

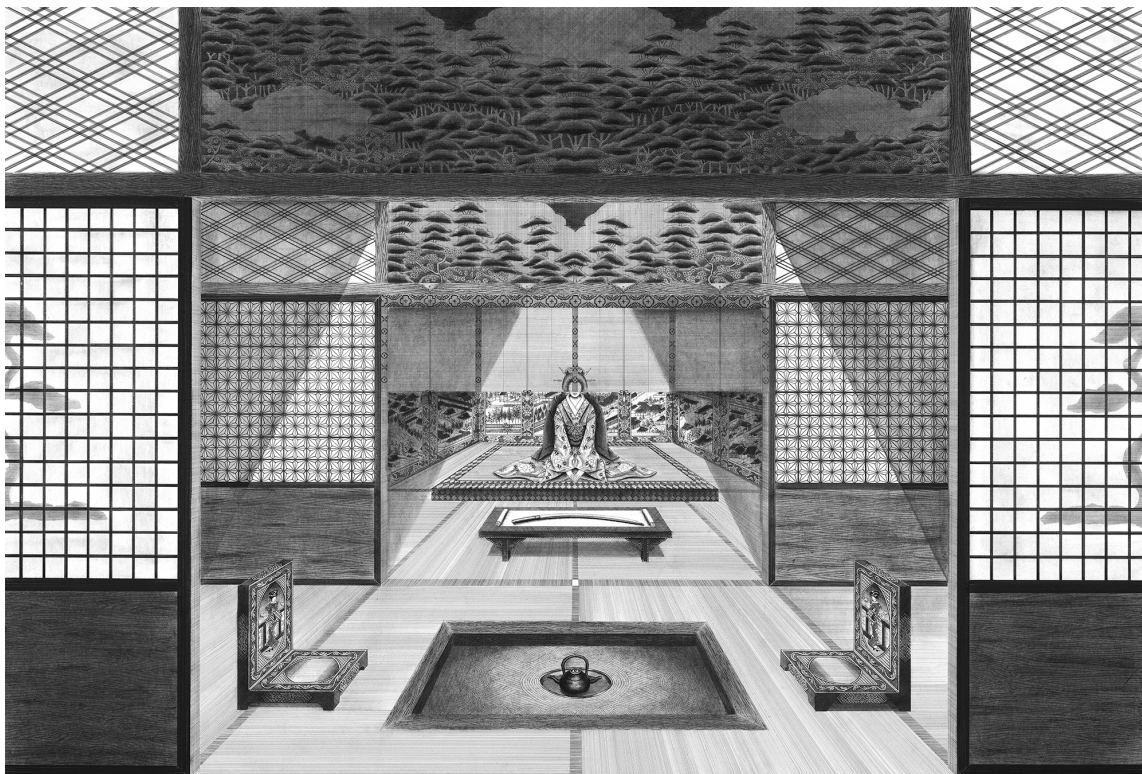
THE  AMP

# KYUNG-ME ON DEPICTING THE LABYRINTH OF THE PSYCHE

By Shannon Lee

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INTERVIEWS



*The Profession*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau.

In his late 30s, Carl Jung embarked on a 16-year-long journey through his own psyche, documenting and analyzing his fantasies and visions in what would become his totemic *The Red Book*. Dense, poetic, and annotated with works of art, the journal-cum-novel is an attempt to unpack one's own subconscious, identifying and analyzing recurring motifs and symbols. "The symbol becomes my lord and unfailing commander," wrote Jung. "It will fortify its reign and change itself into a starry and riddling image, whose meaning turns completely inward, and whose pleasure radiates outward like blazing fire, a Buddha in the flames."

At Bureau's current exhibition "Sister," Brooklyn-based artist Kyung-Me's drawings are proof of a similar process. Meticulously detailed, each of the eight ink drawings depict surreal scenes that attempt to uncover a spiraling psychology. There is a maddening, inescapable symmetry to these works. Kyung-Me's beautiful labyrinth of mirrors is a world that is both collapsing in on itself and opening wide like a maw, consuming its viewers.

Ahead of the exhibition's closing week, *The Amp's* Shannon Lee spoke to the artist about the show, Jung, doll-houses, and the endless process of trying to understand oneself.



*The Mother*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau.

**SHANNON LEE:** What was the process of creating these drawings like? Did they happen organically or did you go in with a specific design and plan?

