

STUDIO VISIT ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/SERIES/STUDIO-VISIT/](https://bombmagazine.org/series/studio-visit/))

Justin Sterling

Working with broken and repaired glass.

BY LOUIS BURY ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/AUTHOR/LOUIS-BURY](https://bombmagazine.org/author/louis-bury/))

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(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Justin-Sterling1_2023-04-22-113507_itno.jpg)

All photos by Louis Bury.

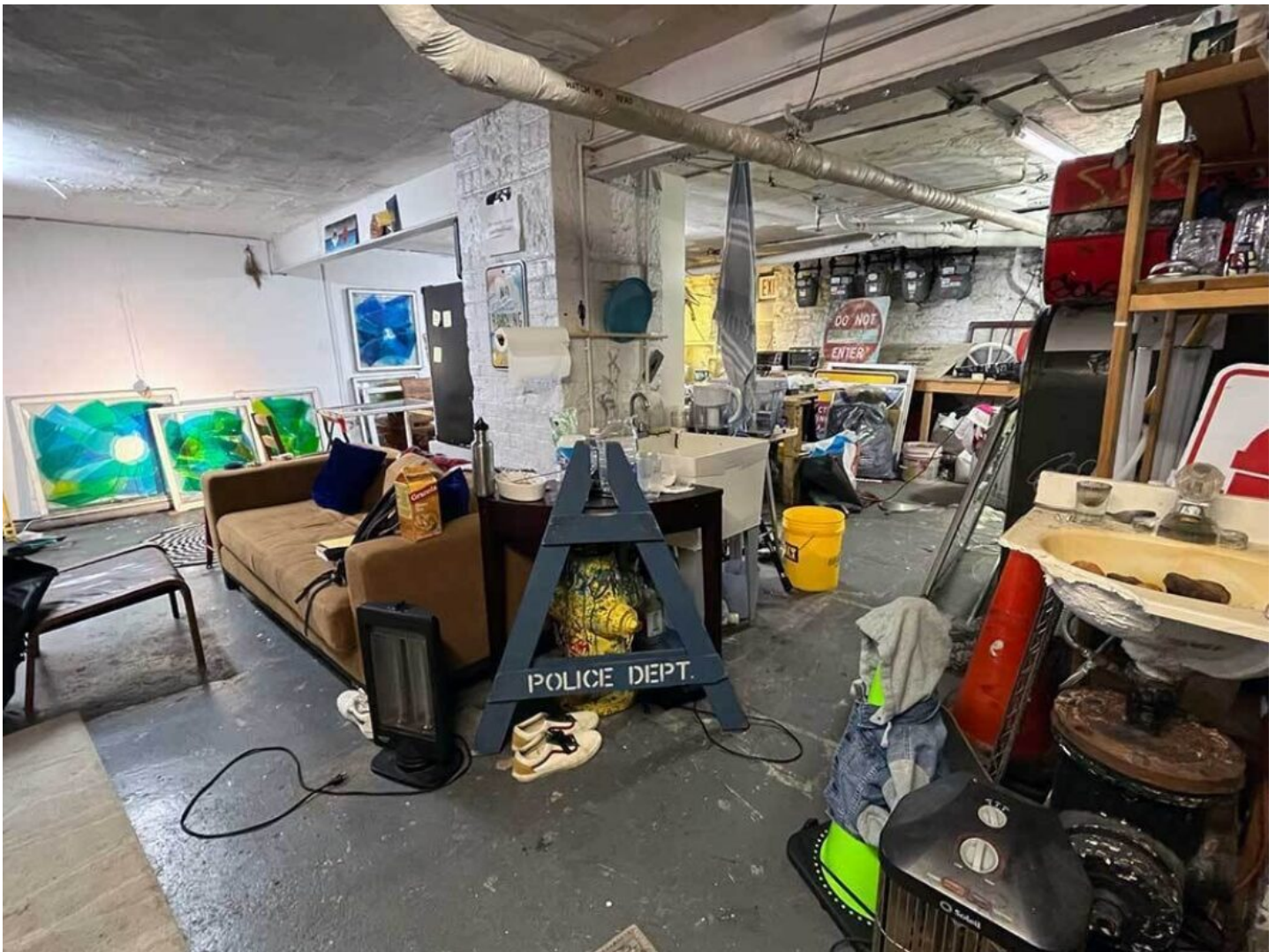
The irony isn't lost on Justin Sterling that his otherwise windowless basement studio is packed with artworks made out of windows. A dozen or so lively windows line the wall behind his work table, each of whose panes have been shattered by the artist with a rock, painted in semi-transparent analogous colors, then pieced back together into shimmering kaleidoscopes. In a nearby corner stand four windows that resemble flattened terrariums with soil, moss, and living plants sandwiched—humorous and poignant—between each artwork's broken and repaired transparent panes. In other corners of the studio, artistic windows stand stacked together as impromptu storage for work returning from or going to exhibitions.



