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On Governors Island, Art Interventions Are Everywhere

NADA House hosts 66 galleries, nonprofits and artist-run spaces arrayed in and around stately officers' residences. Expect the refreshingly unfamiliar.



A painting by Matthew Kirk, presented by Fierman, New York, features a field of drifting hieroglyphs and marks, some of which reflect the artist's Native American background. Credit.. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

By [Roberta Smith](#)

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If you want respite from the moneyed, big-name glamour of some of your larger art fairs, you can, in one little trip, leave it all behind; see some relatively untrammelled parts of New York and also revisit the way that many things in the art world begin — that is, in a D.I.Y., grass-roots situation, when people take things into their own hands. If you want V.I.P. services at this event, you'll have to bring your own; snacks and fluids are recommended and of course sensible shoes. The V.I.P. lounge is a huge greensward graced by tall, regal trees.

I refer to “NADA House 2021,” which opens Saturday on Governors Island in New York Harbor and runs through Aug. 1. It is not an art fair, technically, but it remains a lively, confab of art, artists, dealers and such organized by the New Art Dealers Alliance or NADA. To get there requires a short ferry ride from Lower Manhattan or Brooklyn. (The Brooklyn ferry runs only on weekends right now.) An eight-minute walk — past Castle Williams, a circular red sandstone fortification from the early 19th century — brings you to Colonels Row, a string of stately brick officers’ residences. “NADA House 21” occupies five of them side by side, from 403 to 405 Colonels Row.

NADA was founded in 2002 by younger, mostly New York dealers, looking for mutual support and an art fair to call their own. In 2019 it staged a Gallery Open to coincide with Fair Week and its first “NADA House” show on Governors Island. Covid-19 caused the cancellation of the second Governors Island outing.



At NADA House on Governors Island, a wood sculpture by Colby Bird at the presentation by Halsey McKay Gallery seems to have stepped out of a painting by Magritte. Credit.. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

The current “NADA House 2021” is offering work by more than 100 artists from 66 galleries, curators and artist-run or alternative spaces from the United States and around the world. (Many of the names here may be pleasantly unfamiliar.)

It was still a work in progress when I visited twice this week, with rooms waiting for dealers or artists to show up. What is already there to see is enough to compel me to return to see what finally lands.

The art is everywhere, in front halls, kitchens and pantries, in rooms once used for living, dining and sleeping. A collective that calls itself Turn On has decorated all the light switches. These quirky interventions, which crop up frequently, are always a welcome sight.



Rachel Libeskind's "Archive Fever," from "The Secret Life of Photographs," at NADA House, presented by Signs and Symbols. Credit.. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

Before you reach the houses, you may come across "Luna," by [Bill Saylor](#) (of Magenta Plains gallery), an engaging outdoor sculpture that cleverly accommodates his improvisational painting style with a panoply of graffiti-like phantasms on five thick, white panels that converge like an eccentric kiosk.

On the porch of 405A, a big painting by [Matthew Kirk \(Fierman\)](#) may attract you with its field of drifting hieroglyphs and marks, some of which reflect Kirk's Native American background. The canvas, which is two-sided, is raw and unstretched and held aloft by a wood support on a base of bricks, cinder blocks, grass and a snail.

As you approach House 403, you'll hear "Isla a Isla" (Island to Island), six short pieces by sound artists and composers presented by Embajada, a gallery in San Juan, P.R., starting with a percussion piece by Eduardo F. Rosario that sounds like a well-tempered wind chime.



Shellyne Rodriguez's "La Doña Raises Her Cane," presented by EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop. Credit.. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

Just inside House 403 are woodsy paintings by [Henry Glavin](#) and wood sculptures by Colby Bird, including one that seems to have stepped out of a painting by Magritte (Halsey McKay). The upstairs landing is dominated by the muscular realism of Shellyne Rodriguez's "La Doña Raises Her Cane" ([EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop](#)). In a feat of 3-D trompe l'oeil, Pablo Gómez Uribe (Proxyco) has turned a small room into a workshop with a chaotic pile of bricks and an orderly line of bisected ones, meticulously made of sheets of wood. All are palpably weightless, even the sledge hammers covering one wall. In another room, [the veteran artist Ken Grimes](#) gives a full sense of his illustrational style and his obsession with science-fiction and things extraterrestrial, paying homage to figures like Carl Sagan and Arthur Clarke ([Ricco/Maresca](#)).