**KYUNG-ME:** My first inclination was to blend Japanese and Christian imagery. I didn't know why at first but I knew I wanted to do something merging the worlds of nuns and geishas. From that point, it was about unpacking why. In both worlds, you have women who have to live lives that are entirely devoted to a higher power. In both houses, there is such a high aspiration and obsession to embody an idealized image. For nuns, they aspire towards the immaculate image of the Virgin Mary so they can ultimately reach salvation and enter the kingdom of heaven. In the world of the geisha, there's a striving towards an alternative idea of supreme beauty.

**SL:** I think it's so fascinating that while these worlds that you've crafted are so insular and spiral around a central figure, the identity of that figure is often obscured. You never see their faces.

**KM:** I was thinking of the vanishing point as the center point of this very decorative void. I wanted to express how when investigating one's own void and spiral, just when you think you've gotten to the heart of it is really where it begins. It's this *mise en abyme*, Russian nesting doll thing where you're constantly opening up a box within a box. With these drawings, I was trying to move through the spiral. Since it's impossible to know what's at the center, I didn't want to put a face to it.

**SL:** That absence felt particularly striking given how, for example, in your earlier book *Bad Korean*, the facial expressions are so strong and deliver so much. Here, the subject doesn't give you anything back.

**KM:** I was a little more shameless back then. Those drawings feel a little juvenile to me now.

**SL:** I feel like they're just way more literal; you had put yourself in your work in a much more transparent way rather than the more metaphoric space of the works in "Sister."



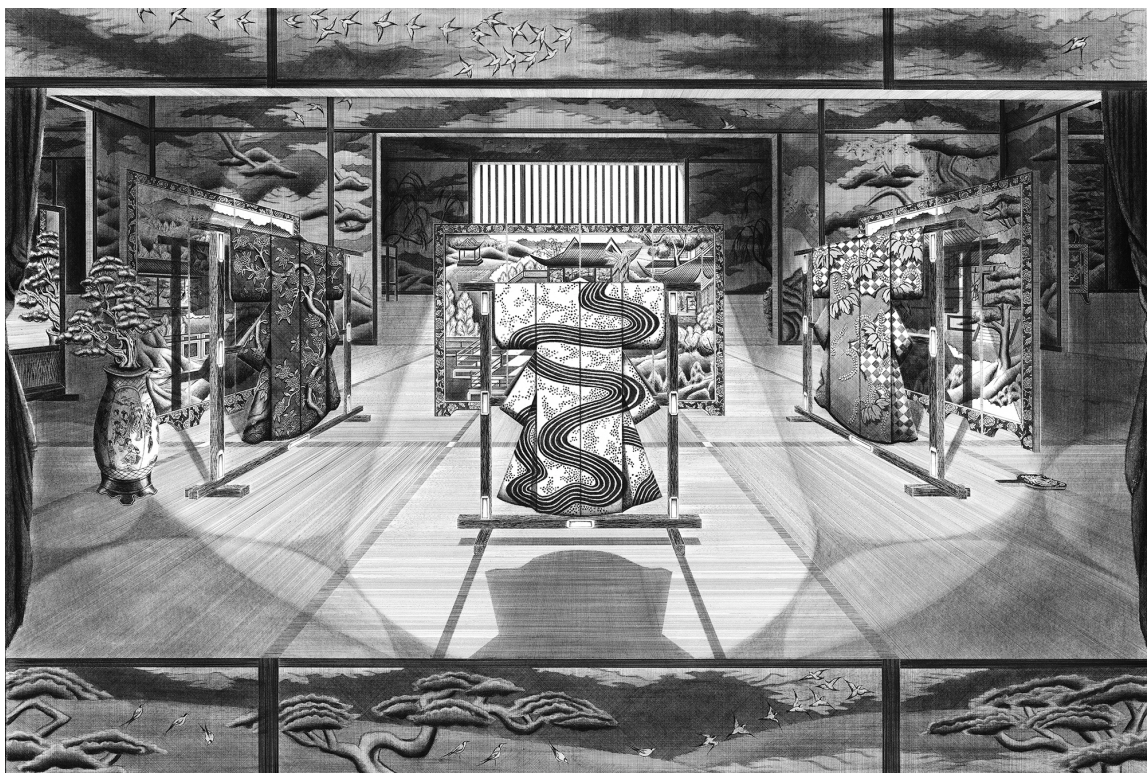
**KM:** Yeah, that's true. In my past projects, such as *Bad Korean* or *Copy Kitty*, I would create a character who was essentially a stand-in for myself.

**SL:** Do you feel like these new works are being made from the vantage point of a kind of persona or character?

**KM:** I feel like I was making these works as an overseer or a dictator, rather than as a persona or character. In past projects, I would embody the character for the duration of the project.

