



## Nina Katchadourian interview

By GUY SOMERSET | Published on April 28, 2011 | **ONLINE ONLY**

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Air travel will never seem the same again after this American artist's Seat Assignment exhibition in Dunedin.

Nina Katchadourian is an American artist working across many media – photography, sculpture, video and sound – and many themes, including maps, language and translation, and nature. Her work includes the ongoing *Sorted Books* project, in which she resequences the spines of book covers in libraries and other collections so their titles combine to create a new idea or meaning; *Talking Popcorn*, a sound sculpture that translates the popping sounds of popcorn into Morse Code; *Natural Car Alarms*, where alarm sounds are replaced by the sounds of bird calls; and *Hand-held Subway*, for which she dissected a map of the New York subway system, cutting out the individual routes and then scrunching them together liked unspooled cassette tape. The *Listener* spoke to Katchadourian a month into her six-week residency at Dunedin Public Art Gallery and a fortnight before the opening of her exhibition there, named after and drawing on another of her ongoing projects, *Seat Assignment*, which is comprised of work made during air travel.



Nina Katchadourian, Lavatory Self-Portrait in the Flemish Style.

**Presumably, you did some work on the show on the flight over to New Zealand.** Yes. This whole project is grounded in the idea that I'm making work while I'm in transit, while I'm in flight. And it started about a year ago on a flight when I found myself thinking, here's all this time and usually I and most of us are just sitting there trying to make it go away, trying to pretend that the time isn't happening to you, that you're in point A going to point B and what happens in between more or less you're trying to erase. So I thought it would be interesting to actively and almost maniacally make things during this time. Using what I've got around me. And so that's what I did and some interesting things came of it. And I decided to keep doing that. So this whole past year, [I have been doing that] on every flight that I've been on, which I totalled up to be 30 something flights – I travel quite a bit for exhibitions and for projects and for lectures and that kind of thing, and my family is also spread all over the place. So when this show came up here, I thought

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when this show came up here, I thought first of all this is a project I'd love a chance to pull together for the first time as a show, but also I've got the longest flight of my life, heading over here, to take advantage of, and the challenge I gave myself was I would try to make the bulk of this exhibition on the plane on the way over and that is what I've done. There are three rooms that I am installing into, and two of those spaces are entirely things made en route and then the third room is a look at past flights that have happened leading up to this one to come here. I made a lot [on the flight over]. I had a good 18 hours of flight time. It's a lot of photography, it's also quite a bit of video, and some things that I shot on the plane but then edited afterwards. Because, of course, I didn't actually do all the editing on the plane. The interesting thing about knowing I was coming here is that as a place I've never been and a place I've imagined a lot of times and tried to picture, as someone who's very interested in nature and specifically in birds, and all of that, there were a lot of things I was wondering about before I got here and was trying to imagine before I got here, and I think some of the New Zealand work is playing with my preconceptions and fantasies, the idea of going to this place that's so far away and so full of landscape and wildlife I've never seen.

**What sort of equipment do you use? Are you using a cellphone?** The rules of engagement are that I only work with what I naturally have with me and what I find on the plane. I'm not allowed to bring complicated props and things that skew the project too much towards something that I may as well have just made in a studio. So it's important to work within the limitations of the airplane's space and with materials that are part of that environment. And then, of course, I take stuff in my carry-on bag. I take things to read and snacks to eat and things like that and those are also fair game. But I'm trying to keep myself pretty strictly limited to things I would normally have with me.

**How does your *Seat Assignment* sub-series of Flemish-styled self-portraits fit into that?** Well, the things I'm using to dress myself up with are for the most part found in the lavatory. They're the paper towels, it's the seat protector cover, the tissue cover, sometimes I put eight or 10 of them over my head and crinkle them up so I kind of make this lace collar, sort of something that looks like a lace collar. I took the pillow case off the little airline in-flight pillow and put that on my head as a hat at one point to take some of them. I have a black scarf I travel with and I took that with me into the lavatory and draped it up behind me, which makes for this deep black background to some of the pictures. And then I'm wearing a black T-shirt, which is what I often wear. But I didn't bring anything that would be too much of a prop. That's the rule.

