

MIT List Visual Arts Center
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listart.mit.edu

LIST PROJECTS 22: Cindy Ji Hye Kim

October 29, 2020 – March 21, 2021



Reign of the Idle Hands #1, 2019
Graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, acrylic, and oil on birch wood
12 in. (30.5 cm) diameter



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Bakalar Gallery October 29, 2020–March 21, 2021

Cindy Ji Hye Kim's Fateful Allegories

*Fate—monstrous
and empty,
you whirling wheel,
you are malevolent
well-being is vain
and always fades to nothing,
shadowed
and veiled
you plague me too;
now through the game
I bring my bare back
to your villainy*

"O, Fortuna," *Carmina Burana* manuscripts, c. 1230

A NOTE ON THE EXHIBITION AND COVID-19

While MIT continues to prioritize the health and safety of its communities, in-person visits to the List Center are suspended. We are nonetheless pleased to have installed *List Projects 22: Cindy Ji Hye Kim* and invite you to join us for upcoming virtual programs that offer a deep dive into the artist's work and practice.

Throughout the exhibition's run, we will be sharing video interviews, virtual tours, and other materials related to the exhibition on our website at listart.mit.edu.

We will continue to monitor the possibility of in-person visits in early 2021, and encourage everyone to stay tuned for updates and additional programs.

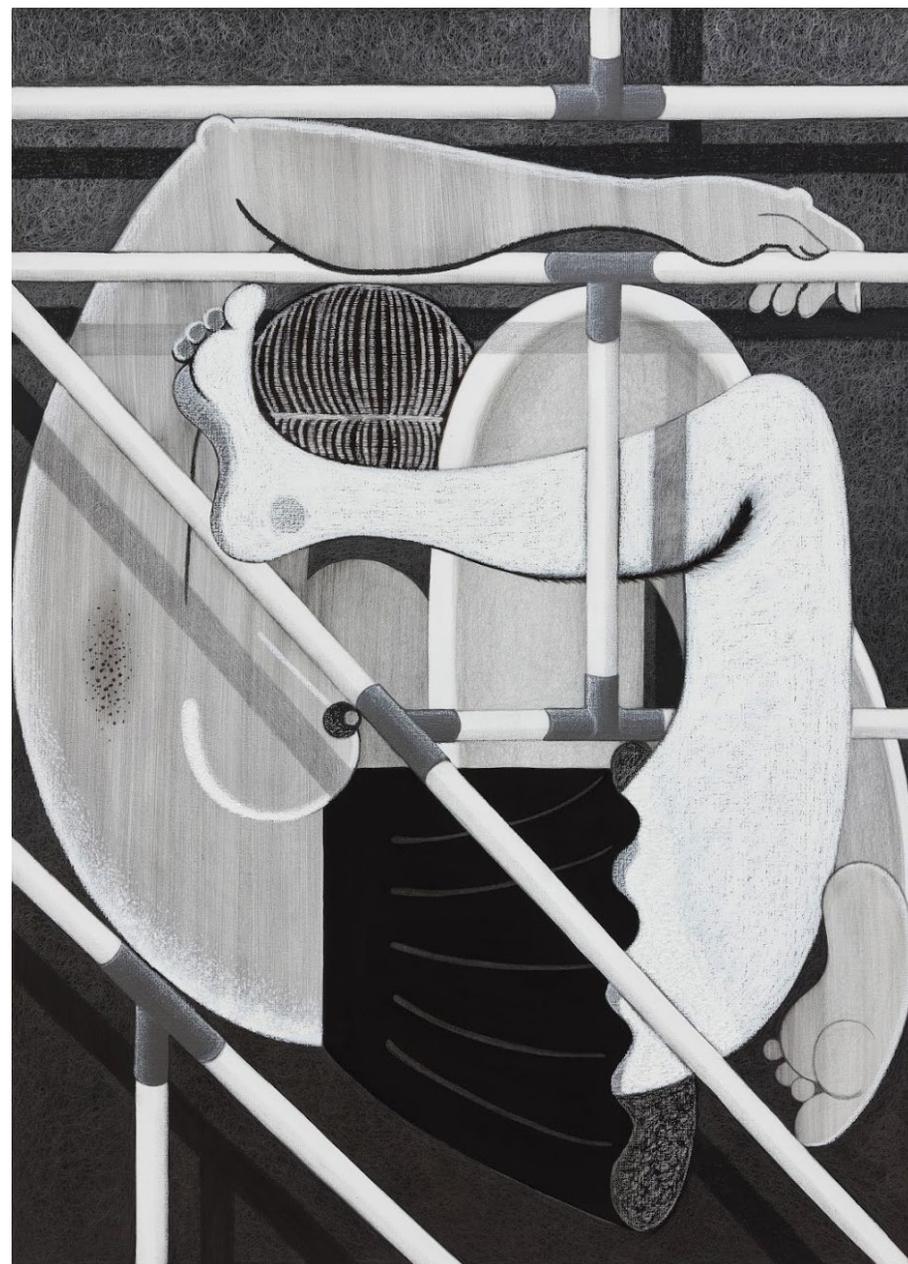
A tangle of vines seeming to pulse with biological energy creeps inwards from an assortment of edible flowers and medicinal herbs that border *Superego Fortuna* (2020), a large, double-sided hanging painting on silk by Cindy Ji Hye Kim. Converging pinwheel-like at center, the tendrils also comprise a circulatory system for the silhouette of a human pelvic bone. Formed by milled stretcher bars that are visible through the translucent painted fabric, its skeletal form appears as a shadow under the surface of the image. The effect is as if the painting itself is made flesh—stretchers, silk, and image each constituent parts of a body. A closer look reveals the faint outline of a figure within the vines who those acquainted with Kim's iconography will recognize as Madame Earth. Such dense imagery—where painted forms and their relationship to language are laden with adjacent meanings—is characteristic of Kim's work. The porosity of *Superego Fortuna*'s multiple semblances recalls a tendency in the structure of allegory where two or more levels of meaning exist simultaneously and "interpenetrate one another," creating an "ambiguous tension" between the "surface meaning" and those that are coded.¹ While the most immediate visual information the painting offers is a decorative composition of herbs and flowers, the vines also figure as veins in a body whose anatomy is ensnared by a mesh of vegetation. Tensions between meanings manifest in the unusual translucence between image planes at the front and rear of the canvas and in the visual pun between vines and veins. Even as the motifs share compositional elements, each pictorial scenario offers new possibilities for interpolation, revealing interrelated meditations on mortality, growth, and entrapment.

