

# The New York Times

## Josh Kline: Living in the Ruined World

At LAXART in Los Angeles, the artist imagines an unmoored but romantic life in the post-climate change future.



Josh Kline's exhibition, "Adaptation," at LAXART, with blunt warnings about the effects of climate change, confronts the existential questions of how we live. Ruben Diaz

**By Travis Diehl**

March 3, 2022, 11:14 a.m. ET

LOS ANGELES — When Josh Kline debuted his “Climate Change” series at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, the slick sci-fi work looked a little smug. The New York-based artist, who at 42 has pieces in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art, is known as a political fantasist with a dyspeptic view of life under capitalism. A recent series of dirty, resin-soaked American flags shaped into televisions, for example, is meant to critique Fox News.

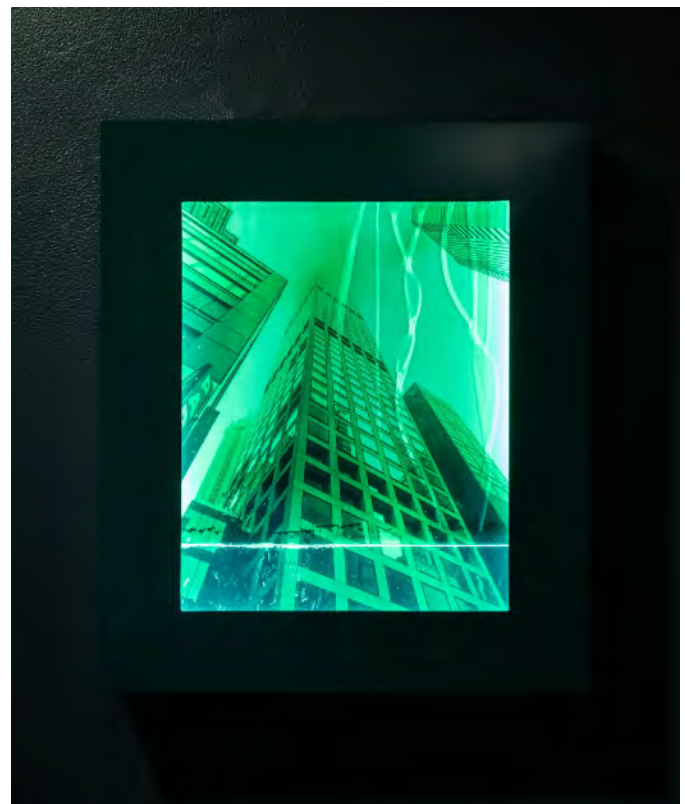
Even so, Kline's apocalyptic vision of warming seas for the biennial had outdone itself for corporate-chic confidence: a series of 8 tinted prints of emblems of U.S. power — San Francisco skyscrapers, the front desk of Twitter's headquarters, a statue of Ronald Reagan — partly submerged in water in plexiglass cases and lit with medicinal ambers and greens. Pumps recirculated the water over the prints, erasing them slowly, like the washer in a darkroom or a

hotel water feature or, maybe, liberal tears. The message was propagandistically clear: climate change is real; the water is rising; turn back the tide while you still can.

