Life in Minutiae

STANFORD-BORN ARTIST NINA KATCHADOURIAN HAS A KEEN EYE FOR THE OVERLOOKED.

BY SHERL N. NONNENBERG

Ina Katchadourian sees art in the least likely of places. And the least likely of those places, it can be assumed, was in an airplane bathroom.

It was there, during a 2011 flight from San Francisco to New Zealand, that Katchadourian, the Stanford-born artist, started messing around with the paper towel dispenser. She draped facial tissues, paper towels, and toilet seat covers over her head, and fashioned them into a sort of Tudor-style collar. Then she covered the bathroom mirror with a black towel and posed for a series of cell phone selfies, all taken in the style of 17th-century Flemish portraits. The result is part of an ongoing series of airplane-related works—born of what she calls “curiosity about the productive tension between freedom and constraint”—called Souf Assignment, which will be shown beginning this month in a mid-career survey of her work at Stanford’s Cantor Arts Center.

Nina Katchadourian: Cartoons, organized by the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, and opening on September 15, is her largest solo museum exhibition to date and includes Katchadourian’s video, photography, sculpture, and sound art, underscoring both her cross-disciplinary interests and her appreciation for life’s minutiae. “I like to put my attention on things that are generally familiar to a fairly wide audience,” Katchadourian says. “so that there might be some initial moment where a viewer thinks, ‘I know what that is.’ But it’s also important to me, in almost every case, to undermine that or second-guess it so that something I bring to the situation prompts a reconsideration or a double take.”

That attention to detail tends to produce a lot of humor. Consider her series Started Books (1993), in which she stacked books together so the wording on their spines told a miniature story (How Did She Begin? placed atop Uninvited Guests placed atop Human Error). Or take Katchadourian’s Mended Spiderweb (1996), a series of color Cibachrome prints taken in Finland during a family vacation. Katchadourian found several broken webs and, using red thread, repaired them. By the next morning, the spiders had completely removed the red thread and restored the webs.

Catherine Clark, who has represented Katchadourian since 1999, recalls first meeting the artist through her sister in New York: “It was just this instant love affair,” she says. Katchadourian’s work is “so satirical, but in a way that’s so thoughtful and processed. I love her really sophisticated use of humor to get at issues that are really complex.”

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Another big-time retrospective: the one of the late artist who once placed a car tire around the neck of a Judith cocktail: Nov. 18–March 25, 2018, SFMOMA

PLAYMATS
Isaac Julien, the British filmmaker and installation artist, will show his film about the history of capitalism: Dec. 1–Feb. 11, 2018, Fort Mason Center for the Arts

Roll Call


In addition to being her biggest show so far, the Stanford retrospective is also a homing in of sorts for Katchadourian, who was raised on the farm, where her father, Herant Katchadourian, was a professor of human biology. Nina also served as an artist in residence at the Exploratorium in 2013 to 2016, where she created Fuster Theater, a miniature theater in which viewers can see their “epic failures” dates before them. However, most of her artistic development came on the East Coast. In 1996, Katchadourian was accepted into the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum. Her first big New York show was in 1999, and since then she’s exhibited around the world, including at SFMOMA, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Palais de Tokyo. In 2015, she was part of a group show from the Armenian diaspora in the Venice Biennale.

Much of Katchadourian’s work has a playful side, though some pieces are more direct social commentaries. Her The Genealogy of the Supermarket (2003), a sculptural family tree created out of the likenesses of Aunt Jemina, Uncle Ben, and the Gerber baby. Other series include Natural Car Alarm (2002), in which the sounds of brake failure alarm sounds, and Dust Gathering (2016), an examination of dust found on artworks and windowills at the Museum of Modern Art.

And what to make of Telling Popcorn (2001)? “The sculpture connects a computer to a popcorn machine and translates the sounds of popping kernels into Morse code. ‘Something can be very funny and still be very meaningfully,’” Katchadourian says. “If you want to eat the funny against the serious, the challenge for me is to get both those experiences to happen within the same piece.”

This exhibition was first conceived during last fall’s Home Land Security show and reinforced by the ongoing controversy over President Trump’s proposed ban on Muslim refugees. “That’s me as a socialjustice issue,” Haines says. “We’re thinking about what we’re preventing these people from finding—safety and security.”

Asked about the logistics of coordinating with so many artists in so many countries, Haines practically sighs—she’s tired of it. “It’s been worse. We can get anything anywhere.”

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Two of the 35 rug designs to be displayed in Sanctuary, by Tammam Azzam, of Syria (above), and John Akomfrah, of Ghana (below).