

HYPERALLERGIC

Art **Reviews**

Expressionism Turned Inside Out

Kyung-Me's disciplined focus on minute details is inseparable from a vast grotto of feelings that she has channeled and kept in check.



by John Yau

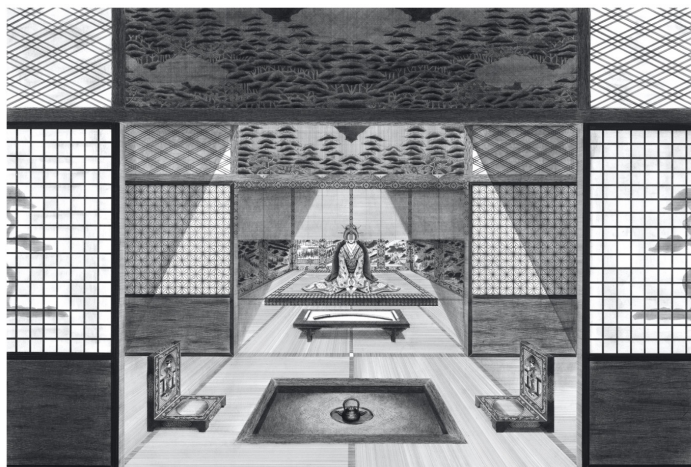


Kyung-Me, "The Fall" (2022), pen and charcoal on paper, 10 × 14 inches (all images courtesy Bureau, Inc.)

In June 2020, shortly after New York City was ordered to go under lockdown in response to the rapidly spreading pandemic, I sent an email to artist Kyung-Me asking if she knew how I might obtain a copy of her graphic novel *Bad Korean* (2016). I told her that I already had *Copy Kitty* (2020) and wanted to find her earlier, out-of-print book. In addition to being beguiled by *Copy Kitty*, the story of a cat who keeps changing its identity in the pursuit of love and affection, I was curious about her art because the work I had seen on her website revealed that she had undergone at least three major shifts within less than a five-year span. I do not know of many graphic artists who consciously resist the trappings of style.

In the ensuing sporadic correspondence, I learned that Kyung-Me was working on a series of ink drawings. A year later, she related that she was unhappy with the series and had started another one. By then, I was more than casually interested in what she was working on.

Everyone knows that when you have high expectations, you stand a strong chance of being disappointed. I had none of these worries when I went to see [Kyung-Me: Sister](#) at Bureau (October 29–December 22, 2022), her first solo exhibition at this gallery, and I was not let down. Everything I had gleaned from seeing her precise ink drawings on my computer screen was multiplied tenfold in person. It was not just that the exhibition's eight drawings measuring 32 by 47 1/2 inches were spellbinding because of the intricacy of minute detail, culminating in a precise, elaborately constructed interior space. It was that Kyung-Me's disciplined focus on these details seemed inseparable from a vast grotto of feelings that the artist channeled and kept in check. This was expressionism turned inside out.



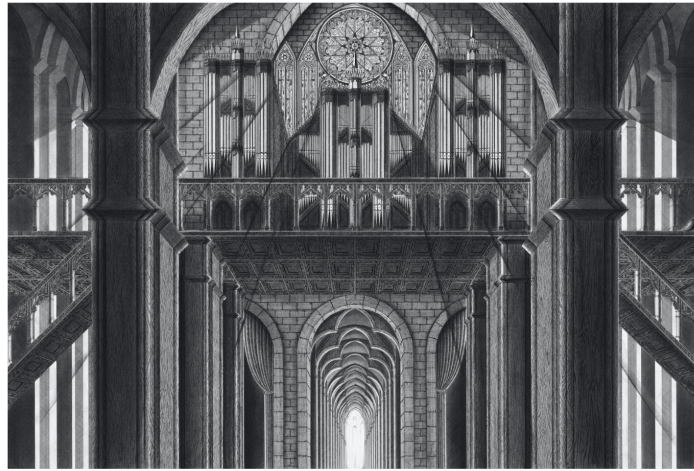
Kyung-Me, "The Profession" (2022), pen and charcoal on paper, 32 × 47 ½ inches

Sol LeWitt, who decisively removed his hand and personal feelings from drawing, famously said: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach." LeWitt could almost be describing the work of Kyung-Me; she leaps willingly into a world that he consciously eschewed — the self — and all that the word implies, including the body, memories, phobias, legacies, desires, and imagination. The results are large ink and charcoal drawings that are every bit as embellished and mysterious as Albrecht Dürer's etchings. I cannot think of another artist who can be favorably compared to LeWitt and Dürer and can (miraculously) still stand on their own.

The first work the viewer encounters in the exhibition is "The Fall" (all works 2022). At 10 by 14 inches it is the smallest of the nine drawings. The lone work on a wall in the front gallery, which is separated by a long hall from the main gallery, it depicts a barefoot woman in a long-sleeved gown, seen from behind. The woman is on the brink of entering a tree-lined tunnel that seamlessly opens up from the wall of a modern house inspired by a traditional post-and-beam Asian residence. The woman's long, raised arms resemble baguettes that extend from her shoulders like wings and terminate in stumps. The tunnel's round walls and floor suggest a vortex. A few leaves float in the room she is about to depart. Her feet seem to float above the floor; we might wonder if she is choosing to enter the tunnel or is being transported by unknown forces.