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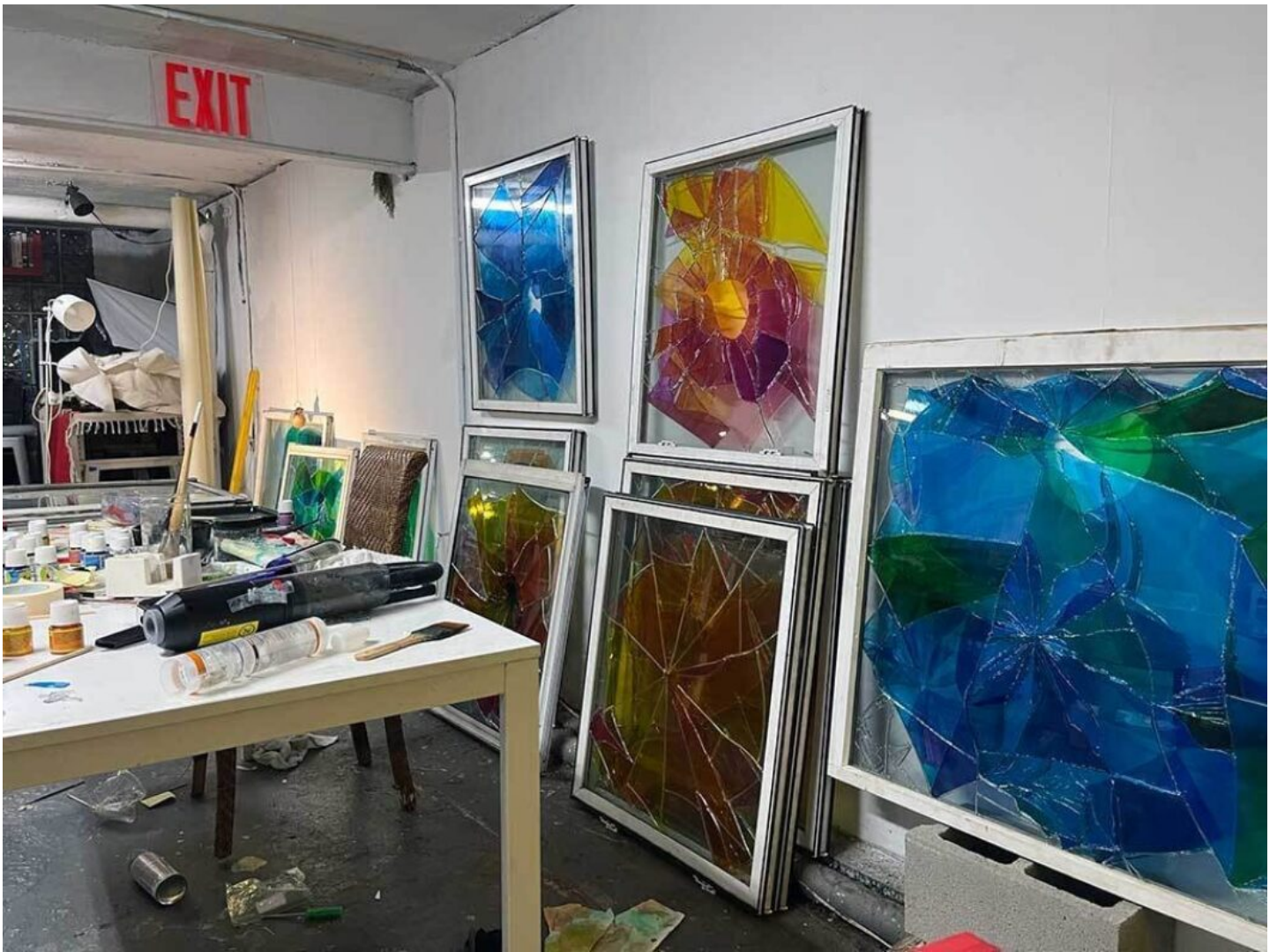


