone selfies, all taken in the style of 17th-century Flemish portraits. The result is part of an ongoing series of airplane-related works—born of what she calls “curiosity about the productive tension between freedom and constraint”—called *Seat Assignment*, which will be shown beginning this month in a mid-career survey of her work at Stanford’s Cantor Arts Center.

Nina Katchadourian: *Curiouser*, organized by the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, and opening on September 15, is her largest solo museum exhibition to date and includes Katchadourian’s video, photography, sculpture, and sound art, underscoring both her cross-disciplinary interests and her appreciation for life’s minutiae. “I like to put my attention on things that are generally familiar to a fairly wide audience,” Katchadourian says, “so that there might be some initial moment where a viewer thinks, ‘I know what that is.’ But it’s also important to me, in almost every case, to undermine that or second-guess it so that something I bring to the situation prompts a reconsideration or a double take.”

That attention to detail tends to produce a lot of humor. Consider her series *Sorted Books* (1993), in which she stacked books together so the wording on their spines told a miniature story (*How Did Sex Begin?* placed atop *Uninvited Guests* placed atop *Human Error*). Or take Katchadourian’s *Mended Spiderwebs* (1998), a series of color Cibachrome prints taken in Finland during a family vacation. Katchadourian found several broken webs and, using red thread, repaired them. By the next morning, the spiders had completely removed the red thread and restored the webs.

Catharine Clark, who has represented Katchadourian since 1999, recalls first meeting the artist through her sister in New York. “It was just this instant love affair,” she says. Katchadourian’s work is “so satirical, but in a way that’s so thoughtful and processed. I love her really sophisticated use of humor to get at issues that are really complex.”

Clark points to one of Katchadourian’s *Sorted Books* images in particular: “It’s two books: *What Is Art?* and *Close Observation*,” Clark says. “I feel like that’s her self-portrait.”

In addition to being her biggest show so far, the Stanford retrospective is also a homecoming of sorts for Katchadourian, who was raised on the farm, where her father, Herant Katchadourian, was a professor of human biology. Nina also served as an artist in residence at the Exploratorium from 2013 to 2016, where she created *Floater Theater*, a miniature theater in which viewers can see their “eye floaters” dance before them. However, most of her artistic development came on the East Coast. In 1996, Katchadourian was accepted into the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum. Her first big New York show was in 1999, and since then she’s exhibited around the world, including at SFMOMA, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Palais de Tokyo. In 2015, she was part of a group show from the Armenian diaspora in the Venice Biennale.

Much of Katchadourian's work has a playful side, though some pieces are more direct social commentaries, like *The Genealogy of the Supermarket* (2005), a sculptural family tree created out of the likenesses of Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and the Gerber baby. Other series include *Natural Car Alarms* (2002), in which the sounds of birdcalls replace alarm sounds, and *Dust Gathering* (2016), an examination of dust found on artworks and windowsills at the Museum of Modern Art.

And what to make of *Talking Popcorn* (2001)? The sculpture connects a computer to a popcorn machine and translates the sounds of popping kernels into Morse code. "Something can be very funny and still be very meaningful," Katchadourian says. "If you want to cast the funny against the serious, the challenge for me is to get both those experiences to happen within the same piece."