

GYOPO :: Bobby Hundreds Interviews Korean American Artist Christine Sun Kim

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BOBBY HUNDREDS: How were you attracted to the arts? Like, is that something that was passed down through your family? Were you just surrounded by great art? Is that something that you needed to do to express yourself? What attracted you to the creative path?

CHRISTINE SUN KIM (via interpreter Su Isakson): I feel like my family is full of in-the-closet artists, closeted artists. My mom is one of them, definitely. And when I had asked about the tiger part, she had taken an entire week where she refused to draw anything, and I had to work it hard

to get that piece. And she finally came out of the closet a little bit, you know, to create that tiger. But no, my family really isn't a bunch of artists and I didn't really grow up around art. I was a part of a deaf program within a public school, my sister and I both were, and we really didn't have a lot of exposure. But I got exposed by my ex-boyfriend to a whole museum scene, he's from LA, he's deaf, and his family is very artistic. They're producers, filmmakers and writers, and so on. And so that's when I really started to get more exposure to art, he had taken me to museums in LA and New York.

And it's weird that it was actually through my ex that I really got that connection with art that I didn't growing up. But of course, my family did contribute to that, to the foundation of my desire to want to go into art. But I had always wanted to do art, but then felt like I had to do other types of work to pick something that was safe. And I sucked at everything. Honestly, my last resort was art. And it was kind of weird because I was doing art that is very standard in the deaf community like this very safe bet. You know, being an artist in the deaf community is kind of a safe thing to do, but there were a lot of internal conflicts that I had.

Back in the '80s, it was very common that deaf people were printmakers, they worked in mailrooms and they worked in fast food. And I was just talking with my deaf friends about the retail industry. Like, I'd always apply to different retail stores like Zara or Urban Outfitters, and I never got a job at a retail outlet. I always wanted to, and I ended up doing something else. But it's interesting because the retail industry is a hard industry to get into, but even teenagers can get jobs in retail, but a deaf person can't get a job in retail. I mean, I would get a job like folding clothes in the backroom and hanging up clothes in the backroom all by myself. That was not what I wanted.

I never thought about that. It's so funny because, already growing up as an immigrant, as a second-generation Korean American in the '80s, you're already limited with what you're told you could do for a living. And I always thought I was limited like, "You only have these options." But then when you're deaf also, it narrows that field even more.

Yeah. And that's why when I read your book, I was telling myself, like, "I could have done that shit." But I never got that message. I don't want to play like a sympathy card. Like, that's not what I'm doing. But growing up, I never wanted to settle for less. I never really thought that I could make it beyond that until I was an adult. I don't know, I feel like Bobby, you got that message early on compared to me. So that's why it was exciting to see that representation gaining popularity now.



Have you seen the movie The Eternals?

The Marvel one?

Yeah, yeah. Okay, so one of my really good friends is a deaf actor in there. She's one of The Eternals. She's a good friend of mine. And so when I saw her on-screen, I got goosebumps because she's not white. And I've always seen just deaf white people, never people of color who were deaf. And I always wanted to see somebody like her so that I could relate to it.

You were saying earlier you felt empowered when you had permission to start going down this path that you really wanted to. What was it that gave you that permission? Like, what turned for you? In my book, I talk about a lot of it having to do with being 23 years old when I started this brand, but it was the guy I was working for in the courthouse who was dying of cancer. He was the one who was like, you have to do this. And it was the first time in my life that someone gave me permission to do art. Did you have something like that?

Not exactly a mentor like yours. I think that's one of the things missing in the deaf community,

Christine Sun Kim

almost nobody I know has a mentor in the deaf community. And I hadn't really been looking for one because of cultural barriers and language barriers and lots of other things. It's weird because when I really started to get into art, mentors started popping up out of the woodwork, I can help you with this or whatever. And that's really after I'd already gotten started, but I didn't have that before I got started. And so I would always tell myself, if a young deaf person would approach me, always make time for them. It's hard but I want to.

This is a dumb question I'm about to ask because it's probably hard to divorce the two. But do you identify more as a Korean American first or as a deaf person first in terms of how you engage with the world and work, relationships, everything? Depends on who I'm with. Depends on where I'm going. When I was in school, there were a lot of people from Latin culture, so I identified as Korean because I was kind of like an outsider of that community. But most of the time growing up, I was in white spaces. So in the school that I went to the interpreters that I had, and everybody