The trope of a young woman falling into or entering another world is familiar, but Kyung-Me's evocation of it feels authentic, and sets the stage for the viewer's entrance into an alternate reality. The evenly spaced lines in "The Fall" both endow the walls with texture and underscore the meticulous attention the artist pays to every inch of the subject's surface, no matter how incidental it might seem. Kyung-Me's concentrated imagery pulls us into a state of heightened consciousness through her own immersion in surfaces, details, light, and shading. It is as if we are seeing everything through a magnifying glass. With each drawing, I got closer, slowed down further, and became increasingly lost in the plethora of details. I was reminded of the hours I spent staring at the weave of a carpet after I had taken mescaline.

Kyung-Me's nested rooms, a motif throughout the show, are stages occupied by a single individual whose face is hidden from view. The spaces evoke what Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, called a "dream house" that "must possess every virtue. How ever spacious, it must also be a cottage, a dove-cote, a nest, a chrysalis. Intimacy needs the heart of a nest." In the artist's dream house, I would add that intimacy, in search of its opposite, needs a labyrinth, hermitage, private theater, barriers, and mirrors. She uses hatch line work, as well as perspectival devices, such as foreshortening, and choreographed combinations of repetition and unexpected disruption, to draw a space that is simultaneously vast and claustrophobic, open and sequestered. It is as if she drew each line with a razor blade that cuts deep but draws no blood. The effect is mesmerizing and unsettling.



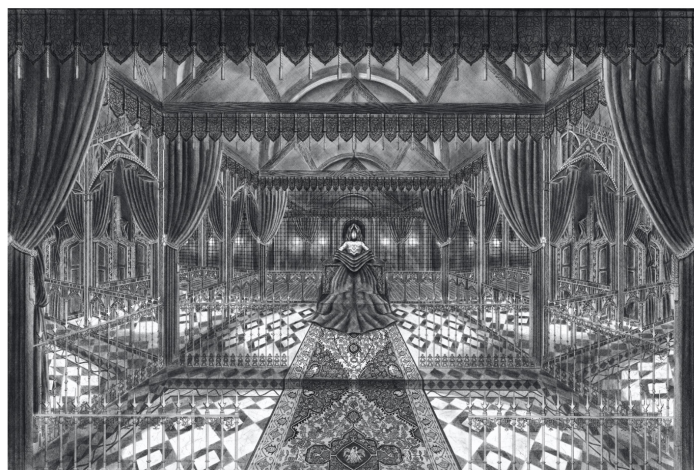
Kyung-Me, "The Organ" (2022), pen and charcoal on paper 32 x 47 ½ inches

I thought of the provocatively named, unpopulated architectonic drawing "The Organ" as the second portal to the other seven drawings, all populated. The artist depicts what could be the front or back of a church, dividing the space horizontally into two equal areas. In the upper area, on the mezzanine, are three clusters of the organ's phallic tubes. Directly below them, we see a receding, columned passageway culminating in a white-lit elliptical space. The bottom edge of this opening touches the drawing's bottom edge, compressing the space.

The combination of phallic tubes and elliptical openings invites comparisons to the male and female body. Piranesi's prisons and Martin Ramirez's drawings briefly come to mind as reference points that help locate the psychic territory in which Kyung-Me's drawings exist. The longer I looked, the more I felt I was at the beginning of a bottomless inquiry that would lead into all kinds of psychologically charged niches and recesses. The rest of the drawings confirmed this thought.

In "The Profession," a room nests within a room. In this *washitsu* (Japanese room), a woman in an embroidered kimono is seated in the *seiza* position (on her knees) on a platform, which is set in a windowless alcove covered in *tatami* mats. A curved sword lies on a table placed midway between the woman and the room's framed entrance. A partially lowered bamboo curtain obscures the upper half of the woman's face, but does not cover her full, sensuous lips. Eroticism and repression, the hidden and the revealed, have merged into a ceremonial space, all of which the artist has decisively defined in thin, unwavering hatch lines, repeated patterns, dark and light.

In the foreground, two *zaisu* (chairs with backs but no legs) are placed near the drawing's outer edges, opposite each other. Between them, in a rectangular, framed box set into the floor, we see a teapot sitting on a round disc set into a smooth bed of raked sand. For whom are the chairs meant? What is going to happen next?



Kyung-Me, "The Confession" (2022), pen and charcoal on paper, 32 x 47 ½ inches

The undulating grooves and patterns left by the rake accentuate the strict order found everywhere in the room, from the tight arrangement of the tatami mats to the placement of the geisha's long, tapered fingers. Chance and chaos may have been expunged this world, but I get the

feeling that beneath this intricately detailed surface flows a river of controlled rage. The rigidity and repetition of the structure, with its suggestion of a straining desire held in check, is riveting and intimidating.

Although many of the drawings share these qualities, I think the most entrancing, unsettling, vertiginous, and sinister one is “The Confession,” a receding, oblong room in which mirrors and spiky metal railings separate one part from another. Placed exactly in the center of the drawing, as if pinned there, is the back of a woman kneeling before an arched opening. The side walls extending diagonally into the drawing mirror each other, multiplying the spiky fences. The effect is chilling.

While the drawings share many compositional devices, what Kyung-Me does with each room is radically different. Dividing the surface into discrete trapezoids and rectangles, she establishes a receding space in which she depicts a wide range of objects and surfaces drawn from the Victorian era and Asian cultures, including porcelain vases and other chinoiserie. Starting in the 17th century, no royal residence in Europe was without its Chinese room; these were often where the mistress was kept. As much as these works might evoke the past, I was reminded of the groundbreaking writings of Anne Anlin Cheng, who has theorized that in Western cultures Asian femininity is regarded as ornamental, a surface to be decorated and inscribed, an exotic object. Kyung-Me is one of the few artists I know of to address the Western objectifying gaze at Asian women and its long, sordid history.

Kyung-Me: Sister continues at Bureau gallery (178 Norfolk Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 22.