

## “It’s the Play Thing”: Nina Katchadourian in Conversation with Lisa Bulawsky and Tom Reed



Nina Katchadourian at Island Press. Photo courtesy Island Press.

The Brooklyn- and Berlin-based artist Nina Katchadourian works primarily in photography, video and film. She is perhaps best known for *Seat Assignment* (2010–present), an ongoing response to the entrapped boredom of air travel, in which she makes art mid-flight, using a camera phone and materials available on the plane, from in-flight magazines to lavatory paper goods. In 2013 Katchadourian spent a week working with Island Press at Washington University in Saint Louis, where she produced a series of five etchings of plane wing details, *Window Seat Suprematism*, and a group of monotypes made by placing found cat whiskers on an inked plate (the whisker acts as a stencil, leaving an arcing white line where it lay between the ink and the paper). Below she speaks with Lisa Bulawsky, director of Island Press, and Tom Reed, the press’s master printer, about making art in public and strategies for play.

**Lisa Bulawsky** When you came to Island Press, was that your first experience making prints?

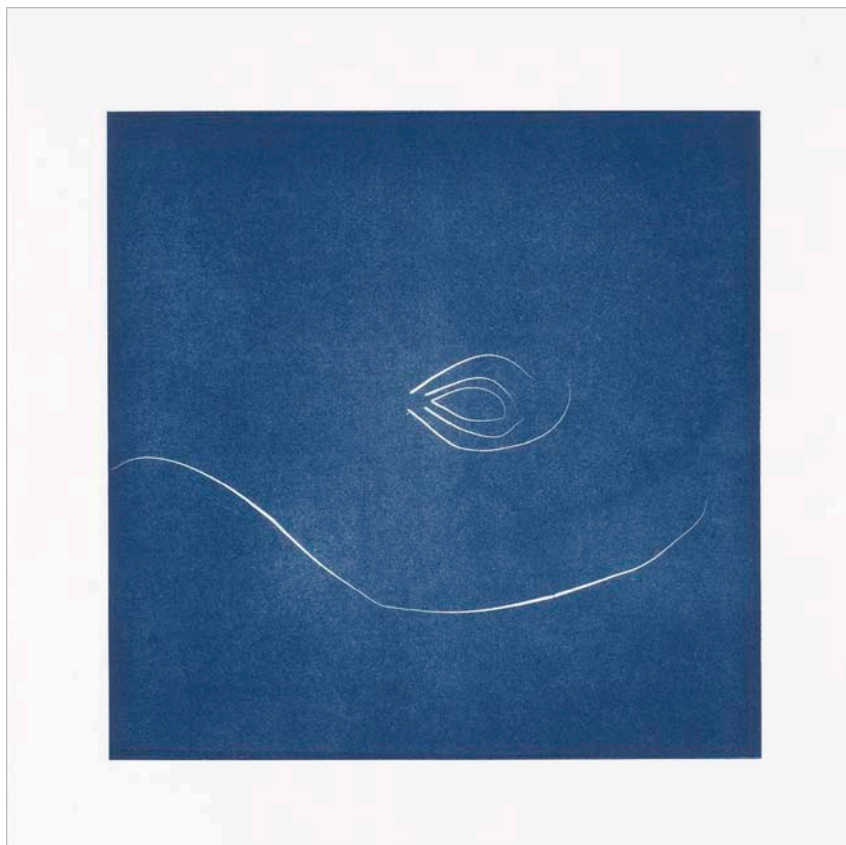
**Nina Katchadourian** My first *major* experience. There had been a little dip-your-toe-in-the-waters about ten years previous, but that was just me presenting an idea and a printer making the print. It wasn’t at all like what we did—evolving ideas together and working it out from scratch.

I have to say that I was *extremely* nervous before coming. You guys were so generous, saying, “So many things are possible! We can do this. We can do that!” And I kept trying to turn the screws on myself to come up with things I was interested in doing. You probably remember several phone calls where I was panicking: “I really don’t know what I want to do. I feel like I should know!” And you kept telling me, “you really don’t need to

know as much as you think. It will work itself out.”

**LB** That nervousness was not apparent. I was really impressed with the freshness and humor—you arrived with the airplane photographs that would become the basis for the *Window Seat Suprematism* etchings,<sup>1</sup> but also with pet toys and cat whiskers—all these options. And you seemed very comfortable with us playing with these ideas that were very close to you. That seemed so generous.

