

# 2020 Visions

"Doomscrolling" at the Hall Art Foundation

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## REVIEW



Last week, moderators opened the presidential debate by asking if Americans are better off than they were four years ago. Those looking for a visceral answer to that question may find it in "Doomscrolling," a collaborative exhibition by Brooklyn artists Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston, on view through December 1 at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading.

The show presents a powerful series of 18 woodblock prints based on media images that appeared from May 24, 2020, through January 6, 2021. The *New York Times* headline proclaiming, "U.S. DEATHS NEAR 100,000, AN INCALCULABLE LOSS" is quickly followed by scenes of unrest after the murder of George Floyd. Images of national protests and violent police response are interspersed with others picturing the realities of COVID-19. We see the McCloskeys of St. Louis, Mo., threatening Black Lives Matter supporters; then-president Donald Trump holding up a Bible for a photo op after ordering protesters tear-gassed; Rudy Giuliani melting down at Four Seasons Total Landscaping; the fly on Mike Pence's head.

Each of the prints is composed of many layered images



## THIS PLYWOOD WAS WITNESS TO THESE EVENTS.

ROB SWAINSTON

in bright, saturated colors. All but one are 57 by 45 inches and vertically oriented, like the image on a phone. They are titled by date and sometimes by time, when more than one print represents the same day. Viewing them mimics the feeling of doomscrolling on a phone: seeing many images of the same event unfold in real time and being unable to make coherent sense of them beyond a feeling of momentous dread.

During summer 2020, much of New York City was boarded up. At the duo's artist talk in July, Swainston recalled that he had been out taking photos of the empty city. "As a woodcut artist, I was looking at this, going, *Look*



From left: "July 18, 2020-21"; "July 4, 2020-21"; "August 25, 2020-21"

*at all this plywood!* It conceptually made sense: It was getting graffitied, it was getting covered, it was getting weathered — this plywood was witness to these events."

Swainston and Sidhu wrote to institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art with a project proposal. When the museums opened back up, the artists received some 120 sheets of plywood, which they carved into the woodcut blocks for the series. The distressed material would normally be considered undesirable for printing, but here it introduced an element of chaos and unpredictability that made sense for the work.

In "July 4, 2020-21" which primarily portrays protesters at the Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Va., the artists included an image of Mount Rushmore, one of many elements describing patriotic themes. Because that piece of plywood was warped, Abraham Lincoln's face is the only part of it that printed. Close-ups of the graffiti on Robert E. Lee's plinth add literal subtext to the print, creating a texture that echoes the grain and blemishes on the wood's surface.

The artists are interested in both the history and technology of printing and photography and how people

consume images. Woodcut printing, they said during their talk, was the first real form of mass-media communication and has long been a tool of protest and dissent.

Sidhu and Swainston wanted to create singular images that convey the contradictions inherent in today's endlessly scrolling news: composed pictures that are in conflict with themselves.

"This entire series is about conflicts," Sidhu said. "There are political conflicts, but we can also have conflicts of scale, conflicts of time, conflicts of color, conflicts of different kinds of ways of describing bursts of light."

The last are articulated in "August 25, 2020-21" which pictures 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse after he shot three people in Kenosha, Wis. Layered over a photographic lens flare is a halo of rays taken from Albrecht Dürer's "The Lamentation," a woodcut from around 1500.

Sidhu and Swainston have included historical art references throughout the series, sandwiched among their own drawings, Associated Press photos, screenshots of Fox News and stills from protesters' iPhone videos. The older sources ground the prints in a longer time frame, marking these moments as part of history.

The artists also use these antecedents to help process meaning, forging a connection between our understanding and that of people making sense of their own events in centuries past. Sidhu and Swainston said that when they got stuck, they often went to the Met for inspiration.

The print "July 18, 2020-21" shows a Sunday on the lawn of a city park, as vibrantly green as Georges Seurat's pointillist masterpiece "A Sunday on La Grande Jatte — 1884." Unlike their 19th-century counterparts, the Brooklyn park goes lounge six feet apart, separated into white social-distancing circles painted on the grass. A photo of a patient on a ventilator, layered behind them, hits the eye second.

In making the piece, the artists said, they asked themselves how they would describe the fear of death. Their answer was to include a detail from Hans Holbein the Younger's 1533 painting "The Ambassadors" — an anamorphic skull that is only really visible when one stands at the edge of the frame by the gallery wall. Both works point out that death is ever-present, even in a germ-free zone.

Several audience members at the artist talk remarked on how strange it felt to walk into the show and remember that these



Installation view

things actually happened. Swainston and Sidhu said that even as they created this work in 2021, it seemed as though people were forgetting — or perhaps blocking out — what they had just lived through. Today, that sense is even stronger.

The artists said they hoped their complicated images would inspire people to keep remembering and examining the historical events rather than feeling as if they had "ossified," Swainston said. "The negotiation

of *What does this image mean?* — we thought would sort of keep them alive and keep them in the public sphere, keep us thinking about them — and [keep us from being] surprised when these things happen again." ⑦

#### INFO

"Doomscrolling" by Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston, on view through December 1 at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading. [hallartfoundation.org](http://hallartfoundation.org)



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