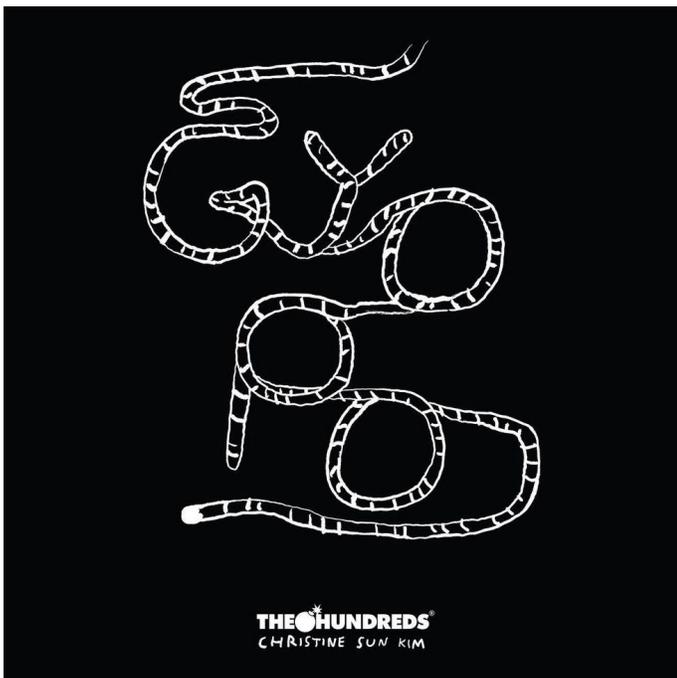
that I looked up to the adults, I mean, everybody was white. Other than my extended family, I don't feel like I really had a connection to my Korean American roots when I was young.

I was too busy trying to perfect my deaf identity. You know, like sign beautifully. And you know, the way that I tell stories, it's a really, it's like a deaf thing to be a very good storyteller. To be very good at poetry, telling jokes. It's something that we value in our community. My sister and I are super close, but we're very different. And I feel that what keeps us that close is because we're both deaf. I really started to understand my Korean American identity in the last five years, my eyes kind of opened, and I've realized what I've missed. Last Summer was one of the most amazing times that I've had meeting you, meeting Greta, meeting Carol Lim. I mean, all of those folks were super incredible. It was so stimulating, right? I feel like I'm always late to the party, though, I don't know. I mean, I don't want to focus too much on that.

Well, yeah, I feel the same. I was late to the party, too. I think for me, it was after I had children. And then I had a new appreciation for being Korean American and my heritage, but that really wasn't a part of me.

The same as me, yes. The children. Yeah, yeah. Roux, my daughter, was born in Germany. And her experience is nothing like what I grew up with. I was in Orange County, by the beach, Southern California. Roux gets none of that. I grew up with tons of cousins, Roux has nothing. I feel like I've lost my daughter to German culture. Plus, this deaf hearing dynamic, I think is a little weird. There isn't a lot of that here in Germany, you know. So I think that kind of affects it, too. But, I mean, we're good, right? But I want Roux to just have a little bit, like 25% of my childhood experience to be able to give to her, but how do I do that?

Well, how you do it is you move to LA. [Laughs] I mean, I've been softly looking at homes in LA. I don't know. Maybe think about buying a small little house.



François Ghebaly

I'm down with that! Can you define what the word "gyopo" means?

Gyopo means the diaspora. Coming from the same place, right? It's odd because I've never been to Korea until I was 34. How old were you when you went to Korea for the first time?

I was seven or eight. I went young a lot when I was a kid.

Oh, that's right. With your brother Larry, I remember that from your book.

Yeah. [Laughs]

Larry is such an American name, by the way.

It's also such a boomer name. Like, have you ever met anyone under the age of 40 with a name like Larry? It's wild.

No. [Laughs] Well, so 34 and it's because I have a huge family. All my grandparents, everybody had moved to America. So I have almost, I don't know, like 50 first cousins. Oh my gosh, everybody's in America. Like, there's nobody left in Korea.

Oh, yeah. Most of my cousins are still there. So that's why we were there so much.

It's nice. I mean, you have a little bit more connection back to Korea. I feel like I don't. Mine has been severed from Korea. So yeah, Gyopo, let me show you the sign. I just learned the sign myself because I had asked a Korean friend of mine. This sign right here is Korean, it's different from American Sign. But this sign right here is "red." And then this sign right here is to show "in your blood, your veins." So this gyopo sign is like red veins, red blood, in my blood. I think it's a very powerful sign. It's all about your blood, your heritage. The reason why I made that art is that, with the long tiger tail, I feel like it resembles this ongoing journey that we have. My grandmother left North Korea,

that's the beginning of this journey. And then she moved to South Korea. Our family then moved to America. I moved to New York, then further moved to Berlin. I hope to make it back to LA. But this journey is like a long winding trail, a tiger's tail. And so as I look at and think about gyopo, you know, I asked all four of the women in my family, my grandmother, my mother, my daughter, and me, and I felt like this. The women in my family really needed to be represented. I come from a long line of women, and I'm continuing this long natural lineage by having my own daughter. And so after giving birth to my daughter, I understood my place in this long history as a woman. And so when I was pregnant, I had this very common line on my belly, but it felt like this line led all the way back to my history, my heritage. So, gyopo to me is like this continuous journey of the diaspora. But it always comes back to our heritage and now with my daughter Roux, I wonder about what her journey is going to look like and what her heritage looks like. What does gyopo mean to you?

