

Nina Katchadourian's *Genealogy of the Supermarket*

...Americans have become curiously comfortable with the idea that advertising manipulates them.

—Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*

I LIKE TO THINK OF Nina Katchadourian as a conscientious grocery shopper with an odd agenda. I picture her in the supermarket, carefully scrutinizing all the brightly colored packages before placing anything in her cart. But unlike her well-informed counterpart in the next aisle, who anxiously calculates the nutritional content, serving sizes, and food miles for each product, Katchadourian never even turns over the packages. Instead, she greets the products head on, just as they are displayed, and then checks out what the product's icon is wearing.

Katchadourian's face-to-face interaction with supermarket shelves appears to stop at the surface: *Genealogy of the Supermarket*, her elaborate family tree of branded icons, is hardly burdened by the hard facts of science, the history of food manufacturing, or the politics of nutritional policy. The work seems instead to celebrate decades of icons devised by American advertising to differentiate products and encourage brand loyalty. Here, the icons, originally designed to instill in consumers a sense of trust and personal connection, have been freed from their packaging, enlarged, and arranged as an installation piece spreading across a wide gallery wall. Even though the images have no personal relation to Katchadourian, each has been treated like a family photograph, lovingly displayed in an assortment of store-bought frames. Hung against a patterned wallpaper





background, these images reveal a large and extended family in a surprisingly intimate way. In Katchadourian's words, "To take the icons off the package and put them on a family tree seemed like the logical conclusion; it's the way you're supposed to feel about them."¹ Following this logic, her chart is both obsessive and humorous. Katchadourian's absurd embrace of this generally subconscious aspect of grocery shopping echoes Pop Art's cheeky devotion to the gloss of commercialized culture and reminds us how readily we accept its presence in our daily lives.

As with Pop Art, Katchadourian's work elicits delight by rewarding the viewer with visual puns and inside jokes that are easily deciphered. On her family tree, Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima are siblings, while two attractive icons, the St. Pauli Girl and Samuel Adams, are married. No worry that they thrust overflowing beer steins toward the viewer—should they spill any liquid, their two strapping sons, both Brawny Paper Towel men, are there to wipe it up. Elsewhere, the bright yellow rain gear worn by the Gorton's Fisherman and the Uneeda Biscuit icon make for a convincing father-child relationship. Chef's hats, sombreros, and wool caps have obvious relationships, as do raised cups of coffee, puffy white blouses, and baby faces. By inviting us to scan for these connections, Katchadourian forces her viewers to see these familiar icons in a new light, literally substituting gallery lighting for supermarket lighting.

Categorizing surface attributes is not a new undertaking for Katchadourian. In other works she has devised genealogies of rock formations and airplane shapes to suggest new opportunities for visual categorization. In one deceptively simple project, *CARPARK*, she and her collaborators directed traffic for one day at a college campus so that every parking lot contained vehicles of only one color.² The exercise uncovered surprising variety within each of the

seventeen color categories determined by the artists, including white, beige, and metallic raspberry. The unexpected rigidity and rules of these categorization schemes allow Katchadourian to reveal and question seemingly natural behaviors and overlooked aspects of our visual world.

By employing the irrefutable logic of a genealogy chart (double lines denote a marriage or partnership; single lines, biological offspring; and dotted lines, adopted offspring), Katchadourian adds an air of authority to her family tree and, thus, another layer of absurdity. Yet her chart offers unexpected insights. Through the clarity of her display, Katchadourian reveals how advertising icons operate: they have been designed to appeal to our emotions, not our intellects. As the shrewd data design analyst Edward Tufte has written, successful displays of visual information are governed by principles of reasoning, by means of which "clear and precise seeing become one with clear and precise thinking."³ Herein lies the tension in Katchadourian's work. Advertising icons are not designed to withstand the rigors of clear and precise seeing *or* thinking. Her chart applies an often-humorous logic and structure to a deceptively trivial part of our lives, and thus we are left to wonder which icon is hot enough to get paired with Mr. Clean. We might also question what has contributed to the staying power of certain human icons on grocery-store packages. How did they even get there?

One answer is obvious enough. Ethnicity has long been used to invoke authenticity, especially on food packaging. The seventy-eight icons in Katchadourian's family tree provide sufficient characters to form separate ethnic enclaves of Hispanic, Asian, African-American, Jewish, and Italian icons. There is even a half-human, half-vegetable section, in which the Jolly Green Giant has fathered the Corn Maiden, who represents Argo Corn Starch. Katchadourian's pairings

make us smile, but they also raise important questions. Is the Native Indian icon found on Land O'Lakes butter the Corn Maiden's mother because Native peoples are more connected to the earth? Or because they were treated for a long time as less than human, making the half-vegetable reference more pointed? Whether the icon is viewed as related to a product, to a people, or to advertising history, Katchadourian's pairings encourage speculation, along with multiple interpretations and, at times, misinterpretations.

