

Pared-down beauty

Is the alluring abstract art at Nada in danger of becoming decorative?

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Gianni Politi is a 27-year-old Italian painter who lives in Rome. He had only shown once in New York before his Turin gallery, CO2, brought his work to the New Art Dealers Alliance (Nada) fair this year. Yet his pictures fit right in with the work of his American contemporaries. His abstract paintings refer vaguely to the landscape and were made relatively quickly (“the execution takes probably ten minutes, but it's composing the work that takes time,” he says), much like the art of Ethan Cook, whose eight Mark Rothko-like paintings, all 2014, are on view at the American Contemporary stand just across the way. Both painters could be put into a group show with the Baltimore artist Seth Adelsberger. His drip paintings stem from the art of Jackson Pollock, although his decision to cut squares and rectangles from the centre of his paintings is a more contemporary strategy.

Abstraction reigns supreme at Nada, and the real question is why? “We spend so much of our time looking at digital images on the internet, and I think artists want to get back to something more material,” says the dealer Hunter Bradley of the Baltimore-based Springsteen Gallery, where Adelsberger's art is on view. Also, materials, when they become the focus of art, often turn abstract, says the gallerist Jessica Lin of the Josée Bienvenu Gallery, where the artist Ana Bidart is showing abstracted paintings of barcodes. It may all come down to resolving lingering problems in painting. The dealer Matthew Dipple of American Contemporary says that “younger artists feel like there were things left undone” by an earlier generation of non-figurative painters and sculptors.

All of this points in the right direction, but there is a related problem: whether this new art supports a flexible enough conversation. The ideas behind much of the work on view throughout the fair—paring down a visual vocabulary to its basics; focusing on process and materials; introducing, when necessary, a figurative element to shake things up—may ultimately echo too loudly in a crowded field. In an almost obvious way, much of the art at Nada is alluring. But are the artists different enough from one another to host a conversation where there are multiple points of view?

At this point, the answer is still yes. Politi, Cook, Adelsberger and Bidart are each doing something distinct enough to raise certain compelling questions. But their art is on the brink: a gentle nudge in the wrong direction and it could just become pretty graphic design. As it stands, Nada has earned the distinction of being a beautiful fair. It is installed with generous space and the art is in common dialogue, one which is often missing from unfocused behemoths like Frieze New York. But the organisation, its dealers and the artists they represent need to beware the threat of becoming too fixed on a certain sight. This is a hip fair, and the sleekness of cool design could easily catch up with it and drown out any real ideas. It's a slippery slope.