

Christine Sun Kim

Trauma, LOL

December 12, 2020 - January 9, 2021

François Ghebaly is proud to present *Trauma, LOL*, an exhibition by the acclaimed multidisciplinary artist Christine Sun Kim. Rooted in visual communication systems like musical notation, infographics and internet memes, Kim's work explores broad conceptual terrain, from celebrating the complexity and elegance of American Sign Language (ASL) to considering the cycles of oppression and trauma inflicted upon marginalized groups like the Deaf community.

The exhibition opens with *America the Beautiful* and *The Star-Spangled Banner (Third Verse)*, two drawings derived from Kim's experience performing the songs in ASL at the 2020 Super Bowl in February. This performance and its related drawings call up the question of patriotism, and what it means for oppressed Americans to take part in patriotic action. Her drawing *The Star-Spangled Banner (Third Verse)* reflects this conflicted status. By focusing attention on the lesser known third verse of Francis Scott Key's poem, which historians have read as mocking and racist, Kim unearths an anti-Black history embedded in America's national song.

Other works delve into Kim's love of language and wordplay. Her drawings frequently use English loan words as well as diagrammatic or notational systems to explore the linguistic structure of ASL. Her wordplay sometimes extends between both languages, as in the trio of drawings called *I Walk I See*, which toys with the use of the index finger as a classifier pronoun in ASL. Kim puns the English homonyms "I see" and "eye see" along with their ASL equivalent EYE SPOT. This layered wordplay runs through the exhibition, meandering through the sometimes fuzzy boundaries that lie between English, Deaf English, and ASL.

The image of the clock also recurs, aptly dwelling on the experience of time during this year of elastic hours. In a major new mural titled *Turning Clock*, Kim depicts a clock of hands, each alternating through the ASL signs for "my turn, your turn, my turn, your turn." The drawing's notion of shared burdens is open ended, calling up the split responsibilities of domestic tasks or the give and take within a friendship. Committed in the wake of large public mobilizations for civil rights, the drawings also evokes the need to give support for one another's equality, and the importance of receiving that same support in turn.

The exhibition's title drawing, *Trauma, LOL*, and an accompanying series of line graph drawings, directly address experiences of trauma and their reverberations through time. The words trauma upon trauma upon trauma form a face with downcast eyes composed of the words IMPORTANT COOL and a softly smiling mouth made of the words STAY POSITIVE, referencing the ASL slang that means "under pressure, you have to stay cool in the moment." The piece speaks to coping mechanisms, self-coaching, and the often grueling work of carving space for oneself in a world rife with ableism. Using laughter as a political tool, Kim engages the uninitiated and brings potential new allies to the table, but this kind of welcoming is also a serious energetic labor. It requires downplaying years of traumatic encounters, systemic marginalization, and the hurt of casual ignorance.

Another work, *Three Tables*, identifies specific sources of trauma: Dinner Table Syndrome, a well known phrase in the Deaf community for the experience of being excluded from the conversation in hearing-dominated social settings; Hearing People Anxiety, a sense of worry and inferiority triggered by language difference and cultural tensions imposed by hearing people; and at the top Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor who emphatically advocated against the teaching of sign language to Deaf children. His belief that deafness was something to be eradicated—through sign language suppression and eugenics—lead to disastrous educational policies across the western world throughout the 20th century. These three obstacles, stacked in concentrically nested musical notes, rise like hurdles, ready to be bounded over.

Christine Sun Kim (b. 1980, California) has exhibited and performed internationally, including at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge (2020); Whitney Biennial, New York (2019); Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (2019); Art Institute of Chicago (2018); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2017); De Appel Arts Center, Amsterdam (2017); Berlin Biennale (2016); Shanghai Biennale (2016); MoMA PS1, New York (2015) and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2013), among numerous others. Kim is the recipient of a Ford Foundation Disability Futures Fellowship, an MIT Media Lab Fellowship, a TED Senior Fellowship and has presented at numerous conferences and symposia. Her work resides in the public collections of numerous institutions, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Busan, and the Williams College Museum of Art. She lives and works in Berlin.