

An Art Show That Addresses the Economic Collapse Head-On

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Josh Kline's "Productivity Gains (Brandon, Accountant)," a 3-D print of a laid-off professional, is among the works in Kline's new show "Unemployment" that address the effects of the mortgage crisis and recession on real people. Credit: Joerg Lohse

As an artist who matured during the rise of the so-called "attention economy" — which has rewarded practices that combine a miscellany of ingredients into sometimes tenuous works of art — Josh Kline's anticipated new solo show at 47 Canal gallery demonstrates how a little editing and restraint can elevate unnerving sculptures to an indelible *mise-en-scène*. Titled "Unemployment," Kline's exhibition begins in the gallery foyer, where the stuffing of an easy chair upholstered in clear vinyl is in plain view: shredded financial data, credit card offers and mortgage contracts formerly belonging to the artist — and to the unemployed persons represented in his show. In the main exhibition space, amid illuminated shopping carts replete with empty plastic bottles custom-molded in the shape of human hands and discarded computer keyboards silicone-cast in a full spectrum of skin tones, life-size individuals in business attire lay on the polyester sandstone carpet. They are curled in the fetal position and bagged in plastic like yesterday's recycling — because, in a sense, they have been recycled.

The figures are 3-D prints of laid-off professionals Kline found and fabricated in Baltimore. "She was the president of a small company that developed educational curricula for Wall Street," he explains, stepping past a woman in a skirt suit. "He was an accountant." There is something altogether mortuary about the scene, which the artist describes as a period piece set in the near future, possibly the 2030s. These types of jobs aren't extinct yet, but processes of automation have already begun.

A third room contains sporelike glass bubbles blown around moving boxes full of personal effects: running shoes, stilettos, mugs full of highlighters and family photos, all the office errata a soon-to-be disgruntled

discharge would pile up and take with them on the day they receive their pink slip. “I call these ‘unemployment viruses,’ because when you’re unemployed, it feels like you’re sick with something, the way that people avoid you,” Kline says. “These are different stereotypes of different sorts of people.”

Kline made a splash last year with his installation included in the New Museum’s Triennial “Surround Audience,” the memorable protagonists of which were soldier mannequins in gray-blue fatigues whose faces were occluded by Teletubby masks like infantilized Storm Troopers. Both bodies of work refer to key issues he feels will come to define 21st-century politics. “The project at the New Museum was about democracy and political speech in the corporate commons under mass surveillance by government security,” he says. “This new one is about the middle class as it loses its jobs to software over the next quarter century — the lawyers, the journalists, the accountants, all the office workers, and what to do with this huge swath of the population.”

A cheery proposition waits around the corner, where the suburban carpet yields to a subflooring made of Amazon Prime boxes, complete with their disconcerting smiles. A patchwork blanket made of middle-class brands and fabrics — the Gap, quilted down, etc. — is spread before a projection of a new video by Kline. Done up with the saccharine rhetoric of a campaign spot, it’s a jazzy propaganda for universal basic income hinging on the trope of creating more time for living. “For me, the video is completely sincere — it’s what I believe in,” Kline says. “But I wanted to couch it in the language of political advertising. It’s like an ad from the future.”