Furnishing her abundant compositions with a psycho-dynamic narrative, Kim employs a recurring cast of three archetypal characters. A child, who the artist refers to as "The Schoolgirl," and a duo of maternal and paternal figures she's named "Madame Earth" and "Mister Capital" are found throughout Kim's recent production and amplify how, in her works, meaning accretes in interpenetrative layers. These *dramatis personae* are typically contained by restrictive or provisional structures like scaffolding or gallows, and are always rendered in a greyscale palette known as grisaille. Historically, painters have employed grisaille to illustrate the monochrome forms of classical sculpture, for drafting, and as an underpainting scheme over which other, colored, pigments are later layered. Observing the technique's potential to render a world from shadows, Kim repurposes grisaille from its humble, technical applications and instead foregrounds the restrictive palette to imbue her images with a hint of cinematic noir and to mirror the sense of confinement her subjects face.

A 2019 series of "Character" paintings depict The Schoolgirl's yielding figure crammed between scaffolding, her body twisted into positions that resemble Hangul (letters of the Korean alphabet). Hemmed in by the structures depicted in the image and by the physical boundaries of the picture plane, the young pupil is objectified and transformed into a linguistic signifier. In contrast to the bold, illustrative quality of The Schoolgirl's fleshly contortions, Mister Capital and Madame Earth tend to exist in abstracted or flattened figurations. Mister, with his tall ten-gallon hat, and Madame, with her signature bouffant hairdo, appear as paper cut outs, decorative motifs, or as shadows that merge with their surroundings—"camouflaged," in Kim's words, "to confine, as well as to design [...] the universe of The Schoolgirl."² The paintings titled *Mister Capital* and *Madame Earth* (both 2019) each feature a figure of parental authority emerging from an architectural perimeter—the father from an accumulation of laid bricks and the mother as a penumbral apparition—establishing an allegorical relationship between parental and environmental control and a corporeal submission to larger, invisible mechanisms of (infra)structural domination.³

