

## Art installation features 200 sculptural ‘sneakers’ fashioned from high-end trash

By [Kelsey Ables](#)

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At first glance, artist [Andy Yoder](#)’s new installation at [Cultural DC](#)’s mobile art gallery looks like the kind of well-designed shoe store you’d find along M Street in Georgetown. Hundreds of “sneakers” line the walls, commanding attention with their pristine order. But the sneakers themselves — colorful, text-filled and representing not Nike or Adidas but clashing brands from Fanta to Comme des Garçons to Ziploc — send your mind whirring into overdrive, unable to process it all. Yoder likens it to walking into Times Square.

The title of the show, “Overboard” implies the kind of excess that is endemic to a consumerist culture. But the name is more literal than that. The installation, displayed, fittingly enough, inside [Cultural DC](#)’s mobile art gallery (a repurposed 40-foot shipping container), was inspired by what has come to be known as the Great Shoe Spill of 1990, when a container ship en route to the United States from South Korea hit stormy waters that sent 21 shipping containers, filled with some 60,000 Nike sneakers, into the ocean.

Yoder’s installation of 200 shoe-shaped sculptures are crafted in the image of Nike Air Jordan 5’s from McDonald’s packaging, Kellogg’s cereal boxes, luxury shopping bags and other materials rescued from recycling bins and dumpsters. It may look like an endorsement for the labels the sneakers represent, yet the exhibition also reduces all brands, including Nike, to their waste.

Big corporations go to great lengths to obscure the origins and afterlives of the things we consume. In the fictional world of capitalism, no product is ever “made.” Corona beer rises from the sand of the beach. Charmin toilet paper grows on trees. Frosted Flakes are the natural food of a (talking) tiger. And a Heinz Ketchup bottle has existed on the center of every plaid tablecloth since the dawn of time.

Central to branding is erasure: of primary ingredients; processing plants; workers who assemble a product; the grit and grime of shipping; the waste that comes after. Yoder’s installation — while glossy on the surface — draws attention to the expanded, complicated lives of the products we consume.

For some, the shoe spill was serendipitous. As the shoes washed up on shores along the coasts of the northwestern United States and British Columbia, they proved surprisingly durable, and a cottage industry of shoe swapping popped up. And long before Yoder’s installation, Steve McLeod, an environmentalist and artist who made works out of items that washed up on the shore near his Oregon home, amassed a collection of the sneakers in his studio. McLeod kept data on when and where the shoes appeared, laying the foundation for noted flotsam expert [Curtis Ebbesmeyer](#)’s

from game-winning sneakers to ocean debris is far too easy.

Yoder's installation has subtle environmentalist undertones. One shoe, made from a cutup Audubon magazine, features fragmented images of flamingos. "You take the flamingo, you're chopping it up and [making] it into a sneaker. Well, that's basically what we're doing," Yoder says, of our treatment of natural resources. For the most part, though, Yoder is against "finger wagging" activism. Much of the show is playful. (See the coronavirus-inspired placement of Corona and Clorox sneakers, side-by side.)

Yoder's wider body of work varies in medium, but it is unified in approach — he reimagines found objects and free-associates, often drawing on personal memories. His 2003 work "[Licorice Shoes](#)" comes from memories of his dad's wing-tipped shoes and his grandmother's crock of licorice. A series of dynamic braided rug sculptures derive from recollections of Yoder's childhood friends' homes, which were packed with antique furnishings.

"Overboard" might seem more impersonal, but Yoder points to these big brands only to create an entry point for more personal reflections. Heinz ketchup, for example, was a fixture on the dinner tables of his childhood (and a source of play with what Yoder calls the bottle's "funny sounds"). "It becomes part of your personal landscape as a kid growing up in the Midwest," he says.

On the whole, Yoder is enthusiastic about the associations brought on by the brands in the show. "I think people feel disconnected from the past, and these are things they can hold onto and remember fondly," he says, noting how companies such as Ritz and Krispy Kreme never change their logos. "It's like you're seeing your friends," he adds.

An accessibility that could even be described as friendliness is a strength of his work. Yoder says he envies the way music cuts through to emotion and creates a kind of universal reaction. With his art practice, he wants everyone to have a way in.

But what does it say about our culture that the most universal thing, next to music, might be corporate branding?

There's a sadness simmering beneath the enthusiastic surface of this show. Sneakers, Yoder points out, are a kind of self-expression, a "plumage." As are many of the things we buy. What we eat, drink, wear, own — we've been trained to identify ourselves and our worth by them. Here, the logos of all kinds of consumer goods — from computers to champagne — have been made ostensibly wearable, in sneaker form. In the world conjured by this installation, consumerism is the very thing supporting our feet, the ground we stand on — and that world is not far from reality.

## Overboard

Sandlot Southeast, 71 Potomac Ave. SE. [culturaldc.org](http://culturaldc.org). Limited occupancy; masks required.

**Dates:** Through June 27.

**Admission:** Free.

By [Kelsey Ables](#)

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