

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