**SL:** What's the process of making these drawings? Do you go in knowing all of the objects and textures that you are including in each image or is it more improvised?

**KM:** I generally figure out what I want at the center first. Everything in the drawing circulates around that. Everything mirrors the head. Once I figure out that central figure, it all comes pretty naturally and falls into place.



*The Resurrection*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau.

**SL:** What were some of your references?

**KM:** I was looking at a lot of French, English, and Russian cathedrals, as well as Japanese architecture and art. I was thinking a lot about how images from different worlds merge together. For example, a church is designed to be a place of worship and the idea is that they're so beautiful that they can indoctrinate someone. There's a deeply power-oriented point of view that you have to take in order to design something like that. In this work, I was thinking about how to create a structure that contains this oppressive beauty where everything that lives beneath it needs to mimic it in order to survive.

**SL:** We were talking earlier about Carl Jung and creating personal symbols for self-mythologizing. How were you thinking about symbols in these works?



**KM:** I think every artist has their codex of symbols and that they work with the same 5 to 10 symbols over and over again. Beneath the surface of the symbol, there is an underlying tension that the symbol is pointing towards. Usually, this tension mirrors a tension in our psyche that keeps us trapped in an inner prison. In this project, I wanted to take my symbols and put them under a microscope to understand how to move through them instead of getting trapped inside of them... I'm still trapped. *Laughs*

**SL:** *Laughs* There's no escape! But at least you know you're trapped.

**KM:** Superficially, a symbol can just be an object or an image of an object. But they hold so much power and structure within your mind. It's up to you to see if you can reorient your relationship with these symbols.

**SL:** Can you talk about some specific symbols you were identifying in your work?

**KM:** A woman, a mirror, a room, and a labyrinth around the room. The mirror can be symbolic of the self, the double and also the void. The labyrinth is a structure that's a trap but also a shelter; it's hard to get out but it's also hard for others to get in. For the works at Bureau, it was about changing my vantage point with these symbols. Prior to this, I was taking this kind of birds-eye, CC-TV, surveillance approach, where I could only see things in overview. For this project, I wanted to get inside of the room, inside the symbols. I wanted to explode the structure. So much of this project was about exploring vanity and thinking about the idea of entrapment within the structures we create around ourselves. The concept that symbols are charged with the tension of their opposites is pretty basic and well-known but it really unlocked a lot for me. When I started analyzing my own symbols and understanding the tension that they hold, I started to be able to move through my ideas in a different way. Ironically, I think obsessing over these images so much really helped me get over them.

**SL:** Like you're sick of them!

**KM:** Basically!



*The Marriage*-, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau.



**SL:** Given that, are you now at a place where you're in search of or generating new symbols?

**KM:** I am! I kind of already know what I want to do next... it's the same thing. Laughs But better! I'm thinking about the subject of envy, particularly female envy. I'm thinking about the pipeline from admiration to emulation to envy to violent fantasy. I want to investigate the construct of the desire to submerge the person you're trying to merge with and embody their identity. I like exploring these more unsavory emotions and qualities.

**SL:** Do you do a lot of writing as you're working through these?

**KM:** Yes. I did quite a lot for this project. The first step for me is identifying and verbalizing and making invisible tensions visible.

**SL:** It's funny because you're investigating these unsavory aspects of humanity within these overwhelmingly beautiful images. That contrast is really powerful and haunting. As critical as they are, to me, the fact that they are imbued with so much beauty bears a ton of compassion. These aren't disgusting things.

