

System Warning: Josh Kline Michelle Kuo

New York-based artist Josh Kline connects the smallest details—the curve of a police helmet, the grain of 3D-printed resin—to vast systems of technology, money, and ecology. His latest work, *Climate Change* (2019), is the fourth chapter in a larger science-fiction cycle depicting daily life in a catastrophic future. In conversation with Michelle Kuo, who included the artist in the recent exhibition *New Order: Art and Technology in the Twenty-First Century* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Kline discusses his new film and his desire to understand human emotion in the face of colossal problems.

MICHELLE KUO

Your art often addresses the death of technological systems and the rise of massive new ones.

JOSH KLINE

Almost everyone alive today is embedded in staggeringly large-scale societal, political, and economic structures. Globalized capitalism places us in a framework and relationship with an unfathomable number of other people.

MK

Your work connects things on this large scale: world systems, from material infrastructure, to media ecology, to ecology writ large. You've been working on a multipart exhibition, *Climate Change*, which itself implies a very big project. How do you think art can relate to these different scales and grasp seemingly ungraspable, impossibly abstract, vast entities?

JK

I'm grappling with how to represent the individual in relation to these massive structures and the conditions and problems they spawn—like climate change, technological automation, or the breakdown of representative democracy. For me, one of the challenges in art is how to make people feel something personal when confronting these colossal, dehumanizing systems. I locate a lot of my work in the perspectives of and at the scale of individual people caught up in these large phenomena. Screenwriters often refer to the “worm's eye view”—looking from the bottom up rather than down from overhead.

The project I started this year, *Climate Change*, is the fourth chapter in a larger science-fiction cycle of installations about human life in the twenty-first century. It is set in the 2050s and looks at the potential climate impact of nationalism and white supremacy. It's a story about U.S. global hegemony bringing about its own catastrophic meltdown. It's really one big single installation or exhibition that I'm working on in parts, because of the space I need and the randomness of exhibition opportunities. Sometimes I feel like a nineteenth-century novelist publishing bits and pieces in serial in magazines and newspapers.

MK

I've always thought your work was very Dickensian! Your nested series within series also remind me of the media ecologies of the 1960s and 1970s: an attempt to grapple with huge crises like technological automation, environmental disaster, global telecommunications, the erosion of the public sphere and liberal democracy. Before *Climate Change* was your project *Unemployment*, which addresses the massive disenfranchisement of human labor amid the next waves of technological automation, and how that might lead directly to the rise of new nationalisms.

JK

I think this issue of scale is part of every problem we face today. And why so many people feel overwhelmed politically. There are so many problems looming and they're all interconnected. Where do you start? When people ask me what we can do, I always say that we need to get the Republicans out of power. That's the first step toward fixing almost everything.

MK

Yes, we are left fighting over scraps while systemic change seems unfathomable. And yet those systems themselves are fallible, catastrophically so, as we've seen—we seem surrounded by crashes and disasters and accidents, the demise of modern institutions and global networks, the rise of disinformation.

JK

I think this feeling of hopelessness that the media creates for us is false—it's part of how the status quo is trying to maintain itself. What's happening with climate is much worse than we're being told, but there's actually still a window in which we can make a difference.

MK

The film you're working on now gives us a glimpse of that possibility.

JK

The piece I started shooting last week is the final part of my *Climate Change* project. It's a short film in 16mm set in a mid-twenty-first-century flooded New York. The film is an image of working people in the future—those who inevitably end up cleaning up the mess—but it's also kind of hopeful. New York is gone, but life goes on for these people and it's not necessarily a bad one.

MK

Why 16mm?

JK

I started shooting on 16mm for a film installation I made in 2017. I feel like CGI (at least in its current form) is an aesthetic that's tied to this decade; by contrast, I wanted to move this work in a different direction and free it from that relationship to our time. Film has nostalgic qualities that I want to tap into—it conveys “timelessness.” I'm also working on a video of fictionalized climate refugee interviews—also set in the future—and a script for a longer narrative film set in the same world.

