

On Zona MACO: How to Excel at Being an Average Art Fair

by Michael Anthony Farley

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Last week, I visited Mexico City's Zona MACO (México Arte Contemporáneo), Latin America's largest art fair. This was on the heels of our visit to Material, a satellite fair that impressed Paddy and me beyond our expectations. Walking into MACO felt just like visiting the most art fair-y of art fairs by comparison—which is to say, the immediate experience was predictable. There were long convention center lines, groups of “fresas” queuing up to take selfies in reflective sculptures, and familiar overexposed blue-chip names such as Alex Katz and Richard Prince. (“Fresas” is Mexican slang for “yuppies”, literally translating to “strawberries”.) MACO devoted a good chunk of floor space to design wares—from furniture to high-end sunglasses. I wasn't immediately inspired to lend the event much thought beyond snapping some photos. With a few days of reflection, I realize Zona MACO is noteworthy for its extremes. And that's not just the quality or quantity of blatantly commercial crap. For all the lackluster blue chip staples on the floor, I also saw an impressive amount of well-curated project booths that smartly positioned emerging artists and galleries in dialogue with the establishment. These two poles served a useful purpose: they lay bare how contemporary art fairs function. Zona MACO is the best model I can think of to demonstrate how for-profit fairs must work to remain both commercially viable (see above GIF) and discursively relevant. For better or for worse, MACO excels at both.

Perhaps because of the peso's affordable exchange rate with other currencies, there seemed to be more ambitious presentations than we're used to seeing at most U.S. fairs. Tellingly, Latin American galleries took the limelight here. Two generous sections of curated booths offered work on par with Material in terms of feeling fresh and artist-centric. Zona MACO Sur, curated by João Mourão and Luis Silva, featured galleries with solo projects. While New Proposals, curated by Humberto Moro, focused on remarkably solid group shows from emerging galleries. Gallerists seemed eager to discuss artworks with earnest passion—never feeling like a sales pitch. That's rare. Another rare takeaway: days after attending, I find myself thinking about individual artists and their work rather than dealers and sales.



Even in the fair's uncurated general section, a handful of booths read as solid group shows sensitive to context. These paintings from Uruguay-born, DF-based Ana Bidart show what appears to be a United States guest visa worked into a disorienting abstract composition. The visa lists the address of the Untitled art fair in Miami Beach. Given the difficulties Latin American artists face entering and working in the US (and the increasingly hostile border rhetoric), it's a timely piece for an art fair in Mexico.

Ana Bidart, “Pasaporte: fold” and “Untitled (ensayo de pasaporte),” 2016 at Josée Bienvenu Gallery.