

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