

FORT GANSEVOORT

Garage

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An Artist Invented a Mythical Beast Who Lives in This New York Townhouse

By Max Lakin



View of *Sam Stewart: Cryptid*. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort

Artist-designer Sam Stewart's new show in a Meatpacking District apartment is overseen by a mysterious presence.

Masking your intentions is big right now. Online cryptocurrency exchanges, crypto-fascists in the White House, **face masks** on the runway, faceless oligarchs shielded by obtusely named LLCs snapping up luxury real estate like so many bonbons. Cloaking our movements, operating in the half-shadows—there's something about the rapidly deteriorating state of global affairs that makes clandestine living so attractive.

This idea was at the heart of last fall's *Timeshare*, a group show housed in Zaha Hadid's undulating **520 West 28th Street**, the architect's first and last residential project in New York. Spread across several of the building's high-priced apartments, the show manifested imagined human narratives, questioning why such spaces exist at all, and what they say about us. Sam Stewart's contribution, a cat condo that incorporated a snaking tree limb and a castle turret, prefigured *Cryptid*, his first solo show, now on view by appointment at **Fort Gansevoort** in New York. In the exhibition, Stewart pushes the idea of a shapeless entity occupying luxury real estate to its extreme.

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Fort Gansevoort sits in a slender townhouse in the Meatpacking District, its name a nod to its position as a redoubt in a neighborhood of clubstaurants. Earlier this winter, after the neighboring retail tenant departed, the gallery began leasing the adjacent townhouse, whose upstairs units were unoccupied but zoned for residential use (and thus required by the Department of Buildings to have things like a shower in the bathroom and a working kitchen). So Stewart gave the residence an occupant: a cryptid, some mythic Yeti or Bigfoot, a creature whose existence is unconfirmed by the scientific community but is able nonetheless to afford downtown Manhattan rents.



View of Sam Stewart: *Cryptid*. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort

Stewart, who makes artful, modernist-inflected furniture that skirts the boundary between function and form, fills the narrow, otherwise anodyne space with the expected domestic conveniences of any good, affluent urbanite: a daybed, interesting chairs, a home gym. As much capitalist commentary as comic lark—at this point, is NYC real estate any less absurd than folklore about glandular humanoids?—*Cryptid* traffics in the vocabulary of high-production-values furniture design, and it's not hard to imagine these pieces in the showroom of some Milanese manufacturer or the **Salone del Mobile**. Taken as a whole, the *Cryptid* apartment probes the psychological relationship between our space and the things we put in it—how what we see reflects what we can't.

Stewart approached the Fort Gansevoort space as an extension of the Hadid site, a psychologically

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loaded expression of luxury real estate's aesthetic of generalized opulence. "With the gallery it's very clear what's going on: it's this residential space that's been modified to be used commercially," Stewart said. "What I noticed at Zaha's building is that there's no modification to make it a commercial space—it is a residential space, but I think of them as in-between spaces: you have to make it look convincingly nice enough for someone to buy, as an investment or living space, but it also has to leave enough room to allow for, How can my decorator or designer or architect make this into something different? So at Zaha's, there's this huge marble island in the kitchen, and there's a bathroom that's all Carrera marble, these tubs custom designed for the building—but every apartment has those same materials, those same designs. So you feel like you're in those cheap furniture showrooms, like an IKEA, but surrounded by these very luxurious interiors. It's almost like purgatory for architecture. It's like you're lying to yourself that this means anything, because it really doesn't. I have an emotional response to those types of spaces, and this space feels like a great example of that."

Aesthetically and materially, the pieces here aren't far off from the commissions Stewart builds for private clients, but are exaggerated just past realism's horizon line: a burlled wood table with tree-trunk legs ringed in tufted, snow-white leather that serves as a combination dining table and daybed and looks uncomfortable for both is a riff on *Table and Chair*, Richard Artschwager's barely-usable 1964 intervention into domestic perspective that limned the demilitarized zone between furniture and sculpture. It's also a nod to that artist's love of Formica; a droopy bench press and barbell set of formed sand evokes both Mary Bauermeister and Memphis design; high-backed dining chairs made from snarled maple and beech branches that Stewart charred with a propane torch and then shrouded in gray vinyl stand like spiritual totems—the Franz West equivalent of your grandmother's efforts to protect the good upholstery.

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Sam Stewart, *Untitled (Treadmill)*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort

“With the stuff that I do for private commissions, there’s an element of pragmatism when it comes to something that someone is going to use, like a sofa,” Stewart said. “Clients will give me a pretty long leash to articulate things in my own language, but I still need to make a sofa. For awhile I tried to keep them separate [from my art], you know, I felt like it was important to do that. Probably a year and a half ago I started letting go of that and letting one play off the other, and not be so rigid.”

Stewart’s pieces are partly influenced by the textures of the city—a diamond-plated steel bench evokes sidewalk cellar hatches; a five-foot-tall curve of a lamp dressed in an orange vinyl sheath looks, among other, ruder things, like an overgrown standpipe caught in a *Yellow Submarine*

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interlude—but their immediate reference point is fashion. “I have lots of friends in fashion, and I pay close attention to that too, more as an observer. You have all these sorts of codes and you understand what’s going on at the moment, but I always kind of feel a bit removed at the same time, like it’s a sort of philosophical model to observe all these different aesthetic treatments, but when it comes down to it, the method is still very much the same.” Two years ago, for the since-defunct fashion label **öhlin/d’s Fall 2016 show at New York Fashion Week**, Stewart created a suite of wearable furniture inspired by the work of Hussein Chalayan, modular wooden forms that distilled clothing down to their most basic geometric shapes.

In *Cryptid*, Stewart pulls from those pieces, as well as more recent runway references. So the vinyl coat worn by the charred branch chairs recalls the vinyl-veiled coats Raf Simons showed for **his first Calvin Klein collection** last year, at once concealed and transparent. (Stewart experimented with this application in an earlier table whose legs he upholstered in tobacco leather and then wrapped in clear vinyl, after seeing a woman on the subway on a muggy summer day, her clear plastic raincoat sticking to her skin). **Fashion’s infatuation with “ugly” sneakers** wends its way in as well, the exaggerated proportions and clunky, overgrown soles finding their way into the stubby leather table legs. One covert reference is hidden on the underside of the daybed-table, laminated in glossy red lacquer.

“It’s a flag of wealth, color as a signifier,” Stewart said. “To people who don’t understand the code, it’s just red. But for people who have some concept of what that red means, you can quickly turn that into a larger narrative of who that person is and what they care about—even if it’s wrong. It takes you there. It finds its way in all the time.”

Sam Stewart: Cryptid *is on view by appointment only through March 24.*