

# STEWART UOO

## Conceptual Objects

BY EMILY CHUN



Portrait of STEWART UOO in his Brooklyn studio. Photo by Emily Chun for *ArtAsiaPacific*.





Silicone molds of cat sculptures were piled up on the windowsill in Uoo's studio. Photo by Emily Chun for *ArtAsiaPacific*.



Placed on a desk alongside works-in-progress and various tools were ginkgo leaves that the artist had collected. Photo by Emily Chun for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

Stewart Uoo is something of a rhizomatic artist; spanning conceptual sculpture, video, fashion editorial-like photography, collage, and a cult art-and-performance event called *It's Get Better* (2013- ), his practice is characterized by a radical indeterminacy. His studio is located on the third floor of a former warehouse nestled in East Brooklyn, an industrial part of New York pullulated with boxcars and cranes.

When I visited on a crisp March day, the hallways leading to the space were lined with big tropical potted plants, which were temporarily sheltering there due to a move (Uoo joked that walking through these hallways reminded him of the iconic vegetation in Jennifer Lopez's music video for the 1999 pop hit *Waiting for Tonight*). Dominating one table across the entrance of the studio were peachy-colored silicone molds that Uoo was testing out to create a frame for his friend's wedding gift, a drawing of their cat, which he also produced. After creating the silicone mold from the original, professionally made frame, Uoo then cast the parts in Aquaresin (a fiberglass-reinforced gypsum compound, essentially a more durable and user-friendly plaster) and planned to assemble the parts with epoxy. Small tubs of various sizes and mixing tools strewn across the tables attested to these efforts. It's one thing to produce a drawing as a gift, but to also create its frame from

scratch feels like an endeavor of a different order, and signals Uoo's interest in the objectness of a work of art.

Uoo comes from a painting background, having studied in California and then in Frankfurt for his graduate work. But his practice has since expanded beyond painting and his relentless material investigations speak to a broader desire to return to the fundamental question of what an artwork is, rather than what it does or what it means. And like all good artists, he's invested in how forms have both affordances and limitations. During my visit, he wondered aloud why he feels drawn to materials such as silicone, and I offered up tentatively that silicone is also a fluid, like paint. Thinking back, I don't think that quite explains it. Rather, what seems to undergird Uoo's interest in different materials (particularly those deriving from plastic, such as silicone and epoxy), and their concatenations and transformations (in the past, Uoo would leave out all sorts of materials on his roof to distress them) is what theorist Roland Barthes calls the transubstantiating miracle of art: one substance revealed to be, or turning into, another. In an intriguing micro-essay called "Plastic," written in the mid-1950s, Barthes is fascinated by how plastic, as a singular origin, can yield a plurality of effects, from buckets to jewels, and elaborates: "plastic . . . is the transmutation of matter. At one end,



STEWART UOO, *Security Window Grill IV*, 2014, steel, enamel, rust, silicone, acrylic varnish, and human hair, 182×92×50 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.



Installation view of STEWART UOO's *Don't Touch Me (No ParTy)*, 2012, polyurethane resin, ink, epoxy, wires, clothing, acrylic nails, accessories, ferrofluid, razor wire, hair, steel ball bearings, eyelashes, and vinyl, 187.96×43.18×137.16 cm, at "Life is Juicy," 47 Canal, New York, 2012. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal.

raw, telluric matter, at the other, the finished, human object; and between these two extremes, nothing; nothing but a transit . . . So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature."

Across the room, perched on the windowsill, were more silicone molds—this time of garden sculptures of cats. They are slippery and creepy to hold, as they are all skin, no substance. Like the dogs that Uoo created from silicone molds for "used," his 2021 solo show at 47 Canal gallery in New York, these sepulchral cats seem either slumbering or dead; it's hard to tell. Next to the felines were pucky dog statues, also made of silicone, whose heads are crowned with butt plugs. Uoo is interested in how pets can be surrogates for children in the gay community, and how dogs in particular might serve as the vessel for this kind of sublimation. These dogs display Uoo's balmy wit, and the kind of dark erotic humor characteristic of John Wesley's irreverent paintings. Few are as alive to the absurdity of life as artists who, like Uoo, infuse Pop tchotchkes with Surrealist tendencies.

