

## JOSH KLINE'S 'UNEMPLOYMENT' AT 47 CANAL: A BRILLIANT, HIGH-CONCEPT THRILLER

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Installation view of "Josh Kline: Unemployment," at 47 Canal, New York.  
JOERG LOHSE/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK

Josh Kline's show "Unemployment" was set around the year 2030, with an election approaching and people losing their jobs to software. The situation it presented was downright ugly—humans appeared only as 3-D-printed sculptures, digital cyphers of their former selves. Subtle, "Unemployment" was not, but it did strike a nerve. Armed with the drama of dystopian movies and the coolness of advertising, Kline revealed that this economy is more hostile to people than are the machines they create.

Although barely over 35, Kline has already created a style that is uniquely his. His work is distinguishable by its uneasy blend of surrealism, new technology, and 3-D-printed janitors, artists, and designers. As the craze for art about technology has escalated, so too has the critical acclaim for Kline, who received widespread attention last year at the New Museum Triennial for his epic Occupy Wall Street allegory, *Freedom*.



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A grand look at the way social media distorted identities during the 2008 recession, *Freedom* is a tough act to follow, but Kline was up to the challenge. This brilliant show unfolded like a high-concept thriller, in a series of intense set pieces.

"Unemployment" began with *On Layaway* (2016), a see-through vinyl chair and ottoman stuffed with shredded tax forms and junk mail. Enter the gallery's main space, and the show intensified. Three granny carts with silicone-cast bottles recalled urbanites who collect bottles to recycle for minimal amounts of money. But, rather than being green or clear, these bottles are the colors of skin, suggesting that people are becoming like tossed-out objects.

Nearby, in a dark room, four spore-like "Contagious Unemployment" sculptures were suspended from the ceiling. Inside these glass objects are boxes that contain sneakers, family photos, and documents—the personal belongings of laid-off employees, or their useless data.

As viewers exited that room, hidden objects appear behind the granny carts: 3-D-printed businesspeople in fetal position, bagged in knotted plastic like materials to be recycled. These life-size humans are dressed either for work or their own funerals; they look alive, but, thanks to new technological modes of production, they are very much dead. At this point “Unemployment” descended into pure horror—beige carpeting gave way to Amazon Prime boxes and hand-me-down clothing; human beings drop out entirely.

And then, all of a sudden, there was a ray of hope. Kline ended the exhibition with *Universal Early Retirement (spots #1 & #2)*, two faux commercials for a universal basic income. Lensed with the sheen of advertising, these short videos depict people living in sync with technology and enjoying life. In the hands of other artists, the *Universal Early Retirement* videos would have been ironic or coy, but Kline is great at genuine, bittersweet finales such as this one, which offers a surprisingly upbeat view of the future. These utopian views of life could be a reality, Kline proposes, if we engineer an economy that prioritizes workers over machines. As one person says in voiceover, “The future is now.”

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