

Nina Katchadourian

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In Artist's Work, Grand and Tiny Come Together

By Laura van Straaten on October 29, 2016

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NEW YORK — Anny Aviram has spent 40-plus years as a conservator at the Museum of Modern Art, often swabbing away dust and grime on priceless Picassos and other masterpieces.

One of the most effective tools she uses is her own saliva. (The practice, centuries old, has scientific backing.)

That revelation is one of several surprises in a new audio guide to the museum produced by the artist Nina Katchadourian that focuses on a tiny topic: dust.

Wall texts encourage visitors to listen in at a dozen locations throughout the museum, including a tough-to-Swiffer ledge overhanging four stories of the museum's atrium.

"Yup, my first major project at MoMA is all about dust," said Katchadourian, 48, while recently accompanying a visitor on the tour. "I like coming at the big things by what's immediate and observable to me."

She created the audio tour, “Dust Gathering,” as part of the museum’s Artists Experiment program, which invites contemporary artists to work with MoMA educators on public programming.

Over two years, Katchadourian interviewed staff members across every department, ultimately realizing that they were united by their stance against this pervasive, invisible-until-it’s-not element.

You might expect such a tour to be dry, but the Brooklyn-based artist, who as a child dreamed of becoming a radio journalist, narrates with a knowing, wry warmth, weaving in interview snippets and documentary moments with MoMA staff members.

It has the feel of a scavenger hunt.

The first stop is steps from the sculpture garden, just behind the desk where visitors pick up audio guides: a windy microclimate that is a magnet for more mites than anywhere else at MoMA. Katchadourian demonstrated how to use a cellphone flashlight to illuminate, through the white slats of an electrical closet, clusters of gray dust billowing like tumbleweeds.

Later in the tour she interviews an allergist on the digestive habits of dust mites, which will appall some listeners but might appeal strongly to certain 10-year-olds. But the soul of the audio tour is Harvey Tulcensky, an art handler at MoMA for 42 years and an artist himself.

“It’s not about the dusting per se; it’s about the dusting of something that means so much to me that I feel I am helping that thing,” he says with audible wonder. “Handling the art, without wanting or trying to sound naive, is kind of magical.”

As entertaining as “Dust Gathering” and many of Katchadourian’s other projects might be, they are serious in intent.

“I hate the words ‘quirky’ and ‘whimsical’ applied to me and my work,” she said. “Joy, wonder, play, humor? All good. But I am not just making little jokes.”

That point comes up when she discusses the work for which she is best known, “Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style,” a series of cellphone selfies taken in airplane bathrooms in which she poses with whatever materials are at hand: toilet seat covers, sanitary napkins and the like. When the series went viral a few years ago, she was upset “to see them reduced to a prank.”& amp; amp; amp; amp; lt; /p>

But she’s no killjoy. A case in point is “Floater Theater,” a new exhibition she created at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, near where she grew up. The piece consists of a red-velvet enclosure with a screen that is optimally lighted to prompt people to notice eye floaters and watch them dance.

“Like dust, floaters are there all the time and we sort of find them annoying or boring,” she said.

“There is a false sense that art has to be about the big stuff, when actually every artwork is in some way a thinking exercise — mental, aesthetic, philosophical or whatever kind of gym the artist is putting you in to exercise your imagination.”

In some ways, her work is about questioning what merits attention. “You usually come to a museum and orient yourself toward the artworks,” she said, “and a lot of things in your literal and metaphorical peripheral vision are ruled out as things not worth looking at.”

But Katchadourian’s work will be at the center of attention next year, when the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas in Austin surveys her career.

Taking her MoMA tour, you might feel silly elbowing through the crowd to examine the dust on a ledge, vitrine or picture frame. But just as she can make visitors to the Exploratorium consider eye floaters as art, she can make you treat MoMA’s masterpieces as mere motes. The grand and the tiny come together: I am the universe, and I am dust.