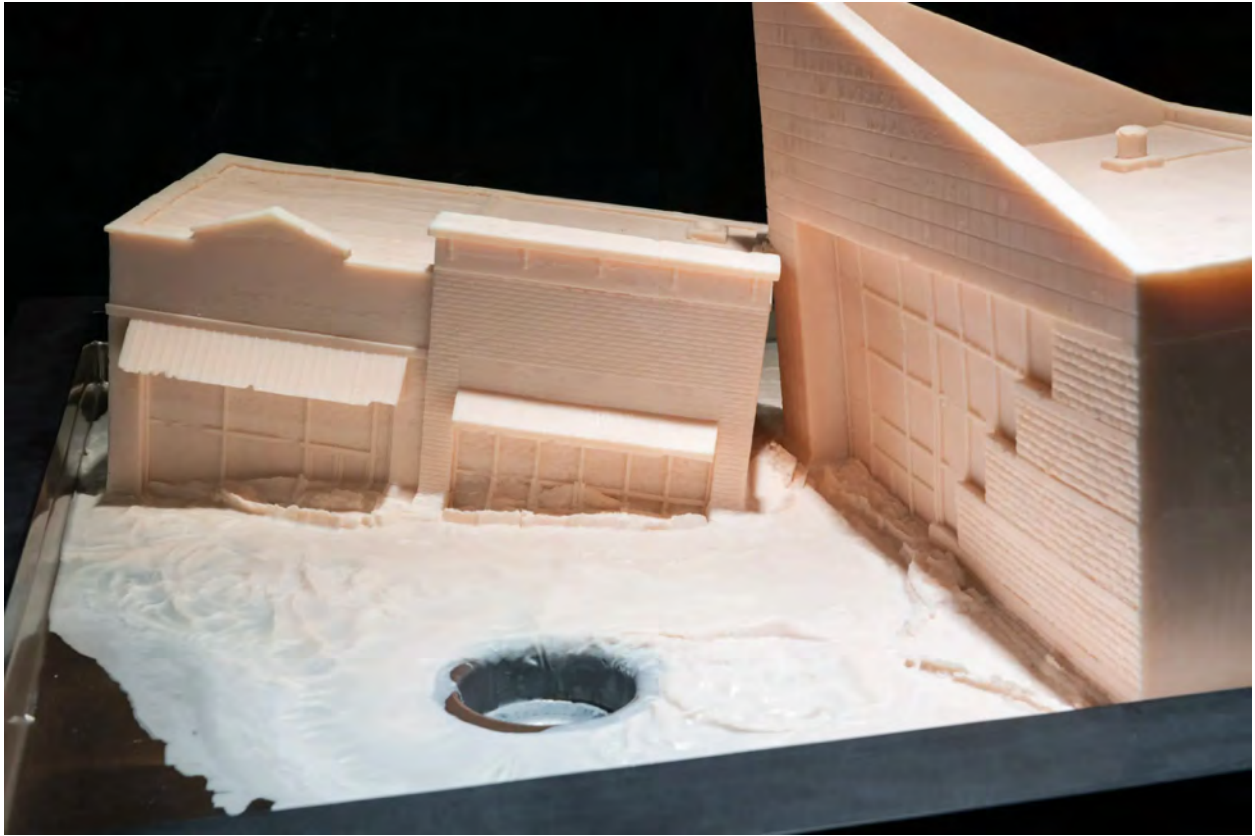
Now, three of these flooded works appear at LAXART, a nonprofit project space in Los Angeles, as part of Kline's new exhibition, "Adaptation." In this setting, they seem less declarative, more hunkered down. The relentless combination of time and trickling water soaks the photographs with an aura of romantic decline. A Silicon Valley McMansion's peaked roof peers through a curtain of cloudy fluid in "Luxury Home, Los Altos Hills." A white patch of blight creeps up from the bottom of "Deck, Rosewood Sand Hill Hotel, Menlo Park." In "432 Park Avenue, Manhattan," which depicts a supertall residential tower that may be more an investment storehouse than an actual home, a little scummy foam jiggles on the water's surface.



**Josh Kline, "Deck, Rosewood Sand Hill Hotel, Menlo Park," 2019, from a series warning about the blunt effects of climate change. Ruben Diaz**



**Kline's "432 Park Avenue, Manhattan," 2019. The relentless combination of time and trickling water soaks the photographs with an aura of romantic decline. Ruben Diaz**



**Detail from Kline's "Consumer Fragility Meltdown," 2019, commercial buildings slumping and sweating on a heated table. Ruben Diaz**

Kline's earnest warnings about the effects of climate change are still blunt — the immediate greed of energy and tech and lifestyle companies will still doom our civilization, if not the world, to a watery end. (In fact, the artist doubles down: the back room also features "Consumer Fragility Meltdown," 2019, a soy wax model of two commercial buildings slumping and sweating on a heated steel table.) But as each image breaks apart, Kline's message also erodes. Ambivalence creeps through the gaps. Then, when the emulsion has been rinsed away, the print is replaced and the cycle begins again.

