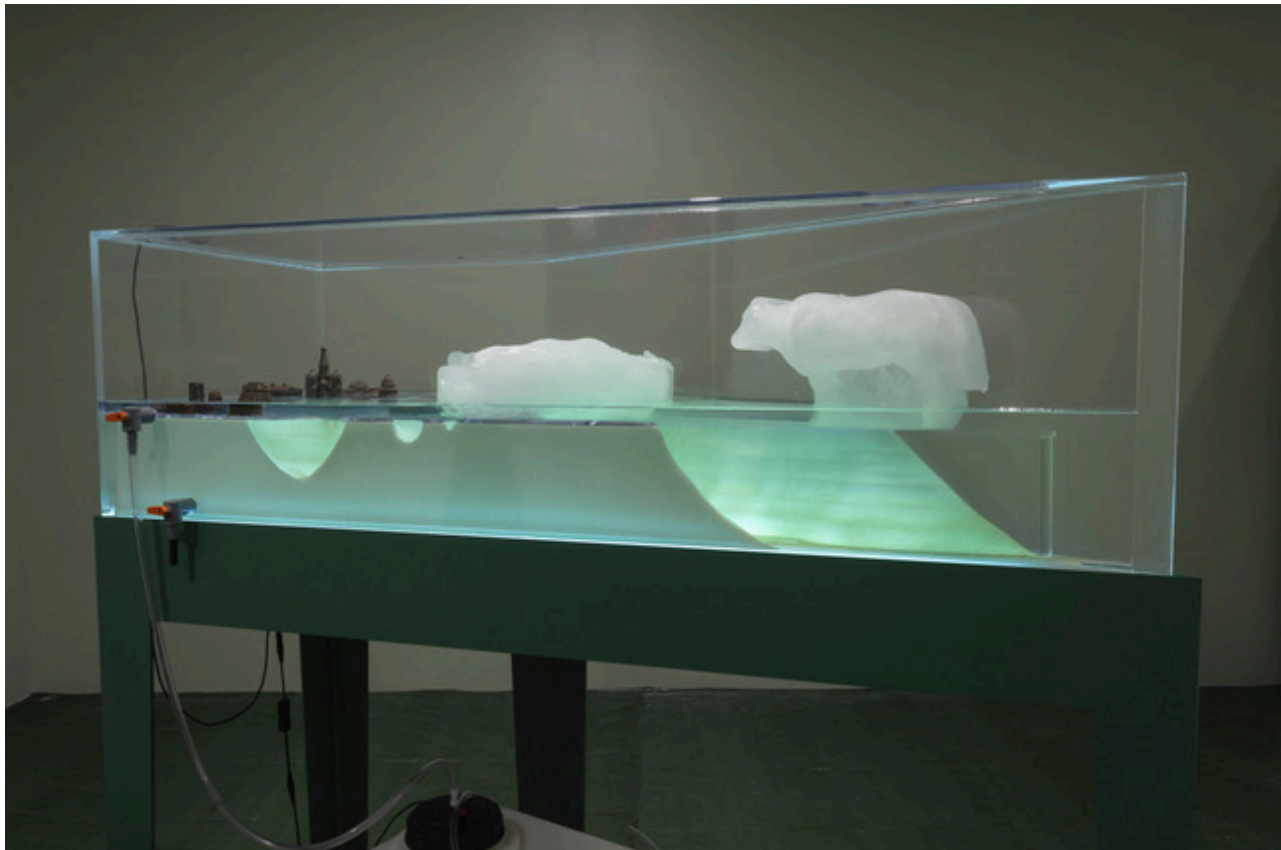


Josh Kline's Water World

The artist imagines a future in which an Antarctic ice sheet has broken, resulting in a catastrophic sea-level rise.