Historians will notice the genealogy chart's unabashed disregard for actual advertising history, as well as the absence of earlier generations of icons. Most of us know that the Gerber Baby has been around longer than either of its adopted fathers, the Brawny Paper Towel Man or Mr. Clean; or that none of Betty Crocker's several earlier versions—a mini-family of their own—appears. Neither do previous iterations of Aunt Jemima, who in her current incarnation has slimmed down and donned pearl earrings as if to appeal to the weight-conscious consumers now buying her “lite” pancake syrup. Even without a depiction of the earlier, kerchief-wearing “mammy” version of Aunt Jemima, Katchadourian's family tree investigates the use of ethnic stereotypes to sell products; when the icons are removed from the packaging and placed in this ahistorical chart, it becomes obvious how loaded they are as images. Inevitably, some of Katchadourian's pairings interrogate the branding strategies in which companies have invested large amounts of time and money.⁴ Is the marriage of the smiling Quaker of Quaker Oats fame to Aunt Jemima a reference to the business-trivia fact that his parent company purchased hers?⁵ Is it, perhaps, a commentary on marriage as ownership? Or on slave-holding whites? Or, as one historian friend has suggested, perhaps the interracial union is a reference to the Quakers as early abolitionists?

Although the original motivations behind the ad campaigns might seem distant from our contemporary lives, consumers have long craved “personality advertising” and intimacy in an otherwise dehumanizing marketplace. As the advertising historian Roland Marchand has noted, in the 1920s and 1930s advertisers adopted a “therapeutic mission,” in which “advertising provided comforting reassurances to those who anxiously watched the institutions of their society assume a larger, more complex, and more impersonal scale.”⁶ Yet those who anxiously “watched” these institutional and societal changes began to see less and less of what lay behind them. The processes responsible for sending goods—especially food—to market became increasingly hidden, and now they are mostly invisible to us. The more divorced the production of food has grown

from our daily lives, the more attractive the packaging has become, distracting us from this arrangement. We now find ourselves burdened with industrial foods that undernourish or make us sick. We rely heavily on long-distance transport of anonymous foodstuffs. Ambiguous legislation affects us in often hidden ways, contributing to a decline in the health of our citizens and of our environment. Katchadourian is aware of these realities, and her family tree of comforting faces offers a pointed interpretation of how alone we really are when we shop without the aid of our nutrition experts, investigative journalists, or food pundits.

As an artist employing her powers of observation, Katchadourian bears witness to a system hiding in plain sight on our supermarket shelves. Her work begs the question of how we as consumers can be expected to know what is best, when we are encouraged to know so little. The artist and scholar Claire Pentecost notes the value of the artist's perspective: “What the artist is allowed to know reflects what the citizen is allowed to know. The rest is mystification.”⁷ Although the latest generation of consumers appears to be focused on access to information and issues of accountability, advertisers still know their audiences and the trends and anxieties that are important to them—as is evident in the current spate of “green” packaging. For many consumers, interaction with the supermarket will remain superficial. Katchadourian's *Genealogy* challenges us to think beyond the surface to consider the elaborate staging behind those enticing supermarket shelves. ◉

NOTES

1. Quoted in Amanda Hesser, “The Way We Eat: Kings of Convenience,” *New York Times*, 10 July 2005.

2. See www.ninakatchadourian.com/misc/carpark.php for images.

3. Quoted by Michael Shermer, “The Fenynman-Tufte Principle,” *Scientific American*, 28 March 2005. See Edward Tufte, *Beautiful Evidence* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 2006).

4. By attempting to preempt scrutiny of its black icon, the Uncle Ben's company may actually have brought more attention to it by transforming a stereotypically happy servant without a last name into a board chairman with a luxurious office (though he still lacks a last name!). See Stuart Elliot, “Uncle Ben, Board Chairman,” *New York Times*, 30 March 2007, and www.unclebens.com.

5. For an examination of what lies behind the smiling Quaker on Quaker Oats packaging, see Sutton Stokes, “The Right Thing to Do: Taking a Closer Look at Quaker Oats,” *Food, Culture & Society* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 73–95.

6. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 359.

7. Claire Pentecost, “What Did You Eat and When Did You Know It?” *Art Journal* 61, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 46–62.