

NADA New York: Still the City's Best Art Fair

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It's hard to look at fairs objectively: One year, a fair looks like a gentrified emerging scene, the next year it's called the best fair in town. Ambience changes with hourly waves of visitors, booth size, and high stakes. And then with the onset of fair fatigue, caused by too many familiar paintings or too much fair-going in general, the experience is a crapshoot. It's all relative.

So it speaks well that NADA remains a consistently good experience. It's the "friend fair,"; exhibitors get along with each other, dealers return year after year, and people are generally in a pretty good mood. It probably helps that sales tend to be strong and swift. The most purchasing, at both NADA New York and NADA Miami, occurs right when the fair opens to VIPs at 10:00 AM. This year was no different.

Part of NADA's success seems to do with shared similar interests. Look around and you'll see plenty of smushy, flat abstract paintings, crushed-up ceramics, and quirk: This year, you'll find a vintage car with art in the parking lot (Shoot the Lobster), a booth decorated as a bodega (The Hole), and **a floor covered in bubble wrap (Josee Bienvenu Gallery)**. Unlike, say, Frieze, dealers and artists were having a blast. And people were talking about the art.

Asya Geisberg said that compared to other fairs, the conversations at NADA are often deeper, and result in relationships with collectors, among others in the scene. The SculptureCenter's Associate Director Frederick Janka (he used to work for the fair) described the fair as having a "great, collegial vibe" and an informed, interested collector base. In fact, "collegial" was a term we commonly heard from exhibitors to describe the fair. (The fairs are now a good portion of the SculptureCenter's fundraising efforts—in the double-digits.)

The neighborliness makes it easy mistake NADA for a Lower East Side fair, but it's about as international as it gets. Galleries hail from Detroit, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, Vancouver, Toronto, Oslo, Berlin, Frankfurt, Rome, Turino, and London—just to name a few. By now, getting into NADA should be considered a high bar.

"They won't let us in to Miami just yet," Simon Cole of Toronto's Cooper Cole joked with us. This is the gallery's second year at NADA New York; they have yet to show in NADA Miami.

Don't let NADA's elevated status fool you into thinking the fair doesn't have its casual elements. We spotted one dealer escorting a collector with a freshly wrapped painting outside; when asked about the sale, the dealer brought up that it was somewhat scary how easily she walked outside with the painting. There was no point-of-sale slip, nothing.

Administrative elements aside, NADA remains the type of fair that galleries aim to be a part of, and not just for the sales. We spoke with Ana María Jarabo from Roberto Paradise, a Puerto Rican gallery that's been doing NADA for four years running. "There's a lot of movement on the art scene in Puerto

Rico and a lot of great artists coming from Puerto Rico,” she told us. When we asked why, she said she thinks it has to do with “going overseas” more. Partially, that takes place at the fairs and the connections sparked there, that bring in a more international network of artists. One of their artists José Lerma, for example, is also represented by Andrea Rosen and and Kavi Gupta, and while the gallery was in town for the fair, introduced them to his former student Austin Eddy, who’s a Lower East Side stalwart. It’s strange to see Eddy in this booth alongside artists like José Luis Vargas, who, despite having gone to Pratt and the Royal Academy in London, has spent the last few decades entirely removed from the art world in the mountains in Puerto Rico. It’s a small world at NADA.

While its not uncommon for dealers to participate in the same fairs year after year, few so consistently produce shining reviews from their exhibitors. A brief look at the comments made by exhibitors made at The Miami Project in 2012 demonstrates how those hiccups can eventually lead to trouble; Pulse experience exhibitor migration after mismanagement and poor sales.

One way NADA continues to distinguish itself is through messing around with the dealer-at-a- booth formula. Some artists, like Brian Belott, were manning their own booths. (That’s a similar trend we noticed over at Cutlog.) Belott was selling his own work at Essex Flowers, ushering in visitors to rifle through his piles of books and charcoal and ink drawings. It’s refreshing; it’s a booth filled with quick doodles and notes, and he stands up for them.

“Can you make it bigger?’ That’s always the question [they ask],” Belott said. “I feel like if you’re going to make a large painting, there has to be a goddamn good reason for it,” he continued. “Show me the reason for existing—other than money or power.”

Like most artists, Belott’s used to the advice to “be scarce.” Clearly, that’s getting old.

And next to Belott’s raw, experimental drawings and garbage, you can buy a beautiful handmade Moroccan rug from Brooklyn’s Magic Flying Carpets. The apartment-run dealership sources its rugs from family members and friends of Youssef Jdia. As for how he found out about the fair, he’s married to Katherine Bernhardt, who’s represented by CANADA Gallery, one of NADA’s founding members. At NADA, it doesn’t matter what you’re selling when it’s all in the family.