

The Washington Post

World-class conceptual art pops up in a vacant bank at the Watergate



Josh Kline's video "Crying Games" is part of the pop-up exhibition "Exodus."
(Kristian Laudrup/Courtesy of Josh Kline/Bortolami)

In a vacant space on the ground floor of the Watergate office building, there's the faint sound of sniffing. "All those people," a voice moans, "Oh God, I'm so sorry!" On a video monitor, a teary-eyed George W. Bush appears, dressed in a prison uniform, rocking back and forth in the fetal position.

The footage is a part of Josh Kline's "Crying Games," a video artwork where the faces of politicians who played a role in the war on terror are superimposed over bodies of hysterical, crying actors, expressing regret. Heard in a building that, by name alone, invokes scandal, Kline's manufactured apologies sound particularly urgent, like repressed guilt fighting to be felt.

"Crying Games" is part of "Exodus," a pop-up art exhibition by New York-based Bortolami Gallery on view in the Watergate complex. Bringing together some of the biggest names in conceptual art — MacArthur grantees Wu Tsang and Cameron Rowland; 2019 Venice Biennial Golden Lion winner Arthur Jafa; Danh Vo, the subject of a 2018 Guggenheim retrospective; among others — the show explores the way familiar objects and images contain layers of meaning.

This explains why — with stacks of lumber, a half-erased whiteboard, two shopping carts and a piece of a chain-link fence — "Exodus" looks more like an abandoned storefront than an art show. Found-object art, as it is known in the art world, goes back to Marcel Duchamp, who, in 1917, turned a urinal upside down, signed it and displayed it in a gallery with the title "Fountain."

"The point is the work literally looks like something you could have picked up off the floor of a garage," says curator Paul Pfeiffer. "It has been purposefully untransformed."



Installation view of the pop-up exhibition "Exodus," with Cady Noland's "Institutional Field," foreground, and Sondra Perry's "Historic Jamestowne: Share in the Discovery and Take Several Seats," behind it.
(Kristian Laudrup/Courtesy of Cady Noland/Bortolami)

With conceptual works, an object becomes "art," when it is elevated in a gallery setting. But here, in a space with unfinished floors and ceilings, in the underbelly of the Watergate, these objects are not so much elevated as they are entirely recontextualized. Kline's "In Stock (Walmart Worker's Legs)," made of stolen shopping carts filled with 3-D-printed limbs, critiques labor practices under global capitalism. Vo's political totem, a pen once used to sign a 1963 nuclear test ban treaty, enshrines a kind of diplomacy that feels precarious in the era of Twitter foreign policy. Lutz Bacher's "Whiteboard" renders an ordinary classroom material a politicized tool for disseminating historical narratives. The critical aspects of these simple objects all come into high relief when displayed in a setting that reeks of American scams and controversies.

A work such as Cady Noland's "Institutional Field," a chain-link fence laid out on the floor, might be provocative in a gallery setting. But in a space that reminds us of the extent to which established institutions can serve as a cover for ill will, the physical materials of incarceration have added edge. "The simple gesture of putting the show in the Watergate building creates a narrative around the whole show and every object in it," says Pfeiffer. "That's part of the draw."

So it's not just the objects that are "found." At a time when the U.S. president is facing impeachment — and the -gate suffix seems ubiquitous — the stage for the exhibition is a found object in its own right. The show is just "pretending to be about objects," says Pfeiffer. "These artists are going outside the realm of traditional art-making practice and attempting to break through the fourth wall into the real world."



Installation view of the pop-up exhibition "Exodus," with Danh Vo's "Walnut Lumber," foreground, and Josh Kline's "In Stock (Walmart Worker's Arms)" and "In Stock (Walmart Worker's Legs)," right."
(Kristian Laudrup/Courtesy of Danh Vo/Bortolami)

This is particularly evident in the work of Vo, who, most infamously, has married and divorced two of his friends for the ongoing artwork "Vo Rosasco Rasmussen," and who has been termed a "hunter gatherer" for his practice of purchasing historically significant objects at auction and displaying them as artworks.

Vo's "Walnut Lumber," a stack of wood on view in "Exodus," was shipped across the country from the California estate of Robert McNamara's son (McNamara was the former Vietnam-era defense secretary). Vo, whose family fled Vietnam when he was 4, obtained the work through his friendship with McNamara's son and grandson. The walnut tree, a symbol of longevity, has been removed and relocated — much like Vo and his family. But it's unclear whether the work is art. The wood is mostly raw, and Vo has expressed interest in how a future owner might transform it. Complicating authorship and merging process and product, the wood is what might be called a potential artwork.

"The use of found objects by artists today could be an interesting laboratory for considering what is going on in the larger culture," says Pfeiffer. One thing certainly unites the two: In "Exodus," the line between fiction and reality, much like in our digital and political universes, is blurrier than ever.