

Nina Katchadourian

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## Renny Pritikin on Nina Katchadourian

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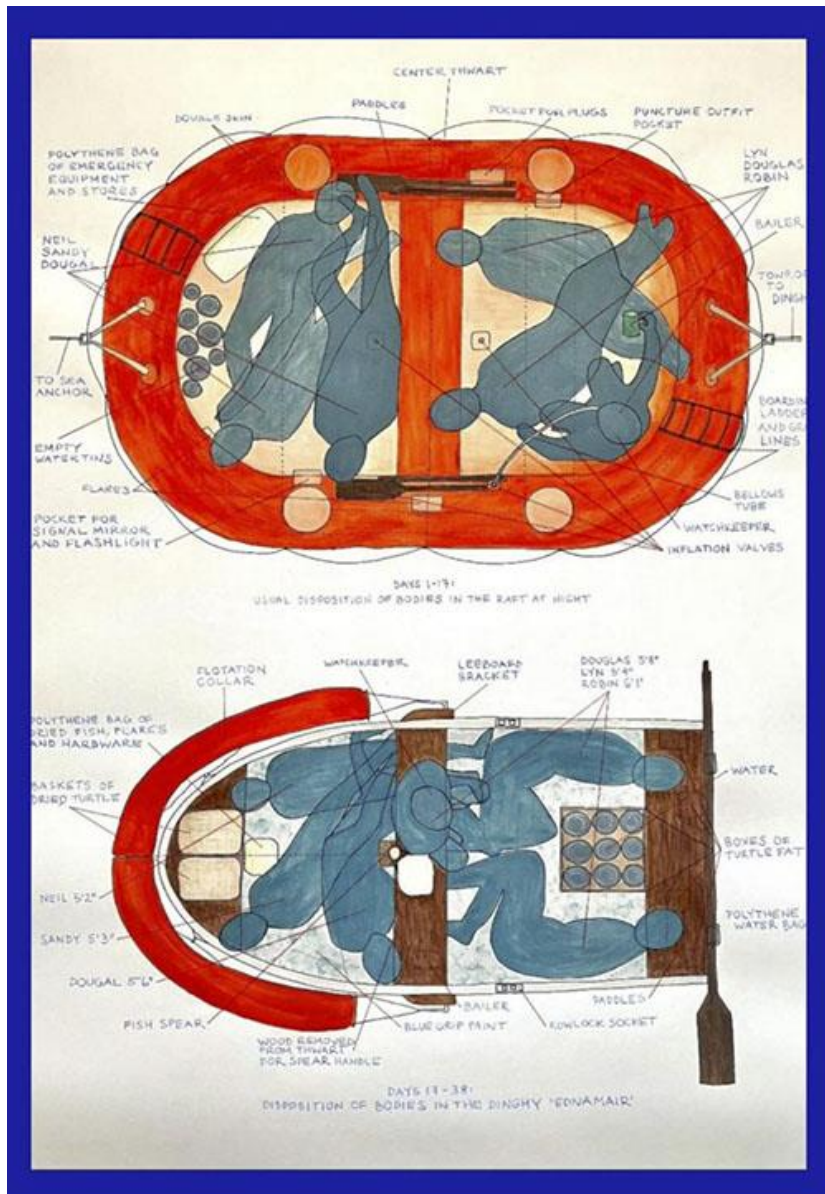


Installation view: *To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World*

Almost every museum or gallery exhibition of contemporary art consists of artist-created objects, but occasionally there are shows of material culture that are meant to give insight into how artists draw inspiration from the world. I'm thinking of shows of tattoo, surfing, biking, costume, and the like. Nina Katchadourian's *To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World* falls into the latter category. She generously pulls back the curtain to reveal how research is inherent to her practice and how her relationship to storytelling nourishes both her personal life and public oeuvre.

Literature abounds with precedents for this sort of activity. The Icelandic mystery writer Arnaldur Indriðason, for example, has written eleven novels about a detective named Erlendur who, as a young boy, survived being lost in a blizzard that killed his brother. Erlendur spends the rest of his life obsessed with his

ever-growing library of books about people lost while traveling in the wilderness; it's how he processes—or keeps at bay—his grief and survivor guilt. Something similar appears to be operating with Katchadourian. When she was seven, her mother read to her from *Survive the Savage Sea*, the true story of an English family's shipwreck ordeal. Katchadourian was deeply affected by the book; she absorbed the narrative and carried it with her into the present. It was how, in some ways, she came to understand and maintain a connection to her family history.



