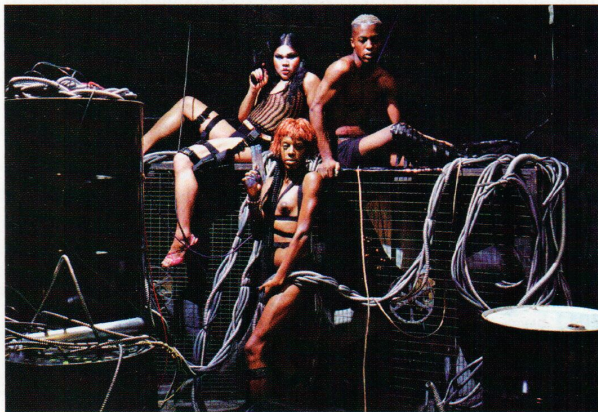


Stewart Uoo

GALERIE BUCHHOLZ

In Joan Didion's famous description of New York's "insistent sentimentalization of experience," she claimed it involved a century-old "distortion and flattening of character and the reduction of events to narrative." Today, however, her observation calls for different terms. The distortion of character may be ubiquitous, but *flattening* is too simple a word to describe what links self to surface; and rather than being reduced, events are exaggerated through narrative. New York's "downtown scene," for example, thrives on its relationship with its own romanticized past, which is not to deny the thrill or the legitimacy of its current incarnation as a celebration of new intersections of ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and charisma. But the temporal lag between a counterculture and its co-optation seems ever smaller, and once the party's over, the two may seem almost indistinguishable.

The resulting conflation of substance and style, hipness and hype, was one starting point of Stewart Uoo's recent exhibition. Fashion-editorial-style photos, made in collaboration with Heji Shin, depict people from the New York downtown/nightlife/queer/trans scene. In the mirrored and recomposed image *Wet Wonder* (all works 2014), Juliana Huxtable, an ex-ACLU paralegal who is perhaps the best known of these figures, lies in a bathtub, while in *No Secrets*, the image



window grilles (large metal cages with protuberances for air conditioners, familiar sights in brownstone Brooklyn), partially covered with fleshy tubes of veiny latex and small tufts of hair. These intestinal forms seem to contradict or rebuke the objects to which they are affixed, which, in their original function, literally constitute the boundary between inside and outside, private and public, defined as safe and hostile respectively. A signifier of liminality here thus itself becomes a site of hybridization, wherein horror-film special effects clash with white-painted steel to leave avatar-sculptures made of fragments of existing image-languages, ranging from a Brooklyn streetscape to sculptural statuary and, via the fake flesh, the artist Paul Thek—a paradigmatic reclaimed (even co-opted) outsider.

The narrative in a fashion shoot is typically escapist, consciously staged propaganda for an otherworldly mode of seeing and seeming. But its supposed counterpart, grim (or at least everyday) reality, has also been undone. Uoo addressed this sense of collapsed structures in an interview in *Artforum* last year: "Identity is seen as passé. Aren't we all post-human? But I think living a story and telling it is very important. . . . We already know that identity matters, that it's nowhere—it's like breathing." The fashion/horror scenarios in the exhibition suggested that stories are themselves a reality hack—a way of mixing up the given and the staged.

—Alexander Scrimgeour

Stewart Uoo,
Out Here, 2014.
C-print, 26 x 40".

gets a horror-flick modification: She is covered in wet silk chiffon. DeSe Escobar, incongruously dressed in a fishnet outfit, holds a pistol in the snow in *Bad Bitch Heaven*. And in *Trust No One*, Eliot Glass looks devastatingly stylish in black patent-leather stiletto boots. A group photo, *Out Here*, shows the three of them in a grungy, cable-filled warehouse: a page from an anti-heteronormative lookbook.

In all these images, Uoo seems to situate identity at the intersection of simulation, fantasy, performance, and selfhood. All of these terms are already mediated—by technology, fashion, art, TV, film, politics, theory. And in the gallery space, this concoction was modulated, too, of course, by the outside gaze that comes with presenting such work—specifically: such bodies, in such scenarios—in an upscale Berlin townhouse gallery. Yet the real strangeness—and force—of the exhibition lay in the way the photographs' overt theatricality connected with four