**NK** Oh, that’s nice. The funny thing is, I grabbed that little bundle of whiskers in the last hour before I left the house to fly to St. Louis. It was a combination of spontaneity and desperation—“these things are weird, but you never know what ends up being useful”—so I stuck them in a Ziploc bag and took them along.



**Tom Reed** Why did you collect the whiskers? Was it like a reliquary?

**NK** It was really just the fact that they are so materially interesting. I'm a pack rat and we had three cats, so I would find whiskers on the floor and pick them up and put them on the mantelpiece. Later the location got upgraded to the black marble base of a hilariously hideous sculpture I bought for my husband. So they were there in the bedroom when I was packing. Those whiskers always had a lot of magnetism for me, and materials like that—even if you don't always know how you're going to use them—are often a good starting point, because of the attachment and fascination and curiosity that can guide things.

That said, I remember we worked like crazy for days and days trying to use them in ways that weren't right—

**TR** We tried embossing them, we tried inking each one individually, we tried pressing them in soft-ground. At one point there was gold leaf involved...

**NK** I was really attached to the idea of using them as letterforms to spell things out—

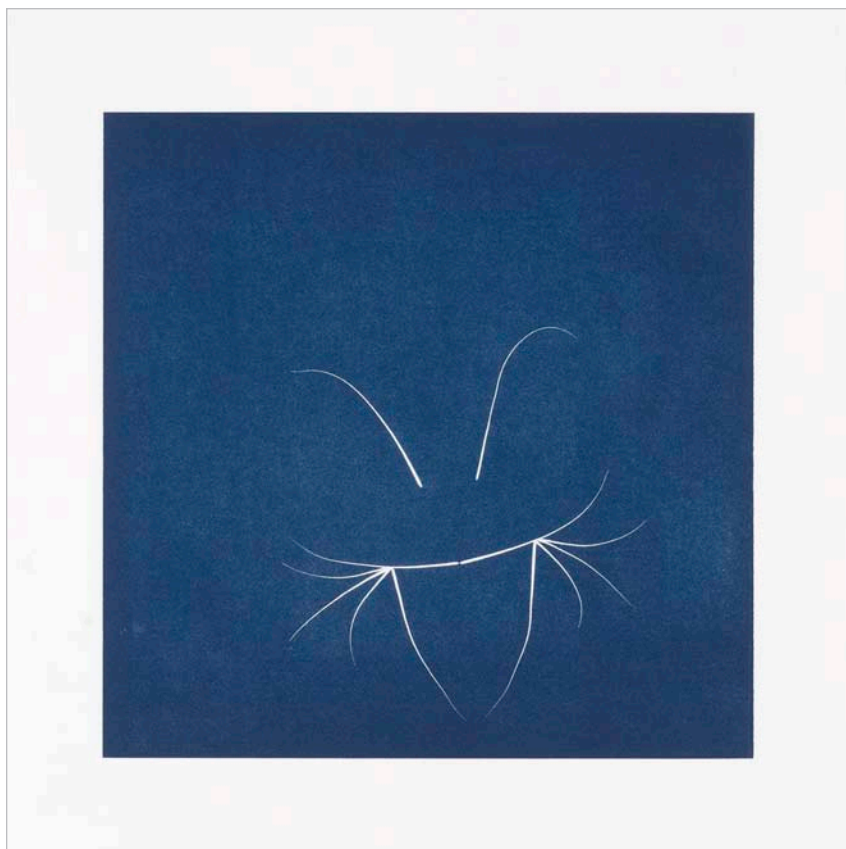
**LB** We still have one hanging up, don't we?

**TR** I think it says, "Let them eat kittens."

**NK** Hah. Finally I decided to be spontaneous and just think about them as lines—to play a game where I would try to draw things using just this handful of lines. They are just so materially interesting, and that simple fact underlies what makes the prints interesting too: they are so thin at one end and so sturdy on the other, and their arc is so simple yet beautiful. Do you remember how many whiskers there were? I think it was 15 or 17.

**TR** Well, it grew a little bit because other people started contributing.

**NK** That's right—a couple of people came in with whiskers. The first drawing I tried to make was of this fifties-era



Nina Katchadourian, *Whisker Prints (4A)* (above left) and *Whisker Prints (6A)* (below left) (2013), whisker stencil monotype, 15 1/2 x 15 1/2 inches. Unique images from group of 17 prints. Printed and published by Island Press, St. Louis.





Nina Katchadourian, *Whisker Prints (1B)* (left) and *Whisker Prints (2B)* (right) (2013), whisker stencil monotypes, 15 1/2 x 15 1/2 inches each. Unique images from group of 17 prints. Printed and published by Island Press, St. Louis.

cartoon character drawn by Al Capp called a shmoo that was on TV for a little while when I was a kid.

