

Nina Katchadourian

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“Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser” at the Blanton

By Sam Anderson
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Image from Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style

I left Nina Katchadourian's "Curiouser" with the conviction that I had found a new favorite artist, mostly because Katchadourian seems to be an artist having fun. Because she is skillful and wise,

her fun translates. I finally burst out laughing in the red-walled gallery where her airplane lavatory pieces are hung. Apparently, Katchadourian travels a lot, because she's been on enough airplanes to start making work on them. This includes a series called *Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style*, which is exactly what it sounds like. Using her camera phone, toilet paper, blankets, shawls, and other items on hand during a flight between San Francisco and Auckland, Katchadourian made a collection of hilariously convincing images that don't have any obvious conceptual connections to flight or travel or much of anything else. The same could be said of the series of lavatory videos featuring the artist in various ad hoc costumes lip-synching to songs by AC/DC and the Bee Gees. It is the artist's utter seriousness, her over-the-top dedication to a simple, ridiculous premise, that makes the series work. It isn't overly clever or attempting with any explicit gestures to convince me of something philosophical. Instead it revels in improvisation and play, dynamics that are typically overlooked in artmaking, or if they are not overlooked, are overemphasized until they feel like preaching. A lot of postmodern work fails in this way. Katchadourian, however, seems to really mean it.

In terms of medium, it's impossible to pin Katchadourian down. In *Finland's Unnamed Islands*, she has cut the illustrations of Finnish islands from a map and placed the cutouts between glass microscope slides so they appear like amorphous biological blobs primed for examination. *Songs of the Islands: Concrete Music From New York, 1996-98* includes strands of found audio tape pressed, like human hair, beneath Plexiglas and labeled for the streets and intersections where they were picked up. Headphones have been included nearby to allow visitors to listen to samples of the audio (music by unknown bands, scraps of television shows, etc.). Rather than making the tape seem more substantial, being able to listen in on the content makes the tapes seem more mysterious: How did this end up in the middle of the street anyway?

One of the more complicated pieces included in the show is *Talking Popcorn*. A popcorn machine has been set up with a computer that translates the pops into Morse code. Handfuls of popcorn have been vacuum sealed, dated, and labeled with the message they represent. The message from the popcorn gathered on Nov. 15, 2001, includes the following: "taqhncst vkno feznttmtezb." It's gibberish, and on its own that might be all it is, but with the accumulation of Katchadourian's committed planning, it becomes more. It's a paean to gibberish, a statement on the degree to which meaning can proliferate when everyone agrees to play along.

The most endearing series is *Seat Assignment*, photos documenting art Katchadourian made from her airplane seat. These are mostly collages using photos from in-flight magazines, and bits and pieces of food. A belt buckle distorts a rock climber's muscular torso. Rectangular cookies are balanced to look like the World Trade Center towers. Like much of Katchadourian's work, the photos resemble child's play. This is what makes them so engrossing. Katchadourian allows her artwork to reflect her untamable curiosity. After all, art is only serious play. It's gratifying to find an artist who knows it.