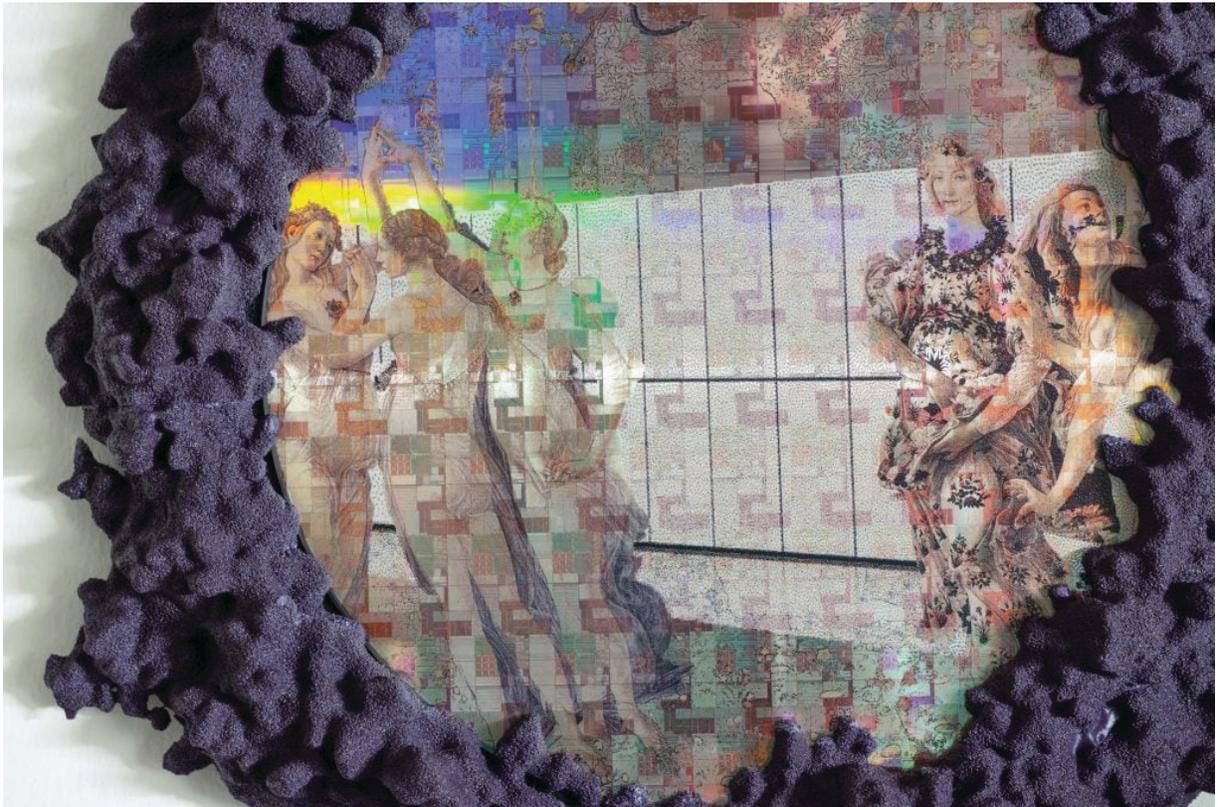


An Artist's High-Tech Works Have Been Held Up in Customs. Are Tariffs to Blame?

Art is apparently exempt from Trump's tariffs, but these particular artworks, maybe not so much.



Sam Ghanous, when you have mixed feelings about your phone 20 (2025). Courtesy YveYang Gallery.

Brian Boucher May 2, 2025

A New York art exhibition opening tonight may have fallen victim to U.S. president Donald Trump's protectionist trade measures, or, possibly, pending regulations on microchips. While artworks are (apparently) exempt from his protectionist tariffs, these artworks in particular contain the same materials that are used in the microchips that power much of modern technology, and thus may be the subject of some confusion at Customs.

"We're harassing FedEx," said Erica Kyung, gallery manager at YveYang Gallery, on Wooster Street in SoHo, in a phone conversation this morning. The artworks arrived at Newark Airport on Friday, April 25, she explained, and have been hung up there ever since.

The show, by artist Sam Ghanous, is titled "your golf course made my GPU," and explores the global interconnections of raw materials, specifically sand, that travel the Earth and end up in our pockets and on our desktops. Ghanous obtains these chips from the same places one would use if they were building a research supercomputer, but it's not as though he's building computers with the artworks in the show.

"It's not something you can go and put in a computer," Ghanous stressed. "It will not work."