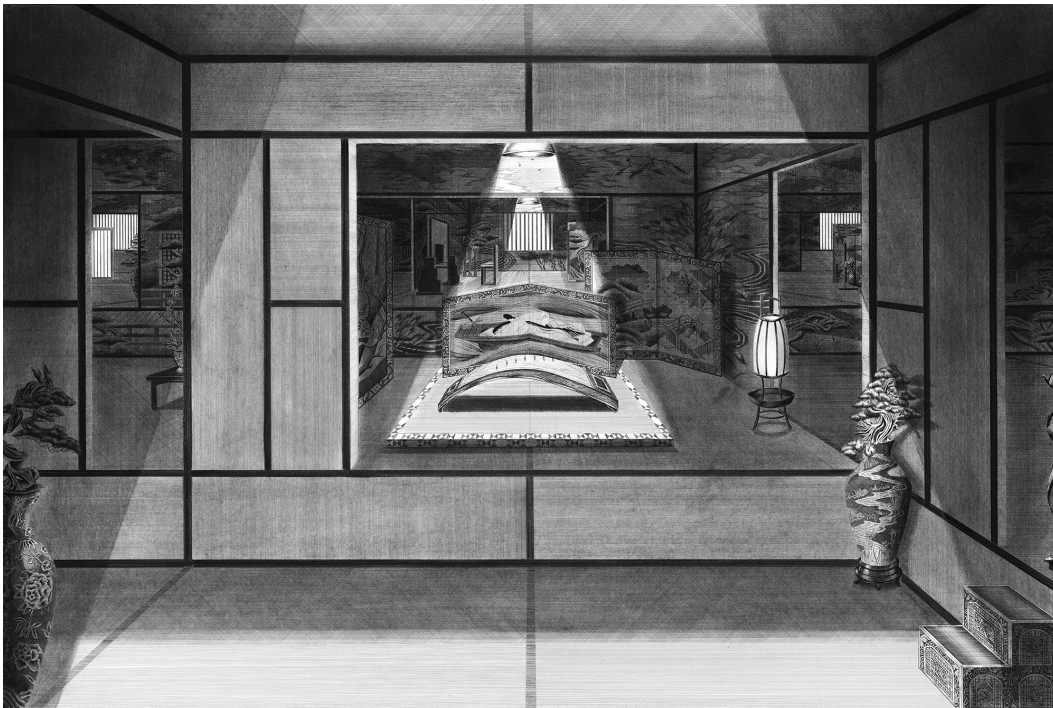
**KM:** Right. These things exist because we desire them. Beautiful, ornamental objects have this hypnotic quality and gravitational pull. These objects of desire have so much power, that sometimes people orient their entire lives towards acquiring them or being in proximity to them.

**SL:** This is dumb but... do you watch *The White Lotus*?

**KM:** Yes. I really like that show.

**SL:** Your work feels very thematically parallel.

**KM:** I know what you mean. You're trying to understand the nature of the power structures and what's at the heart of it. It's something so grandiose and so dark; it's a void that it entraps everything around it. It's also incredibly seductive. It's so fun. I love it. Watching that show actually relaxes me. Laughs I also love *The Real Housewives*.\*



*The Vessel*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau.



**SL:** I think there's also a parallel in that your works also depict these highly decadent but haunting domestic spaces. The furniture you include feels very central to creating that. I'm thinking particularly of the stringed instrument in "The Vessel."

**KM:** I was looking at images of the Japanese koto and was merging it with the female arch of hysteria. I wanted it to feel as if its pelvis was arched towards god. I wanted to imbue each object with conflicting energies.

**SL:** These objects feel very embodied and that they have a deep internal life. Is that something that you were thinking about when creating these works?

**KM:** I'm glad you picked up on that. This was the first project where I felt much more intentional about it. A lot of my writing that I was doing was articulating how I want the image to feel a certain way and do a certain thing. I was trying to be very calculated. I wanted every object to be charged with bivalent energy, where they all feel very trapped but also liberated at the same time. The space is both very open and very closed. I wanted it to feel occupied but abandoned, rageful but repressed.

I also wanted these works to radiate out like a star. When you think about true stars, like icons, they're all charged with these extremely opposing forces to the point where they are so many things at one time. All of that intensity generates a halo of energy that radiates out in every direction into a star. But it also works inward. As much as these stars radiate this bright white light, they also possess a deep, spiraling dark void. That's a true star, in my opinion.

For a lot of these drawings, I was playing a set dresser. I spent a lot of time on Pinterest, especially during the pandemic. It kind of felt like I was online shopping to decorate my house.

**SL:** That's right, most of these works were made during the pandemic. Did that influence the direction of these drawings?

**KM:** Totally. I was in a room, drawing a room inside of a room. I think I spent a lot of that time looking inward and thinking about my relationships to the things around me. It got very dollhouse-y. There's this essay by Durga Chew-Bose where she talks about dollhouse people being people who get deeply invested in their own fictions. They take their own lives and have an impulse to make a smaller version of it. Some people orient that way and others don't but I think all art making is, to an extent, a version of dollhousing. My works make that a little more literal and transparent.

**SL:** I think that they're so consuming and immersive, the viewer is posed with a choice of whether or not they fully immerse themselves in this dollhouse fantasy you've created. The composition opens it up to the viewer to decide whether they keep a foot outside of the frame. Your works also feel very referential to childhood. There's a kind of whimsy to them.

**KM:** That's good! Sometimes I think my works come off as more serious than I intend them to be. Much of my work over the years has involved creating a character and creating a fictional world around them, which is how I used to play and escape as a child.