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# Shape Your Feelings: Justin Adian's Minimalist Riffs

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | SEPTEMBER 11, 2015



Left to right: Justin Adian's "Playback," 2015, "Dance Shield," 2015, and "Dungeoned," 2015.  
(© Justin Adian/ Courtesy Skarstedt, New York)

Justin Adian, sporting a prodigious and suitably metal-approved beard, is telling me about the death of former Pantera guitarist Dimebag Darrell. The band, like the artist, hails from Texas; Dimebag was infamously murdered in 2004 during a live performance in Ohio. That assassination — and the ensuing wake, during which Eddie Van Halen honored the fallen musician by laying his own custom guitar in the coffin — obliquely inspired “Razor Back,” a wall-mounted sculpture of canvas-wrapped foam whose stark red-and-white geometry conjures a kind of plush, tactile Suprematism. Each of the pieces in Adian’s latest solo, on view at Skarstedt in New York through October 24, seems to born of a similar melange of influences: Autobiographical, pop-cultural, art-historical. “Slip It In,” which resembles a piano in which the white keys have been replaced with taffy, is a subtle homage to Raymond Pettibon’s classic logo for the band Black Flag.

Adian's sculpture is simple in its construction: Hunks of ester foam atop shaped planks of wood, with canvas or drop-cloth stretched over the foam and then covered with many layers of paint traditionally used for boat or automobile exteriors. He traces the genesis of this format to an encounter with the contorted-foam works of John Chamberlain; after seeing one of them at David Zwirner, he started experimenting with a piece of discarded foam he found on the street in Chinatown. ("This was before everyone was freaked out about bedbugs," he noted.) Those early trials were unsuccessful. "I thought: The language I'm most comfortable with is painting, so let's stretch some canvas over the foam," he recalled. "I was thinking about rumble-seats in hotrods. And then the next ones looked like cushions. They were quirky, and took on narratives of their own." While working at a gallery, Adian began mining materials that would otherwise end up in the trash. "I was using drop-clothes, scrap from crates, plywood," he said. "It blew me away how much we throw away in the art world. This stuff still has utility, so why get rid of it?"

The resulting work typically conjures a parade of associations in the critical imagination, often tinged with a certain nostalgia or child-like edge: Candy, diner booths. In a typical Adian piece, two or three shapes engage with each other — mashed, stacked, intersecting, clinging, cozying up. The anthropomorphic associations are intentional; Adian says he does think of the shapes as a type of character, and a 2014 show at Skarstedt in London was named "Strangers," as if the sculptures depicted chance meetings. This exhibition is titled "Fort Worth," after the town in Texas where the artist lived until the age of 18. (He left for college at the University of North Texas and then moved to New York, where he's had a home for 15 years.) Certain sculptures directly engage with the Lone Star State: "Storm Front," a cool grey-and-blue abstraction, was born from childhood memories of watching weather systems make their way over the landscape's flatness; "I-85," two distended, noodle-like forms wedged into a corner, are meant to mimic the titular highway, which runs from North Dakota down to Austin. Other aesthetic elements point to personal associations, Texan or otherwise, like the inexpert "trashiness" of speedboat paint-jobs.

In Adian's hands, the everyday and mundane is mingled with the legacies of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. He first became interested in creating sculptures that occupy a room's corner after seeing one such work by Fred Sandback, which showed him "how easy it is to occupy two walls with a slight gesture." The visible, vertical seam of a drop-cloth wrapped around foam reminds the artist of a "prefabricated Barnett Newman zip." Adian's understanding of art was cultivated during visits to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, where he engaged with work by Ellsworth Kelly, an obvious influence — though Adian answers Kelly's flatness with a lumpy rotundness; his sculptures almost beg to be poked. This is abstraction oddly humanized: Quasi-sentient geometries, going places. The artist perceives the works as capturing "a very specific moment in a story — right *after* something happens," he said. Aidan borrows from Minimalism but eschews cool detachment. He gestures toward a small sculpture on the wall: A bulky mass in baby blue, shaped somewhat like an upside-down Oklahoma, bearing down on a smaller grey rectangle. Both forms are puckered around their edges, the canvas bunching as it was pulled taut. "This," Aidan explained, "is really about two people *feeling* each other."

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