

'Josh Kline: Climate Change' at MOCA, Los Angeles

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'Josh Kline: Climate Change', Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles,
23 June 2024 – 5 January 2025

Several years ago, expanding on his earlier book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, writer Amitav Ghosh gave a public talk in Berkeley, California, in which he urgently called for artists and writers to use their skills to address our ecological crisis. This is something that many visual artists have been doing for years – think of the late Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison whose work was concerned with threatened ecological systems from the 1970s until their deaths; of Agnes Denes's 1982 *Wheatfield* planted in lower Manhattan; and of Mel Chin's first *Revival Field* in which his plantings leached toxins out of the soil in 1991.¹

This important work has been, and is still being, done in myriad ways. Filmmaker John Akomfrah's *Purple* (2017) examines the effects of global warming on people across the globe.² In 2022, Mary Mattingly's *Swale* created a floating forest of food for New York City.³ And art about climate change can potentially have a large reach. When John Kerry, the US Presidential Envoy on Climate, saw Richard Mosse's 70-minute video installation *Broken Sceptre*, which focused on the Amazon region's ecological and human disasters, in 2023, he asked Mosse for a link to send to Inácio Lula da Silva, the then newly elected President of Brazil.⁴

Obviously, not every artwork gets the sort of political mileage that Mosse's did, but making an impactful statement on one of the dominant issues facing all of us is a compelling challenge

¹ For further information on the Harrisons' longstanding ecological works, see their website 'The Harrison Studio', www.theharrisonstudio.net; on Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield*, see Karrie Jacobs, 'The Woman Who Harvested a Wheat Field Off Wall Street', *The New York Times Style Magazine*, 14 June 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/06/14/t-magazine/agnes-denes-art.html; on Mel Chin's *Revival Field*, see the artist's website: <https://melchin.org/oeuvre/revival-field>.

² See Sean O'Hagan, 'John Akomfrah: "Progress can cause profound suffering"', *The Guardian*, 1 October 2017 www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/oct/01/john-akomfrah-purple-climate-change, accessed 16 August 2024

³ See Zoë Lescaze, 'The Optimistic Art of Mary Mattingly', *The New York Times Style Magazine*, 30 September 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/09/30/t-magazine/mary-mattingly-art-climate.html, accessed 16 August 2024

⁴ See the last paragraph of Jonathan Griffith's article 'The Terrible Beauty of Richard Mosse's Portrait of the Amazon' in *The New York Times* on 9 June 2023: 'When "Broken Spectre" was shown in London, Mosse recalls, John Kerry, President Biden's climate envoy, saw the film, and soon after Mosse received an email from Kerry's office requesting an online screening link. The next day, Kerry was to meet with Brazil's new president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and the minister of environment and climate change, Marina Silva, and he wanted to share the film with them.' www.nytimes.com/2023/06/08/arts/design/richard-mosse-film-amazon-brazil.html, accessed 23 July 2024

to many artists. Josh Kline's 'Climate Change', which opened at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art this summer, shows that he is one of them.

I wanted to see Kline's work because (as of this writing), even as record heat, fires, floods and unusual hurricane patterns worldwide have been increasing dramatically, climate is not being addressed by either of the presidential hopefuls in the US's over-long election cycle. Maybe, as Ghosh suggested, it is up to the artists. Kline's initial instincts seem excellent; he is tying human and social costs together with climate change and his research is solid. It is unfortunate, however, that he doesn't do it better.

The exhibition is ambitious in every way, taking up over half of the museum's square footage. There are installations that melt and freeze; there are nine separate videos, eight of which are set within various life-size simulations where visitors can sit and watch them. And there are scores of people, carefully listed, who helped realise Kline's projects, from scriptwriters to actors, editors and fabricators.



Josh Kline, *Personal Desperation*, 2023, installation view, photo by the author

'Climate Change' is broken up into six spaces. Curiously, regarding ecological concerns as a core concept, the exhibition's floor is covered in what appears to be a black plastic tarpaulin.⁵ The first section, titled 'Deep Fragility', is divided into three rooms, each entered by a door that is roughly collaged with fragments of flags from the USA, China, Russia, Japan and Britain. Wall signage tells us that these doors are 'a physical allegory for a geopolitical relationship

⁵ After contacting MOCA about this, I was promised a reply about the material and the idea behind its choice, but after several tries and a week later, the question was left unanswered – and at the time of publication of this review, is still so.

between nations who have destabilized the world's climate'. Inside the first room are three medium-sized vitrines filled with miniature tableaux that reimagine various urban landscapes. There is always something inherently seductive about miniatures in the way they let us experience their world as a giant, but Kline dilutes that impact by placing a larger ice sculpture in each (a cow, a car and an aeroplane). Apparently memes for our biggest sources of pollution, these outsize forms are designed to melt and then be replaced with solid versions throughout the day.

The next room also has vitrines. This time the sculptures consist of an office building, a church and a set of suburban-type homes, presumably symbols for corporate business, religion and the American dream. These are made of a soy wax that melts, slowly dripping into buckets below each piece, again replaced with new versions throughout the day. The third room also has three vitrines; these are filled with miniature domestic items (the labels identify them as doll-house furniture) which are variously submerged in water and/or heat. Perhaps it is the repetitive process of all these items melting, freezing and cooking, but it becomes a distracting device that, while likely fun for Kline to have made, does little to explicate the issues.



