

An Artist Who Channels Her Anger Into Pie Charts

Christine Sun Kim discusses her experimental, sensory-rich process — and her favorite shoes to wear in the studio.



The artist Christine Sun Kim in her Berlin apartment. Robert Rieger

By [Anna Furman](#)

May 21, 2019



Six years ago, the California-born artist Christine Sun Kim, 39, moved from New York City’s Chinatown to Berlin. “I fell in love,” she explains. Her eyes widen and brows lift as she signs, “I’m actually not a big fan of making these big moves for love. But it worked out really well for me.” After earning two M.F.A.s — from the School of Visual Arts and Bard College — and finding a foothold in New York, it was time to find a different way to practice.

In transgressive textual drawings, videos and participatory performances, Kim visualizes sounds and distills spoken language into clever new forms. She was selected for the 2013 MoMA show “Soundings,” the museum’s first exhibition dedicated to sound art, and she has become known for her powerful works that demonstrate the possibilities of sound as an artistic medium (her 2015 TED Talk about the similarities between music and sign language currently has over one and a half million views). A series of her large-format charcoal drawings, which explore navigating the hearing world as a deaf person, are now on view at the 79th Whitney Biennial in New York. The six works pair depictions of varying mathematical angles with correlative, rage-inducing encounters that are both

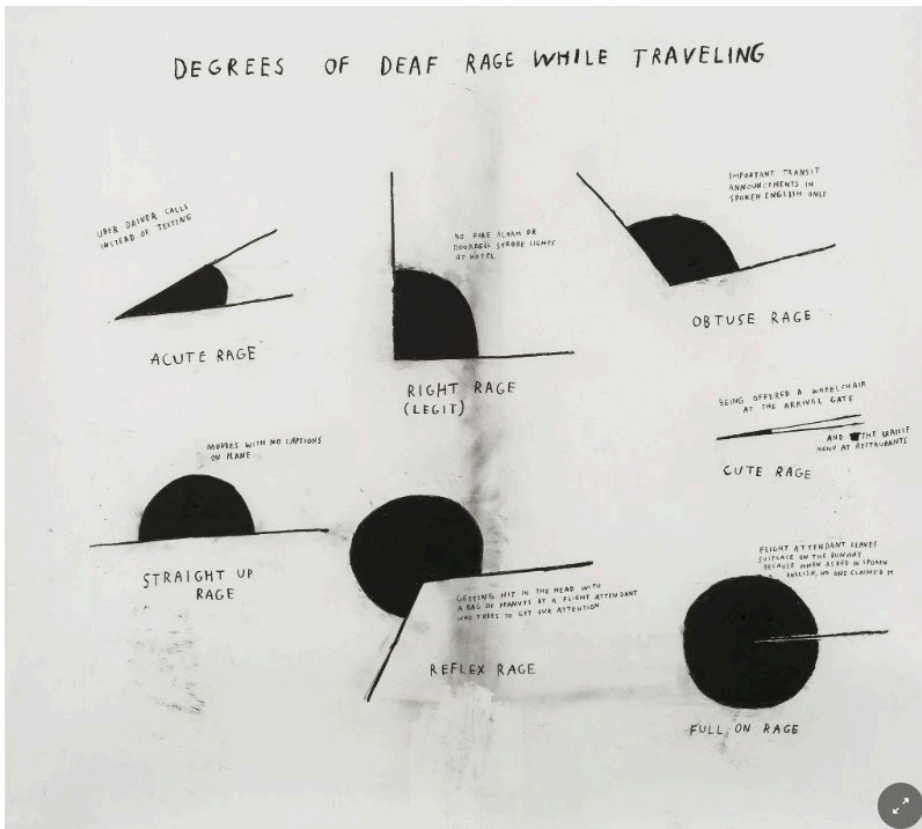
broadly applicable — “being given a Braille menu at a restaurant” or “offered a wheelchair at an airport” — and painfully specific to her experience — “curators who think it’s fair to split my fee with interpreters.” After a controversy-laden 2017 show, this year’s biennial, curated by Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley, highlights the most diverse group of artists yet; the majority of the 75 participants are people of color, and two-thirds are women. In her works in the exhibition, Kim explores her various identities — as Korean-American, as a new mother and as a deaf artist — taking the maxim “the personal is political” to a new level.



Inspired by meme formats, the artist creates pie charts that cleverly address different types of discrimination she faces as a deaf person. Here, she offers answers to questions like “Why does your hearing partner sign?” and “Why do you watch shows with closed captions?” Robert Rieger



A tattoo on Kim’s arm spells out A-B-C. “I saw a deaf vlogger showing off his ABC tattoo in a video,” she explained. In the video, he said it stood for “always be cool.” Robert Rieger



Christine Sun Kim’s “Degrees of Deaf Rage While Traveling” (2018). Robert Rieger

Kim lives with her husband, the conceptual artist Thomas Mader, and their daughter in a railroad-style apartment with parquet flooring in Wedding, a northern Berlin neighborhood known for its Weimar-era architecture and countless doner kebab stands. “I’ve always wanted a live-work situation,” she says. “And it’s something I actually could find in Berlin.” Channeling her experiences into images of geometric angles, musical notes and meme-like pie charts, Kim playfully combines different sign systems to create what she calls a “common language that all people can connect to.” Sitting at a desk in her studio, across a small foyer from her apartment, and wearing her signature jet black lipstick, Kim answered T’s Artist’s Questionnaire in American Sign Language with an interpreter.