This unsure mood pervades the show's main event, the short film "Adaptation," making its U.S. debut in the gallery's darkened, tarp-lined main room. The film opens on a view of the tops of clean-cut skyscrapers clustered around a clear blue sky. Then the image wavers and ripples; a small boat enters the frame. The sky turns out to be a reflection on the glassy water that covers the pediments, streets, parks, and entrances of an entire metropolis. Evidently the major industrial nations weren't able to stave off global warming, and the ocean inundated New York — and, judging from the waterline, likely every other coastal city.

There is not much plot to speak of, only the real-time present of the characters, six rescue workers surveying the scene. We're privy only to the poetry of their inner monologues, unfolded in a lyrical voice-over. "Soaking in the tainted brine," one begins. Two scuba divers climb the boat's ladder and hose down their contaminated suits. The light on the buildings is slow and

orange. Whatever their mission, the divers also seem to be searching for some of their old joys. “What is home,” asks another. “Is this home?” It was, and maybe it could be again.



**Although Josh Kline is known for a dyspeptic view of life under capitalism, his new film “Adaptation” imagines a surprisingly romantic boat ride above the avenues of a flooded, toxic Manhattan. Ruben Diaz**



**Josh Kline’s film “Adaptation” at LAXART. ”The real sadness of the film, resides in the sense that, whatever happened, whoever is to blame, and whoever is left, all that matters is pressing on with the species-wide business of survival.” Ruben Diaz**

More waters are “rushing in,” they say, although the sea appears deathly calm. We hear that “human aspirations, dreams, and plans” have sunk along with all the “temporary rented homes for temporary rented lives,” and “all the drowned drugstores.” These references, delivered as dreamy asides, echo Kline’s indictment of the American dream, venture consumerism, housing inequality, and big pharma in the “Climate Change” series. But here, the previous work’s bitterness feels abstract, at odds with the film’s placid drift. The real sadness of the film resides in the sense that — whatever happened, whoever is to blame, and whoever is left — all that matters is pressing on with the species-wide business of survival.

Kline’s film is drenched in dystopian, “Blade Runner”-esque sentiment. Indeed, its soundtrack, an entwining dirge of synthesizer and sax arranged by the beatmaker Galcher Lustwerk, pays tribute to the strains Vangelis composed for Ridley Scott’s film. Here, too, the more or less hellish world of the near future is mostly the backdrop for the existential questions of its human tenants. These dramas, of course, are quite short, even shortsighted, compared to the wide pageants of the planet itself.

As the divers pass around energy bars and bottles of what could be beer, the sun settling between the buildings and lying gold above the flooded avenues, the voice-over softens and grows indistinct, cross-chattering, as if overlapping scraps of the characters’ thoughts. One speaks of “human tears in the water,” a line that recalls the dying words of the android at the end of “Blade Runner”: “All these memories will be lost in time, like tears in rain.”

Even as Kline makes science fiction, his form embraces nostalgia. “Adaptation” was shot on 16 millimeter color film — the projector clatters away in the gallery on a derrick-like stand — using scale models and other practical effects. The choice to use film, rather than the digital rendering and seamless HD video that have become increasingly affordable for contemporary artists, is more than a rejection of that trend. This is the way movies used to be made — and perhaps, he suggests, if the computers fail, or if the entertainment industry collapses, they’ll be made this way again. But the filmstrip, too, looping and looping for the show’s duration, will also degrade ...

This is the seductiveness of Kline’s work on climate change: whether or not countries meet their greenhouse gas reduction targets, whether global warming can be held below the threshold, some degree of *change* is inevitable. Cities like Miami and New York will face — already face — rising waters and unprecedented storm surges. Yet Kline’s message in “Adaptation” isn’t one of doom, necessarily — nor of hope. We will simply keep living in the ruined world.