

## Water Logged: Josh Kline's First Solo Show in L.A. Centers on New Film About Climate Change

BY [ANDY BATTAGLIA](#) February 18, 2022 9:00am



Josh Kline, *Adaptation* (film still), 2019-2022.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST/LAXART/47 CANAL, NEW YORK/MODERN ART, LONDON

**Josh Kline's** first solo exhibition in Los Angeles, at the nonprofit West Hollywood exhibition space **LAXART**, centers on the U.S. premiere of *Adaptation*, a 10-minute film set in an eerie version of New York City that has been inundated by rising seas. Made with scale-model buildings and boats and shot on 16mm film, the work features a moody, melancholic score by electronic-music-maker Galcher Lustwerk and voiceover readings by actors making their way through a city sunken in despair.

Along with the film, Kline's show—which runs through April 9—also includes related photo works, sculpture, and installation. All of the work is a continuation of an ongoing project titled *Climate Change*, first shown at 47 Canal gallery in New York in 2019 and, as an exhibition description designates it, “part of a larger cycle of installations concerned with the unfolding political, economic, technological, and biological changes that will shape life in the 21st century.”

To learn more about *Adaptation* and the context in which it is being shown, *ARTnews* conducted an interview with Kline over email.

**ARTnews: The film has a distinctive look and sensibility. What kinds of reference points did you have in mind when first conceiving of it?**

**Josh Kline:** During pre-production, in 2019, I was thinking a lot about *Alien* and the original *Blade Runner*—both of which used analog special effects like scale models, matte paintings, blue screen, etc. These techniques are more grounded in reality than CGI—there are real objects with real lights shining on them. This approach is free of the associations that contemporary tools of digital image manipulation are burdened with, especially their relationship to post-truth technologies and disinformation. They're more honest about engineering a fiction. I also love the really creative low-budget special effects used in BBC sci-fi from the '60s and '70s. Working with these tools is something that I've wanted to do for years. The style of CGI animation that's defined so much video art in the last 10 years (including my own work) had become a negative reference for me. I want to run far away from it.

The costume design in *Alien* and *Blade Runner* is really interesting—their approach to portraying working people in space. Science-fiction novels by Ursula K. Le Guin and Kim Stanley Robinson, both of whom frequently depict labor in the future, have had a lasting influence on my thinking as well. So much science fiction comes equipped with main characters who are heroes—single individuals or small groups of individuals who change the world. I want to get away from heroes. *Adaptation* isn't a film about a special person saving the world, it's about ordinary people who will have to clean up after a catastrophe they haven't made—and live inside it. The same way we're all living through the Covid pandemic.

I've also been thinking a lot about French Impressionism and its historical context over the last few years. Paintings from the late 19th century of the French bourgeoisie at leisure on their day off. In *Adaptation*, I wanted to show working people in their time off—at rest—even if it is inside a dystopia. In this world, work is an ugly necessity. I wanted to leave that work to the imagination and show the work crew at the center of the film off the clock on their own time. After everything we've all seen in the last two years, I think it's crystal clear for everyone now that the Protestant work ethic is a fraud—part of a cruel pyramid scheme masquerading as an economy.



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**ARTnews: How did you discuss with Galcher Lustwerk what you wanted from the soundtrack? What sort of language did you use in talking it through?**

**Kline:** I've been a fan of Galcher Lustwerk's music for some time and had been listening to his album *Information* a lot in 2019. Galcher mostly makes minimal techno and house, but this album starts with an ambient track that's bursting with feeling. And I love the synths and the music under his beats. In my early conversations with Galcher, in 2020, about composing music for the film, I was referencing his own music a lot, basically asking him to make an ambient soundtrack—and sharing which of his tracks I responded to. Some of the other references I shared with Galcher in our early conversations were A Guy Called Gerald's album *Black Secret Technology*, this album *Las Vegas* by Burger/Ink (which is Wolfgang Voigt), and music by Gas (which is also Voigt), Drexciya, and Vangelis.

Galcher came back to me with some initial ideas that were really minimal. The drafts had this feeling of loneliness, isolation, and sadness that really spoke to not only the mood of the film but the feeling of being in quarantine during Covid (at least my experience of it). He came back later with more embellished versions, but in the end we stripped it all back to his original sketches—which were spot on.

