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Houston Artletter - It's All About the Mango Milkshakes

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This is getting written a week or so after the event rather than being the sort of on-the-spot reporting it probably should be, but I want to submit some thoughts and images from this year's round of Miami art fairs.

I flew at dawn on Wednesday, Dec. 5, and reported directly to NADA, actually arriving a bit before they opened the doors. NADA and several of the other fairs had openings on Tuesday night, and reports were already coming in that they were sparsely attended this year because there were just too many of them and people got spread too thin. I think there were 24 supplemental fairs in addition to Miami Basel at the convention center.

Just inside the door to NADA things got off to a good start with James Fuentes Gallery. He had several sculptures by Agathe Snow, who seemed to have been in a better mood when she created them than had ever been in evidence with other work I had seen.

The cheerier look, however, brought her into the realm of artists like Rachel Harrison and Isa Genzken, but she is clearly a singular talent.

In general, however, the NADA show this year seemed flat. I expected to see lots of small, expertly rendered graphite drawings and watercolors of peculiar things. This is, after all, an art fair and dealers are there to sell things. But so much of the work was so lame that it made people like David Shrigley and Yoshitomo Nara seem like major artists. Two bright spots were provided by Ballroom Marfa and Sunday – and this isn't just Texas chauvinism. Ballroom Marfa had an installation by Matthew Day Jackson, who also showed up in Peter Blum's booth at the convention center. I had not seen this work before and still know very little about Jackson, but he is working with American history, current events, and art history in interesting ways with a combination of multi-panel prints and sculpture. At Sunday, ex-Dallasite C. Sean Horton did a one-person exhibition of ex-Houstonian Michael Jones McKean, whose complex sculptures are as dense with historical reference as Jackson's prints, although possibly more impenetrable without a guide. The installation of the work was elegant, not nearly as yellow as my poor photograph, and a relief from what seemed like so much clutter elsewhere at NADA.

After checking into my crummy hotel room. I went with a friend to the vernissage for Miami Basel. Too much of a zoo to see the art, but the people watching was excellent. Lots of scary face work, with a couple of "his and her" jobs as particular standouts. Everyone looked like they were waiting to be in a Martin Parr or Jessica Craig Martin photograph. Well, not everyone. But a lot of them.