Josh Kline, *Domestic Fragility Meltdown* (detail), 2023, courtesy of the artist and MOCA Los Angeles, photo by Joerg Lohse

The largest room is filled with eight almost life-size installations. Titled 'Personal Responsibility', this section is described as the 'core of Kline's project'. From a distance, it looks terrific in a terrifying way: an enormous room alive with red-orange colour, multiple objects, sounds, and lots and lots of text. The problem is in the details. Again, there are too many of them. It overwhelms. Each of the eight installations are made from ripstop polyester and designed to alternately suggest a dormitory, hospital room, storage unit, tent, life raft, trailer

and camper. Appropriate items, such as work clothes, food, water and beds, are arranged within each. Kline and his crew also created different videos with specific seating arrangements for every individual one, a thoughtful touch considering their length.



Josh Kline, *Personal Responsibility*, 2023, installation view, courtesy of the artist and MOCA Los Angeles, photo by Joerg Lohse

The first video shows a white woman, from the liberal Pacific Northwest of the USA. She expresses cynicism about tech billionaires and worries about the encroaching sea levels. She is environmentally green, but within minutes her fears about the climate morph into xenophobia as she talks about how refugees from other parts of the country shouldn't be allowed into her state. This installation is placed at the room's entrance and sets the artist's intentions for the other eight – which appear to be that, as varied as peoples' responses are, and whatever their ethnicity or class backgrounds, they are all equally affected by encroaching waters and fires. It is an unassailable point, but in this piece, the woman's delivery is so formulaic, it sent me rushing to take another look at the signage. There, I saw that this isn't an actual interview, but a script.⁶ And apparently cast with a less than adept actor.

Some of the other installations are better. In *Personal Responsibility*, the actors are more convincing. The installation recreates a UN refugee camp in Miami after the severe flooding there, and its characters, from the Dominican Republic and Belarus, discuss their fears about deportation. *Disinformation* shows a white man, who formerly worked in tech and now lives in suburban Arizona after his town ran out of water. In what seems typical of Kline's overweening

⁶ Each of the videos were scripted by Josh Kline and Thymaya Payne; the latter directed *Stolen Seas* (2013), a documentary about Somali piracy.

instinct to include everything all at once, there is more. In addition to these scripted monologues, four of the eight videos have another, lengthy sequence of an object being slowly lit on fire and burning to carbon before being carefully packaged, bound and buried. The objects are, variously, a can of gasoline, a pair of folded blue jeans, a pack of Marlboro cigarettes and a box of Domino sugar. Wall text informs us that these are symbols for oil, cotton, tobacco and sugar, the industries that are part of America's history of wealth accumulation, slavery, and its reckless treatment of the environment. Viewing the first sequence appeared poetic, but after circumnavigating the entire room, the repetition begins to pall.



Josh Kline, *Capture and Sequestration Cigarettes* (video still), 2023, courtesy of the artist and MOCA Los Angeles

All this action, and acting, makes *Industrial Revolutions Pregame* a relief. In this piece, the room has ten dirty and tired-looking oil cans labelled after the major oil-producing countries. The cans are well-spaced apart and attached to long cords, which are then connected to small, upside-down, orange oil derricks on the ceiling. It is noteworthy that this is one of Kline's most recent works (from 2024), suggesting that he may have grasped the truism that less is (most often) more.

The first time I went to see 'Climate Change', I was in the company of a friend. She is a filmmaker and public health advocate who for the past twenty years has been working nationally and internationally on creating social impact storytelling within the television and movie industries. I found her waiting for me sipping tea in the café; she had walked out of the galleries after an hour. Her response to the exhibit came from her own work in 'narrative transportation theory',⁷ a theory that if art is going to move us emotionally – or even (hopefully) to action – one

⁷ See the implications of 'narrative transportation theory' in Sheila Murphy, Heather J Hether, Laurel J Felt and Sandra DeCastro-Buffington, 'Public Diplomacy in Prime Time: Exploring the Potential of Entertainment Education in International Public Diplomacy', *American Journal of Media Psychology*, vol 5, nos 1–4, 2012, downloadable here: www.researchgate.net/publication/260063585_Public_Diplomacy_in_Prime_Time_Exploring_the_Potential_of_Entertainment_Education_in_International_Public_Diplomacy



Josh Kline, video still from *Adaptation*, 16mm film, 10 mins, 2019–2022, courtesy of the artist and MOCA Los Angeles

needs to be absorbed into a story with ‘a suspension of disbelief’, something she felt Kline didn’t allow.

‘Climate Change’ is described in the press release as an immersive installation. A better term would simply be *active*. With all its dazzle, in terms of media and devices, and with all the different characters Kline introduces in his videos, it has the feel of a large commercial convention – lots of cool stuff and no way to take it all in. Kline loads us with his message but doesn’t allow for the time or space to contemplate it. A common critique of work this earnest, that somehow doesn’t end up as emotionally or intellectually moving, is that the artist doesn’t trust his viewers’ own acuity. That is certainly true here and it may be that in Kline’s passion for his subject, he has lost sight of what art can do best: leave little poetic blank spots for viewers to fill in the gaps themselves. Those little spaces that allow for thought and change.

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