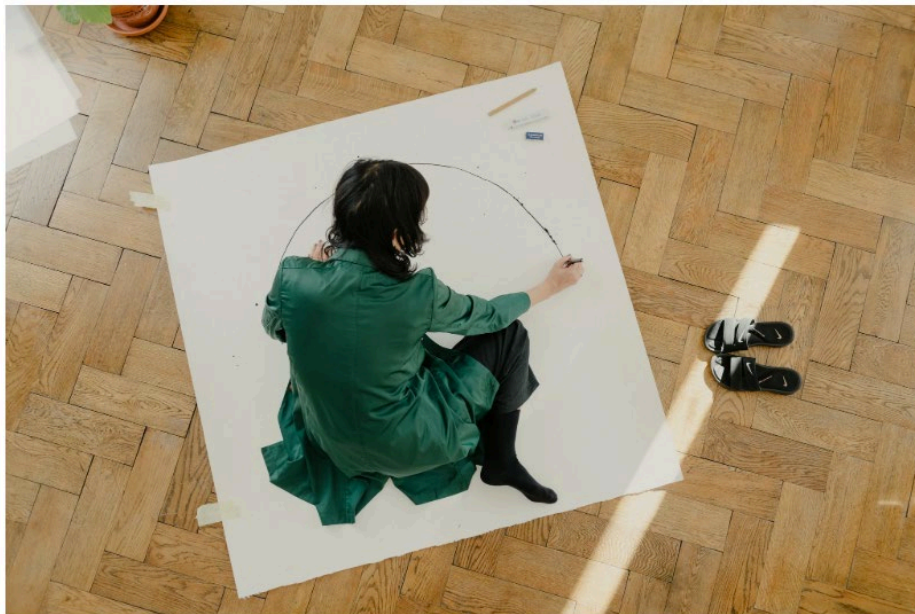
What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what’s your work schedule like?

I’ve read articles that are like: “successful artists have routines, and that’s the secret.” I don’t. My schedule is chaotic, partially because I have a baby. She’s about to turn 2, and she’s got her own schedule that I adhere to. I have to use those gaps to make my work; I have these periods of crunch time when I really have to go, go, go and get things done.

And my sleep schedule kind of depends on Netflix. If there’s a really good movie or series that I want to watch, I might only get six hours of sleep a night, but if there’s nothing good on Netflix, I might get eight hours. I know science says you should have eight hours of sleep a night, but quite frankly, my body loves a 12-hour sleep session.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

I feel like it’s always zero. I know I’m doing the opposite of that, but I’m not really sure how. Sometimes I’m online for a while or I’m talking to somebody — and all of that contributes to my creative process.



The artist draws an arc on paper to represent the American Sign Language gesture for “day.”
Robert Rieger

What do you usually wear when you work?

Pajamas. I also really love a good hotel slipper. I’ve got a whole stash. I have a new habit where I grab slippers off an airplane or in a hotel.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

I'm not that good of a cook. My partner is the cook. And I'm lucky for this. He'll usually leave some leftovers on the stove. If he's not around, I do love a good pretzel with cheese or kimchi or butter or broccoli sprouts. And a lot of coffee.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

A drawing of Jesus or a rainbow. I went to church a lot growing up. I was a high-energy kid, so sometimes my mom would try to distract me by drawing some pumpkins on a napkin, and then I would fill in the pumpkin's face — adding eyes or a nose or mouth.

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

My ex-boyfriend's father bought my first piece for \$500. It was when I was 22, in my first grad school program. It was a decent sized painting of my dog.



Kim's studio is adjacent to her home, which gives her the flexibility to take care of her 2-year-old daughter between periods of work. Robert Rieger

When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step?

