



14: peace

July 2011

GILBERT MAY

Review: Nina Katchadourian, *Seat Assignment*

(Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 26 March – 17 July, 2011)

GILBERT MAY

Review of **Nina Katchadourian, *Seat Assignment***, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 26 March – 17 July 2011

Rarely can anything be discerned beneath the floods of criticism which the history of art has periodically levelled at Plato's all too frequently quoted banishment of 'the poets' from the Republic:

If a man who is capable by his cunning of assuming every kind of shape and imitating all things should arrive in our city, bringing with himself the poems he wished to exhibit, we should fall down and worship him as a holy and wondrous and delightful creature, but we should say to him that there is no man of that kind among us in our city, nor is it lawful for such a man to arise among us, and we should send him away to another city, after pouring myrrh down over his head and crowning him with fillets of wood.¹

Most often heard in this passage is that "we should send [the poet/artist] away," and that it is unlawful for such a one to "arise among us." This reading is not at all unjustified: the moral and political grounds under which art is judged by Plato set the agenda for hundreds of years in the history of the philosophy of art. But we should not forget, as Giorgio Agamben has recently reminded us (and Nietzsche long before him), that Plato treats art with an extraordinarily high degree of respect.² As is overtly stated, the artist should be worshiped as holy and wondrous, his abilities should be praised, and he should be showered in myrrh and crowned with 'fillets of wood.' More importantly, however, we should not underestimate the profound (subversive) potential that is here implicitly granted to art: it is somehow within the power of art, according to Plato, to drastically undermine the health of the state and disturb its *pax domestica*.

The myopic focus on banishment, however, cements and bolsters an interpretive framework where a dialectic of negativity reigns over a logic of exclusion: internal peace and stability are guaranteed through the expulsion of the problematic body. However, Plato's passage says more than this simple exclusionary function admits: we should not just 'send him away' but 'send him away to another city.' Plato's banishment is, in effect, a logistics of exile and transit (between) rather than a logic of exclusion simpliciter.

Although couched in a register far removed from the classical stories of exile and transit found in the Oedipus trilogy or in the Odyssey, Nina Katchadourian's *Seat Assignment* is situated in the same liminal space of transit and exile into which Plato 'condemns' the poets, painters and other 'imitators.' In some sense a self-conscious exploration of the logistics of exile, *Seat Assignment* is a show whose work was made entirely 'in transit:' on thirty or so flights over the twelve months preceding the exhibition (including, importantly, the very lengthy flight from New York to Dunedin), Katchadourian "transformed her downtime on airplanes ... into a period of artistic production."³ By no means the first to make the vicissitudes of the contemporary travelling artist the very focus of a series of work (think of Fischli & Weiss's *Airport* series, or even Kippenberger's works on hotel paper), Katchadourian nevertheless draws (or redraws) our attention to the very conditions of distribution (if not also production) of much contemporary art and perhaps even forces us (especially here in Dunedin, at the far (dead)end of any international artist's journey) to question how much of the art world is a simply logistical equation.

Despite this being the first time she has focused on the process of the physical communication of bodies, Katchadourian is no stranger to the transport of meanings (including any handling errors in transit) of which information theory speaks. As one commentator put it, she is "a connoisseur of failed communication," – Katchadourian takes pleasure in the small discrepancies in GRNAD OPENINGS and the hours of drivel punctuated by the occasional burst of significance which popcorn speaks when translated into morse code.⁴ The works exhibited in *Seat Assignment* and produced under her self-imposed and austere parameters (only use materials on hand and in-flight, document

only with a digital camera/phone) inhabit this same space of light-hearted irreverence. *Lavatory Portraits in the Flemish Style* (figure 1), for example, is a series of photographs which have the artist dressed in the apparent garb of the high bourgeoisie and merchant class found in Flemish portraiture, but the characteristic white ruffs and head-dress are made with disposable hand-towels and other items found on board and photographed with appropriately pious composure in the airplane lavatory. A two channel video work is made in the same style but here devout countenances are corrupted as faces begin to mouth the words to the video's ACDC soundtrack found on the onboard music centre.⁵



Figure 1. Nina Katchadourian *Lavatory Portraits in the Flemish Style* (2011). Photograph. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery.

If Plato's main objection to art was its tarrying with the trickery of mimesis, it should be no surprise that the contemporary travelling artist 'exiled' to a life of inter-city and inter-residency practice should likewise take interest in the cunning of illusionism. Many of Katchadourian's *Seat Assignment* pieces play deliberately with the indistinction of recursive representation: for example, laid out on her fold-down table is a picture from an inflight magazine

of someone skiing upon which she has placed a half eaten airline sandwich in such a way as to look as if the skier is being pursued by a voracious avalanche. The resulting photograph becomes a snack-food sublime. Another group of images plays on the seductions and hocus-pocus of advertising imagery through the selective and idiosyncratic documentation of images of 'pure New Zealand.' The pieces are photographed so that they capture reflective glare from the tourist brochure's glossy paperstock, visually intimating occult emanations, supernatural light coming forth from idealised landscapes, or 'lifestyle' shots of the antipodean bourgeoisie. In another series, Katchadourian adorns images of native New Zealand flora and fauna with candy and other bits and pieces to create an entire ecosystem of exotic creatures. With names like *Tic Tac Tui*, *Fruity Eyed Swallow (male)*, and *Ornate Sugar Crested Penguin* (see figures 2-4) the nature-porn of the inflight magazine is brought down firmly into the sphere of kitsch infotainment (the true genre of touristic imagery), and leads the ironic stance evident throughout the show at least some way down the road of critique.



