

## Josh Kline's Tour-de-Force Whitney Survey Is Further Proof of a Major Talent

By Alex Greenberger May 3, 2023



Installation view of "Josh Kline: Project for a New American Century," 2023, at Whitney Museum, New York.  
PHOTO RON AMSTUTZ

A mysterious ticking emanates from a gray-walled, gray-carpeted gallery on the Whitney Museum's fifth floor. The anxiety-inducing beeping portends oncoming disaster—a time bomb about to go off, the Doomsday Clock moving seconds closer to midnight.

Spoiler alert: the source of all this noise is nothing quite so dramatic. Rather than an explosive weapon or an apocalyptic countdown, the ticking comes from a set of jerry-rigged devices that have been cut in two, then reassembled, courtesy of Josh Kline, who is currently the subject of his first US museum survey at the Whitney.

One of these works, titled *Alternative Facts* (2017), features a Samsung flip phone and

an iPhone attached to each other by red duct tape. Primly shown on a chintzy display, the piece evokes gadgetry repurposed for warfare. The sculpture's title implies that the conflict in question has been necessitated, and possibly even exacerbated, by the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election.

There's a tendency in mainstream media to catastrophize recent events, like that election or the current pandemic, and claim that they signal a grand finale to life as we know it. But the world already ended a long time ago for the many who face climate change, racism, and economic freefall daily. Kline seems to agree with that line of thinking. For him, the apocalypse is now.

His Whitney survey, "Project for a New American Century," attests to his foreboding vision, filled as it is with dismembered limbs and late-capitalist junk. It's dark stuff—you don't exactly leave a Kline exhibition feeling good about the state of things. But oh, how intoxicating it all is. This terrific show is further proof that Kline is one of our great living artists, a true master at spinning nightmarish visions of worlds to come.



Works from Kline's newest body of work, "Personal Responsibility" (2023), feature survivors in a post-apocalyptic landscape narrating their lives.

PHOTO RON AMSTUTZ

Ugly as it may be from a conceptual standpoint, Kline's art is quite beautiful to look at, which is no small part due to the way he installs it. Kline treats art spaces the way film directors approach sets, stylizing every imaginable element so that his fictions feel real and lived-in. Accordingly, there are no white cubes in this exhibition, which is arranged non-chronologically and into environments related to an ongoing saga about where we're headed.

In this exhibition, in lieu of the Whitney's smooth floorboards, there are now flattened Amazon boxes and raw balsa wood. One gallery is lit gleaming white like an Apple Store, while most others are cast in varying degrees of darkness. It's all immersive, creepy, and totally unlike the traditional mid-career survey.

The most notable intervention in the Whitney's architecture is *The look, the feel, of Patagonia Nano Puff®* (2012/23), which covers a pristine wall facing the Hudson River. It's a long stretch of black polyester fabric and insulation that was originally produced by Kline in collaboration with the titular outerwear company. With its rows of black rectangles and its recurring Patagonia logos, the piece offers a curious breed of Minimalism and luxury fetishism.



Josh Kline, *Creative Hands*, 2011.  
PHOTO JOERG LOHSE/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND 47  
CANAL, NEW YORK/RUBELL MUSEUM

Familiar logos proliferate in Kline's art. Walking through the show, I amassed a long list of the products invoked: Lays, Jarritos, FedEx, Eastsport, Barbour, Lysol, Walmart, Purina, Levi's, Gold Medal, Rubbermaid, Advil, Amazon Prime, and many more. There's a seductive comfort in discovering each label—and an ambient fear in knowing that the act of brand recognition is now a condition of life as we know it.

The earliest pieces in the show, from the late 2000s and early 2010s, attest to this. A looped animation from 2013, titled *Forever 21*, features digital pills raining down on text spelling out the retail chain's name. The capsules are red, white, and blue: the colors of the American flag. It is presented alongside refrigerated coolers containing pouches of blood doped with drugs like Wellbutrin and IV bags filled with cocktails of Vitamin C, Red Bull, Ritalin, and more—creepy reminders of how we pump ourselves with trademarked substances in order to work harder, better, faster, stronger.

Nearby, there are two videos whose titles, *Forever 27* and *Forever 48* (both 2013), imply a bond with that animation. They depict actors playing the musicians Kurt Cobain and Whitney Houston, respectively, as though they had never died young. These stars' faces are crudely superimposed via open-source AI technology, and periodically, their eyes, mouths, and noses stutter, offering glimpses at the real people beneath the computer-generated masks. Underneath, there are living, breathing beings who are getting squeezed out under the weight of a celebrity's identity—a brand of a different sort.