The first time I heard that word, we were doing business in Korea in like 2007 or 2008. So I was like, 26 or 27-years-old. We were just out partying. And some of the guys we were with in the club were like, "Oh, you're cool. The girls like you because you're gyopo." Like to be gyopo was really cool here. And I thought that was so odd because my experience with Korea, whenever I would go there in the '80s and '90s when I was a kid, was it was a bad look to be an American-born. I remember as a kid, just speaking English, in Korea, and a man literally came over and hit me over the head, and was just like, "speak your native tongue." There was this real tension around like, "don't stick out. Don't be the American Korean. They

don't like that here." Like, you're basically a sellout. And then you go back to America, and everyone's like, "You're Korean, and you speak Korean to your parents in public" and everyone's just like, "speak English." So it's like, as a kid, where the hell do you go? But then in my late-20s, we're out in Korea and we're partying and all of a sudden, that generation just decided it's cool to be gyopo. Like, the girls are down for that, the guys think it's cool. And I'm like, "Wait, when did that change?" And so I don't know how I stand with that word, because I'd always understood it to be a negative thing. And so my first exposure to the Gyopo organization was, I think it just came across my feed somehow on Instagram. And so just following it and reading about it, I'm like, "Oh, this is cool because it's basically putting a name to our experiences." Your experience isn't my exact experience, but I can relate so much. I often wonder about the fact that as I get older, all I want to do is eat Korean food. I just think Korean people are the most beautiful people I've ever seen. I love the culture and life. And I'm so passionately in love with my heritage, in a way that it makes me mourn for having neglected that part of my life for so many decades. I almost feel like my ancestors are calling me back because there's so much weight there. For thousands of years, we exist and reside in one place. And in one generation, we get pulled out and of course, the momentum is gonna pull us back home. My grandfather died a couple of years ago, right before the pandemic. And I flew out to Korea for like 24 hours, just for the funeral. It was crazy. I'm going to write about it one day, but it was amazing. I spent 24 hours in Korea, just traveling around the countryside, ending up back in Seoul partying with my cousins, eating the food, just watching people. And I was so

emotional. I just really didn't want to come home. And I was texting my wife the whole time and I was like, "What are the odds that we could ever move to Korea?" And she's just like, "What are you talking about?" I didn't want to leave there. I just felt so loved and seen. It was like a warm bath. Being in Korea for just one day. Just walking around and everyone looks like you and they just get it. There's so much I feel like I need to explain sometimes, just culturally.

I mean, here's a little stupid example. I had gone to Korea and one thing that totally blew my mind. Well, two things. In the hotel rooms, the lights are super bright. Everywhere, like Europe and America, they're always so dark. No, I have dark brown eyes. I need more light to be able to see. Everything in Korea is bright. I love it. There's nothing wrong with me. Second thing, the clothing. Everything fits me. Two things that felt like home.

I never thought about the lights, it's so true. But it's like an entire culture, the way that people just engage with you. It's just in the air and you don't realize, being of a different culture in Germany or in the States, just how much friction there is in your everyday life that you're constantly encountering and dealing with just to exist. The stories that you see now posted on social media where a man is caught on video saying something racist, I'm like wait, that was every single day of our lives, every day on the playground. Everywhere I went.

Exactly. I know it, man. But coming back to the family thing, you know, I was thinking, how I became an artist, and how I was able to really then do art. It's because I'm deaf. And I've noticed that a lot of my cousins always say, "Oh, well, your parents are so open-minded. They're so cool." And I was like, "No, actually, my parents are really super conservative."

Like, I mean, you know, compared to my uncle, maybe they're a little bit more liberal. But I think it has to do with shame. And so when my parents had two deaf daughters, ouch. And so I could feel the second-hand shame given to me because of that. And so my parents had this tough immigrant life. It's hard for them to keep a job. We didn't really grow up with money. So, with that whole experience, I think my parents kind of were just like, "Do whatever you want." I became an artist because they allowed me to, they gave me that permission.

You're really lucky. I would have given anything for that. Like, all I ever wanted to do was just do art and make a living off my art and all the way up until my book was published, my entire life, my parents said I shouldn't be doing this and told me to stop. And I don't care anymore. But when I was a kid, it really sucked. And it didn't help that your brother became a lawyer, right?

My younger brother became a lawyer. My older brother went to med school but then he also kind of did a thing like me where he's like, "I don't want to do this" and now he's a pastor.

It's so perfect, now they both check those boxes. Pastor, lawyer. Now, you can do whatever you want. There you go.

Well, yeah, I mean, it really took me publishing the book for them to finally get it. That was two-and-a-half years ago and it was the first time they understood. Okay, last question. What does GYOPO as an organization mean to you?

Yeah, it's nice to finally see that we have a space for Korean American artists, specifically, and the space is clear.

<https://thehundreds.com/blogs/content/bobby-hundreds-interviews-korean-american-artist-christine-sun-kim-about-gyopo>