

Nina Katchadourian

**THE FIFTH SENSE**

Curiouser and Curiouser: the Art of  
Nina Katchadourian

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By Jodi Bartle  
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*Nina Katchadourian, Lavatory Self-Portrait in the Flemish Style #3, 2011 ("Seat Assignment" project, 2010–ongoing)C-print, 13 5/16 x 10 5/16 in. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin; promised gift of Lawrence Banka and Judith Gordon in honor of Catharine Clark, 2016*

American conceptual artist Nina Katchadourian uses hold music, neck pillows and spiderwebs (although not all at once) to create art that explores a whimsical and intelligent look at the the systemic reordering of natural processes.

Remember those aeroplane selfies of a woman draped in paper toilet seat covers and collared by hand towels looking uncannily Vermeer-esque that went viral a few years ago? Those portraits by American conceptual artist Nina Katchadourian are part of an ongoing project that uses only objects available on a flight to examine boredom, time and constraints, documented via her mobile phone. *Seat Assignment* (2010) also takes in covert photos of sleeping co-passengers, peanuts rephotographed to look like giant public sculptures, packaged salt spilled onto magazines to resemble Victorian phantasmagoria and photographs of a sweater shaped into a gorilla. In Katchadourian's other works, she has pioneered the art of reworking book titles into pithy phrases, delved into dusty MoMA corners, DJ'ed at on-hold music dance parties using only music sourced from when she's been stuck on hold, and mended broken spiderwebs with red thread.



*Nina Katchadourian, Sugar Fox, 2011 ("Seat Assignment" project, 2010–ongoing)C-print, 24 x 24 in .Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin; gift of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, 2016*

Katchadourian's art begins with a sideways glance at something ordinary and ignored - she has an insatiable curiosity about the everyday periphery that surrounds us. "My job as an artist is to look carefully at the mundane stuff that surrounds me very closely, the boring things, to see what more might be there. I have to find ways to communicate that to other people, to be smart about the form

that I convey those observations through.” For multi-disciplinarian Katchadourian those forms are without constraint, spanning sculpture, video, photography, conceptual works, audio, charts, maps, language, bird song, animations. “I have never stuck to one medium – so if the idea leads me to sculpture, then so be it, if it becomes a dance party then that is what it becomes. I didn’t think much about becoming an artist until I went to college and it became clear to me that all these different things that I was becoming interested in were contained under the umbrella of ‘art’ and ‘artist’. For someone like me who works like I do, now is a very good time to be an artist – it is a capacious term and a capacious discipline.”

Katchadourian plays with ideas and pushes them as far as she can go, using “Whatever tools are right for the job” – disparate objects all come under her close scrutiny to convey her interest in the world and how we exist within it. Her work is conveyed through sight, sound, texture and scale, and asks the viewer to step back a little and look closer, listen a little harder. She spent her childhood exploring the Finnish archipelago with grandparents who taught Katchadourian the importance of looking at natural things carefully and learning the names of things. “I credit both grandparents as major influencers on my methodology...the ‘pay attention’ message was writ large. Every summer my grandmother did something extraordinary with me – she called it ‘Night Watch’ where we spent the night outside on a recliner, all bundled up listening to and observing the night, watching the bats fly, listening to the birds in a close observation of nature.”

While this potential for artistic curiosity and exploration is open wide for Katchadourian – anything not previously given much attention is ripe for scrutiny - her work itself is tightly controlled by self-imposed constraints. “I love rules - I love setting them up for myself to operate within. I am really not a fan of the open field, the idea of all things being possible. I like to set limitations and boundaries around what I do, seeking out the challenge of having a little less to work with rather than endless possibility. The relationship between constraint and then the curious type of freedom that comes from constraint is a productive way for me to work in, and many of my projects have a sort of ‘operating instructions’ logic to them.”

Before her new show opens in March at the Blanton Museum of Art, we asked her to talk us through five projects that are emblematic of her work.



