



Left: American Flag, Supreme Court of the United States, Washington D.C, 2019 Right: Deck, Rosewood Sand Hill Hotel, Menlo Park, 2019

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Since 2014, Josh Kline has been at work on a major cycle of installation-based projects concerned with the unfolding political, economic, technological, and biological changes that will shape human life in the 21st century. The first three chapters—Freedom (2015–16), Unemployment (2016), and Civil War (2017)—were variously exhibited in the U.S., the U.K., and Italy. The first components of a fourth, Climate Change, debuted in the Whitney Biennial and at 47 Canal in New York this past spring. In these new artworks, Kline continues to mobilize the strategies he’s developed over the last decade, using material transformation and transubstantiation to describe a future altered beyond recognition by human-made climate change, global warming, sea-level rise, and nationalism.

Among the Climate Change works are Kline’s Flooding Images, photographs of sites of American power, presented in colored frames and behind tinted glass. Inside their frames, the photographs are continuously inundated by water over time, “washing the images away like bad dreams or traumatic memories.” The images of the works that follow document the photographs at various points in their transformation, as the digital color prints “un-develop.” Haley Mellin spoke with Kline about crisis, longevity, and the role art might play in response to the threat of climate catastrophe.

GARAGE: How did you source these images?

Josh Kline: I shot the photographs myself using my phone. I chose locations where American power is created, expresses itself, or is stockpiled: Silicon Valley and San Francisco, where America’s technology industry is centered; Manhattan, America’s financial center; and Washington, D.C., the nation’s capital and the center of its political and military industries.

The images are lit by LED lights. What's the significance of the colors you used?

Orange for DayQuil, purple for Dimetapp, green for Sudafed, and brown for generic medicine bottles. America is a nation of addiction and addicts, and a nation in pain: pharmaceutical pain killers, social media, political spectacle, gasoline, toxic food, neoliberal capitalism, religious extremism, guns, escapism.

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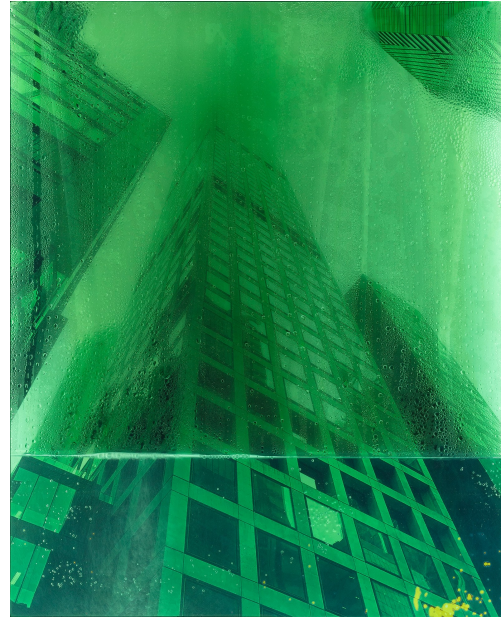
How do decay, deterioration, and the challenge of conserving your work speak to our current world situation?

I'm interested in working with and talking about physical processes such as deterioration or melting. Melting is going to be one of the most consequential physical processes for our lives in this century. Scientists tell us that whether we limit global average temperature rise or not, some amount of sea-level rise is now unavoidable. It's baked into the oceans and the atmosphere. Greenland and Antarctica are going to melt. As a world, the question we have to decide is: How much melting? Art is a way for people to come to terms with or to confront these phenomena emotionally, or it at least contains that potential.

Currently, oceans are rising at an inch per decade. As the waters rise in these works, I think about this visual being real one day in our cities and towns.