Josh Kline, *Forever 48* (still), 2013.  
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When humans do show up in Kline's sculptures, they are made to seem like refuse. Six brutally effective sculptures from 2016 feature people in business casual garb. These office workers look oddly organic as they lie in a permanent slumber, but their 3D-printed plaster forms, with their waxy, pallid coating, betray any signs of life. Curled up in the fetal position, they have been spat out by the capitalistic companies that once employed them and returned to their embryonic state. Now, their amniotic sacs have been replaced with knotted plastic bags, causing them to appear like yesterday's trash.

Or maybe it's more accurate to say like last week's recycling, since Kline's sculpted bodies are often exhibited in parts intended for reuse. Some assembly may be required.



*Overtime Drip* (2013/23) enlists materials such as espresso, Adderall, deodorant, Red Bull, Ritalin, printer ink, Vitamin C, mouthwash, and toothpaste.

PHOTO CHRISTIAN ØEN/©JOSH KLINE/ASTRUP FEARNLEY MUSEUM, OSLO

Severed heads, arms, and hands can be found in the janitor's cart enlisted for *Cost of Living* (Aleyda), 2014. They've been 3D-printed based on the likeness of a real

housekeeper who worked at a Manhattan hotel; she allowed herself to be scanned by Kline's team. After Aleyda was turned into a data file, she became an object whose pieces now lie alongside plaster renditions of her toilet brushes and spray bottles. She has been literally objectified—she is turned into the tools of her labor, perhaps to represent the perspective of her employer—but Kline does not entirely deprive her of personhood. Nearby, the real-life housekeeper can be seen in a confessional-style video in which she discusses her ambitions and the conditions of her work.

Kline's freakish surrealism is unsubtle in a way that can be jarring. It is unsparing; it cuts through the politesse that typically abounds in conceptual art. It seems directed less at the art-world elite, who may regard its lack of subtlety with a circumspect eye, than it does at the general public, which will find much to gawk at in this show.

Its curator, Christopher Y. Lew, has created an experience that likewise feels accessible. He isn't keen to position Kline with respect to recent art-historical developments, skirting entirely the issue of post-internet art, a movement of the 2010s whose purveyors glibly ported the look of Web 2.0 into galleries, as Kline did in early works that assume the guise of stock photography. And, unless you read the catalogue, you wouldn't know that works like *Cost of Living (Aleyda)* are intentionally paying homage to the tapes of video art collectives like TVTV and Videofreex. Instead, Lew mainly connects Kline's art not to his peers but to ChatGPT, DALL-E, and deepfakes, which he claims Kline foresaw.

These are sloppy comparisons—Kline's art doesn't really have much in common with any of them. It is true, though, that Kline has pointed the way forward for many who came up after him. A case in point: a recent sculpture by Andrew Roberts from 2022's Whitney Biennial that featured a lopped-off silicone arm with the Amazon logo on it. This isn't all that dissimilar to Kline's *15% Service (Applebee's Waitress's Head)*, 2018, in which a server's 3D-printed neck contains, on its hollow inside, the eatery chain's apple icon.

If Kline's art has proven predictive, we probably ought to expect a lot of tech-minded artists to go analog soon. The most recent works in the show, a new group of installations from the series "Personal Responsibility," list 3D-printed elements among their materials, though I must admit I had trouble spotting them. They mainly consist of freestanding cloistered spaces—a vehicle redolent of the #vanlife trend, a bunker-like cell—that each contain a screen. These screens play videos of fictional characters offering testimonials about leaving society and starting anew; they're interspersed with hypnotic shorts showing reversed footage of denim, sugar, and more going up in flames.

The "Personal Responsibility" pieces, which lure in issues related to land rights and systemic racism, are unusually knotty for Kline—perhaps too much so for an artist who is best when diagnosing one symptom of societal collapse at a time. But there is something compelling about how stridently un-digital they are, at least compared to the early works on view not far away.



*In Stock (Walmart Worker's Arms)*, 2018, features 3D-printed severed limbs based on scans of a Walmart worker.

PHOTO JOERG LOHSE/©JOSH KLINE/COURTESY 47 CANAL, NEW YORK



Works like *Adaptation*, from 2019–22, rely heavily on analog technologies to image the future.

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I much preferred the three-channel video installation *Another America Is Possible* (2017), which envisions a July 4 celebration held in 2043, the year that the US is slated

to become a minority-majority country. Across the three screens, Black men and women are shown ceremonially burning a Confederate flag as children run freely. Shot on 16mm film, it reclaims the aesthetic of Levi's commercials, peddling leftist politics instead of straight-cut jeans.

Kline's sour worldview and any notion of optimism seem opposed, but this work suggests that the two can be squared. So too does *Adaptation* (2019–22), in which a group of climate-change seafarers navigate waterlogged Manhattan by boat. The Doomsday clock has already struck midnight; disaster arrived a while ago. But the tone is not all so dour. As the actors in it look out at the deluged landscape they traverse, their gazes seem to express something unexpected: hope.