**TR** Sort of a blob meets a ghost.

**NK** Yes, and it had whiskers. My best friend, whom I've known since I was two years old—we started calling each other Shmoo in about fourth grade. And it's still what we call each other. So I decided to use the whiskers to make this shmoo-form, because I was just playing. If I imagined I was making it for a friend, it might take the pressure of the "art-making" off. So I just drew a shmoo for Shmoo. By the way, I gave Shmoo the print of shmoo and Shmoo has it on her wall at the moment, which is really nice. Anyway, because of the way the whiskers worked, the shmoo ended up looking a little bit like a seal.

**LB** I'm looking at a picture of a shmoo right now, and he *does* look like a seal.

**NK** That led to the realization that I could draw other sea creatures with the whiskers—aquatic beings like those deep deep sea creatures that I've always loved that live in this intense darkness and have to sense their way through space. At that point the whiskers—as sense organs—had a conceptual connection to what I was drawing with them.

**LB** You're from California, and when you were a kid you went to Finland every summer, so I would imagine that you grew up with a pretty intense relationship with the sea.

**NK** As I recall, when I arrived we all got together with the students and had a big sprawling conversation. I think I talked about *Seat Assignment* and also about my obsession with shipwrecks.

**LB** I was also thinking about the shark teeth video.<sup>2</sup>

**NK** That's another example where having an assignment and not a lot of time turned out to be incredibly productive. I was invited to be in a show curated by an artist named Chris Doyle in three different Connecticut art spaces—the Aldrich Museum, Real Art Ways and Artspace. It was called "50,000 Beds" and the prompt was all the beds in Connecticut hotels and motels. You had to pick one place to spend the night, and make a video work in the hotel room. So I thought I'll go to Mystic because the Mystic Seaport Museum is there, and I'm obsessed with all things maritime and it's always fun to go and look at the boats, and I'll ask for a room that has a view of the water and I'll figure it out. So I got to Mystic, went to the museum, and then to the gift shop where I spent about an hour and a

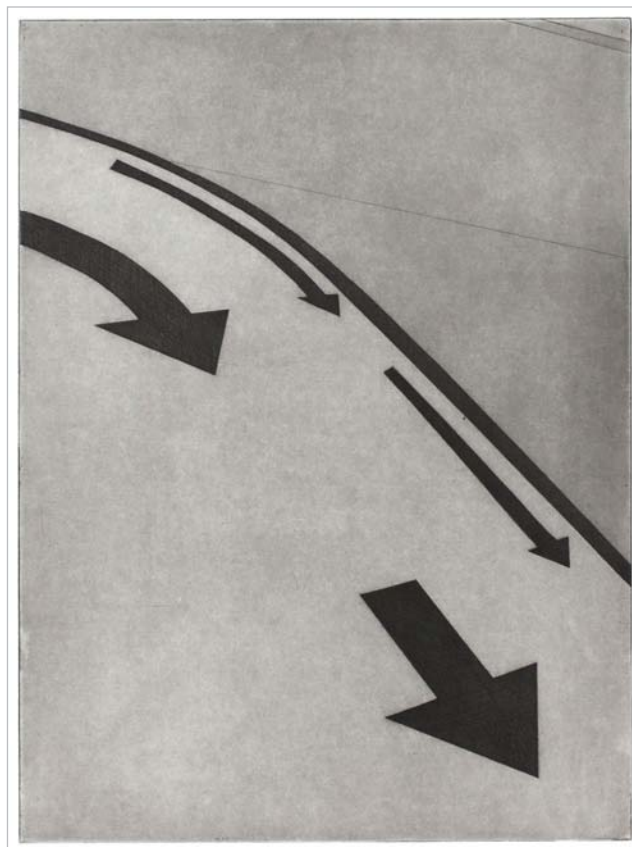
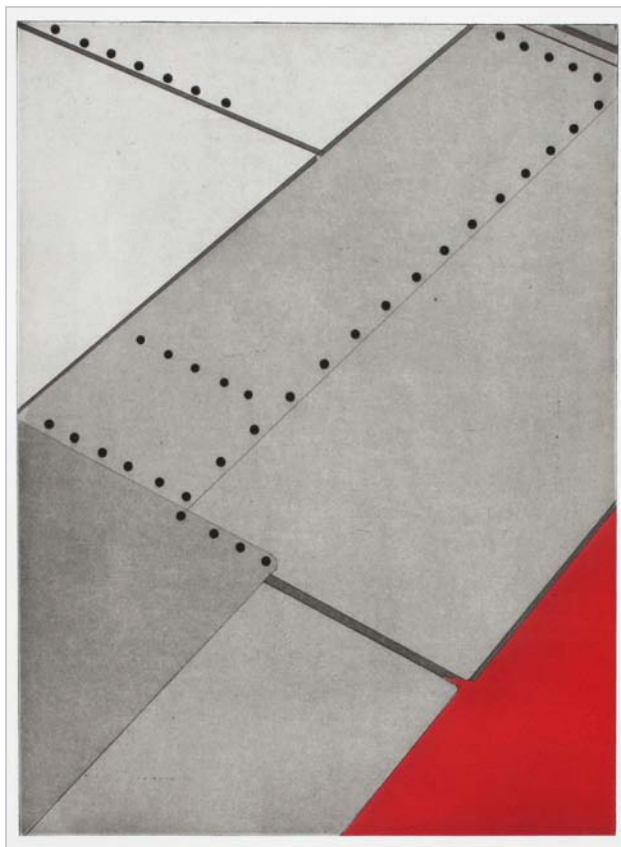
half just going through stuff—tourist tchotchkes and this and that. I bought about \$70 of stuff, including a used book that had a shark silhouette on the cover. The video begins with me holding up that book. But this little box of shark teeth became the key. I just decided to play dress up with them and make them my teeth. I set up the camera with a little bit of water view behind me and put these really quite uncomfortable teeth into my mouth, one at a time. I think I made two takes of it and then I was done. It was a really lovely evening.