**When did you begin that series? Did you board a plane thinking, "I'm going to do this", or did you just go in there and think, "Eureka, I could do a Flemish-style self-portrait"?** The very first of the Flemish lavatory portraits started on a flight a few months back. I did that one really quickly. It was completely spontaneous. It's interesting, I have been looking at the pictures from this entire past year [for the exhibition], and I can see that on a few flights previous to the first Flemish portrait I had gone in there and put one of those tissue seat covers on my head as a hat. I think a few flights later I tried it again in a different position and then I suddenly thought, "Oh, it kind of looks like one of those Flemish head coverings." And it kind of clicked into place. It was on a domestic flight and I didn't have that much time in the lavatory, because usually people are queuing up after a while. However, I realised that on the way to New Zealand the likelihood of having a lot of time in the lavatory was pretty good. Because on a long-haul flight most of the time people are just asleep and I was counting on the bathrooms being unoccupied a lot of that time, and that turned out to be the case. So I went back there the first time and rushed through what I was doing and when I came out I realised, "Oh, there's four empty lavatories all around me and no one's in line. So maybe next time I can take a little more time." So then my second foray was probably 10 minutes long. I think I maybe made five or six trips back there during that flight. And by the end I was really comfortable and settled in. I could stay in there for 15 minutes without anybody really noticing or caring.

**With the *Seat Assignment* series as a whole, have you also perfected your technique and become more adept at finding possibilities?** You do sort of learn things that tend to work. The longer I've been doing this the more I have a sense of what photographs well. The rule is that I only use my cellphone camera. And that is very important, because although I would make life a lot easier for myself using a proper camera – I'd have a lot more resolution to play with – I think using a proper camera would draw attention to what I'm doing in a way that would turn it artful. I'm much more interested in looking like someone who's just bored and trying to pass the time messing around with her phone. It lets me get away with a lot more to do it on the phone, I'm convinced of this.

**So you've managed to remain pretty much incognito?** It's amazing. I get the question all the time of "What do people say when they see you doing this?" Sometimes I'll have all kinds of things on my tray table – pretzel crumbs and pictures from the in-flight magazines – and I'm rummaging around with these things, and it must look very curious. But nobody ever asks a question. It's amazing. Mostly, I think, they are trying to ignore me. They think I'm some slightly odd lady.

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**Not even the person sitting next to you asks anything?** No, I have not had a single question. There was one time once where there was this fellow who got a little bit curious and he tried to strike up a conversation, but I was really so immersed in working that I didn't want to talk to him much.

**And nobody's asked to move seat?** No, nobody's done that, either. On this long-haul flight, I was at one point in the lavatory for quite a long time and there was a knock on the door from one of the flight attendants who was waiting to tidy up in there. I think he was just concerned I wasn't feeling well. I came out and I tried to look a little bit like I was having stomach trouble or something.

**Has it transformed flights for you? After all, flights, especially 18-hour flights, can be an ordeal. Would it be hard for you to go back to not doing this on a flight?** Well, it has made the flight time very, very busy. On the San Francisco-Auckland leg, I really actually ran out of time. There were a whole bunch of things I was still hoping to do and I did not have enough time to do them. The flight passed very fast, I have to say. I maybe napped for an hour or two perhaps, but the rest of the time I was working. And there was something about staying so actively engaged that obviously made the time pass very quickly, but I actually felt better when I got off the plane. It wasn't that feeling of you've had a bad night of

semi-sleep and you're all stiff. It was a wonderful feeling. Everyone on the plane was asleep or trying to sleep and there were moments when I really was the only one awake I could see in the entire sightline I had. Just sitting there and doing my thing. So I had a lot of good uninterrupted time to work.

**And do you incorporate your fellow passengers in what you do?** There is one series that I've done. This has become one of the things I do on every flight now, which is that I wait for the moment my seatmate next to me falls asleep and then I take a picture of him or her. The reason for that is, one thing that is curious, people tend to fall asleep I've noticed right after the plane takes off. I think there's a sort of, I don't know, a moment then of psychological release, like the trip has begun and you can relax into it, or maybe it's a response to the anxiety of that slightly scary moment of take-off for some people who are nervous flyers. But people inevitably, I've found, close their eyes at that moment and as the plane is climbing into the air there is this good opportunity to get a picture of them. I find it's a very tender moment, actually.