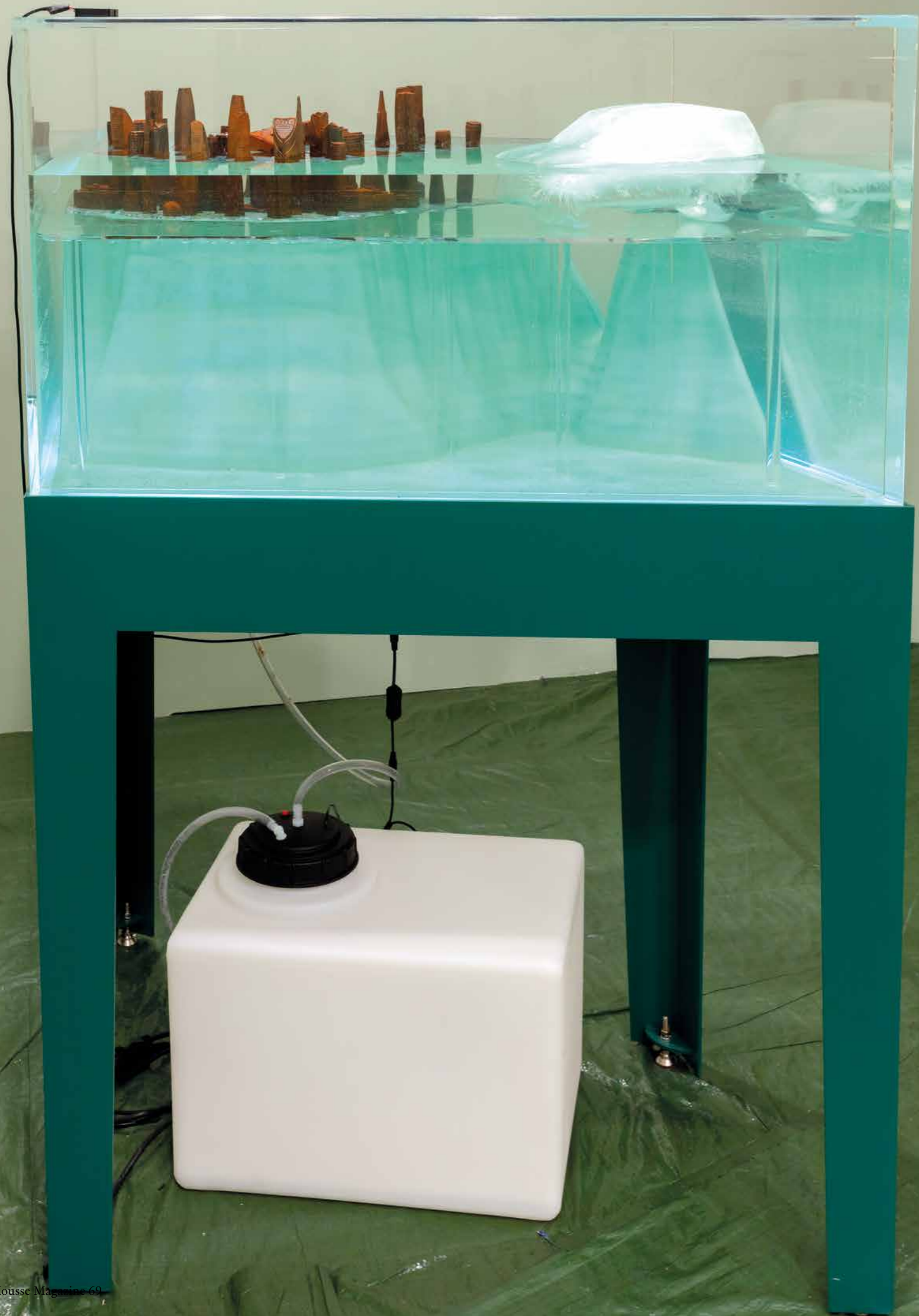
With every video or film project I do, I try and learn a bit more about filmmaking. I'm slowly working my way up to making a feature. Film and television are still some of the best ways for artists to engage in a conversation with mass audiences. Whether via art or whatever TV and film are turning into, it feels increasingly urgent—again—to try and reach as many people as possible.

