

ARTFORUM



Justin Sterling, *Broken Windows*, 2016–19, found windows, glass, caulk, expandable foam, live plants, soil, gravel, spray paint, plastic, dimensions variable.

Justin Sterling

CATHOUSE PROPER AT 524 PROJECTS

The multivalent figure of the broken window—emblem of both thoughtless neglect and mindful disobedience, of a certain species of policing and righteous resistance to it—presided over “Orange Chapel,” Justin Sterling’s stirring solo show at Cathouse Proper in Brooklyn. Provocative and contemplative in equal measure, and shot through with rough melancholic beauty, the artist’s intervention into the Court Street space consisted of three sculptural scenarios placed around the gallery, whose six large windows had been replaced by his signature injured ones. Sterling first shatters and then reassembles his window sculptures and in doing so consecrates them. He ministers to their broken forms with coarse remedies, including tape, caulk, and spray foam, but also transmutes their damaged bodies into sites of profusion and regeneration, filling them with dirt and plants, trimming them with paint and found objects. His secular stained glass mediated the urban landscape

visible through them as well as the interior of Cathouse Proper itself, casting shadows and ghostly smears of color along the gallery's walls—sanctifying the world both without and within.

Sterling, a New York-based Black artist, is attuned to the psycho-geographic landscape of the city, and the first work visitors encountered in the space was his avatar, *David*, 2017. A safety-orange traffic cone dressed in a denim vest and a gray hoodie, David features in several videos by the artist. In one, posted to Sterling's Instagram, the manikin appears in various locations around Manhattan. A totem of intersecting vulnerabilities, David is small, innocent. Clad in a miniature version of the familiar garb that after Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012 would become a symbol of Black men's exposure to racially motivated violence, he stands in the middle of the street holding a golden balloon like a child who has wandered away from his caregiver. Yet he also has a placid watchfulness about him—a quiet audacity that makes one feel not just sympathy but admiration for him.

The other freestanding works in Sterling's ad hoc chapel similarly demonstrated his ability to infuse familiar objects with a spiritual potency. *Deposition*, 2017, featured a towering metal ladder propped against a wall in the double-height space. At the top of the ladder was a window, hung from one corner so that its foursquare shape formed a crisscrossed lozenge, suggesting a West African cosmogram. At the bottom of this industrial crucifix, suspended from a length of thick chain, a bowling ball—painted a bright orange, like a prison jumpsuit—hovered just inches above the floor. This tension between a desire to ascend and a kind of inescapable downward pull also animated *River*, 2017, in which a fractured lavatory sink suggested a pitiable font. Water poured from the work's salt-encrusted faucet and passed over shards of broken glass before disappearing down a drain and into a beat-up fire hydrant set beneath the shallow bowl.

Sterling's canny mixing of the sacred and profane was nowhere more evident, though, than in the aforementioned sextet, *Broken Windows*, 2016–19, which offered up a riot of jury-rigged form and color. The three windows on the bottom row were more terrestrial; the two outer frames were made dark and earthy with black foam and paint, while the central one featured actual soil, from which a small crop of hemp was happily sprouting. The top trio had a more celestial cast, with blues and greens tinting the light that passed in through the splintered panes. Given limits on attendance prescribed by Covid-19 regulations, most visitors to the show would likely have had the space to themselves. That solitude, coupled with Sterling's skill in commingling the meager and the numinous, produced a remarkably persuasive transformation of the white cube into a rawly sacred compartment—one that acknowledged both suffering and the possibility of redemption. It was only fitting that on the exhibition's final day, Sterling—a talented trumpeter—brought his horn into the gallery and blew a short, tender improvisation in front of the windows: a tune carefully pitched, like the show, between a jazz riff and a hymn.

— *Jeffrey Kastner*