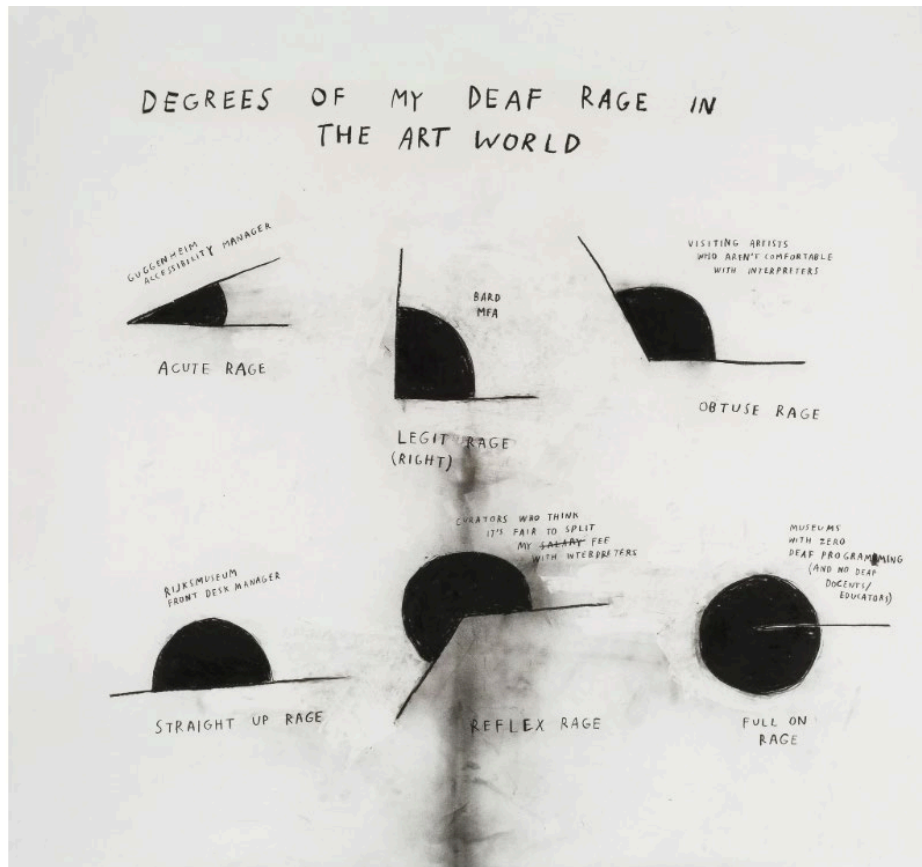
I usually have periods of putzing around. My partner is an artist himself and we're really good sounding boards for each other. It's not until I have one solid idea that I can get to work on it. One idea for a drawing turns itself into a series of drawings — or a series of answers. For example, the deaf rage and the angle drawings turned into pie charts.

How do you know when you're done with a piece?

When I'm done documenting it, through video or a photograph. That's how I make things official. Then I can put the thing aside, and move on to the next one. I need to have structure; without it I'm just lost. The more structure I have, the more I can move on and move forward.

How many assistants do you have?

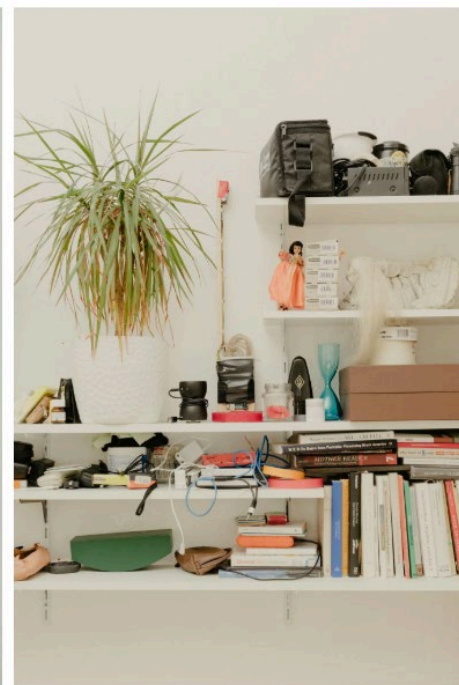
I have zero. And I need one!



Christine Sun Kim's "Degrees of My Deaf Rage in The Art World" (2018).
 Courtesy of White Space Beijing and Yang Hao 杨昊



A drawing by the artist based on a combination of the letters L, L and Y in American Sign Language to mean "I love you." In March, the piece was installed on pay phones throughout New York City, as part of the initiative "Art in Ad Places." Robert Rieger



The last stage of Kim's process involves documenting her work by making a video or taking photographs. "That's how I make things official," she says. "Then I can put the thing aside, and move on to the next one. I need to have structure; without it I'm just lost." Robert Rieger

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

When people started paying me to speak at colleges, give talks about my work and to perform — that's when I felt legit. Like in 2013, I gave a talk at MoMA for the sound exhibition "Soundings."

What's your worst habit?

Taking forever to answer long emails. When I see that long body of text, I just — can't. I have emails that I haven't responded to for a year.

What are you reading right now?

Maggie Nelson's "The Art of Cruelty" and W.E.B. Du Bois's "Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America." I'm really into depictions of data. Du Bois's book is a series of hand drawings and data graphs that visualize America. It's just beautiful.

What embarrasses you?

When I'm not being voiced properly.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

My tax documents. I just think they're so dumb. Like, "Why are you there?"

This interview has been edited and condensed.

The Whitney Biennial is on view May 17 through September 22, 2019, at The Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, New York.

Furman, Anna. "An Artist Who Channels Her Anger Into Pie Charts,"
The New York Times Style Magazine, May 21, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/21/t-magazine/christine-sun-kim-artist.html>