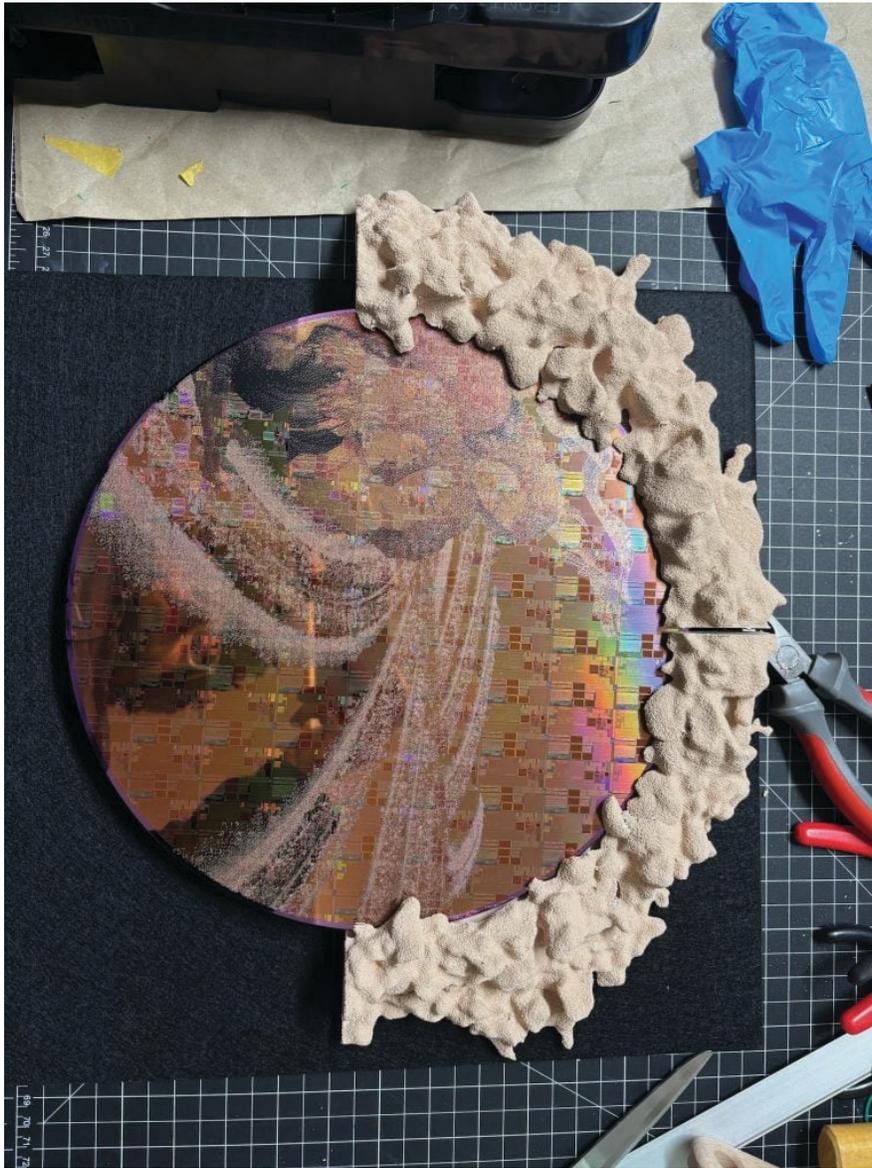
Artist Sam Ghantous. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Born in Oman and now living in Zurich, Ghantous has shown his work in New York at the New Museum and Postmasters Gallery, as well as with ZKM at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest and as far afield as the OoEli Art Park in Hangzhou. He earned a master's degree in architecture from MIT and teaches at the Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (aka ETH Zurich); he's also taught at Cornell University, the University of Toronto, and MIT.

Nine of his artworks are held up in the shipment; fortunately, two works in the same medium were produced at a different facility and were previously transported to the gallery in the owner's suitcase without hassles, and those will be on view. The works consist of prints on silicon wafers, including art-historical imagery by Old Masters like Botticelli, with artist-designed frames.

"These wafers are almost these jewel-like objects, made at a nanometer scale," said Ghantous over the phone. "Despite being everywhere around us, these materials are rare to see in person.

"Maybe we'll put your article in the show if the artworks don't arrive," the artist joked.



Sam Ghantous work in progress. Courtesy of the artist.

An alternative theory of the case is that the artworks are held up due to artificial intelligence regulations, though those are technically not yet in effect.

Even before Trump, the U.S. government placed restrictions on the international movements of these crucial materials. In the final days of his presidency, Trump's predecessor, Democrat Joe Biden, issued so-called "A.I.-diffusion" rules that put in place caps on how many A.I. chips created by tech giant Nvidia can be sold in various countries, including Ghantous's home country of Switzerland; the rules are principally designed to deprive China of this powerful technology. Sources tell Reuters this week that the Trump administration may modify those rules before they go into effect May 15. Could these rules be behind the delay? Unclear.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement did not reply to a request for information on the reason for the delay, nor did representatives of the agency's Newark field office. A FedEx agent was investigating the problem at time of publication; this story will be updated if the company clarifies matters.

The shipment has been a bit mysterious from the start. At home in Zurich, Ghantous received not one but two bills from FedEx for two slightly different amounts to cover customs charges. Could they be fraudulent? He supposes so, but they were sent by postal mail and had all the right information, so he's pretty sure they were legitimate, even though the gallery should have been the point of contact all along, said Kyung.



Sam Ghantous, your golf course made my GPU (2024-25). Courtesy the artist and YveYang Gallery.

Besides the two artworks containing the silicon, a titular three-channel video (2024-25) will be on view that, per the press release, “weaves together industrial footage with advertisements for luxury hotels in the imperfectly buffering reality built by today’s technology.” Golf champ Tiger Woods appears, along with trawlers scooping up sand from the ocean floor. Among the subjects is a Chinese trawler that, Ghantous said, is literally editing the Earth, in that it is creating new islands for China’s use. The video also explores networked time, which involves quartz crystals and connects all our phones with a central reference clock. And there’s the story of special sand from North Carolina that becomes a golf course but also goes into devices like phones, said Ghantous.

“In many ways, I empathize with the sand depicted in this show,” Ghantous said in press materials. “I was born in Oman, and like many in my generation, my childhood was subject to the migration of global capital. I felt perpetual displacement and transformation as my family moved to locations across the Middle East and eventually to North America.”

“It’s the ultimate irony,” said Ghantous over the phone. “Thanks, Trump, I guess, for really driving home the concept for me.”

UPDATE: At about 3:45 p.m. Eastern time, shortly after this article was published, the artworks were delivered. No explanation was provided for the delay. “We apologize for the inconvenience this has caused,” said a FedEx spokesperson in an email. “We have worked directly with the customer to resolve this issue.”