**LB** That came before the *Whisker Prints*, so you *became* a sea creature before you drew them.

**NK** That's true. And both are made from remnants of animals—detritus or traces. Whiskers, like teeth, fall out. Their presence doesn't indicate that the animal died. These were petrified shark teeth, though, so I did know that the shark was long gone, but . . . teeth are bones that fall out of your head, which is just really strange.

**LB** And how does Jacques Cousteau fit into all this?

**NK** That's funny. If lying underneath that question is the question of influences I might have seen as a child, there's actu-



Nina Katchadourian, *Window Seat Suprematism 4* (left) and *Window Seat Suprematism 5* (right) (2013), etching and aquatint, plate 14 x 11 inches, sheet 16 x 13. Unique images from a group of 5 prints. Printed and published by Island Press, St. Louis.

ally a much more concrete answer, which is a Time Life book we had called *The Sea*. I used to love looking at the pictures. There was a full-page, full-bleed, gray-and-white close-up of a whale's eye. It felt like it was at scale—it was probably not quite full-scale but it was close since whale's eyes are pretty small given how big their bodies are. Because it was full-bleed you could imagine the whale continuing off the page in all directions. I loved that image. It was the whale's eye and a little bit of the mouth. That's also one of the *Whiskers Prints*. I wondered whether anyone else would recognize it.

So to make the *Whisker Prints*, I had to relax. I had to dump certain ideas, and I had to play it like a game without the "art" part.

**TR** You needed the right amount of limitation.

**NK** That is something that, as you know, I'm very fond of—the challenge of doing a lot with a few things. Once the field wasn't so wide open, it got a lot easier for me. I had to figure out a way to have less stuff that I could do, as weird as that

sounds, in order for more things to be possible.

I learned a tremendous amount about the benefits of loosening up and making a leap. I hadn't had to do that for a while, and it was hard not to be worried about disappointing all of you. I know how to loosen the grip when it's just me that I'm accountable for. But there was this whole community—I had to be willing to be unsure of what the hell I was doing in the company of others. That's not always so easy.

**TR** It's not easy for anyone; nor very comfortable. It puts you in a position where you have to perform.

**NK** One of the *Whisker Prints* I kept for myself has an interesting mistake in it. The Plexiglas kind of slipped a bit, so the ink isn't even, and there's a kind of jittery eh-eh-eh where it got a little stuck. But it created these nice rhythmic bubbles. It just looked right to me. It's the only one where we had that quote-unquote problem, and I'm really fond of it. Did we do them all in one day?

**LB** It was like a day and a half. We were working on all the other things, including the *Window Seat Suprematism* etchings, at the same time.

**NK** It helped to have one thing going on that had a preexisting image underpinning it, something known. It was great to have those formal and technical concerns to dig into on the other project—putting that kind of energy in that direction allowed the whiskers thing to be super loose. We had an ecosystem of processes in which one thing really helped the other.