*Accent Elimination - Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery*



*Accent Elimination - Image courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery*

Accent Elimination (2005) - This work is a great example of the painstaking processes involved in my projects - it shows me and both my parents attempting to learn to speak using each other's accents with the help of extensive lessons from a professional accent coach. It might seem like we are playing a kind of game but it was actually tortuously difficult to do. Our accents are a confusing mix of Armenian, Turkish, Lebanese, Swedish, Finnish and American influences and all three of us reacted to the stress of our task at hand in different ways. My father was like a deer in headlights, my mother just laughed uncontrollably and I became the bratty child because I got so frustrated that I couldn't get their accents better. The video installation shows that process and confusion: even though we were doing it as a way to make something more clear, it jumbles everything further. There were such odd revelations during that piece - we realised none of us even pronounce our surname the same way.

On Hold Music Dance Party (2017) - For a few years now I have been using apps on my mobile phone to identify the music I hear while I have been stuck on hold, trying to figure out what it is that we are all listening to when we hear that strange music. To satisfy my own curiosity I collected the songs and now I have a sizeable list of them. An invitation came my way from a space in Philadelphia on the subject of boredom and I thought "ah ha, I like this...this is my opportunity to use the music." I've been working with two DJs to create an event which is an on hold music dance party. Initially, they said "No way—we can't mix an entire party out of only on hold music - we need to bring beats and loops in" and I said no, we have to try to work with what we have, and it became perfectly possible to do that. It was so much better and more interesting because of the limitation.

We have a DJ'ing uniform and dress like customer service representatives in button-down shirts and ties and hands-free headphones behind the decks. Part of me was like, "Why am I working on something so frivolous when this country is on fire, in a crisis - is this

really relevant?” But then after the party all these people came up to me and said “that’s the best I’ve felt in weeks - thank you”. I was grateful to be reminded that there is something very important about joyful things and making room for that, taking that seriously.



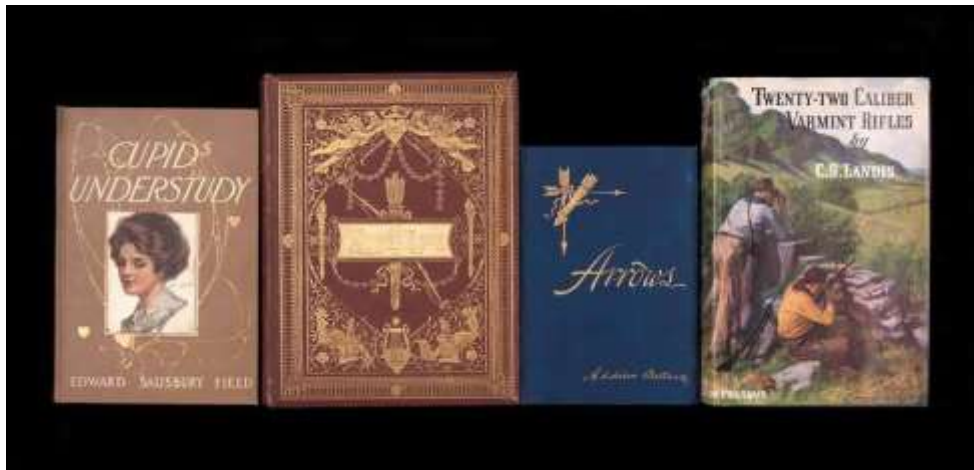
*On Hold Music Dance Party - Image courtesy Temple Contemporary*

Sorted Books (1993) – For this project I sort through a collection of books, pull particular titles and eventually group the books into clusters so that the titles can be read in sequence. I talk of this work often as a portraiture project because I feel like I am getting to know the person through their books, and there have been some sensitive moments around this because books reveal a lot about people’s interests and their anxieties, fears, and the things they struggle with. I have to decide how much of it is fair to expose. It does take a lot of trust on behalf of the people who let me go into their libraries. It is a curious mix of what is reflected about the people through their books but also what my own interests are, so there is some crossing over between me and what I think about and see, and the person who owns the books.

My favourite book sorting was done in William S Burroughs’s personal library - such a complicated and controversial writer whose reputation and mythology precedes him. His books were unbelievable – weird, intense, disturbing often with horrible topics like physical interrogation, torture, drugs, but then, because he was a huge cat lover, there would be whiplash moments of taking books out of boxes and reading the covers, you know, like “Torture Techniques”, “Handgun Manual”, and then “How to Massage Your Cat”.