I've thought a great deal about sea-level rise since moving to New York in 2002. Over the years, while walking along New York's streets, I sometimes try to imagine what they would be like under 6 or 16 feet of water. Based on current scientific understanding of global warming and its effects on the world's ice caps, unless massive sea walls are built, New York and all the world's coastal cities are doomed to drown later this century, possibly experiencing three to six feet of permanent sea-level rise by 2100. America—which is one of the main culprits behind rising atmospheric carbon levels—is a society whose power centers are located on its coasts. It's a nation in the process of knocking out its own foundation. Many of the locations that I present dissolving in water are the places where decisions to take us down this irreversible and catastrophic path were or are being made. Once those places are lost to the rising sea, all we'll have of them are images, which may also fade and disappear over time.

This series is prognostic. What is something that people can do to lessen their footprint on climate change?



"67432 Park Avenue, Manhattan," 2019



"67432 Park Avenue, Manhattan, 2019 Statue of Ronald Reagan, United States Capitol Rotunda, Washington, D.C.," 2019



"United States Capitol, Washington, D.C.," 2019

The most important thing that people can do—in America or abroad—is to work to support the American Democratic Party and to work to dismantle or neuter the American Republican Party. While, as individuals, we can make climate-conscious choices like becoming vegan or abstaining from air travel, these individual choices and their consequences are dwarfed by the impact that governments and their policies have on the emerging disaster. Because of America's global political, economic, and military hegemony, our individual actions of conscience will all amount to nothing if this country continues to be governed or obstructed by a political party that denies the reality or gravity of human-made climate change.

What role do you think politics can play in confronting climate change?

In the United States, we can support politicians and policies that align with the Green New Deal—and work to remove Republicans from power and keep them from getting into

office. The most impactful and far-reaching solutions to the climate crisis are only possible at the level of government policy. This is really not an area that we can compromise on with the Right. I read somewhere that the American military has one of the largest carbon footprints on the planet; as long as Republicans are in office, no serious discussion of moving them to a carbon-neutral or carbon-negative energy footing is possible.

What are the implications of climate change for visual culture?

The climate catastrophe that's coming could shatter our entire society. I have a hard time imagining capitalism surviving what's coming, much less our mass visual culture, which is rooted in that economic system. Most of the coastal cities where the art, entertainment, and advertising industries are centered will be flooded out in the coming decades.

What does it mean to make artwork as a response to this ongoing catastrophe, rather than producing, say, polemical literature or going into direct action?

I don't think that making art about political subjects precludes involvement in activism. Contemporary art is the platform that I have access to and the platform that I know how to use. Although I do write and have been briefly involved with activism in the past, I am not a writer or an activist. In terms of raising awareness of the issues that I'm concerned about, I can reach far more people through the art I make and the dialogue around it than I ever could through direct action or attempting to restart my life as a journalist at age 40. I believe there's a role for artists,

and for all other people who make a living through communication, to speak publicly about political issues and to use their work to contribute to raising awareness of the crises we face.

Who do you think of as your audience?

Before World War II, there was a belief among artists and many others that art could directly change society, that art itself could be an instrument of revolution. After the war, belief in art's political potential swung into oblivion, and people ceased to believe that art had any capacity for political or societal impact. For the past 75 years in the West, art has largely been seen as an intellectual exercise, a space to debate formal issues or obscure points of academic theory. I think both of these extreme positions on art's political potency ignore a wide swath of possibilities in between. While I don't believe that art can be a revolutionary instrument in a mass-media society like the United States, I think it does have untapped potential for communication. For me, the challenge is the possibility of making a complex and rigorous art that's open, that seeks to include rather than exclude the audience.

Given how a sense of disintegration is fundamental to this body of work, what are your thoughts on your own legacy as an artist?

As an artist, I'm living and working in the present. It feels urgent right now to speak out publicly about the dark future our rulers are building and advocate for policies and perspectives that lead somewhere else, somewhere more hopeful. I always keep a future audience in mind when making my work. I want to be in dialogue with people in the future, to help explain the past out of which their future present emerged. The more I read about climate change, though, the less confidence I have that much of my work will survive the future that's coming.