

# Enter Street View

In his return to 47 Canal, **Stewart Uoo** unpacks the parallel algorithms that draw us along our IRL commutes and our daily digital strolls through social feeds.



A peek at a work in progress in Stewart Uoo's studio.

**WHEN YOU WALK INTO** the New York-based artist's show, don't be alarmed if the scene echoes the city outside. Sidewalk observations play a central role in Uoo's latest body of work, which teases out the way we use our surroundings as screens for projection. By carefully remaking some urban landmarks and placing them in the cosseted interior of the white cube, Uoo transforms experiential anecdote into a scientific method. Pets are some of the street-side denizens that Uoo pays particular attention to. In his work, they operate as both an excrescence of their owners and a blank space upon which strangers can project feelings of love and comfort.

# FRIEZE

## Stewart Uoo Gives New York City Sidewalks an Exquisite Makeover

In his fourth solo exhibition at 47 Canal, New York, the artist turns everyday city objects into enchanting sculptures

By **Peter Brock** | 19 Mar 21



‘You look fabulous today!’ This is what I feel like saying to the commonplace objects that Stewart Uoo has transformed into delightful sculptures for his fourth solo exhibition, ‘used’, at 47 Canal. This show feels like going for a walk in New York after smoking a good joint. Fixtures of everyday life sparkle with unusual charm – there’s even a fake strip of pavement in the gallery. Just to the right of the entrance, Asphalt (all works 2021) prepares you to reassess familiar forms by showcasing the myriad variations in size and shape of the ginkgo leaf. Mounted to the wall, this black, squarish form is covered with these luminous yellow leaves with their distinctive, fan-shaped silhouette. Some of these specimens have an indentation in the middle that forms two lobes, while others exhibit a continuous curve. Even their colour is far from uniform: the glowing auburn actually contains pink, tawny-beige and fuzzy-white hues. The stark black background dignifies these iconic emblems of a tree, indigenous to China, but now ubiquitous across the US.



Stewart Uoo, 'used', 2021, exhibition view, 47 Canal, New York. Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York; photography: Joerg Lohse

The faux pavement, two panels wide, runs along the back wall, ending in a rounded curb that arches back in a splendid curve. Atop this humble pedestal we find an array of sculptures that depart from their pedestrian sources through simple but potent alterations. Despite missing a chunk from its base, a traffic cone (Used Traffic Cone in Well-Worn Pink) radiates confidence thanks to its stunning hue, which is a fetching compromise between peach and rose. A metal parking sign (Traffic Sign in Well-Worn Pink and Aged Blue Twinkle), of the type found all over this city, stands proudly with its pole slightly bent where the rectangular sign bolts on. No longer an enforcement tool, the sign is painted a cool bullish grey while the pole is the same peachy pink as the nearby cone. Farther down this fanciful pavement, Uoo has applied pigeon feathers to another parking sign (Traffic Sign in Pigeon Breast). Each feather graduates from fluffy white at its base to slick, dark grey toward the outer tip. The face of the sign itself swims with the motion of these gently curving feathers. Uoo's surface alterations are like an exquisite makeover: they liberate these slender towers from their bureaucratic burden so that they can become the captivating minimal sculptures they have always been.





Uoo manages to eroticize a fire hydrant (Fire Hydrant with Two Holes) by applying some lilac paint to the mid-section of this now off-white form, accentuating the two circular orifices on the trunk of its sturdy column. The casual blush of light-purple paint makes these threaded openings, which would normally receive the firefighter's hose, appear more tender than their hefty girth implies, rendering the work so much more than a well-made facsimile by implicating attraction and desire. These delicate transformations benefit from the conditions of a gallery: a quiet room with plain white walls tends to heighten a viewer's sensitivity. This made me wonder about the art world more broadly, and whether it is hopelessly naive to want contemporary art to serve as a force for love and compassion? Probably so. But at least Uoo's sculptures reminded me that visual pleasure can be an emancipatory experience.

*Stewart Uoo's 'used' is on view at 47 Canal, New York, through 27 March 2021.*

*Main image: Stewart Uoo, 'used', 2021, exhibition view, 47 Canal, New York. Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York; photography: Joerg Lohse*

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● Stewart Uoo

*Photography* Nick Sethi

By Folasade Ologundudu

You've certainly seen fire hydrants, construction cones, and rubber tires before—but none quite like the ones in Stewart Uoo's latest show, "used," at 47 Canal. Installed in the gallery is a slice of New York City streetscape: a dull gray cement sidewalk, atop which stand light poles and assorted street objects, in colors that suggest an alternate reality just beyond our own. Uoo's hollow-cast recreations are intimately nostalgic yet alien in their shiny, lustrous, and opaque finishes and pastel hues. Straddling alienation and the familiarity of city life in a pandemic, the sculptures contemplate euphoria and isolation. "This project was in response to a period of my life where who I was or what my interests were was starting to shift," the 35-year-old artist

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explains. "The exhibition started with me trying to see what intuitively and authentically made me happy or was generative of joy."