Figure 2. Nina Katchadourian, *Tic Tac Tui* (2011). Photograph. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery.



Figure 3. Nina Katchadourian, *Fruity Eyed Swallow (male)* (2011). Photograph. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery.

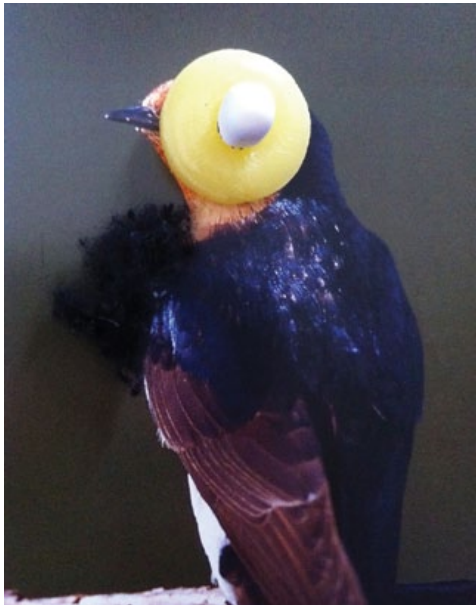


Figure 4. Nina Katchadourian, *Ornate Sugar Crested Penguin* (2011). Photograph. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery.

Exactly how far down that road becomes a burning question the longer one spends with the work. There is the distinct promise of a critically reflective practice that would address the logistics of contemporary art: the ‘assignment’ which Katchadourian sets herself seems ripe for an institutional analysis of the ‘mobile’ artist, the short term residency, and the trade in the presence of the artist’s body and its phenomenology. However, despite allusions to a critical gravity, the works themselves seem terminally stuck in the oxygen-light atmosphere of 80s ‘PoMo’ irony and their humour wears thin quickly. In an article published in the latest issue of *MUTE*, Anna Dezeuze addresses a similar kind of inadequacy and suggests there is a growing gulf between “the unbearable lightness of certain artworks” and the “loaded lightness of ‘precarious’ art.”⁶ In the financialised time of our post-Fordist contemporaneity, thoroughly unbearable analogies surface between what could once have been regarded as romantic artistic nomadism (valorised by *dérive*, some form of post-Deleuzianism, or even the modern epic) and the practices of what Zygmunt Bauman called “liquid modernity’s ... nomadic and extraterritorial elite.”⁷ Dezeuze herself points toward a fortuitous homonym linking the 2009 George Clooney film *Up in the Air*, which follows the life of an inspirational speaker and hatchet man for deterritorialised capital whose weightless mobility charts a lifestyle of first-class airtravel and expensive hotels, and an identically named 2010 installation by American artist Tom Friedman which, she maintains, portrays the frivolity of contemporary symbolic capital without calling anything into question. In contrast Dezeuze offers the possibility of a ‘precarious’ art which maintains a certain gravity in its ability to call attention to the loaded stakes of the art-world’s embeddedness in financial capital and perhaps even serves to subvert the metastability of the contemporary multinational ‘Republic.’ It is in the context of this distinction, its ambivalences and problematic overdeterminations that I found myself struggling with Nina Katchadourian’s all-too-light-hearted *Seat Assignment* and desiring a more precarious and neo-platonic art capable of at least disconcerting *pax neoliberalis*.

- 1 Plato, *The Republic*, Paul Shorey trans. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), I 398a-b.
- 2 Giorgio Agamben, *Man Without Content*, Georgia Albert trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufmann trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 104-105.
- 3 Aaron Kreisler, [Catalogue Essay], *Seat Assignment*, (Dunedin: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2011), unpaginated.
- 4 Nina Katchadourian and Ian Berry "Paying Attention" *Nina Katchadourian: All Forms of Attraction*, ed. Ian Berry (Saratoga Springs, NY: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum, 2006), 5-43.
- 5 Nina Katchadourian, *Acca Dacca Dyptich*, two channel video, 2011.
- 6 Anna Dezeuze, "The Light Years: Contemporary Art in the Age of Weightless Capital," *Mute* 3 (1: 2011), http://www.metamute.org/articles/the_light_years_contemporary_art_in_the_age_of_weightless_capital, accessed 13 June 2011.
- 7 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 13.