Louis Bury May 26, 2019



Josh Kline, "Representative Government" (2019), Potomac River mud, epoxy, silicone epoxy, plexiglas tank, powder coated steel frame, vacuformed plastic, digital prints on vinyl, reservoir tank, pump, fan, ocean water, silicone molds, freezer, 50 × 13 × 60 inches, edition of 3 plus II AP, photo by Joerg Lohse (all images courtesy the artist and 47 Canal)

The unsubtle symbolism begins with the closed door adjacent to the attendants' desk. The door, titled "8° C (Runaway Irresponsibility Effect)" (2019), reveals jagged patches of a United States flag through its sand-covered exterior, a portent of the tattered Republic that lies in wait behind it. The punchy, artist-authored press release — a refreshing departure from the genre's standard tedium, if also a melodramatic attempt at poetic profundity — explains that the exhibition, Josh Kline's *Climate Change: Part One*, imagines a mid-century future in which the west Antarctic ice sheet has broken off into the ocean, resulting in "sudden catastrophic sea-level rise." The star-

spangled door, we're told, represents the threshold visitors must cross to enter this brave new world.

On the other side, in the first of several rooms separated by textured, flag-strewn doors, stands a lonely vitrine, "Representative Government" (2019), half-filled with murky, teal water. Just below the water line, a translucent horizontal platform bisects the vitrine's interior. Atop it, Google Earth-esque images of city streets and dilapidated scale models of emblematic government buildings, such as the White House and the Kremlin, depict a fictitious coastal city. Below it, the contours of the submerged landmass on which the city has been built are in clear view. An actual ice block rests on the platform, representing a glacier. As the ice block melts, the water line creeps higher up the model buildings, a process repeated daily as the excess water gets drained from the vitrine and refrozen to become the next day's ice block.

Kline's dystopian vitrines (two others are in the show, "Transnational Finance" and "Technological Innovation," both 2019) have a visual charm that's a nifty cross between seeing the earth from an airplane and pressing your nose up against an aquarium tank. And their material construction is not without production value: the press release lists 60-plus names as design and fabrication collaborators on *Climate Change: Part One*, a welcome, signature move by Kline, intended to acknowledge behind-the-scenes artistic labor. The vitrines also convey the impression that Kline wants his work to make an impression, another hallmark of the artist. For instance, his provocative and acclaimed 2016 show at 47 Canal, *Unemployment*, featured 3D print-outs of human workers in the fetal position, wrapped in large, transparent garbage bags as if they'd been kicked to the curb like the day's trash.

What's missing from Kline's climate change vitrines is the element of surrealistic surprise that animated his previous work, from coffee presses whose treachery liquid contents have been infused with stimulants like Red Bull and Vivarin ("Sleep is for the Weak," 2011), to Teletubbies in SWAT uniforms with video screens on their bellies ("Freedom," 2015). In contrast to these détourned cultural symbols, "Representative Government" depicts a miniature version of the climate apocalypse everybody already anticipates. Its one imaginative twist — placing notorious but geographically dispersed government buildings together in a fictitious coastal locale — reads as an attempt to squeeze as much overdetermined symbolism as possible into the artwork. In their obviousness, the vitrines lack the sinister bite of Kline's best work.



Josh Kline, “Domestic Fragility Meltdown” detail (2019), powder coated steel frame, epoxy resin (countertop), stainless steel, heating panels, soy wax, pigment, plastic bucket, liner, 38 1/4 × 39 1/2 × 39 1/2 inches, edition of 3 plus II AP, photo by Joerg Lohse

In two other rooms, three melting soy wax installations — “Professional Fragility Meltdown”; “Consumer Fragility Meltdown”; “Domestic Fragility Meltdown” (all 2019) — have more fang than the vitrines, but nonetheless illustrate how a topical theme and catchy visuals can too easily pass for robust critique. Each installation contains several model buildings — offices, storefronts, and houses, respectively — made from pale pink soy wax to evoke certain Caucasian skin tones. The waxen buildings, situated atop heated tables, melt and deform during the exhibition’s run. A drain funnels the run-off into a clear plastic bucket underneath the table; aptly, the bucket’s translucent plastic storage bag and goopy contents have the grotesque appearance of liposuction drainage.

