

Zombies and Pop Stars

by Ryan Wong on October 11, 2013



Still from Josh Kline's "Forever 27." (image courtesy of 47 Canal)

Josh Kline's work takes the viewer into the uncanny valley. The two centerpieces of his exhibition *QUALITY OF LIFE* at 47 Canal show actors playing Kurt Cobain and Whitney Houston, interviewed as if they were alive today. Using real-time face substitution, a software developed by Arturo Castro and Kyle McDonald, the actors' faces are modified to look more like their roles. The program's hiccups and pixelation leave room for your brain to slip in and out of a suspension of disbelief. As with the Tupac hologram, we *want* to believe we are seeing Whitney reflect on her death, but with the safety of knowing no ungodly acts of resurrection took place.

Kline's art acts as a missing link for a society equally obsessed with zombies and 20-year-old pop stars. They are different sides of the same coin, in which we feel entitled to the perfection of youth and are horrified at losing it. Someone benefits from this, of course, as "marketing experts track your passing birthdays" and "companies sell you back your own youth, preserved in deadstock eBay amber ..." in the words of the press release.

But the work is not didactic. By putting a slight spin on the tropes of our culture, Kline produces funny and surreal gestures. A daytime talk show-style interviewer asks Kurt Cobain what he is up to these days. In between drags on an e-cigarette, he responds in Cobainian monotone, "I watch TV, I meditate, I write," and talks about the painting show he has coming up but won't go into details. It



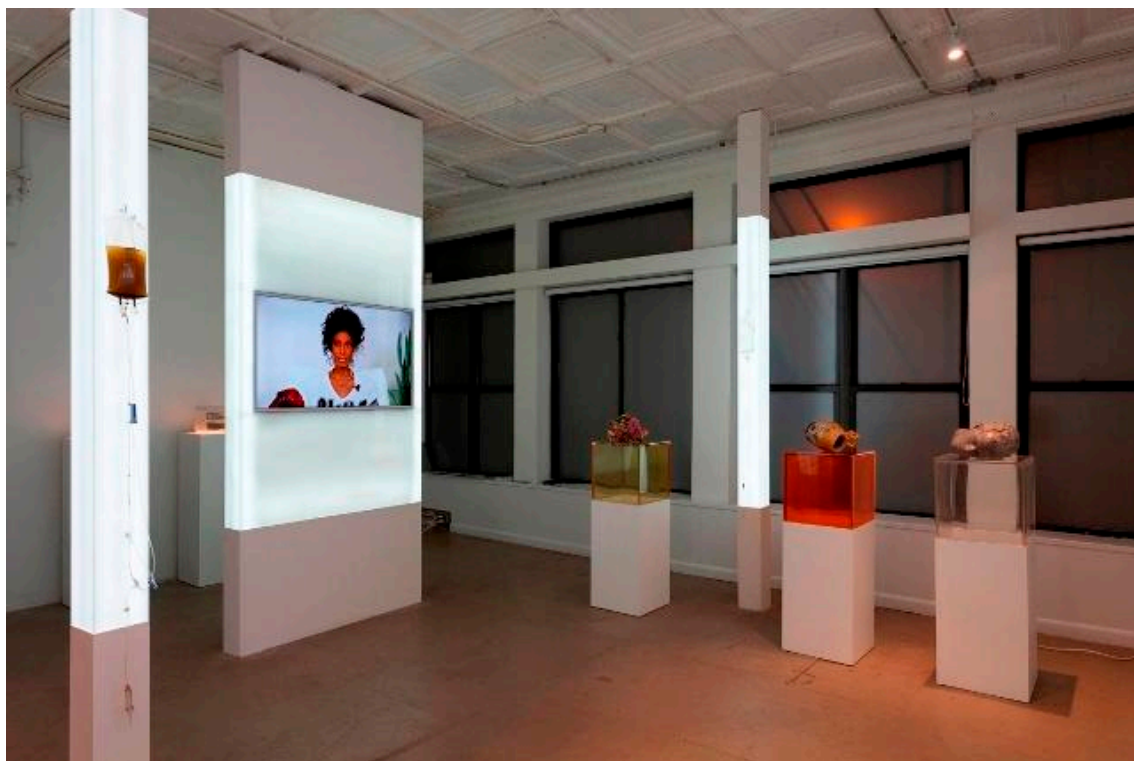
Installation view, QUALITY OF LIFE.

seems death, for this Cobain, was just another media-hyped nuisance, like a concert that received bad reviews.

IV bags full of colorful liquid labeled with ingredients like “dial soap, purell, bleach, lemon, cayenne, honey” hang throughout the exhibition. The idea of injecting this is disturbing, but then, they only add a little hyperbole to the \$9 juices sold at Whole Foods, and trade in the same promises. Against one wall, semi-transparent coolers contain bags of blood, agave nectar, Wellbutrin, and Green Vibrance Powder, while the whirl of their built-in fans suggest that they are being kept in delicate stasis.

Kline curated the exhibition *ProBio* as part of MoMA's Expo 1, which included other eerie, prescient works by his peers. Dina Chang formed rubber chunks into “Flesh Diamonds” with a disturbingly realistic sheen; DIS's commercial-like video zoomed in on pregnant bellies, while a melodramatic voice-over asked which would become the next great artist.

Kline and this crew see “the distinctions between living organisms, information, objects, and products” as “irrevocably confused.” They are united in declining to join one of the common camps reacting to this confusion: the amoral triumphalism of Silicone Valley and un-self-aware sunniness of pop culture on one hand, and the the Marxian lament of alienation on the other. Kline won't tell you what judgments to make about youth, technology, and biology; he's showing us what judgments we, American society, have already made.



Installation view, QUALITY OF LIFE.

In Kline's hands, the human body becomes just another medium, porous and graft-able. The idea of invading, modifying, or selling the body is always uncomfortable, but who would turn down a life-saving prosthetic or implant? And, in a culture where success and health and youth are so intermingled, who is to say what is life-saving?

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Josh Kline: QUALITY OF LIFE is on view at 47 Canal (47 Canal Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 13, 2013.