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## A little bit baffled

*Nina Katchadourian likes to start from the point of 'close, but not quite.' She's back in San Diego with a solo show.*

**May 22, 2008** | Leah Ollman | Special to The Times

SAN DIEGO -- Over the last decade, Nina Katchadourian has mended broken spider webs with colored thread and glue. She has programmed a computer to translate the pulses of a popcorn popper into Morse code. She has diagramed a family tree of supermarket icons -- Uncle Ben, Mr. Clean, the Gerber baby -- and staged an endurance test for herself, attempting to smile for as long as possible while archival footage of explorer Ernest Shackleton was projected onto her front tooth.

Endearing, goofy, earnest, witty, subversive, penetrating -- Katchadourian's work leapfrogs across an array of emotional touchstones, finding a briefly comfortable fit, then moving on. Many of her projects center on thwarted efforts to categorize and simplify, to define and know. They suggest that the impulse toward order may be fundamentally human but that the complexity of nature and experience is just as absolute. Yet according to Katchadourian, misalignment brings satisfactions of its own.

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"A lot of things I'm attracted to are like that: close, but not quite. The way they mismatch is often a starting point for work for me," she explained recently. "Misunderstanding is a very fertile point for making art. When things aren't quite right, that often makes them funny, or awkward, or poignant."

The Brooklyn-based Katchadourian, 40, was speaking as finishing touches were being put on her new solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. A part of the museum's so-called Cerca Series, it has brought her back to the city where she began to mature as an artist in the 1990s.

Consider one of the exhibition's two video installations, "Accent Elimination" (2005), which begins with the simplest of interviews and, within its short (less than 15-minute) loop, evolves into a meditation on

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voice, identity and origin.

The artist and her parents appear, head and shoulders, separately on three side-by-side monitors. Katchadourian asks them their names, which leads to questions about their nationalities and accents. Basic enough, except that her mother is Swedish and grew up in Finland, and her father is Armenian but was raised in Turkey and Lebanon.

After eliciting the mildly perplexing facts from each, Katchadourian repeats the interviews -- only this time she addresses her mother in her mother's accent and her father in his. They both answer in their best imitations of their daughter's uninflected American. Three other monitors, back to back with the first set, show the family training with a vocal coach to perfect the transformations.

"It's not a project about watching our stunning success with the task at hand," Katchadourian said. "It's much more about the brow-sweating effort to get there, and the awkwardness in all of that, and how that awkwardness is linked to a kind of goodwill, to be inside the other person's voice."

She said she was working on the piece at the same time the home she grew up in was being sold. There was a lot of discussion, she recalled, about what to keep and what to get rid of.

"That's when I started to think about the accent as something that could be handed down. What if it was a physical thing, like an heirloom?"

Assistant curator Lucia Sanroman, the organizer of the show, encountered the video piece shortly after she began work at the museum a few years ago. Its themes of translation and mistranslation seemed relevant to the San Diego-Tijuana region, she says, and to her own experience.

"It resonated with me personally, because I also have a strong accent," says the Mexican-born Sanroman. "For Nina, it was a very personal and keen observation of being from so many parts, of having an identity that is beyond hybrid, and how to negotiate that."

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Katchadourian, boyishly slim and angular, with wavy dark hair, soft brown eyes and a deep, mellifluous voice, was born and raised in Palo Alto, where her mother worked as a literary translator and her father was a professor of psychiatry at Stanford. After receiving her undergraduate degree from Brown, she enrolled in the master of fine arts program at UC San Diego, studying with the late Allan Kaprow -- the father of happenings and currently the subject of a retrospective at the Geffen Contemporary in L.A. -- as well as performance poet David Antin and "Eco-Artists" Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison.

"UCSD was a great fit for me, because no one ever told me I had to work in any particular medium," Katchadourian said. "We were required to have people from outside the art department on our thesis committee. They didn't want us just talking to artists."

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In the subsequent years, Katchadourian has taught at Brown, the Rhode Island School of Design and Parsons and been the subject of exhibitions around the world, including a 10-year survey recently organized by the Tang Museum at Skidmore College in upstate New York. She also has a thriving career in music, writing and recording songs independently and with a folky Brooklyn-based group, the Wingdale Community Singers. And she works part time at the Drawing Center in Manhattan's SoHo district, managing and curating shows from its registry of 1,200 contemporary artists.

With her attention honed by so many different endeavors, she doesn't necessarily look to art for her ideas or inspiration.

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"Art has become the best alibi I've found for exploring different things in the world," she said. "It's the perfect excuse. You get to talk to people who are interesting to you. You get to travel to places you want to see, investigate subjects that have you enthralled and obsessed. It's just a fantastic vehicle for all these things."

In her newest installation, "Zoo" (2007), also at the San Diego museum, she portrays a familiar environment as something fragmentary and disjunctive, using footage shot at zoos around the world over the last seven years. Images of animals, enclosures and signage are projected on four walls and dispersed among 15 monitors splayed at different angles and heights around the exhibition space. Several tight close-ups of animal parts are tricky to identify, and sometimes the sounds don't match the accompanying

## Art Exhibits

images. Jellyfish pulse against a glass enclosure to the rhythm of chattering birds. Soothing classical music accompanies footage of a bird maniacally pacing its space.

"In some ways," the artist said, "this is the least funny piece I've made in a while. There are funny moments, and there are moments that are odd and awkward and quirky. What happens for me overall, largely as a result of the sound, is that it becomes a place you don't feel that good in after a while. It's an unsettling and unsettled environment. The animals don't seem entirely comfortable, and neither does the viewer.

"I haven't set out to make a piece that's anti-zoo. What I'm really interested in is this complicated relationship that is contained in zoos and that I certainly have to them. On one hand, I love going to zoos and I love seeing animals up close. But there are also always moments when I feel saddened and guilty.

"Sometimes I make projects as a way of thinking through the questions. I'm making this piece about zoos to figure out what I think about them."

--

Nina Katchadourian

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego Downtown, 1001 Kettner Blvd., San Diego

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays and Fridays through Mondays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays

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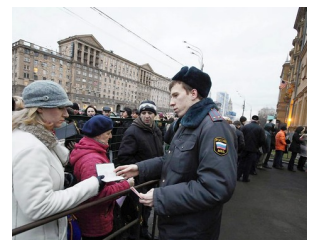
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