

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## GALLERIES

### A Mother-Son “Nerd Bag” Sweatshop at Art Basel Miami Beach

by **Kyle Chayka** on December 5, 2012



Atsushi Kaga and his mother sewing bags (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

MIAMI — Including your mother in an art fair installation might seem like an odd way to get back at your parents, but for Japanese artist Atsushi Kaga it makes perfect sense. At Dublin gallery mother’s tankstation’s Art Basel Miami Beach booth, part of the Art Positions solo-show section of the fair, Kaga and his mom are perched at sewing and gluing craft stations, painstakingly constructing a collection of quirky, handmade bags on sale to fairgoers for a mere \$50.

This unexpected living installation comes out of Kaga’s childhood, when his mother would sew bags for him to take to school. The young artist didn’t quite appreciate the handiwork; he preferred name-brand products and felt out of place with his own homespun versions. Kaga’s getting his revenge by putting his mom back to work: the piece is called “Nerd Bag Sweat Shop,” presumably because the bags made him feel like a nerd, and Kaga’s mom is stuck back in the assembly line. At least she has a lot of visitors.



One of Atsushi Kaga's bags

The results of the mother-son collaboration, however, are anything but nerdy. Their totebags are patchworks of colorful, *kawaii* fabrics covered in the silhouettes of tiny animals, brash plaid patterns, and polka dots. They're decorated with Kaga's signature cartoons made of cut felt — the artist's style is something like a darkly comic version of Yoshitomo Nara's faux-naïf drawings, with bunnies, teddy bears, and sultry airline stewardesses making up a personal cosmology of characters. Visitors can help themselves to a bag emblazoned "Did u call me?" above a wide-eyed bear smoking a cigarette.

Kaga moved from Japan to Dublin to improve his English, but it seems that the city's depressive, sardonic humor rubbed off on him. In drawings, paintings, and collages that line the walls of the booth, Kaga's characters fly tiny jet planes, look up at the stars, and paint pictures with ambivalent expressions on their blank faces. There's a literary quality to the array of images that bespeaks a certain introverted obsession. But Kaga's humor and his light sense of line and color, springing as they do from a relatively scrawny Japanese dude, brighten the whole mix.



Atsushi Kaga's drawings and paintings

When the bags are completed, they're hung on a collaged fabric tree for shoppers to peruse. Blank yellow labels denote the ones that haven't found homes yet. Even at the fair preview, they were getting snatched up almost as soon as they were made (there are laptop cases to grab as well). Thankfully, there are more coming out every day this week — and don't worry, it's cool to look nerdy these days.



Atsushi Kaga's tree of bags



Atsushi Kaga's "nerd bags"

Atsushi Kaga's "Nerd Bag Sweat Shop" is on view at mother's tankstation's Art Basel Miami Beach booth through December 9 in the Art Positions section.