*Usual Disposition of Bodies in the Raft at Night vs. Disposition of Bodies in the Dinghy Edamair, 2020, gouche, watercolor, carbon paper, and red thread, paper, 41 1/4 x 31 1/2 inches*

It is a great tale. The Robertsons were farmers who decided in 1973, when their children were teenagers, to sell the farm, buy a sailboat and spend years together traveling around the world. After visiting the Galapagos Islands, off the coast of Ecuador, they headed west. Deep into the Pacific, a pod of orcas attacked the boat, splintering the hull in seconds. They had one minute to gather what they could and

scramble into a rubber raft and a smaller dinghy as they watched their boat sink. There were six of them, three adults and three kids with almost no food, water or clothing, and little to no experience sailing. They survived for 38 days until rescued by a Japanese fishing boat, and the story of how they managed it, of their ingenuity, improvisation and determination suggests a metaphor for the life of an artist. The stranded family had only their minds and a few odds and ends to marshal toward keeping themselves alive: a situation roughly analogous to that of an artist, self-tasked with making order out of the chaos of the world.

In 2020 Katchadourian dedicated 38 consecutive days of her quarantine life to studying the Robertsons' story, which, in certain ways, parallels that of the Katchadourians' family history. Many in her grandparent's generation were murdered in the Armenian genocide 100 years ago. And while it would be wrong to equate the sea adventure of six people with the genocide of a million people, Katchadourian is nevertheless drawn to stories of how people like her grandmother managed to survive and transcend trauma. (As a tribute, a copy of an embroidery sampler made by her grandmother is included in the exhibition.) Viewed in this light, we can safely speculate that this project may also be a COVID-19 story, the creative response of an artist to months of isolation and the trauma of life suddenly interrupted by an incomprehensible natural event.

The exhibition consists of selected items from Katchadourian's research and found items mounted on the wall or hung from the ceiling. She worked closely with the surviving Robertson son, Douglas, who is 66. There are many audio clips, of Douglas and Nina discussing the story, available for smartphone listening throughout the gallery. Douglas, for his part, has written his account of the experience in a separate book, *The Last Voyage of the Lucette*. One of the most affecting parts of the exhibition is when Katchadourian juxtaposes the two books, open to pages telling the same story: the father more straightforward, the son more vulnerable, emotional. Other aspects of the exhibition include numerous depictions of the fish and turtles that they caught and ate: Katchadourian stubbornly insisted that on identifying the species, size and appearance of these specimens. The resulting pieces are helpful for the viewer's comprehension but are not necessarily intended as aesthetic objects.



Sea turtle, flying fish, dorado, paper-covered wire, variable dimensions

Also included is a picture of the ship that failed to see them one miserable day; a video of the fresh fruit cornucopia they fantasized about eating, and similar background bits and pieces to help fill us in on what the experience was like. The most visually compelling objects on view are the elegant, three-dimensional white wire sculptures Katchadourian made of fish and turtles, suspended from the ceiling in a school-like array, in dramatic contrast to the ocean-blue walls.

In a 2019 [Artforum interview](#), Katchadourian described a prior family-based piece, *The Recarcassing Ceremony* (2016), as having “all the elements of a total art disaster: childhood story, family story, sad plot, happy ending...” Another piece, [Accent Elimination](#) (2005), consisted of videos in which the artist attempted to rid her parents of their foreign accents and acquire them for herself with assistance from a speech coach. Given this orientation, we can surmise that the artist is after bigger goals when using family to make art. In this case, it involves trying to understand narratives and how they evolve.

This exhibition is a time machine that starts with the original narrative from 50 ago, and makes stops every few years since: the publication of the two books;

Katchadourian being read to as a young girl; her dedication of 38 intense days of her life paralleling that of the Robertsons' in the dinghy, in 2020; the installation of the exhibition in 2021; and the experience we, the viewers, have pulling the pieces together through the voice of Richardson, and the enthusiasm and awe of the artist. At each stop, we can attend to how the story changes and its meaning evolves for the participants, the artists and ourselves. It's a saga shared around the "fireside" of the internet at a moment in time when sadly that is all we have and community is what we crave.

# # #

*Nina Katchadourian: "To Feel Something That Was Not of Our World"*  
@ [Catharine Clark Gallery](#) through February 20, 2021.

**About the author:**

Renny Pritikin retired in December 2018 after almost five years as the chief curator at The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. Prior to that, he was the director of the Richard Nelson Gallery at UC Davis and the founding chief curator at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts beginning in 1992. For 11 years, he was also a senior adjunct professor at California College of the Arts, where he taught in the graduate program in Curatorial Practice. Pritikin has given lecture tours in museums in Japan as a guest of the State Department, and in New Zealand as a Fulbright Scholar, and visited Israel as a Koret Israel Prize winner. He is working on a memoir of his experiences in the arts from 1979 to 2018.

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