Sorted Books - Image courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery



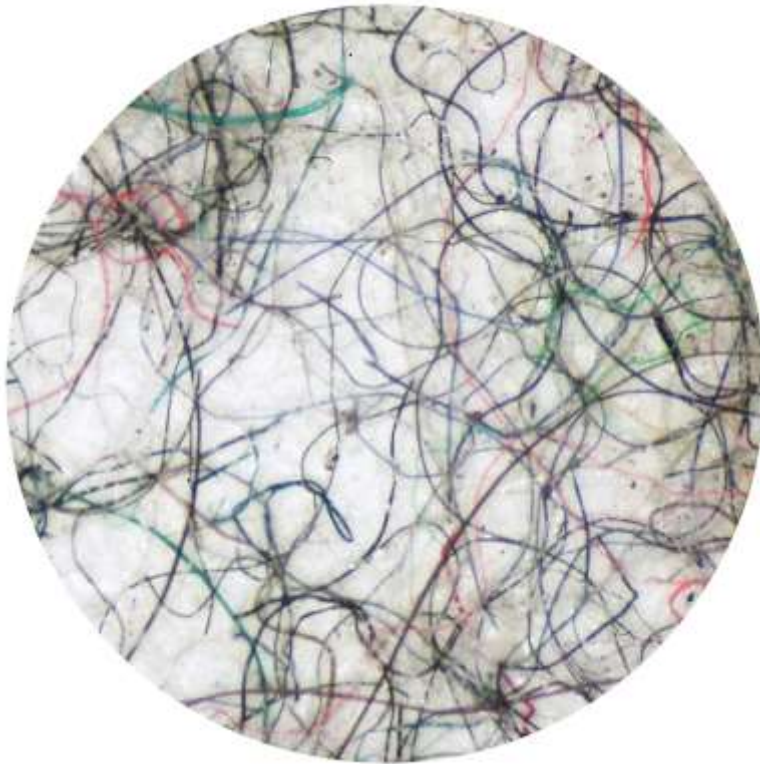
Sorted Books - Image courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery

Mended Spiderwebs (1998) - I noticed that some spiderwebs were in a crappy state of disrepair and I thought that the spider had abandoned them and moved on. I learned later that spiders, when they catch prey, cut out a part of the web to extract the quarry then fix the webs at night, so the holes weren't an indication of an abandoned web, but rather a functional web. I didn't know this then, though, and so I went in with my thread and patched the web up and then the spider would come and discard my patch. It became a battle of one-upmanship and that's actually when it got interesting for me – the spider was rejecting my help and I was insisting upon helping. The meddlesome quality of the project is really important to me. I started this project nearly 20 years

ago in a playful spirit but now we have to think more darkly about human intrusions on things. My feelings about the environment are in such a different place, a despairing, worried place.



*Nina Katchadourian, Mended Spiderweb #14 (Spoon Patch), 1998 Cibachrome, 30 x 20 in. Courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco*



*Dust Is Not Grey - Image courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art New York*



*The Dust Bunny - Image courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art New York*



The Dust Bunny - Image courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art New York  
Dust (2016) - This work is an audio tour through MoMA looking closely at dust: what is in it, and how the museum contends with it, but it is really also about who works at the museum who you usually don't hear from, and those people's voices are also what you hear on the tour. I wanted to draw some attention to the unsung people in that giant place. MoMA has a larger than life quality. I've been going there since I was at school and doing this project has brought it down to earth for me. People are thrilled and intimidated by MoMA but you can also see it as a dusty house, a building with dust like any other building.

People are now walking past the artworks to look at the dust. There's a very dusty ledge, a fluke of the architecture that inspired my whole project, and this location is one of the most important stops on my audio tour. People who stop to listen there have to turn their back to a bunch of Picassos, and then more people cluster around to see what those people are looking at — and it's just the dust on the ledge. Dust is a substance that makes us aware of our own bodies, because it is in large measure pieces of us: our skin flakes, clothing fibres, and so on. But at MoMA, it is particularly international dust: the skin flakes are from people all over the world literally coming together. There is something kind of utopian about that.

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