Like Kim's use of layered figuration and underpainting techniques allow for several images with intersecting symbolism to exist in a single work, interplays between The Schoolgirl and her ominous parents (who collectively represent a family unit) form an extra-pictorial space of signification that extends beyond the individual works. Here, the coded levels of meaning present in each image deepens, forming a network of collective resonances that pries each work loose from its status as a fixed entity, or what Kim calls a "painting object."⁴ This kind of dialogue is evident in *Double-Tongued Citadel* (2020), a two-panel mural commissioned for the List Center exhibition. Extending the visual and linguistic pun between vines and veins that Kim establishes in *Superego Fortuna*, the mural features intertwined stems creeping up gallows-like structures of PVC piping that take shape as frontal outlines of the parental duo. The two gendered figures, each associated with resources, natural or extracted, are gripped by the biological and supported and restrained by the human-made.

Kim further develops the layered resonances of her work through imagery culled from sources as diverse as propaganda posters and early animation, as well as painterly representations of biblical narratives and classical myth. She skillfully imbricates motifs borrowed from art history and visual culture into the sometimes-gruesome compositional stylings of her pictorial universe, and points her viewers to the context and associations of these



Character #13, 2019
Oil, acrylic, ink, pastel, graphite, charcoal on canvas
50 × 36 in. (127 × 91.5 cm)



Mister Capital, 2019 (front view of double-sided work)
Oil, acrylic, ink, pastel, graphite, charcoal on canvas and birch
84 × 64 in. (213.3 × 162.6 cm)

source materials for additional meanings. Circles and wheels, for instance, are found throughout Kim's recent work and integrate references to illusory vision and to fate. *Reign of the Idle Hands #1* (2019) [cover image] belongs to a series of round paintings informed by the phénakistoscope, an early animation disc that when rotated around a central axis gives the illusion of movement to the images drawn on its surface. In these works, Kim disables the kinetic apparatus central to its concept. Instead, the painting is stable, and bears the repeated form of Madame Earth in frustrated attempts to scale a rope—each illustration a fragment of what, if activated, would be a cohesive motion. Echoing this design on a larger canvas, *Yearnings of the Flesh* (2019) features a circular procession of cloaked and rope-bound schoolgirls who spookily float, ouroboros-like, within an arbor formed by a theatrical lighting rig. Found in Medieval illuminated manuscripts like the *Carmina*



Yearnings of the Flesh, 2019 (detail)
Graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, acrylic, and oil on canvas
84 × 64 in. (213.3 × 162.6 cm)

Burana, as well as in the major arcana of most modern tarot card decks, the *Rota Fortunae*, or wheel of fortune, is central to another of Kim's large-scale paintings, *8 Hours of Slumber, Labor & Leisure* (2020). In this work, the wheel, balancing on the conjoined silhouettes of Capital and Earth, cycles through a dualistic cosmos. As myth explains, the wheel is spun by the blindfolded Roman goddess Fortuna (who Kim makes titular reference to in *Superego Fortuna*) to determine the sudden turns of events that fate bestows. The unseeing Fortuna and her malevolent, whirling wheel are an uncanny allegory for the indifference of disciplinary structures and our inevitable submission to them.

At the List Center, Kim also presents two site-responsive sculptures that, like her paintings, engage visible architectures as analogues for unseen structures of power. In *Iron Nerve* (2020), wall-mounted steel cable and screw eyes form the laces of a corset that appears to constrain the "waist" of the gallery. *The Body Sins Once* (2020) is a hemlock wood dowel etched with a relief of Madame Earth and held in tension between floor and ceiling. Employing the materials that typically constitute the support structures of her paintings, these works engage the architecture to delineate and discipline the corpus of the space itself, implicating the site, and those bodies contained within it, in the grim dynamics of her works.

