

Nina Katchadourian



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“I’m With Hillary 2016”: A Clinton Campaign Sign’s Final Resting Place

By Amanda Petrusich on November 9, 2016

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



Photo credit: Nina Katchadourian

High noon on the day after a Presidential election: historically, a moment in which political signs are dislodged from lawns in either satisfaction or disappointment, not freshly planted in them. And yet on Wednesday morning the artist Nina Katchadourian, known for her intelligent explorations of systems—sorting, mapping, charting, coding, arranging, translating—was preparing to complete her latest showing of “Monument to the Unelected,” a collection of fifty-eight lawn signs touting the campaigns of those who ran for the country’s executive office and lost, from John Adams (1796) to Mitt Romney (2012). The installation had gone on display on the front lawn of the Lefferts Historic House, in Prospect Park. Now Katchadourian had a new sign to add to the scrum, and it was not the one that many of those gathered with her in the park hoped it would be.

The previous afternoon, sitting in her office at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, the college where we both teach, Katchadourian told me that people new to the work often assume that she made "Monument to the Unelected" in response to this year's brutal and divisive Presidential race. In fact, it was commissioned in 2008, by the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, in Arizona, and then erected again, in 2012, in the front window of the Washington *Post's* offices. Neither the designs nor the signs themselves are archival; Katchadourian fabricated each one anew from corrugated plastic sheets. "Of course, it's a project about politics and history, but it doesn't take a position on who should win any given election," she told me. The monument, rather, is "a statement of fact—it's what we have collectively done, up until now."

Despite Katchadourian's nonpartisan intent, there was something cathartic for the grieving Hillary Clinton supporters who gathered around the installation in the wake of Wednesday morning's nightmarish results—a reckoning with fresh loss, a chance to look it in the eye. Last night, on MSNBC, the news anchor Brian Williams kept mournfully repeating the phrase "the lawn signs"—as if to suggest we'd all willfully ignored their portent in favor of more optimistic polls. The mood on the park lawn was despondent, funereal; the signs themselves resembled tombstones wedged into a graveyard. We clustered together under a light rain. Elsewhere in the park, people were burying their faces in their dogs. In an overwhelmingly blue county, in an overwhelmingly blue state, many of us had woken up to a world that felt unrecognizable. The subway car I'd just travelled on had been silent. Now onlookers rubbed their eyes.

The Lefferts Historic House is a Dutch Colonial farmhouse originally built on what's now Flatbush Avenue, near Maple Street, by a farmer named Pieter Lefferts. It was constructed around 1783, when our nation was still just a handful of years old and the Brooklyn neighborhood of Flatbush was a pastoral farming community, its boulevards occupied by rows of corn and tobacco. (To avoid demolition by real-estate developers, the structure was declared a landmark and moved into Prospect Park, in 1917.) The house's story is the story of young America's triumphs, and also its ghastliest trespasses. Lefferts was a lieutenant in the Continental Army, and later served as a member of the New York State convention that ratified the U.S. Constitution, in 1788. He was also a slave owner, whose Dutch ancestors, some of the earliest immigrants to America, commandeered their territory from the Lenape Native Americans who had occupied the land for centuries.

When I first visited Katchadourian's installation, last Sunday, it was not yet clear which campaign would be represented on her fifty-ninth sign. Passersby wandering down Flatbush Avenue, separated from the house's front lawn only by an iron fence, stopped to cock their heads at the rows of patriotic colors and outsized text. They grinned, looked flummoxed, chuckled, took photographs. Election signs, particularly homemade ones, have always been a goading, nervy type of folk art; while reporting from the Republican National Convention, in July, I took endless pictures of the sheets of poster board amid the crowds, always proudly clutched and raised heavenward, broadcasting outrage and often accompanied by a crude illustration. Campaign-sanctioned political signs, Katchadourian pointed out—the ones you can order from a local field office—are often purposefully simple, a blunt visual instrument that, like blunt rhetoric, arouses emotions more than ideas.

They are also inherently ephemeral. To drive through any American town in the weeks leading up to Election Day is to witness a parade of signs bearing the names of figures who will go on to become essential to the country's trajectory, collected in textbooks and studied in universities, and others who will quickly recede. For a brief, anxious period, none of us knows which is which. The signs stand side by side in our gardens, announcing our allegiances and our neighborly divisions. "Monument to the Unelected" will be on display for just four more days, until November 13th. In the meantime, it serves as an unexpected and forceful reminder that, sometimes, we collectively indulge a horrifying digression. Sometimes the wrong person loses. The country makes choices. We respect the process as best as we can.

At noon, Katchadourian emerged from the Lefferts House, holding a piece of blue plastic reading "I'm with Hillary 2016." I am certain that, as she knelt stoically to attach it to its signposts, the ground shuddered. Elsewhere in the city, Clinton finished delivering her concession speech, in which she acknowledged the deep pain and disappointment that she and her followers were experiencing, and urged them to do the only thing possible: carry onward. In Prospect Park, the crowd sighed, pulled closer.