Uoo's first show at 47 Canal, which took place nearly a decade ago, featured bionic mannequins that explored fashion and digital technology. While those earlier works took cues from queer nightlife and the absurdity of consumerism, this new series strikes a somewhat more personal note. As a way of channeling his own past, Uoo affixed Ginkgo leaves to the surface of several of the works. In *American Cheese Weekend* (2021) [pictured], for instance, the artist meticulously arranged pressed painted leaves on a golden-yellow piece of salvaged cardboard. Upon close inspection, the silhouette of each leaf is visible. But, from afar, that orderliness lends itself to a transfixing, unequivocally abstract effect. Growing up, Uoo's mother would forage for the edible plants in their California neighborhood; she would pack them in his suitcase as an adult. The pungent berries left a lingering scent that remains noticeable even at a distance. "Whenever the tree was fruiting, people would gag from the smell," Uoo recalls.

Although they make reference to memory, the sculptures also evoke the strangeness of the current moment. Many of the recreated objects were things Uoo spotted while biking through the city. Disenchanted with the deterioration of New York life—from overwrought gentrification to the commodification of every aspect of life thanks to social media—Uoo recoiled at a world almost utterly unfamiliar yet quietly recognizable. But ultimately, the artist seems optimistic about the future. "I'm curious how cities will rebuild post-2020," Uoo says. "How will alternative models and radical imagining manifest? How will we show up now that we've had this opportunity to re-evaluate value in our lives?"

FOLASADE OLOGUNDUDU: Where are you from, and when did art first come into your life?

STEWART UOO: I grew up in Northern California. I was basically always into art since a really early age. I was able to go to some high school programs and those made me more aware of how to take art more seriously. I went to an arts college that was a four-year program in the painting and drawing

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department in the Bay Area. It was really formative—I had the opportunity to be as embarrassing as possible.

OLOGUNDUDU: After graduation from California College of Arts in 2007, you went on to attend the Städelschule in Frankfurt, Germany. Can you talk about that experience?

UOO: At 23 years old, I think I was one of the youngest students at that time. It felt like everyone was a lot more career-minded and had a completely different approach. Europe has a different education and funding model for the arts; there is more social support and a certain civic respect for artists in society. I was still coming from a place where you just make terrible work in school as a strategy for maximum growth.

OLOGUNDUDU: Right, so, you were experimenting?

UOO: Exactly. And I still do that. I still essentially carry that on to the exhibition. Often, people are like, "Your exhibitions always look different." But, to me, they don't really feel so different because they're conceptually coming from the same place: staying curious and trying to ask specific questions visually.

OLOGUNDUDU: I want to switch gears a little and move to your work with 47 Canal. How did your relationship with the gallery come about?

UOO: I met Margaret, who is one of the founders of 47 Canal, as an undergraduate. Then, in that period—when I was working between Germany and New York City—I reached out to her to see if she knew of any art-related things I could do. I'd basically help her out with whatever projects she was working on. At that time she [had] started 179 Canal, which was the proto-project space to 47 Canal. She included me in some of my first group shows. She then invited me to present my first solo exhibition at the gallery, "Life is Juicy" (2012).

OLOGUNDUDU: In this current exhibition, can you speak a little bit about what you're working through?

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UOO: It was kind of in response to a period in my life. I was at the end of my 20s, going into my 30s. A lot of things that were inspiring to me—like my sense of community; discovering who I was; what my interests were—were starting to shift. I was settling into a different part of who I was, but I wasn't conscious of it. The way I approach art is a lot more about actively gathering, consuming research in my own idiosyncratic way: through conversations, reading, walking around, just living.

OLOGUNDUDU: Elaborating on the materials used in this show, I'm curious about the pieces. How are the objects cast?

UOO: The commercial term for the material is Aquaresin, but it's essentially a gypsum compound. Basically, it's a kind of plaster, but much more durable. I like it because it's non-toxic. With the objects, I knew I was interested in the inevitable pathways of how people move and navigate. I was thinking about sculptures and public places, having spent considerable time outside riding my bike just seeing different parts of Brooklyn. I cast the objects from the street, and then for the surface treatment, I was thinking of other materials from outside, such as pigeon feathers. I've always been very attracted to the plumage.

When fall arrived, I was reminded of yellow Ginkgo leaves. I noticed young trees are being planted near new developments. I've always appreciated their aesthetic beauty. One of my favorite drawings is by Ellsworth Kelly. [It depicts] an outline of two Ginkgo leaves, side by side. My mom comes from the countryside of South Korea. Within Napa, she still forages for edible weeds and fruiting trees that are culturally specific, so it was interesting to reflect on the parallels of foraging and psychogeography.

OLOGUNDUDU: What is the significance of the concrete cement sidewalk?

UOO: The sidewalk is generic enough for me that everyone has a very similar kind of relationship to it. And I appreciate how the grid also creates

compositional order. But for me, it's a reminder of how one navigates the grid within the city.



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OLOGUNDUDU: Is there anything, in particular, you're hoping people take away from this show?

UOO: I want to feel a connection, that we are interconnected. That, in turn, makes me feel less alone and together with everyone else.

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