Curiously absent from Kim's new works is The Schoolgirl. The typical subordinate to the pervasive, disciplinary authority of Mister Capital and Madame Earth is only glimpsed in *Yearnings of the Flesh*. If not The Schoolgirl, who do the parents exist to discipline;



8 Hours of Slumber, Labor & Leisure, 2020
Oil, acrylic, ink, graphite, charcoal on canvas and birch
64 × 48 in. (213.3 × 162.6 cm), double sided
Photo: Lance Brewer

who submits to the designs of Kim's "infrastructural hell"?⁵ As her works move towards ensnaring their beholders in addition to their subjects, it seems that Kim, weary of saddling the maligned Schoolgirl with the full burden of submission, has shifted this role to her works' viewers, who, in *The Schoolgirl's* absence, become aware of their own relations to these archetypal figures of authority. By implicating the viewer in her works' disciplinary allegories, Kim offers a potent reminder of the insidious structural dynamics that determine one's actions or beliefs, and a dark lament that subjection to them might be as irresistible as fate. Kim's cynical intimations resonate acutely in this moment, when feelings of being buffeted by forces that remain unfettered by individual attempts at resistance, are, for many, keener than ever.

—Selby Nimrod

ENDNOTES

- 1 Erik Davis, "Techgnosis: Magic, Memory, and the Angels of Information," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 39.
- 2 Cindy Ji Hye Kim, email to author, August 28, 2020.
- 3 My use of the term "infrastructure" is borrowed from Amelia Farley's text on Kim's work published in *The Brooklyn Rail*. Amelia Farley, "Cindy Ji Hye Kim: Verses from the Apocalypse," *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2019, <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/10/artseen/Cindy-Ji-Hye-Kim-Verses-from-the-Apocalypse>.
- 4 Cindy Ji Hye Kim, email to author, August 28, 2020.
- 5 Farley.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Reign of the Idle Hands #1, 2019

Graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, acrylic, and oil on birch wood
12 in. (30.5 cm) diameter
Collection of Rahul Sabhnani, New York

Reign of the Idle Hands #2, 2019

Graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, acrylic, and oil on birch wood
12 in. (30.5 cm) diameter
Collection of Rahul Sabhnani, New York

Yearnings of the Flesh, 2019

Graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, acrylic, and oil on canvas
84 × 64 in. (213.3 × 162.6 cm)
Collection Majudia

The Body Sins Once, 2020

Carved hemlock wood
1½ in. diameter × 96 in. (3.81 × 243.84 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Foxy Production, New York; and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

Double-Tongued Citadel, 2020

Graphite, pastel, acrylic on wall
389 × 124 in. (988.06 × 314.96 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Foxy Production, New York; and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

Iron Nerve, 2020

Steel cable, screw eyes
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist; Foxy Production, New York; and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

Superego Fortuna, 2020

Graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, acrylic, and oil on canvas
68 × 54 in. (172.72 × 137.16 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Foxy Production, New York; and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

All images courtesy the artist; Foxy Production, New York; and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

Photos: Charles Benton (unless otherwise specified)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Cindy Ji Hye Kim (b. 1990, Incheon, South Korea) lives and works in New York.

List Projects 22: Cindy Ji Hye Kim is the artist's first institutional solo presentation and is organized by Selby Nimrod, Assistant Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

VIRTUAL PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Behind the Scenes Preview for Members

Wednesday, October 28, 2020, 6:00 PM EDT

In Conversation with Cindy Ji Hye Kim

Thursday, February 11, 2021, 5:30 PM EDT

Live captioned online event

Programs are online, free, and open to all. Advance registration is required.

For more information about events and to register: listart.mit.edu/events-programs.



MEMBERSHIP

The List Center is pleased to offer special programming for museum members including behind-the-scenes experiences, exclusive events, and travel opportunities. We are deeply grateful to members of the List Center Director's Circle whose philanthropic support ensures our ability to present outstanding art and artists of our time. To join, or for more information: listart.mit.edu/support.

SPONSORS

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