

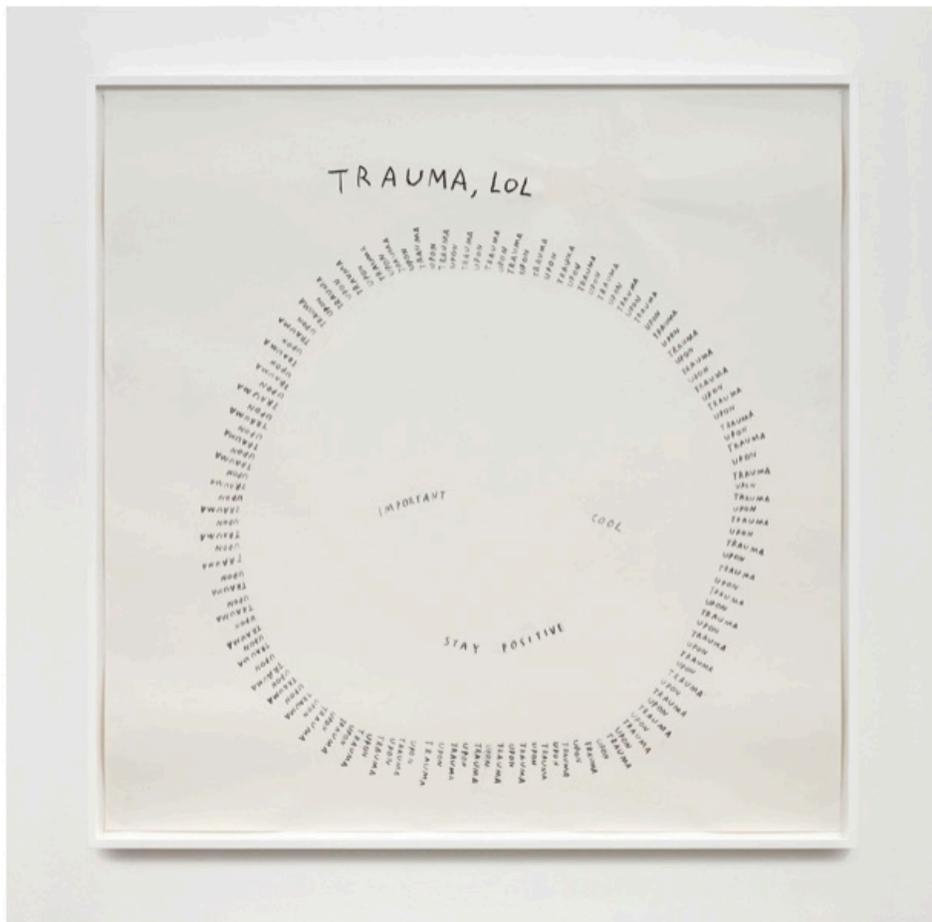
Art

Translating Deaf Culture, Christine Sun Kim Underlines the Difficulty of Interpretation

The artist, who gave an iconic ASL performance at the Super Bowl last year, draws our attention to the struggle of power, ideology, and systems in the juncture of languages.