Work by Ken Grimes, presented by Ricco/Maresca Gallery. Credit.. Nina Westervelt for *The New York Times*

At 404A, a cloak room furnished by works in wood by Quintín [Rivera Toro](#) includes a bench, available for use, titled “This Almond Tree Will Save Our Country” ([Zawahra Alejandro](#)). Textiles speak loudest here. [Kira Dominguez Hultgren](#) (Eleanor Harwood Gallery) has nearly overwhelmed one room with riveting textiles. The monumental “No Dogs Allowed,” a fan-shaped structure of cord and thread nominates this artist as the heir to Sheila Hicks.

Across the hall, [Josie Love Roebuck](#) (Latchkey Gallery) does similarly riveting things with embroidery, patchwork and paint that yield big wall hangings. “Magnificently Willful” celebrates her hair, its long strands cascading from the painting onto the floor like a curtain. [Nikholis Planck](#) (Magenta Plains) has lined part of the hallway with intriguing little paintings — executed on egg-size ovoids. Upstairs, Michelle Rosenberg (Situations) has converted a closet into a magical wonderland of discarded brushes wittily refurbished with colorful bristles.



Mixed media by Josie Love Roebuck on Governors Island, with LatchKey Gallery. Credit.. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times.



Installation by Michelle Rosenberg at NADA House, from Situations. Credit.. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times



The “Swimming Room” with balls of chalk, by Ana Bidart with Josée Bienvenu Gallery. Credit.. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

At 404B, the front hall, a gauntlet of the vigorous sign-like paintings of the outsider artist [Willie Jinks](#) (Shrine) exudes a creative freedom beside which much around it pales. Ana Bidart’s “Swimming Room” has covered the floor with a plastic board of vivid blue, leaving substantial balls of chalk for visitors to draw with ([Josée Bienvenu Gallery](#)). Two cryptic videos are recommended: The poetic “Halo Nevus” by the Welsh-Gambian artist [Tako Taal](#) alternates mysterious narrative scenes with close-ups of flooding water, accompanied by mesmerizing music (Patricia Fleming Gallery). Evan Mast’s “Landscape #2” is a 9-minute panning shot of the streets and alleys of Taiwan, whose concentration on parked, shrouded motorbikes does in fact conjure mountains (Brackett Creek Exhibitions).

In the front hall at 405A, the paintings of Ricardo Partida (Baby Blue Gallery, Chicago) exude a seductive glow — magenta and turquoise here, orange and dark yellow there. Their subject is usually a languid young man in flirtatious, traditionally female poses. They update German Expressionism and share their forthright manner with the work of Jonathan Lyndon Chase but are not yet as original.



Paintings by Ricardo Partida at the NADA exhibition on Governors Island. Presented by Baby Blue Gallery, Chicago. Credit..Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

In the dining room, the artist Rachel Libeskind (Signs and Symbols Gallery) has dotted every surface of a large room with cutout images for “Archive Fever.” It’s an airy walk-in collage, immersive and buoyant, like a Joan Miró painting reimagined by Hannah Hoch.

At 405B, Johannah Herr (Geary) creates a meditation on banana republics in Latin America and their propping up by the United States. It features striking tropical wallpaper centered on portraits of Latin American dictators; a colorful rug, replete with guns, greenbacks, and the Chiquita Banana logo and a remarkably readable poster that grimly traces the 1954 coup that ended Guatemala’s first democratic government.

“NADA House 2021” shows an organization evolving into a hybrid of exhibition and art fair. It remains a vital clearinghouse, reminding us how much the larger art fairs leave out, exposing grass roots everywhere.