**ARTnews: How did you arrive at the title *Adaptation*?**

**Kline:** *Adaptation* was originally a working title, but it outlasted all my other ideas. The film is about these people who have no choice other than to get on with it in a radically transformed world—in most ways a devastated world. When scientists talk about Climate Adaptation, it means accepting the reality that it's too late to reverse much of

the damage that's been done—that a great deal of change is now baked in. The Paris Climate Agreement targets that the governments of the world are almost certainly not going to meet already assume a violent rise in sea levels and hundreds of millions of deaths. That's the least bad scenario we're facing later this century. Climate Adaptation means building sea walls, relocating populations, basically planning realistically based on the science—moving beyond denial and wishful thinking. For me, *Adaptation*, especially after the last two years, means trying to save as much as we can and preventing as much suffering as possible. It's about claiming dignity, joy, hope, and some basic humanity in the middle of an inherited dystopia.

**ARTnews: There's a line of dialogue in the film in which someone says, "There is oxygen in the water. But not for you." What were you trying to evoke with that?**

**Kline:** It's about the flood water that's coming as a kind of denial. Human beings breathe oxygen—without it we die. There's actually a lot of oxygen in sea water—and it sustains animal life. But not us. The oxygen becomes a metaphor for New York—which for me and 8 million other people is home. If you flood it even six feet high, all the streets are gone along with the sidewalks, the subways, all the infrastructure that makes it a functional city. It becomes impossible to live here. New York ceases to be a human place and becomes part of the sea—a place for animals with gills instead of for animals with lungs. People in the future will be able to visit, but they won't be able to stay. They won't be able to make a home here. The pandemic has made me conscious of breathing in a way I never have been before because of the masks we rely on to keep us safe in so many places (and because I have asthma).

**ARTnews: The press release reads: "Originally intended as an image of resilience and survival, as the global health crisis continues, the film takes on additional meanings in relation to our current moment in history." How did it change in your eyes, and did your recognition of it in-process affect the way you finished it?**

**Kline:** I shot the footage for the film in 2019 and made my rough cut in early 2020 before lockdown. I made a second pass through the edit in April and May 2020 during lockdown in Brooklyn. My feelings about the meaning of the film had absolutely changed. The silent empty city, the scene where the divers disinfect themselves after coming out of the water—this all suddenly felt like it was about the present as well as the future. The cast were already supposed to be the equivalent of construction workers in the future—climate refugees returning to work in their former home. Working on the film in 2020, they became essential workers. Because of all this I recorded new voiceovers and wrote the text that accompanies the film. I sent microphones to the actors and directed them on Zoom in summer 2020.

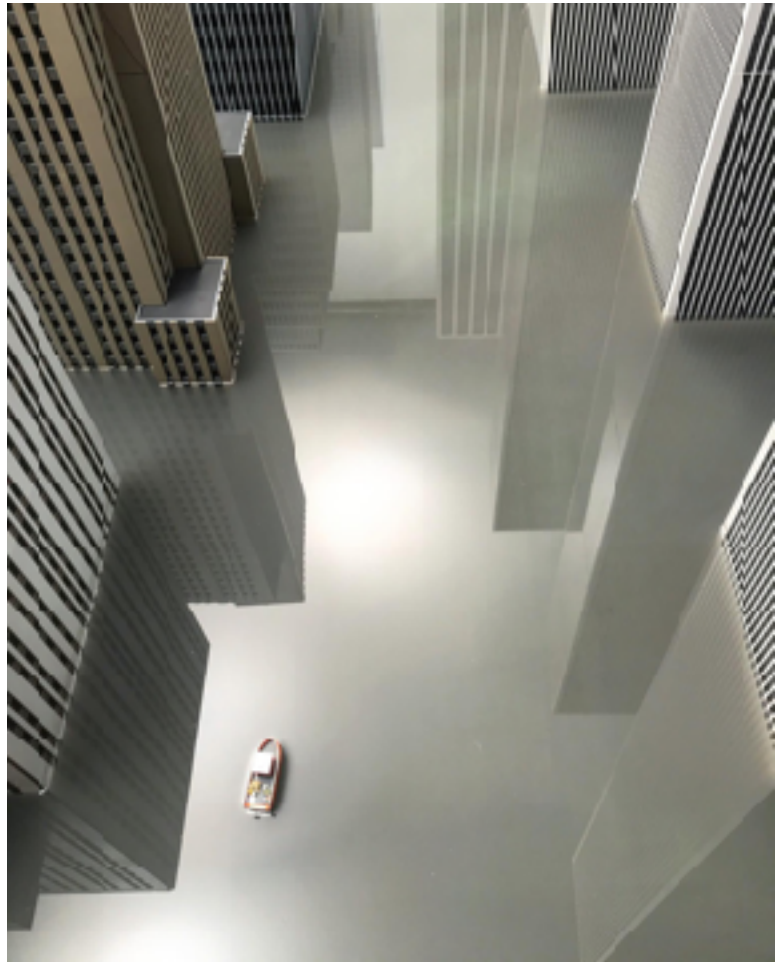
**ARTnews:** What about the medium of film most interested you, in terms of turning to it for your own work?

