

**Josh Kline: Freedom; Kiki Kogelnik. Fly Me to the Moon review –
an unnerving fantasy world and off-the-peg identities**

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Modern Art Oxford

From Teletubby riot police to jailed politicians weeping over the war in Iraq, Josh Kline offers a nightmarish dystopia of recent western folly



Crying Games, 2015 by Josh Kline, featuring a digitised and remorseful Tony Blair. Photograph: courtesy of 47 Canal, New York. Photograph by Ben Westoby

The first solo show of Josh Kline, a 35-year-old New York-based artist, is in part a Stop the War Coalition fantasy world. In a darkened room in Oxford, for the next two months, Tony Blair will sit, face to camera, in a grey prison jump suit and unburden himself of his war crimes on a loop. “Oh, my God!” he will cry, in that familiar boyish Fettes voice, “What have I done?” His face will crumple into a sob as the horror, time and again, engulfs him. “I’m so, so very sorry.”

The former prime minister is not alone in his purgatory. He is joined, one after the other, presumably in adjoining cells, or circles of hell, by a hyperventilating George W Bush (“all those people... I’m so sorry... I’m a monster”), a weeping Condi Rice, a broken Donald Rumsfeld and, perhaps most disturbing of all, Dick Cheney, in his 70s specs, tortured by extraordinary contrition.



'Both contrived and mesmerising': Tony Blair as seen in Josh Kline *Crying Games*, 2015. Photograph: Courtesy 47 Canal, New York. Photograph: Ben Westoby

As in all fantasy worlds, the cast of this drama is both there and not there. Kline's film uses a technique called "real-time face substitution". The actors who double for the neocons (plus Tone) wear the projected features of the real people. The digitalised masks are not quite secure, however; they come and go unnervingly, reminding us these are really crocodile tears. The effect is both contrived and mesmerising, a seductive kind of wish-fulfilment. Like a good deal of Kline's work it asks to be viewed as a stunt, but you keep watching in part because of the disorienting effect of seeing the arch-manipulators themselves manipulated. Even as their faces shift before your eyes, it's an effort not to believe their scripted sincerity.

Kline's talking heads act as a subtext to the main room here, which is a minimal reconstruction of Zuccotti Park, the privately owned space in New York's financial district that was the site of the Occupy protests in 2011. That sit-in standoff is dramatised in a caricature of its most sinister elements: two black-painted mobile phone antennae tower above four police officers in body armour with Teletubby face masks. These mannequins have the white noise of protest playing on each of their abdominal screens. At one end of the room another real-time face substitution, this time of Barack Obama, intones the president's 2009 inauguration speech. At the other, a filmed American eagle is endlessly animated and pixelated, all-seeing. It is the films in the Telepolice's guts that hold your attention though.

Kline has used his film technique to reconstruct protesters' faces, apparently as surveillance technology allows; the words he puts into their mouths are a jumble of social media and jump-cut news. The slash-dot-hyphen-speak of URLs and Twitter feeds is rendered in full, giving the whole a cadence of mediated paranoia. Trending hashtags – BlackLivesMatter, ICan'tBreathe – are woven into reaction to CIA torture reports and fragments of Buzzfed outrage.

The inchoate nature of Occupy seems one focus of Kline's attention, but it's contained within and projected from the black-clad enforcers of state power. Watching the videos, it's frustratingly hard to get a handle on the layers of listening, of who is talking to whom, of the shorthand of information and scaremongering – and, tellingly, that sensation of near-confusion and low-level anxiety is entirely familiar.



Freedom, 2015 by Josh Kline, installation view. Photograph: Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York. Photograph: Joerg Lohse

In other work, Kline has been feeling his way toward a vocabulary that can deconstruct some of the more troubling expressions of American corporate and digital culture. On a prominent Manhattan street he deployed a pair of back-lit fridges containing unobtainable power juices in unlikely colours and abstract flavours – “Big Data” was one. Look closely and the ingredients included “coconut water, HDMI cable, infant formula, turmeric and yoga mats”. Elsewhere he has created a series of sculptures of DHL couriers delivering their own body parts. That bluntly satirical strand of his work finds expression here in his series of doughnut sculptures made of such eminently dunkable substances as resin, mud, plaster, silicone and pig’s blood. Some are hung with handcuffs, others decorated with police badges.

The garish pop art staple of Warhol and Kenny Scharf, that ubiquitous bag of American guilty pleasure, becomes something less palatable. You can imagine Don DeLillo riffing whole chapters on the darker connections between corporatised sugar fixes and police brutality. Kline leaves you to come up with a few for yourself.

In many ways it is a relief to leave his mini dystopia. Modern Art Oxford nicely paired Kline’s show with a retrospective of the late Austrian-born pop artist Kiki Kogelnik. *Fly Me to the Moon* concentrates on the work she made having relocated to New York in the 1960s, where she befriended Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg and toyed with the symbolism of rocket ships and psychedelia. Kogelnik’s signature pieces here are bright vinyl cutouts of human forms, hung on coat hangars, off-the-peg identities. There are portents of the kind of unease about the reactionary effects of technology that haunt Kline’s show, but there is plenty of careless lightness too. The juxtaposition – and the gap of half a century – is something of a before and after.