**Is that not perhaps a little intrusive?** Well, of course it has a slightly sort of stalkerish edge to it. But I think if you saw the photos, the photos are very tender. I'm not sticking the camera into their face. They're taken in a way as unobtrusively as possible. And the person in the image always looks very peaceful. But yes, of course, it's mildly intrusive. I couldn't deny that. But I'm not trying to get pictures where people look silly or look terrible.

**Do you ask them afterwards whether you can use them?** No, I don't. I'm doing this really covertly and the consequences of that, I suppose, remain to be seen. I highly doubt anybody is going to see one of these. In most cases, people aren't particularly recognisable. Sometimes, because I'm shooting in a sort of covert way, I often just catch the side of someone's face or the tip of someone's head. Sometimes the shots are sort of hilariously not on the mark. That's part of the feeling of it, too. That you can tell I'm trying to do it without getting caught.

**The limitations of space, time and material – does that make for a good discipline as an artist?** I'm very interested in situations where there are limits and boundaries to what's possible and how you find your way around those obstacles, how you think on your feet. How you make something out of nothing ... much of my subject matter comes from the mundane everyday. I'm always trying to look at the things we are overlooking and underestimating in terms of their interest or value. At the same time, I have a practice where often my life and my activities and all those things kind of cross over into my art-making. So this project brings all those things together. It's a way of integrating art-making into part of the professional necessity in my life to travel and it's a way to try to test my premise that there really is something to be found no matter where you look if you look in a certain way. My job as an artist is one I see as paying attention. My job is to really pay attention and see what's there that we haven't seen yet.

**Some artists work in a narrow field, reworking a similar theme, but the thing that strikes me about your art is the huge variety of it. Is it liberating and exciting to have that endless sense of**

**possibility?** Sure, yeah. I think that in some ways this project to me is a lot like the working methods of many other things I've made. My motto tends to be, "Pick the right tools for the right job". So if I have an idea, the question is, "What's the best medium for this idea to manifest [itself in]?" Sometimes it's a video, sometimes it's sculpture, sometimes it's a photograph, sometimes it might be a sound-piece. The fun thing about *Seat Assignment* for me is that it gets to be a lot of different things and I get to do the thing that I really enjoy most, which is arriving in a new situation and having a look around and thinking, "What can I do here? What is there that I right now on this spot can find to use or to work with?"

**You have several ongoing themes and projects, including maps and your *Sorted Books* series – you've got the Hocken Library there in Dunedin, I don't know if you've discovered it yet ...** I haven't yet. The thing I've learned on residencies is that usually for me it's most productive when I come to a place I've never been to to just kind of be a very active observer and participant and to kind of be a sponge, basically, just soak things up and look around, meet people and try to travel a little bit to see parts of the country I haven't seen. So as much as possible while I've been here, I've tried to do that. And I find I rarely make any new work actually while I'm on the residency. Those sorts of things happen later once I've gotten home and had a chance to process the whole experience. That's the time things float to the top. I have no doubt that something will percolate and come from this time in Dunedin and in New Zealand in general, but I don't know what it is yet. While I've been here, in terms of the art work I've been making, I've been focusing on *Seat Assignment*.

**Reconfiguration and reordering are things you come back to again and again as a recurring technique in your work.** Definitely. I like to collect and then sift out what I've collected and find connecting threads between things that are sometimes not the ones that are the obvious ones. So there's a lot of collecting, sorting, translating, mistranslating. I'm very fond of situations where things go slightly awry. One thing that's been really fun for me here [has been being] in an English-speaking country but one that has all these other idioms. There's a different English spoken here. And I've really enjoyed all the hilarious misunderstandings that I've been experiencing on a daily level. Expressions I don't know or phrases that come up where I think it means one thing and it means something wildly different. I really, really like that. I make a lot of work about exactly that circumstance.