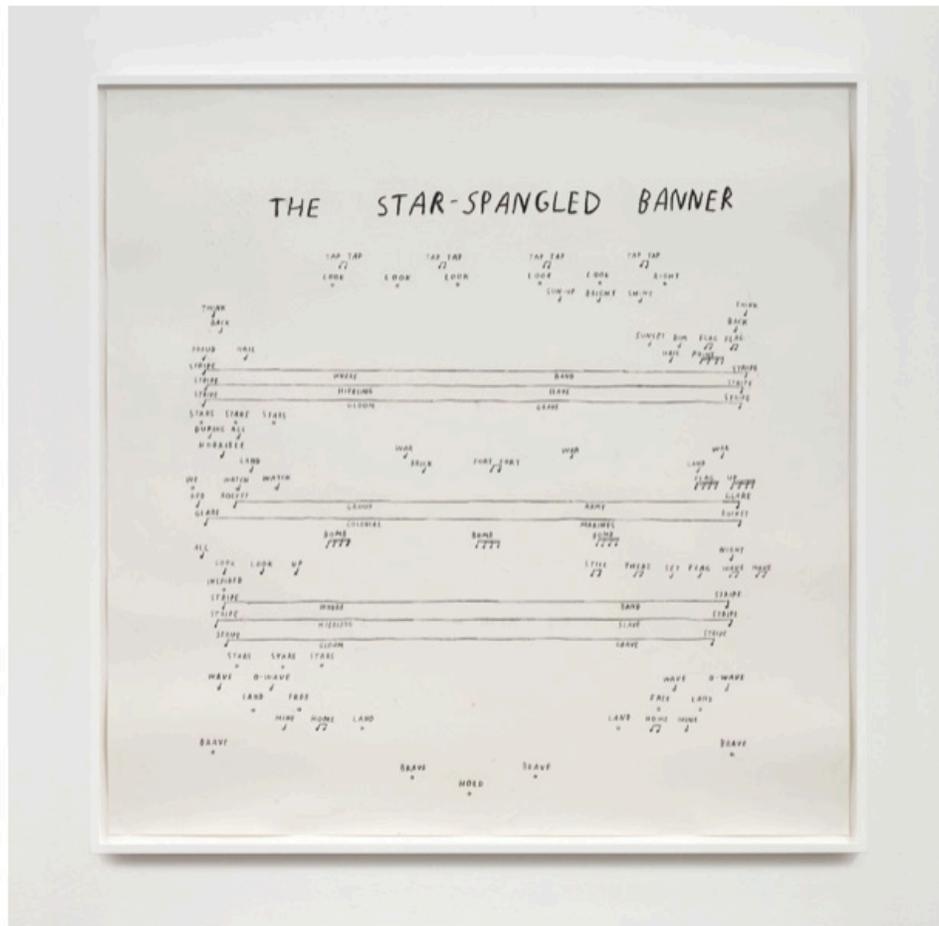


by Caroline Ellen Liou
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Christine Sun Kim, "Trauma, LOL" (2020), charcoal on paper, 58.25 x 58.25 inches (all images courtesy the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, all photos by Paul Salvesson)

LOS ANGELES — You know that split-second lag when translating between two languages (however you define them), when meaning starts to slide into a string of unintelligible symbols? That's the space that Christine Sun Kim's artworks occupy. Her drawings use systems of information — from musical scores to infographics to emojis — to question systemic dissonances between Hearing and Deaf cultures. The results straddle the line between semantic wordplay and semiotic breakdown, evidenced in the artist's current solo exhibition titled *Trauma, LOL* at François Ghebaly, Los Angeles.



Christine Sun Kim, "The Star-Spangled Banner (Third Verse)" (2020), charcoal on paper, 58.25 x 58.25 inches

The show opens with two drawings that illustrate the expansive boundaries of the artist's imagination: "America the Beautiful" and "The Star-Spangled Banner (Third Verse)." Half concrete poetry, half physical documentation, both drawings reference the artist's iconic ASL performance of the anthems last year at the Super Bowl. The Star-Spangled Banner's opening line "O say can you see" is interpreted as "tap tap" and "look," repeated in a line across the top of the white paper. The paper itself, spanning an arm's length, almost serves as a physical notation of the motions of the words in ASL, the charcoal smudges a record of the artist's hand in action. Put another way, Kim's works can be viewed as exercises in both translation and transcription, crisscrossing languages of the body, of music, and of words.



Installation view, Christine Sun Kim, "I Walk I See" (2020), charcoal on paper, triptych, each: 49.25 x 49.25 inches

The artist's sense of playfulness imbues the physical gallery space. For example, "I Walk I See" (2020), a triptych drawing out each word in its title — "I" (eye) / "Walk" / "See"— transcribes the rhythm of the viewer as they approach the trio of drawings and walk past. Moments like this are found throughout the exhibition, such as the pairing of the mural "Turning Clock" with its smaller counterpart, "Now Your Turn," placed directly across from each other. Kim's careful attunement to space not only suggests that the artist treats the gallery as another visual system of information, but the viewer as one as well, to be directed to action



Christine Sun Kim, *Trauma, LOL* (2020), installation view

While most of the exhibition feels fast-paced in its quippy puns, two of the works invite slower looking. The first one, titled “Three Tables III (AGB, HPA, DTS),” stacks three three-word phrases on top of each other: “Hearing People Anxiety,” “Dinner Table Syndrome,” and “Alexander Graham Bell.” The discordant combination of conditions, objects, and names immediately prompts the viewer to play a game of “Which one of these things doesn’t belong?,” forcing the viewer to question the relationship to one another, linguistically as well as within the context of Deaf culture. The second, “Competing Languages I,” features the fewest graphics out of the entire exhibition. The page is bisected by two sets of musical notes, one stacked upside down on top of another, elongated to the point of unrecognizability. Two words, “competing” and “languages,” teeter on opposite ends. Everything about the composition is deliberately skewed; nothing is quite matching. Though the drawing references the disjuncture between English, Deaf English, and ASL, it can also be applied to the untranslatability inherent to all languages. A perfect one-to-one translation is never possible — it is always in relation to another.



Christine Sun Kim, “Three Tables III (AGB, HPA, DTS)” (2020), charcoal on paper, 58.25 x 58.25 inches

The challenge in translating lies in the difficulty of understanding the other, without reducing it into the self. By calling the viewer's attention to the struggle of power, ideology, and systems in the juncture of languages, Christine Sun Kim turns what at first glance appears to be lighthearted into something that is deeply unfunny: the trauma, discrimination, and injustice faced by the Deaf community.



Christine Sun Kim, "Competing Languages I" (2020), charcoal on paper, 58.25 x 58.25 inches

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