

# HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

## Art for a Time of Uncertainty

Jude Tallichet's art is a reminder that, although our world has changed, something weird and wonderful may await us on the other side.

Joy Sperling April 25, 2020



Installation view of Jude Tallichet: *Heat Map* at Smack Mellon (all images courtesy E. Frossard)

The day that Jude Tallichet's exhibition *Heat Map* opened at Smack Mellon (March 7) was also the day before the COVID-19 pandemic brought an end to life as we knew it. It is hard to believe how much the world has tipped off its axis in the seven weeks since. *Heat Map* similarly tips us into a world has been upended and suspended in a seemingly endless free fall of uncertainty.

Tallichet's uncanny sculptures are based on the material of everyday urban life — for instance, a tree in front of a house or car in the driveway — but the artist defamiliarizes them. They can be raucously funny and poignantly moving; they sometimes catch us unawares with their emotional resonance and then pivot instantly to project irrepressible optimism. To quote the artist: “The vitality of these things could be magical, or it could just be life as we don’t quite know it.”

The exhibition's centerpiece is “Heat Map” (2019), a gypsum-and-polyurethane cast of a tree trunk, along with its roots and part of the sidewalk, outside of Tallichet's home in Ridgewood, Queens. The sculpture heaves up from the ground like a mass of energy. The bright red, green, yellow, and blue powdered pigments that tint it mimic a heat map, a common way of visualizing any kind of data in three dimensions. Yet we're not told what this heat map measures. Population

density, weather, geology, crime, disease? A number of directions are implied: the tree trunk looks like a gaping, hollowed out volcano, an ancient bone midden, or a deserted landscape with tiny architectural ruins. The deep, rich pigments suggest both data-driven and emotional significance in each curve and twist.



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“Heat Map” encompasses multiple layers of material information and ideas, mixing ways of seeing, collecting, and interpreting data, to create a complex statement on how place and space as well as time are formed differently. The work asserts that because all measurement is based on human observation and interpretation, the mapping of meaning is ultimately subject to bias. Thus, Tallichet suggests, nothing is ever quite what it seems to be.

“Fire Escape” (2020), on the wall nearby, is a full-scale three-story New York city fire escape, constructed from industrial-weight aluminum foil over a steel armature. Its flimsy, battered appearance and precipitous angle threaten to drop anyone who dares step foot

on it straight onto the street. To its right is another aluminum piece, “Piano Forte” (2016). The dented and crinkled form of an upright piano hangs from the wall, a pair of cast aluminum feet dangling behind the piano pedals, transmuting the piano into a ghostly spirit ascending into the firmament. By recreating heavy and substantial objects with aluminum and other lightweight materials, Tallichet undercuts their heft with a sense of impermanence and instability.



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Across the gallery, “Ghost Bikes” (2014), two motorcycles made of aluminum foil, are robbed of the growling, low-throated power of actual motorcycles. Just as the ghosts of the original bikes seem to manifest, they shrink into aluminum-wrapped leftovers of a meal — or perhaps a reality that is hard to stomach.

The latter idea is also at play with “Keyboards,” reinforced gypsum casts of keyboards, painted black and twisted into writhing forms. Resembling rubber retreads thrown off by eighteen-wheelers on the highway, they could also be the scorched remains of a disaster.

Similarly unsettling is “Relic” (2014), a reinforced gypsum and steel-frame cast of a 2000 Hyundai Accent. The car is widely considered one of the most dependable sub-compacts of the past 25 years, despite its questionable safety record. Tallichet reimagines it as white plates that resemble flat blached pieces of a carcass, pieced together like the bones of a reconstructed dinosaur skeleton. Death creeps in and around its planar, architectural form, which seems almost to shiver. It is dangerous, terrifying, and catastrophic.



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“Wriggle” (2018) and the three-part “Pod” (2020) introduce a more overtly figurative element to the show. The multi-limbed “Wriggle” looks like an alien or monster, or a magnified pathogen. The arms and hands, sheathed in polyurethane sheeting and rubber gloves, reach out, starburst-like, to passersby as the slightly grubby polyester-clothed body balances precariously on unsteady legs. It is hard not to relate this piece to the COVID-19

pandemic; the figure could be the potential cause or a victim pleading for support.

Two of the three pods are cast from sleeping bags and tinted with bright, candy-colored stripes. Their volume suggests that sleepers are inside, transforming them into giant cocoons whose pupae may or may not hatch (a remnant of fuzz on one points to the latter). At the same time, the surface recalls the synthetic fabric of disposable protective medical clothing and the forms evoke body bags.



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In contrast, the lone pod is cast in white beeswax and lies alone on the floor between “Heat Map” and the aluminum wall pieces. In a show characterized by instability, uncertainty, and disequilibrium, it is a powerfully direct symbol of loss. It is a *memento mori*. Its soft beeswax surface imbues

the form with a sense of warmth. Its simplicity and elegance is achingly moving — all the more today.

Jude Tallichet's world is profoundly disorienting. She transmogrifies the world around us. Despite the implications of disaster, just under the surface bubble currents of humanity, humor, and joy. These are reminders that, although our world has changed, something weird and wonderful may await us on the other side. In this sense her work is redemptive: the aluminum fire escape and human-piano hybrid rise up to become constellations on the stark white wall. Meanwhile, the car has transubstantiated into something ethereal, the pods metamorphose, and "Heat Map" rises like a phoenix from the sidewalk — as a new embodiment of the sum of its multiple meanings, a multicolored incarnation of a future unknown.

Jude Tallichet: Heat Map is on view at Smack Mellon (92 Plymouth Street, Brooklyn).

*Editor's note: Please note that physical viewing hours for this exhibition have been temporarily suspended in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Cognizant of the importance of discussions around art and culture during this time, we encourage readers to explore the exhibition virtually [here](#) as many of us continue to self-isolate.*

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