**With *Sorted Books*, obviously you are in control of the reconfiguration. It's a little like found-language poetry. But with *Talking Popcorn*, you are completely at the mercy of chance. One thinks of the monkey in front of the typewriter eventually coming up with Shakespeare. Has there ever been a coherent sentence that's emerged from that?** It's said many things. It hasn't said a whole sentence, but the longest English word the *Talking Popcorn* machine has said to date is the word "silent", which I was quite happy about. It says lots of short words and medium-length words in lots of other languages, too. That project for me is really one about our deep desire for things to mean something. So yes, it is in some ways a very random system, and in working with the programmer who wrote the computer programme that runs the machine I made it very clear that I did not want to cheat meaning into the situation. It was most important that it translated very strictly and if it ever said anything coherent that would be great but it didn't have to. It was not about that. But I think that what happens when we listen in a situation like that is that we're very eager for it to speak and mean something and for it to be coherent. And I think about the situation I've had sometimes when I'm speaking to someone in a language that I don't speak very well and you're both throwing a lot of goodwill into the situation to have there be communication. And so you are communicating but there's probably a lot of misunderstanding and a lot of potential for interpretation doing a lot of the work to have things make sense. If *that* makes sense.

**You've done a variety of works involving maps. When did maps first present themselves to you as a point of interest?** When I started making art, I started making maps. That was the first thing I did. I think that's partly a function of having a family that comes from strange combinations of places all over the world and I've grown up with a rather scrambled world map in my own head. So to start chopping up maps and recombining them in some way made a lot of sense to me. And maps are a thematic that never completely goes away. I still make maps. I will make maps, I am sure, forever. It's one of many things at this point that I think about.

**Do you continue a series for a long time? Does there come a point when you say no more? Or are they mostly open-ended?** Things are pretty open-ended. And what happens, too, over time is I realise there might be a project like *Natural Car Alarms* – that's a project that on the one hand connects to my interest in communication and translation and mistranslation and on the other hand connects to my interest in the human relationship to the natural world. Some of these things end up having fingers that connect thematically to a bunch of different things. So some projects I think of as almost nodal points where a few different interests come together in that place and others are more focused on one of these threads perhaps.

**And do they emerge as ongoing projects when you suddenly realise there are these connections between things you have been looking at? Presumably you don't necessarily always set out with them as something that's going to be an ongoing project.** The process for me is really one of "What's out there and at the same time what is it I'm already thinking about and haven't put my focus to?" I think the job of the artist – at least the way I approach it – is to pay attention to what you're already paying attention to. Because I think in that there's often a clue as to where your interests lie and then your responsibility is to see that through and to take seriously your curiosity and to kind of see that through to the fullest degree possible, all the way, to the end point.

**Do you find your ethos of curiosity and paying attention is infectious with the people who come to your exhibitions?** I would really like to think so. It would make me very happy if that were the case. If I do my job well, I hope what happens is that people leave and there is some slice of something out there in the world that is slightly changed for them, that they observe differently or think about differently, or there is some resonance with something they saw that I had made. The *Sorted Books* project, for example – there has been a very nice ripple effect of that, where a number of people began trying that themselves, because it's very simple. Technically, you just spend some time with books and shuffle them around and shuffle them around. Somebody started a [Flickr page](#) where they put up their own version of *Sorted Books*, and then people began adding to that, and so there was a lot of spontaneous blogging that happened around that project where people were trying their own hand at it. That made me very happy. It was really nice.

**It could become a guerrilla activity in libraries.** That's right, yes. I do that now and then myself.

**You do, do you?** A little bit, yes.

**So if I go into a library and suddenly see a sentence emerging from a cluster of book titles ...** Well, that's in fact exactly how that project began. I was in a library one day and I was walking down a shelf of books with my head turned to the side, as one often does when you're looking for a book, and I thought, "Wouldn't it be incredible if all these titles actually formed one long sentence by accident?" And then I thought, "I know they won't do that by accident but I could make that happen."

**Well, I recommend the Hocken Library to you, there'd be plenty of material there ...** I hope I make it over there before I go.

**NINA KATCHADOURIAN: SEAT ASSIGNMENT, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, until July 17.**

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