Once again, the works’ production value compensates for a conceit that is at best pedestrian and at worst pernicious. “What does the world look like,” asks the press release, “after white supremacy melts down?” The soy wax installations’ answer — vanished buildings and buckets of goop — is terrifically wrongheaded. Kline’s symbolic liquefaction of white supremacy’s architecture not only imagines nothing new or positive in its place, but also portrays its dissolution as the inevitable — and purely passive — result of global warming. The point seems to be that a civilizational blank slate contains liberatory potential (the press release ends with, “Water washes everything away”), but apocalyptic climate fatalism can also limit our ability to imagine and prepare for the future by pretending, resigned, that there won’t be one. It makes one

suspect that *Climate Change: Part One*'s middling, Hollywood-blockbuster conceit trades on this counterproductive sensationalism as a ploy for attention.

In contrast, the fall 2018 exhibition at Performance Space New York, *A Wild Ass Beyond: ApocalypseRN* — a spirited, ad hoc doomsday homestead installation by American Artist, Caitlin Cherry, Nora N. Khan, and Sondra Perry — smartly stressed the role of human agency in creating structures alternative to those of white supremacists; it also conveyed the sense that climate disaster is not some distant future singularity but a phenomenon impacting the built world right now. Likewise, Hans Op de Beeck's *Staging Silence* film trilogy (2009-2019) — whimsical, pint-sized landscapes assembled and disassembled by human hands — plays with apocalyptic ideas similar to those of Kline's vitrines but offers a more unique and sophisticated vision of anthropogenic climate change.

What's frustrating is that Kline understands these discursive subtleties. *Climate Change: Part One*'s press release, for example, contains the nuanced acknowledgement that, even if a potential climate apocalypse can be said to constitute a “threshold” or “singularity” for our species, the “world of refugees, human pain, hunger, and disease” that lies on its other side is actually “the story of every human civilization for the last ten thousand years.” And his *Unemployment* exhibition didn't just imagine a dystopian future in which automation has supplanted most human labor, but also entertained alternative sociopolitical structures that might arise as a result (his clever short film *Universal Early Retirement (spots #1 & #2)*, 2016, a knowing blend of utopian thinking and advertising slickness).



Josh Kline, "Erosion" detail (2019), lab hood, glass, urethane paint, light box, reinforced steel, colored gels, blackout fabric contents: glass, silicone, dollhouse miniatures, fabricated miniatures, objects cast in New York beach sand, cyanoacrylate glue, silicone epoxy, 89 3/4 × 48 × 33 inches, edition of 3 plus II AP, photo by Joerg Lohse

At least in its first Part, *Climate Change* posits no such alternatives. The three sculptural installations in the exhibition's final room — refrigerator-sized lab hoods whose light box chambers display tableaux of dollhouse furniture suspended in containers of formaldehyde-like fluid ("Erosion," "Submersion," "Inundation," all 2019) — merely preserve traces of today's civilization as though they were scientific curios or time capsule specimens. While the concept yet again lacks sharpness, the artist's use of color, scale, content, and materials has the eeriness of Kline's best symbolic perversions. The lab hoods' fluid-logged dollhouse habitats, twice-entombed and glowing, are uncanny reminders of our civilization's deer-in-the-headlights stuckness when it comes to restructuring itself so as to mitigate anthropogenic climate change.

Perhaps *Climate Change*'s second and third Parts will contemplate such restructurings; both, I was told, will be films, a medium whose dramatic possibilities seem suited to Kline's project. For now, though, Part One offers greater insight into the machinations of Kline's own work — much buzzed about these past five years — than it does into those of climate change. Whether depicting the gig economy, the police state, or climate change, his work resonates because its stagnant and hijacked symbolism reflects, with dark humor, our collective and individual sense of hapless, curtailed agency. His conscientious pessimism, particularly prominent in *Climate Change: Part One* but evident in his entire oeuvre, suggests his sensationalist despair is sincere rather than cynical. But the inventiveness and resourcefulness of his most pointed work, his willingness to

rethink something as simple yet taken-for-granted as press release convention, suggests that his pessimism could be tempered with a touch more optimism. Even as it pretends otherwise, Kline's work demonstrates that, as things go from bad to worse, there's still slightly more room to maneuver than you'd first think.

Josh Kline: Climate Change: Part One *continues at 47 Canal (291 Grand Street) until June 9*

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