53 Josh Kline, *Submersion* (detail), 2019. Courtesy: the artist; 47 Canal, New York; Modern Art, London. Photo: Joerg Lohse

54 Josh Kline, *Technological Innovation*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist; 47 Canal, New York; Modern Art, London. Photo: Joerg Lohse

55 Josh Kline, *Transnational Finance* (detail), 2019. Courtesy: the artist; 47 Canal, New York; Modern Art, London. Photo: Joerg Lohse





Artist Josh Kline brings climate change home in a new Manhattan show

by Drew Zeiba
June 6, 2019



Pink soy wax sculptures—Consumer Fragility Meltdown and Professional Fragility Meltdown—slowly melt into their tables, their refuse collected below. (Photo: Joerg Lohse. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York)

In case you've missed it, [the world is ending](#). There's war, displacement, drought, famine, rising seas, [sinking cities](#), faster winds, and a frightening [U.N. report](#) suggests irrevocable, possibly humanity-ending results if we can't [reduce greenhouse gas emissions](#) by 100 percent of 2010 levels by 2050. Artist Josh Kline wants to give us a vision of this un-future. In [Climate Change: Part One](#), Kline has transformed Chinatown gallery 47 Canal in [Manhattan](#) into a dystopian funhouse, one that reflects and refracts our world—and its possible undoing—back at us for unnerving effect.

Through the first door, which features the stars of a mangled American flag peaking through plastered-on sand, you'll encounter an irregularly shaped green table mounted with a lit vitrine. Against the nearest wall are a series of large, whirring industrial freezers. The tarp floors make a slight, sticky sound underfoot. This table is one of three bearing names that read like euphemisms for the current state of catastrophe capitalism: Transnational

Finance, Technological Innovation. In this one, Representative Government, models of various seats of power—the White House, the Reichstag, rendered in Potomac River mud and placed against a satellite photo of Washington, D.C.—slowly drown under the water of melting miniature icebergs. The freezers sustain the chunks of ice just enough that the submergence is painfully slow, taking place over the month-and-a-half of the show's run. As we know, cooling a



small space puts out a [great deal of heat elsewhere](#), rendering the gallery quite warm. Other vitrines hold different building typologies, like skyscrapers rising together from an imaginary Manhattan made from all the world's tallest buildings. The Burj Khalifa and the Chrysler Building aren't in the same city, and there's no iceberg floating and melting in New York's Upper Bay, but you get the idea. The real-life ice may be far away, but water, and the planet, is a continuity. An ice shelf north of Greenland crashing into the sea has implications that reach far further than the Arctic Circle.

Through the doors there are other, unenclosed tables, with pink soy wax in the shape of insurance buildings and suburban homes melting down tubes that collect and direct the colored sludge into buckets below. Waste is not hidden, as everything is a system.

The doors, each named after a degrees Celsius, with a second parenthetical appellation, are themselves artworks, but also serve their usual purpose. Some rooms, arranged together like a cartoon hallway from a Scooby Doo villain's mansion, can only be entered through a singular door, some an array of doors. They present a false sense of choice, and all lead to the same room, each degree of difference still resulting in the same ruins.

The checklist is very clear about origins, at least for some of the more “natural” materials: beach sand from [New York City](#), Shenzhen, and California; desert sand from Texas and the Sahara; steel powder from China. The flags, too, have origin stories, however misleading they might be. We might imagine that the nylon flags desecrated and pasted onto the doors with paint and sand and kelp may represent [Germany](#), the U.S., [China](#), and so on, but they are likely to all be from somewhere else, maybe the same factory, possibly located in none of these countries. To the tentacles of global commerce, borders are long gone. For the refugees of climate disaster and resource wars, the same can’t yet be said.

The doors, with their disfigured flags, are meant to represent the dissolution of borders and nations that Kline predicts climate change and its cascading ramifications will bring about. They also represent our willful participation in the house of horrors-style drowning disasters shown in



While the buildings come from across the world, they are all placed on maps of major U.S. cities that sit on bodies of water—Washington, D.C., New York, and San Francisco. Each of these vitrines, as well as the other works in the exhibition, arose from a collaboration between Kline and [fabricators](#), map designers, 3D modelers, 3D printers, and CNC experts, and many other design and manufacturing pros, all credited on the checklist. (Joerg Lohse/Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York)

each of the different rooms as we open and close them. Even when faced with three doors, the sense of choice is false: each opens to the same room. Whether our actions raise global average atmospheric temperatures by 2° C (Dutch, Belgian, French, and German flags, all compressed with Sahara Desert sand—a Colonial Chain Reaction) or 3° C (a mashup of the Union Jack and Japanese flags along with kelp and chlorella) or 5° C (American and Russian flags, Potomac River mud), we’ll still find ourselves in too deep, so to speak.