**Kline:** I studied film in college (I went to film school at Temple University in Philly), and I worked for 10 years as a video art curator at Electronic Arts Intermix, so the moving image has always been the foundation of everything I do as an artist. In college I turned against film. I saw it as anti-democratic compared to video. As a college student, it was more expensive to work with film and in some ways more wasteful. Now, though, working in the context of crewed shoots, collaborating with cinematographers who know how to work with film, the economics of shooting film or video aren't that different—for film you just shoot less and plan ahead so you can be more economical with footage.

I feel like video from the last decade has a very specific look—slick HD video, hyperrealistic CGI animation, and graphics inspired by and critiquing (or glamorizing) commercial imagery. This kind of video art is everywhere. Film as a medium, because of its long use in cinema—and in sci-fi movies—is largely free of those associations. If video art looks like 2013 right now, film can look like anything. It isn't tied to any time. There's also a deep nostalgia that comes with film that I want to tap into and work with. I wanted to make the audience feel a nostalgia for the present and feel the possibility of its loss. Because of how omnipresent it is on social media and how it's being manipulated to spread lies and disinformation, video feels less honest now than film, and I didn't want to make another work about deception.

**ARTnews:** How much or little do you think of elements in a film as “sculptural”?

**Kline:** I approach filmmaking (or making videos) in the same exact way that I approach sculpture and installation. The difference is that with moving image works, the



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audience can't walk around inside the work—the camera and the edit frame what the viewer sees. But on set, you actually can walk around in the world I'm building. It's temporarily a real place. I consider the design of a set, the color, the materials, all the elements that it's built from exactly the way I plan all my other three-dimensional work. On set, the camera becomes a proxy for the eyes of the viewer. I think about cinematography in the same way I think about looking at art. It's recording the experience of looking at an artwork. For me screen space is installation space. And in my actual installations vice versa—exhibition space is media space.

**ARTnews: How did you conceive of the sculpture and photo-based works to be shown alongside it? How much are they connected to the film versus meant to be regarded on their own?**

**Kline:** Both *Adaptation* and the other works in the show at LAXART are all part of a larger installation called *Climate Change*. The melting wax sculpture, *Consumer Fragility Meltdown*, was originally shown at 47 Canal in New York, and the photographs being washed away by water in their frames were in the Whitney Biennial—both in 2019. The sculptures aren't directly connected to the film, but the film and the sculptures were all imagined as part of a larger whole. With projects like *Climate Change*, I make an installation in parts, as exhibition space and financial support that comes along with it becomes possible. All my sculpture and moving image work is intended to be able to stand on its own, but when brought together with the other work that it was conceived with, it becomes another thing entirely—another artwork.

**ARTnews: Given that this is your first institutional show in L.A., does the sense of place hold any special significance to you?**

**Kline:** L.A., and California in general, has had a massive influence on my work. Going there for the first time from the East Coast was a revelation. It's the truest urban expression of postwar America's urban ambitions. Also, it's the origin point of so much of our culture—what we think of as Blue America. A lot of it started in California.