

Jillian Russo, "Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston: *Flash Point*," *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2025.

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Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston: *Flash Point*

By Jillian Russo



Installation view: Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston: *Flash Point*, Petzel Gallery, New York, 2025. Courtesy Petzel.

Printmaking duo Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston's exhibition *Flash Point* intermingles three new bodies of work addressing current political and environmental crises. The exhibition title, according to the press release, references a "point of combustion...the instant at which a person or event flares up, suddenly exploding into

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Jillian Russo, “Zorawar Sidu and Rob Swainston: *Flash Point*,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2025. action or being.” Rather than conveying the energy of a spark, a mood of barrage and exhaustion predominates. *Flash Point* enables the viewer to confront the effects of constantly grappling with unsettling pictures and to reflect on everything the American public has witnessed.

The exhibition opens with the red, white, blue, and black silkscreen and woodcut *Balloon View of Washington* (2024-25), part of the “War for the Union” series. The composition takes the form of a billowing American flag but in place of the stars and stripes, the artists insert birds-eye views of a crowd at a political rally. A faceless older male leader raises his hand gesturing towards the attendees. Superimposed on this scene are red and blue dots that float like balloons, campaign signs, and partially obscured banners with the words “The Constitution Forever.”

Flash Point
Petzel
March 7–April 12, 2025
New York

Other works chronicle demonstrations, including the pro-Palestine sit-ins on university campuses, the 2017 Charlottesville Rally, and the 2024 Republican and Democratic National Conventions. The prints are composed of many layers and some incorporate appropriated media from the Civil War era, such as Winslow Homer’s drawings which were illustrated in *Harper’s Weekly*. The historical imagery can be hard to spot as it is often submerged and used to provide texture to other forms. In *A Great Meeting in Support of the Government* (2024-25), which references imagery from January 6, 2021, the black outlines of Civil War soldiers are visible within the uniform of the armed capital police officer. In contrast, in *Siege of the Court* (2024-25), a nineteenth-century image of the Supreme Court’s Corinthian colonnade provides a prominent backdrop for images of the protesters responding to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.



Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston, *A Great Meeting in Support of the Government*, 2024–25. Silkscreen and woodcut on Coventry Rag paper. Unframed: 52 5/8 x 41 inches. Courtesy Petzel.

Art historical references are used as frameworks for depictions of current events in the “History is Present” series, in which printmaking comes into dialogue with history and landscape painting. The exhibition pairs two impressive monumental woodcuts that hint at the failures of European government. The tangerine-hued *Raft* (2023-25), based on Theodore Gericault’s 1819 painting *Raft of the Medusa*, is a scene of migrants in orange life vests packed onto an inflatable rescue boat. The image recalls photographs of

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Jillian Russo, "Zorawar Sidu and Rob Swainston: *Flash Point*," *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2025. the Libyan migrant crisis, during which boats capsized in the Mediterranean sea, and the Italian government hampered the efforts of Doctors Without Borders to rescue refugees. On the adjacent wall, a funeral scene, *From the Living* (2023-24), commemorates a child killed in Russia's bombardment of Ukraine. The composition, wherein a crowd of figures peer into the coffin, is modeled on Käthe Kollwitz's 1920 print *In Memoriam Karl Liebknecht*, in which workers mourn an assassinated Communist leader. Kollwitz was not a communist. Her interest in the subject, like Sidhu and Swainston's, was recording the effects of political violence.



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The largest gallery focuses on natural catastrophes. *New York Street; Rainy Day* (2023-25) is an apocalyptic re-imaging of Gustave Caillebotte's impressionist painting *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (1877). Rather than strolling through a tranquil drizzle, cozily tucked under umbrellas, pedestrians wade through a flood of waist-high green-orange water that evokes acid rain. The toxic color palette continues in two adjacent works. *New York; Smoky Day* (2023-25) presents the cityscape under the otherworldly apricot haze of the Canadian wildfire smog, while *Brownfield* (2023-24), reinterprets John Constable's *The Hay Wain* (1821), transforming a harmonious pastoral scene into one in which the landscape has been violated. The neon blue and green sky and vegetation creates a radioactive atmosphere that looms over workers in masks and hazmat suites, who drag a hose through murky sludge. Environmental issues are also addressed pointedly in a series of small etchings entitled *Spring Wake* (2025), which relate to the protests against the release of radioactive water from the Fukushima power plant disaster into the ocean as well as the environmental destruction caused by the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Revisiting tragic events of the recent past through Sidhu and Swainston's prints reminds us that we are living through difficult times. I was grateful for the inclusion of the multi-color woodcut *Blue Marble 2312* (2023-24), a depiction of the earth suspended in space with the moon behind it. The only serene work in the exhibition, it offered some perspective, and a respite, placing our tumultuous historical moment in geologic perspective, as our marble continues to spin.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2025/04/artseen/zorawar-sidhu-and-rob-swainston-flash-point/>