Many of these objects are ideas in the gestation stage for Uoo's next solo show, which is slated to open in 2023 at Galerie Buchholz in Berlin. But he has long been creating objects that simultaneously feel plagued by nightmares and encrusted with playful desires. For his solo show in 2014 at Buchholz, he embellished window grills—ubiquitous in New York—with clumps of pink silicone accreting around the individual metal bars like chewed gum and sprouting tufts of human hair. These security devices look as though they bear the remains of human bodies that squeezed through their slim bars, as one critic put it. In this vein, the works are redolent of installations by artists like Tobias Bradford and Pamela Rosenkranz, whose uncanny, disintegrated bodies suggest an unfixed corporality that is increasingly bound up with technology and synthetic materials. But maybe more compellingly, these window grills, in the way they enflame the grill's rigid, sterile grid with slimy materials, nod to Post-Minimalist artists like Eva Hesse and Hannah Wilke who applied pliable, sensual materials such as fiberglass and liquid latex onto the strict geometries of Minimalism. By recontextualizing these window grills into an exhibition space, Uoo defangs them of their protective, disciplinary function, rendering them defunct and even a bit melancholy.

As Uoo has heavily drawn from pop culture, queer nightlife, and sci-fi, critics have often pointed to the techno-futuristic dimension in his works, as evident, for example, in his *Blade Runner*-like cyborg sculptures that were exhibited at his first solo show at 47 Canal in 2012 and a year later at the Whitney Museum in a two-person show with Jana Euler. Sometimes installed perpendicular to the wall, sometimes impaled upright, these bionic mannequins, donning fake eyelashes, dangling wires, and glitter, conjure a collapsed, post-apocalyptic fantasy of urban females who never wake up after a wild night out. But, as Uoo's window grills attest, some of his most interesting works are born from his relationship to the urban landscape. On a table in a corner of his studio were labeled Ziploc bags containing pigeon-breast feathers; next to them lay pressed ginkgo leaves, most of them retaining their yellowish mustard color. Both of these urban materials were included in "used" at 47 Canal, for which he recreated a stretch of pavement. The sidewalk, as the most generic element of the built environment, functioned almost as a literal platform on which Uoo projected his particular sensitivities to the city. This faux sidewalk included a blush-colored traffic cone, signposts, a slumbering dog covered in pigeon feathers, and a lilac fire hydrant, all cast from





Installation view of **STEWART UOO**'s "used" at 47 Canal, New York, 2021. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal.

objects found on the street. Their surface treatment of pigeon feathers and ginkgo leaves—ostensibly "raw" materials sourced from the outside world—is ironically what gives them away as fabricated sculptures.

Uoo characterizes these explorations as psychogeography, a concept developed in 1955 by the theorist Guy Debord and members of the Situationist International, who were inspired by 19th-century poet Charles Baudelaire's notion of the *flâneur*—an urban wanderer. Debord defined psychogeography as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." On his walks in New York, Uoo likes to pick up ginkgo leaves and sticks, sometimes to use as drawing utensils. Like Joseph Cornell, who famously relished in collecting everyday ephemera, Uoo seems to seek aesthetic encounters through urban foraging. Such encounters materialize in works such as those in "used," startling in their bathetic, banal presentation, and shot through with dreamy, cotton-candy hues and a Dadaist, readymade sensibility. Urban walks and creativity have long been seen as mutually constitutive, particularly by Virginia Woolf. In a 1927 essay called "Street Haunting," Woolf writes about getting to know a city by wandering (or what she calls "haunting") its streets and investigating all its corners. Like the concept of haunting itself, Uoo's relationship to streets comes slowly into focus. And as such, part of what makes his works so compelling are how they reveal a sense of an occluded self in moments of total aesthetic commitment. His sculptures, molded from silicone and finished with polyurethane, often bear no overt trace of his hand; he can get outside of himself. Uoo's yoking of different materials and explorations of formal alterities maintain a sense of wonder around the capability of materials to transmute, proliferate, and ultimately, enchant.



Installation view of **STEWART UOO**'s "used" at 47 Canal, New York, 2021. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal.