

# BAZAAR<sup>Harper's</sup>ART



## GOOD VIBRATIONS

Deaf since birth, Christine Sun Kim creates thought-provoking aural pieces to challenge preconceptions

BY CATRIONA GRAY

As an artist who focuses on sound, Christine Sun Kim has become adept at using technology to create works that question conventional ways of hearing. What's remarkable for an artist who spends her days fine-tuning audio installations is that Sun Kim was born deaf. Far from hindering her, it has given her a unique take on an aspect of life that most of us don't question.

'I started out as a painter, but when I switched to sound art, something just clicked,' she says. 'I was struggling to find my voice in painting, but when I began working with sound, I found my identity as an artist.'

It wasn't an easy transition – not only is the world of sound engineering traditionally dominated by men, but being deaf added another layer of difficulty to the process. Sun Kim, however, realised that she could manipulate the auditory experience so that others were forced to engage actively, rather than listen passively. It's a way of making people interact with sound in the same way she does: for the artist, listening involves effort, having her interpreter Beth Staehle translate the spoken word to signing, and gauging meaning by studying body language.

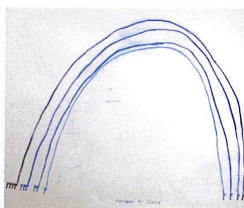
In her hugely popular TED talk, Sun Kim describes her childhood experiences of being told to 'be quiet' as she unknowingly slammed doors or scraped forks across plates, until she learnt there was a social etiquette around sound that she was expected to adhere to. Now, she cleverly subverts these concepts – some of her drawings incorporate written elements playing on the musical phrase 'piano' (softly). Anyone who has ever had piano lessons will remember the difference between the signs 'p' and 'pp', and Sun Kim takes her notation several steps further, with lines of 'ps' depicting an ever-deepening quietness. Her drawings with musical notation can be read no matter what language you speak, which is fitting, given that with her Korean heritage, Californian upbringing and her current home in Berlin, the 36-year-old has an international appeal – this year has seen her exhibit in New York, Shanghai, Milan and London.

One of Sun Kim's recent installations at MoMA, *Game of*

*Skill 2.0*, challenged the audience to complete a task in order to hear a pre-recorded tape. 'I'd created a hand-held device that incorporated a sensor and magnets, and was designed to run along a Velcro strip,' she says. 'If you walked the path beneath the strip perfectly, you could hear the track, but if you did anything wrong, it came out distorted. It forced you to think in order to master the connection.'

As Sun Kim explains the practical details of constructing her installation pieces, it all sounds tremendously complicated. Yet she emphasises that she employs these mechanical

or digital components in conjunction with traditional ways of producing art. 'Sometimes the technology overcomes the idea itself. I wanted to find a balance,' she says. 'I'll work around a strong idea, and while I use electrical equipment or software to support the concept, I also produce drawings. I'm very keen to keep that manual connection – with art, I think it's important that you always have a tangible element. For me, technology is about complementing artistic skill rather than being used in lieu of it.' □



Above: Christine Sun Kim's 'Rainbow as Score'. Left and below left: the artist with a handset from her 'Game of Skill 2.0'. Top left: in her studio. Below: 'Too Possessive for Score'



Christine Sun Kim will be at Frieze London ([www.frieze.com](http://www.frieze.com)) in Regent's Park from 6 to 9 October.