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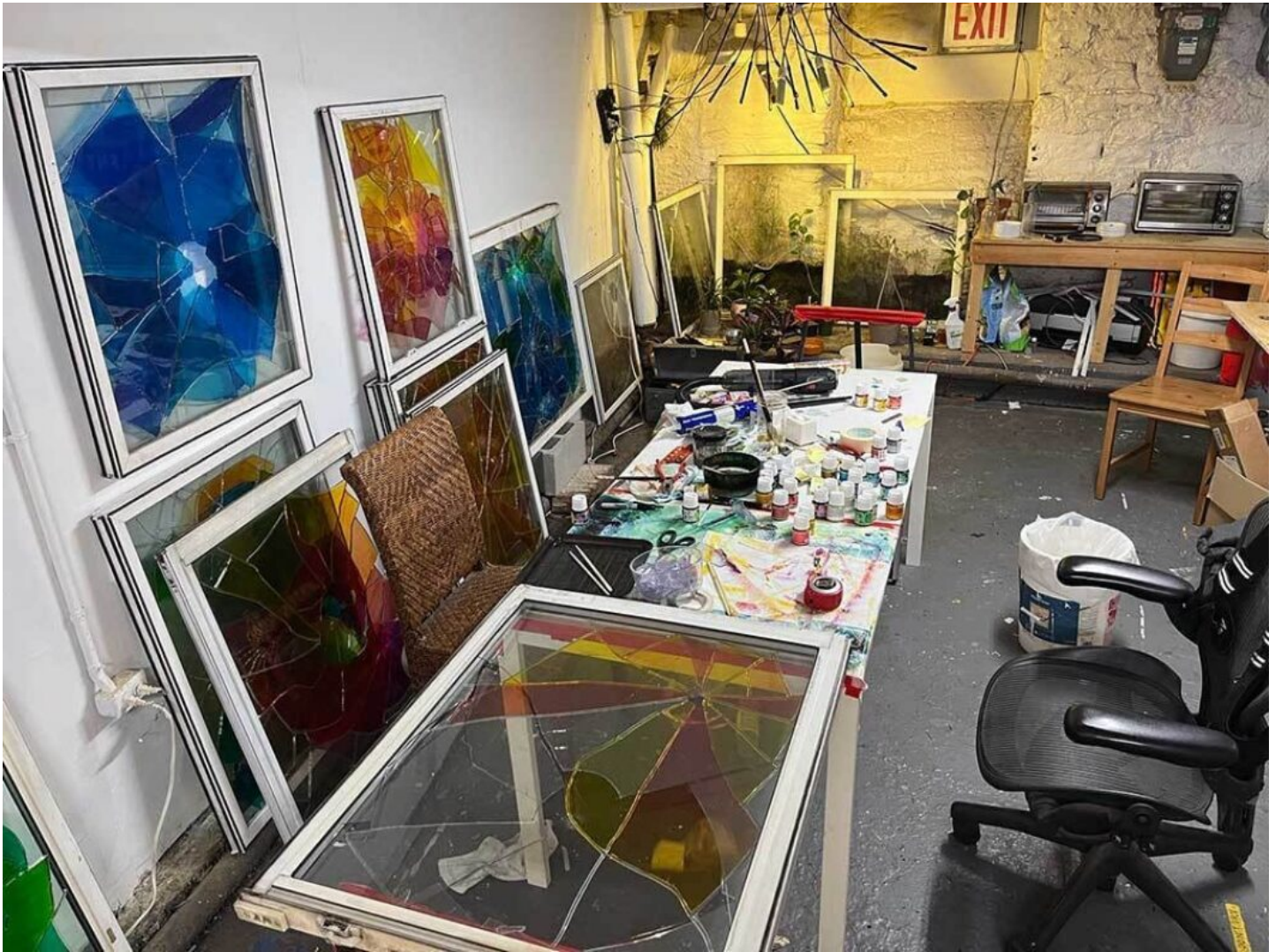


