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Don't Call Me Scrappy: NADA Evolves, But Doesn't Lose Its Soul

BY Scott Indrisek | December 03, 2015



Rachel Uffner Gallery
Mary Simpson
Prine, 2015 (detail)

Photo by Scott Indrisek

MIAMI BEACH — After yesterday's slightly overwhelming exploration of Art Basel Miami Beach, it was a relief to take on the comparatively smaller (and decidedly much more interesting) NADA Miami Beach, which celebrates its 13th year in the city by moving to a more central location at the Fontainebleau hotel. The night before, I'd been chatting with a participating gallery staffer who joked about how NADA had never shed its reputation as the "scrappy" contender to ABMB, despite the fact that it's not exactly a rough-and-ready DIY affair anymore. Heading toward the entrance you pass beneath a sign that reads, simply, "Fontaine & Sparkle Ballrooms, Versaille." The hotel is *fancy*, in that it looks and smells expensive. And for the first time, NADA isn't free (a one-day ticket will run you \$20). But despite evolving into what is very clearly a well-run, professional machine — one beloved by collectors who fancy themselves a bit savvier than the deep-pocketed rabble at ABMB — NADA has still retained a spirit of discovery. It's one of the few art fairs that I would actually suggest someone visit *for fun*, even if they're not contractually obliged to attend for journalistic reasons.

My first stop was a good one: Clifton Benevento Gallery, which is featuring gnarly, wall-hung ceramics by Polly Apfelbaum that look like flattened, charred pans caked with oddly beautiful, blobby foodstuffs. They resonate nicely with two sculptural paintings by Gina Beavers, both of which find the artist exploring a comedic-Surrealist vein. (In one, a man's hand becomes the body of a soccer player; in the other, a nude mother cradles a baby who is bundled into an uncomfortably cramped ball.) Also worth spending some time with is D'Ette Nogle's "For All The Artists [Work (A-Version)]," a 30-plus minute video-collage featuring especially horrific or fantastical birth scenes from films like "Rosemary's Baby"; it's about the creative process, Michael Clifton clarified. (Ouch.)

Overall, painting is especially strong at the fair — along with works that stretch what the medium can hold. For Mikael Brkic, showing with Oslo's VI, VII, a painting can be a charcuterie board: His "Cluster 2, IT ES" is simply an assortment of salami, garlic, and eggs hung on a wood backdrop. (Dude also does some pretty magical things with dehydrated grapefruits.) Bill Brady gallery, which is now based in Miami, has a cozy booth of work by Rob Thom. At first glance they're borderline kitschy scenes — tourists gawking at an aquarium, green lawns on a golf resort — but the devil is in the details (like a looming wave that's poised to obliterate a clueless group on their sailboat). Nicelle Beauchene Gallery has one of NADA's most solid booths, the highlight of which is a grid of same-sized small canvases by Ryan Nord Kitchen, all of them sharing the same pale-blue ground, with the barest squiggly suggestions of landscape (clouds, grass). They sort of look like images from an imaginary children's book painted by Charles Burchfield. Yevgeniya Baras is also amazing. She makes mostly abstract paintings whose surfaces are ornamented with bits and bobs, hunks of shaped wood, a little sill running along the bottom edge of a canvas, and covered with hermetic runes and patterns that bring to mind the oddly moving simplicity of Forrest Bess.

Other painting highlights: Lach Glenn's weird, clean-lined oil-on-linens at Altman Siegel ("they're so *flat*," people in the booth kept remarking, meaning it as a compliment); Rose Wylie's paintings on paper — the largest featuring a portrait of Kate Moss as a kind of contorted alien — at Thomas Erben; Mary Simpson's oil-on-panel abstract works at Rachel Uffner Gallery, which alternately resemble grout, concrete, or strips of faded newsprint stuck to the canvas; and Sam Lipp's haunting ghost-shroud of Michael Jackson, at Bodega (not that I'd want to *live* with it — I'd never sleep again). Lisa Cooley has textiles-as-paintings by Josh Faught — one of them is augmented with a book, "The Self-Esteem Companion," tucked into a little pocket. Over at Rawson Projects, Wendy White has also tricked out her works with cheeky extras, like a crushed beer can and a faux-gold figurine plucked from the top of a trophy. (Fun facts: The booth includes the first lamp White has ever designed, which hangs almost to the floor; the painted walls and carpeting refer to the creamsicle color of an Esprit sweater the artist coveted long ago, but never owned.)

Interesting aside: NADA also features two digital artists making the occasionally uneasy transition into saleable objects, which (for the sake of the fair) seems to mean presenting large photographic prints as paintings. Feuer / Mesler — or Mesler / Feuer, or both, however it's supposed to be written out, I keep expecting them to change the name to some untypeable symbol, like Prince did, but these two gallerists are great and have definitely earned themselves some leeway here — has a large Jon Rafman piece depicting a degenerate gamer's workstation (junk food scattered across a keyboard, a vision of caffeinated teen slackerhood), with an image of artificial Roman ruins in the background. The surface of the print is covered with ejaculatory spasms of clear and pigmented resin. (This is another work that I think is great, but wouldn't necessarily want to own. Unless I had a legitimately huge mansion, with lots of extra space — I could put it in the panic room, with the aforementioned Michael Jackson, and go in there when I needed to freak out.) At Moran Bondaroff, Jacolby Satterwhite has also mounted a digital print like a painting. That one is accompanied by a luxuriously soft mannequin figure playing videos out of its head and crotch, a bit like Josh Kline's unnerving Teletubby cops in the last New Museum Triennial.

O.K., time to wrap this up — let's give out some arbitrary awards! Overduin & Co has the best single-artist presentation that makes chic use of empty floor space. It's an untitled work by Erika Vogt, in which oversized objects — tools, signage, toilet plungers, telephone cradles, *something*, all almost-but-not-quite recognizable — made of polyurethane and wood lean against the wall, looking like huge theater props or Claes Oldenburg outtakes. Regina Rex has the hands-down best cast-resin sculpture of a large dog-like figure with a motor for a face. It's by Carl D'Alvia, and the beast's "fur" is composed of stubby strands of resin that look like extruded Play-Doh pasta. Temnikova & Kasela gallery (of Tallinn, Estonia) gets two honors. NADA's finest art-sweaters are here, the work of Jaanus Samma, who has embroidered sweetly pastel tops with predominantly cock-centric graffiti she's copied from bathroom walls. The gallery has them hung on a retail rack, and they're \$1,500 each. Temnikova & Kasela also scores for the most subtly disturbing title of a sculptural work: Kris Lemsalu's "Father Is In Town," featuring two glazed ceramic animals tonguing each other on a fur rug, with various ceramic human body parts tangled into the mix. It's a perfect one-two punch for the right collector: You can slip into your obscene Samma sweater, curl up with the oddly affectionate creatures on the rug, and drift to sleep, dreaming of next year's fair.