This process, when I'm doing it on my own, I think of "productive procrastination." Like a carousel, around and around. Things eventually get done, but you don't feel trapped with any one of them.

**LB** I feel that you navigated that with great grace, though I totally sympathize with the feeling that you're being watched and have to perform.

**NK** The experience has been really useful moving forward. I had a residency at Pilchuk Glass School about two years

afterward. It was the same situation—I had never worked in glass—but I remembered the lessons about how we worked together. This time I brought a *ton* of cat whiskers. I had amassed this unbelievable collection—people I don't even know mailed me their lifelong collections of cat whiskers. I had whiskers of living, dearly loved cats and also of a few cats that were no more. Oh my god, the aura and sense of responsibility around these things was intense! And it was a total flop. I could not get the whiskers to work with the glass at all. So this time the trick was abandoning the whiskers.

And then this past weekend I took a weaving intensive. I have never done weaving. I thought again about how it felt to be dumb in the face of a medium you don't understand; and how it was important to enjoy in some ways that cluelessness.

It's the play thing. I'm someone who talks so much about play, and yet it can be very hard to remember what that means in some situations. You can still get really caught up in this, "well, I'm an artist and I'm supposed to know how to do this."

**LB** You've lumped prints, glass and weaving together, which are considered "craft" mediums in different ways. I'm wondering, do the prints feel like part of your practice, or do they feel like a side thing that you did?

**NK** They feel like the first step of something. I'm actually working on a print project now with *Signal Return* in Detroit. I've had sort of a hand in one part, but the other part has to be done

by someone who knows a lot more than I do. So it's kind of like a *Whisker Prints* moment meets a *Window Seat Suprematism* moment.

But I really feel ready for an attempt to learn how to do this from scratch, on my own. I think I need to find a printmaking coach. Next fall, I'm doing a Rauschenberg Residency on Captiva Island, and I would love to be able to make some prints, for the first time under my own steam.

The thing I have to get over, which is a big block, is my hesitance around drawing. I used to work at the Drawing Center in New York, and I got very comfortable talking about drawing and responding to drawings. But I lost confidence in my own ability to draw. The whiskers prints were a way of tricking myself back into drawing.

**TR** I think the success of the *Whisker Prints* is you coming to understand the whisker as a mark.

**NK** I've never articulated this before, but it's very helpful to realize that I am much better at arranging lines than originating them. In the processes that are dear to my heart and where I feel confident and familiar, "arranging" is the important verb. That's how the *Whisker Prints* got made.

I work things out with my hands. I still keep a paper calendar. I still have to spread printouts all over the studio table and arrange them. I made a film two years ago and I had to write everything on index cards and arrange and arrange and arrange in order to figure out how to tell the story. That's just how I think. If the lines are given to me I'm happy to draw with them, but I don't

want to make the marks first.

**LB** I'm picturing you sitting at the end of the print studio, on a stool, at the press, with a pair of tweezers, in the act of placing . . . Placing is like editing. What thing goes next to what other thing, and how it sits . . .

**NK** That's totally right. And I *loved* the minutiae—how moving a whisker one millimeter this direction or the other can change things. I do that when I edit video; I change things by a frame here or a frame there. One of the most fun parts of that week was trying to find that point—it's like tuning an instrument, when suddenly you know you have the right harmonic relationship between the strings because they're beating a certain way.

Sometimes you arrive somewhere and people have promised a kind of openness that doesn't materialize, but you guys were really amazing on that front. And don't cut this out of the interview, because this is an important point. A collaboration is really an acceptance that all of us are going to know some stuff and not know some stuff. The circulation of all that had a really beautiful chemistry. I remain very grateful and think of it as a very very happy week.

**LB** Very happy, absolutely. We love collaborating with you.

**NK** Hey, wanna hear a joke?

**TR** Sure.

**NK** So what did the zero say to the eight?

**TR** I don't know—what did the zero say to the eight?

**NK** Nice belt. ■

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*Lisa Bulawsky is the director of Island Press and a professor of art in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Art at Washington University in St. Louis.*

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*Tom Reed is master printer at the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Art.*

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**Notes:**

1. *Window Seat Suprematism* (2014), suite of five etchings derived from photographs taken from window seats positioned over the wing of an airplane.

2. *Mystic Shark* (2007): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oQL7jhtDcA>.



Nina Katchadourian at Island Press, sketching with whiskers using tweezers to move them around on dark paper. Photo courtesy Island Press.