

JOSH KLINE

ANTIBODIES

Words by Adriana Blidaru



Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin; 47 Canal, New York.



In the exhibition “Antibodies” at Astrup Fearnley Museet, New York-based artist Josh Kline presents cycles of works from the past nine years. This survey brings together concerns that the artist has explored throughout his career, from the climate crisis to the evolution of material and immaterial labor under a profit-obsessed socio-political ideology. Under the current circumstances of a world-wide pandemic and a resulting recession, the exhibition feels extremely relevant, even urgent: it seems to unfold as a fever dream emerging from a collective subconsciousness that anxiously taps in the crude reality of a not-so-distant future.

For instance, the body of work “Unemployment” (2016), originally presented at 47 Canal in New York, has proven to be a fairly accurate forecast of our present moment. The press release, written by the artist, reads as a statement from the future: “Another American presidential election is scheduled for Fall 2031. Baggy skater pants are back in style in the suburbs. And increasingly, intelligent software has turned out the lights on a hundred million jobs.”

I’m not sure about the baggy skater pants being back in style—we may have to wait eleven more years for that—but as I write this, the US is nervously awaiting the results of an upcoming presidential election, the country already seven months into the COVID-19 recession, which is predicted to be far worse than the downturn that followed the 2008 global financial crisis. While the recent unemployment rate has been the highest since the Great Depression, however, the pandemic has seen companies like Amazon register their largest profits ever. As a business formed around perfecting data collection, surveillance, and analytics, Amazon is one of many corporations holding its standards of productivity for its employees to those of robots, using the same tools of surveillance to cut inefficiency in workflows through strategies ranging from monitoring bathroom breaks to busting unions.

In this sense, we find an uncanny prediction in Kline’s 2016 installation *Contagious Unemployment*, which quite literally takes the form of a virus to depict the spread of unemployment in the age of extreme automation. Dimly lit glass-blown objects shaped like spores hang suspended from the ceiling, seemingly floating in a dark antechamber. Each is large enough to encapsulate within it a cardboard box filled with objects (family photos, coffee mugs, high heels, notebooks)—

the classic American symbol of the On view through 1 March lay-off. This is a reality highlighted by 2021 at Astrup Fearnley COVID-19: masses of people living Museet, “Antibodies” is the precariously, exploited, over-worked, latest solo museum underpaid, at risk of becoming be- exhibition of artist Josh coming disposable, while automated Kline (American, b. 1979, surveillance dangerously confuses lives and works in New essential human qualities with ineffi- York) addressing the ciency, to the point that it becomes precariousness of life and unsustainable or, ironically, unproduc- work in a predatory tive for people to work under these neoliberal society. conditions. Some of Kline’s most well-known sculptures, also on view in “Antibodies,” depict 3D-printed detached body parts, copies of the actual workers that he interviewed at the time, placed in different contexts telling of each person’s story. Another group of 3D-printed figures depicts middle-aged professionals lying on the ground in the fetal position, wrapped in plastic bags, as if ready to be disposed of.

Kline’s practice highlights the collective responsibility that we have in relation to the future, an idea made obvious in one of his most recent exhibitions, “Climate Change: Part One” (2019). The show is designed as a built-in spatial installation, with a series of rooms connected through custom-made doors that act as metaphorical borders. The rooms, lined with tarp, contain vitrines with miniature cities submerged under melting icebergs. In this representation of the future, everything melts away, with nations and natural elements alike actively eroding to the point of deterioration. Although Kline’s work plays heavily on figuration and symbolism, his vivid presentations ensure that the complexity and clarity of his ideas never get lost.

The dark potential futures that unfold throughout “Antibodies” are the violent but logical consequences of our current broken systems. If the climate crisis can be perceived as the Earth’s antibody to humanity’s damaging impact, we understand that we carry the virus: our profit-driven ideology is the maladaptation. By unfolding these dire—and imminent—outcomes, Kline’s practice leaves very little room for optimism, but it manages, at least, to put things in perspective.