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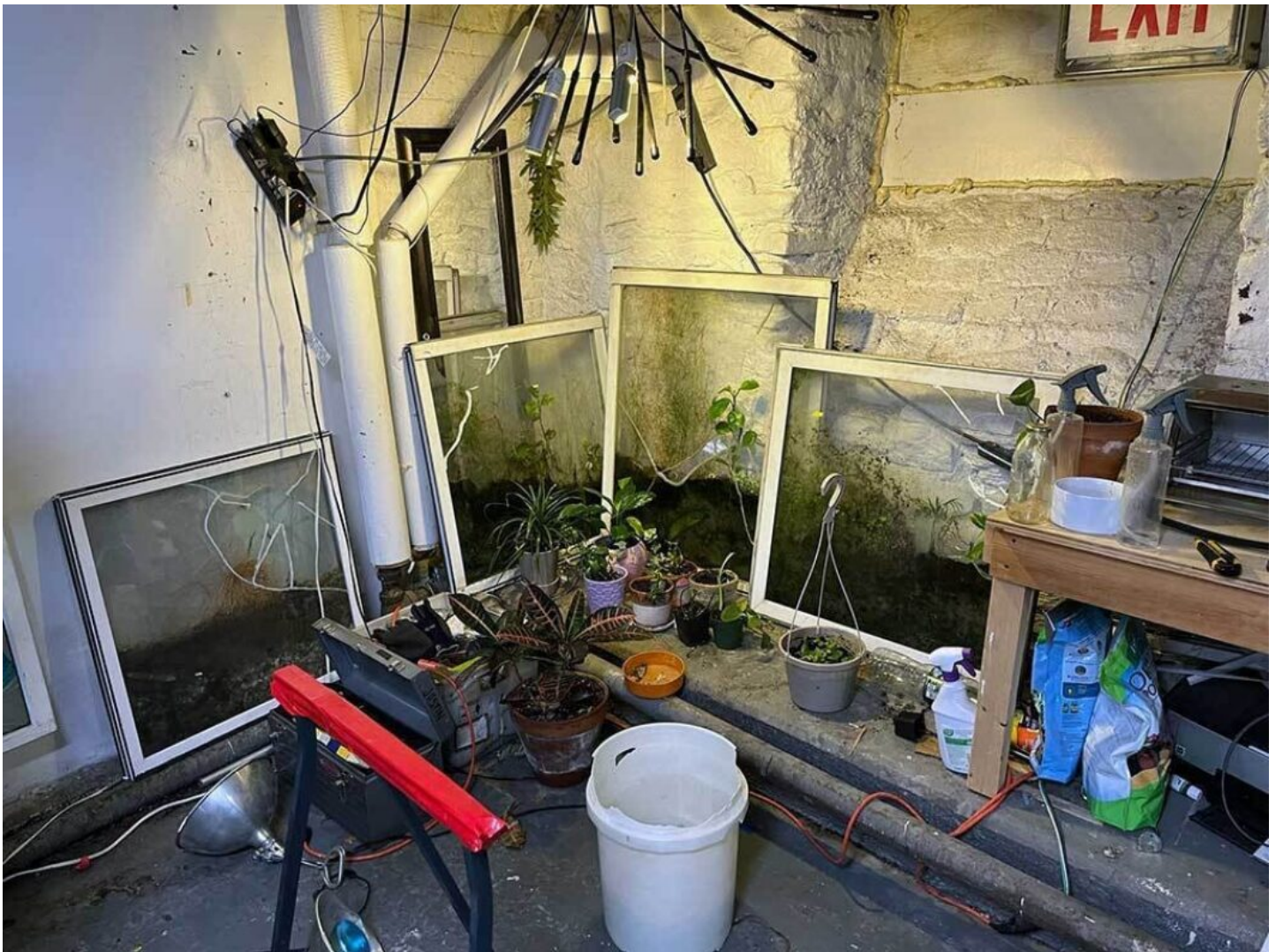
Sterling salvages found urban objects (such as street signs, fire hydrants, and payphones) and modifies them into paintings, sculptures, and installations. He chooses them based on their metaphoric and symbolic resonances, and windows are a particularly smart and suggestive choice. As everyday objects, windows afford visual access across their two sides even as they create physical separation between them. As art objects, windows recall traditional artistic displays, from picture frames to panels, while also embodying offbeat twists. Sterling's decision to break each window's panes with a rock alludes to the broken windows theory of criminology, implemented most notoriously in 1990s New York City, which has provided a dubious rationale for discriminatory police practices such as stop-and-frisk.



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Yet despite their fractured and scarred appearances, Sterling's artistic windows are in part about the capacity for repair under circumstances of duress. At his work table, he demonstrates his process of reconstructing broken and painted window panes in which each glass shard slots into its former position like a jigsaw piece. The process involves a moving combination of accident and intent: "You work with what happens," he explains, "but you can only heal as much as can be healed." This reparative bent was latent in the artist's earliest window works, whose materials and appearances were grittier and more bedraggled, but has become manifest in the windows encasing prismatic bursts of color.



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Over thirty such windows comprise part of Sterling's San Diego Museum of Art installation, *Chapel of the Rocks* (<https://www.sdmart.org/exhibition/justin-sterling-chapel-of-the-rocks/>). The colorful windows are intended to evoke stained glass, only without that art form's conservative sentimentality. Inspired by the nondenominational Rothko Chapel, which Sterling frequented while growing up in Houston, Texas, as well as by Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel, a church built in fourteenth-century Padua, Italy, Sterling's secular *Chapel* illustrates how elements of accident and intent permeate not only his artworks' compositions but also his practice's larger trajectory. Originally a painter, Sterling's time studying abroad in Italy ten years ago led him to eschew the use of traditional painting supports, which in turn led him to branch out into sculpture that incorporates found objects. His willingness to work with what happens, to heal what he can, maintains faith in art's capacity to shine light into places of darkness.

Justin Sterling: Chapel of the Rocks (<https://www.sdmart.org/exhibition/justin-sterling-chapel-of-the-rocks/>) is on view at the San Diego Museum of Art in San Diego until February 12.

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Louis Bury is the author of *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015) and *The Way Things Go* (punctum books, forthcoming 2023). He is Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY, and contributes regularly to *Hyperallergic* and *Art in America*.

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