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MARKING TIME WITH YUJI AGEMATSU

The artist's sculptures made of sidewalk debris are diaristic records of the city's many lives.

By Julie Belcove



Yuji Agematsu illustration by João Fazenda

The other day, in Times Square, the artist Yuji Agematsu took a notebook and a pen from his pants pocket. He logged the time, 12:34 P.M., and the precise location, the south side of Forty-second Street between Broadway and Seventh Avenue, and drew a rough map. Then something caught his eye. "That spot," he said, pointing to the ground beside a trash can several feet away. He crossed the sidewalk and picked up a tiny whitish object, which resembled a used eraser. "Gum," he declared approvingly. He dropped the wad into a cellophane sleeve he'd removed from a pack of American Spirit cigarettes, then carefully slid the sleeve into the empty cigarette box, and returned the package to his shirt pocket for safekeeping.

Shortly after Agematsu, who is sixty-two, moved to New York from Japan, in 1980, he began taking daily exploratory walks, picking up debris along the way to use in assemblage-style sculptures. In 1996, he decided to incorporate his pack-a-day habit into a new project, making a composition inside a cellophane sleeve on each expedition, a practice that has resulted in thousands of diminutive sculptures that are diaristic records of his and the city's lives. All three hundred and sixty-five days' worth of his 2017 "zips," as he calls them, are on view at the fifty-seventh edition of the Carnegie International, in Pittsburgh, through March 25th. Ingrid Schaffner, the show's curator, called the works "a daily art practice, personal ritual, and way of marking time on earth." (They sell in monthly sets for around twenty thousand dollars.)



Art work by Yuji Agematsu / Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery

Crossing Broadway, Agematsu, who has floppy black hair, a graying beard, and glasses, noticed flakes of bright-green color scattered around a small puddle. He bent low and scraped them up: crayon. He added them to the wrapper in his pocket and logged the location in his notebook, which he considers part of the art project. He wrote in minuscule handwriting in a combination of English and Japanese. Continuing north, he said, “I’m not looking at the ground much—I just go straight. Objects are always looking at me.”

Over the years, Agematsu has developed favorite neighborhoods for scavenging: Times Square, Herald Square, Chinatown. He described subway stations, gutters, and the sidewalk under traffic signals or scaffolding as places where people toss with impunity. Desirable debris—he prefers not to call it garbage—also collects at the edges of buildings, such as next to Nasdaq’s tower, on Broadway, where he found some strands of plastic turf tangled amid a mass of hair and a hunk of what can only be described as filth. At a newsstand outside a nearby Starbucks, he scored an M&M, its dye dissolved from the morning rain and half its shell missing. Back in his studio, he secures the items in place inside the cellophane with drops of resin.

Until this past summer, Agematsu, who lives with his wife in Crown Heights, had always supported himself with a day job. He has worked as an art handler and a cleaner at galleries, and he took care of a building in SoHo owned by the Donald Judd Foundation. Recent success has allowed him to be a full-time artist. Earlier in the week, he’d explored Vinegar Hill, in Brooklyn, where he was pleased to collect a dead cicada, and the South Bronx, which, he said, “feels like the early eighties.” The East Village has lost its appeal. “It’s drastically changed. Looks ugly.” Still, he said, shiny new condos do not deter gum-spitters. “People’s behavior never changes,” he said. “This is a consumer society.”



Art work by Yuji Agematsu / Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery

Agematsu strode along the sidewalk at a fast clip. He ignored a soda-bottle cap and a Swedish Fish wrapper. “It’s too easy to identify,” he said. “I’m interested in anonymous things.” Passersby turned their heads when he stooped to scoop up a congealing red gummy, but they did not stop. Only cops have ever approached him, he said: “They asked me very stupid questions —‘What are you doing? This is art?’ ”

It had started to rain—drops smeared the ink in Agematsu’s notebook, but he just brushed them away. Rain is helpful. “It breaks things down and makes them sticky,” he said; they become more unrecognizable. “I like wondering what it used to be.” Outside an Old Navy, he spotted a skinny Club cigarette with a blue stripe. “I’ve never seen one like this,” he said excitedly. He slid it into the corner of the cellophane. Soon after, he stuck wads of gum onto the cigarette, using a cocktail skewer that he’d brought along as a tool.

At Forty-sixth Street, Agematsu held up the day’s “zip.” It looked a little like a demented bonsai tree. He adjusted a crumpled Hershey’s Kiss foil dangling from the top of the cellophane like a disco ball, then straightened a long pink object of indeterminate origin. “I think that’s it for today,” he said. “I like it.” He noted the time, 1:28 p.m., and lit a cigarette. ♦

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