Particularly resonant are the banal and domestic scenes. Situated in hermetically sealed versions of the fume hoods from your college chemistry class painted in subdued, aesthetically-pleasing shades of urethane paints with lighting to match, are scenes with dollhouse miniatures,

submerged underwater (or really, cyanoacrylate glue and epoxy). They depict sorrily-stocked grocery stores, bland offices, and suburban home interiors, but their titles are not so bland: Erosion, Inundation, and Submersion.

Disintegration isn't loss, it's transformation. Even as rising water washes away the mud of the miniature buildings, that same dirt just is transported elsewhere, but formless. Matter is conserved, even if our environment is not. What once was just becomes something else, and with us gone, who will be there to name it or know the difference anyway? Things happen on scales too large for us to know, or to know to even ask questions about. Kline shows us this, plainly, perhaps even at first propagandistically. In this show alone, the interlocking problems of political power, globalization, financialization, housing, architecture, technology, and climate change are all put on display. But there's no real call to arms here, just a documentation of the future present. But it does make one have to ask: If this is Climate Change: Part One, what happens in part two?

Climate Change: Part One

47 Canal, 291 Grand Street, 2nd Floor, New York
Through June 9, 2019

The New York Times

New York Art Galleries: What to See Right Now

Lina Bo Bardi's swoon-inducing furniture; Heidi Bucher's phantomlike sculptures; and Josh Kline's chronicle of a 'calamity in progress.' May 8, 2019



Installation view of "Josh Kline, Climate Change: Part One" at 47 Canal. Display cases hold melting blocks of ice that cause water to rise around dollhouse-size buildings. Credit Josh Kline and 47 Canal, New York; Joerg Lohse

While young people around the world are [calling for action](#) on climate change, artists imagine and simulate its effects, as Josh Kline does in "[Climate Change: Part One](#)" at 47 Canal.

This exhibition envisions a future somewhere from 2040 to 2060, unfolding over five dimly lit funhouse rooms (without the fun). Tables and display cases hold melting blocks of ice that cause water to rise around dollhouse-size legislative buildings molded in mud gathered from the Potomac River. Water from the melting ice collects in buckets beneath the tables and cases and will be refrozen and put back in the sculptures throughout the show.

Elsewhere are sculptures of buildings created in wax, also melting. (They will be recast and reinstalled.) In the final room, giant vitrines with eerie orange and purple light contain round vessels encasing miniature scenes of work or leisure: tiny computers, office equipment and beach chairs. It's like staring into a flooded version of our already memorialized future.

The gallery release written by Mr. Kline serves as a stern policy-brief-as-speculative-fiction. We're living in a "soft dystopia" now, he writes, but when/if the Antarctic ice sheet becomes unmoored and the world's major cities are flooded, this will become a "hard dystopia" as people scramble for resources around the globe. In the same way specially fabricated doors embedded with sodden-looking fragments of national flags divide the exhibition, we are on a historical "threshold" between present and future, prediction and reality. Mr. Kline's show offers a metaphorical-conceptual forecast, after which you can join young protesters in the streets.

– MARTHA SCHWENDENER

May 2019

Goings on About Town: Josh Kline

by Andrea K. Scott



Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York; Photograph by Joerg Lohse

What you're looking at here is a closeup of a door in **Josh Kline's** urgently political and scathingly funny exhibition at 47 Canal. (The gallery is located at 291 Grand St.; the show is on view through June 9.) Seven doors lead to a series of rooms—how many? no spoilers here—in which ingenious sculptures imagine the catastrophic implications of climate change. In this portrait of a disaster in progress, the forty-year-old American artist transforms sculptures into moving images, like an episode of "Black Mirror" pitched by advocates of the Green New Deal. In plexiglass tanks, miniature centers of power (Red Square, the White House) made of mud and sand become submerged under water, supplied by melting blocks of ice. Wax models of houses and big-box stores dissolve down the drains of the metal sinks that contain them. Kline's command of materials and profoundly humanist vision have never been more aligned.

— Andrea K. Scott