

*'She's creating her own language': Christine Sun Kim's unique sound art*

The acclaimed artist discusses her work and relationship to sound and sign language, showcased in a large new mural in New York

By Janelle Zara, March 24, 2022



At the Queens Museum, artist Christine Sun Kim's newly completed mural features the words TIME OWES ME REST AGAIN, scrawled in black, spanning a crisp white wall, 40ft high and 100ft wide. The familiar action lines you would recognize from comic books set the words in motion: "TIME" hops along a pair of bouncing curves; "OWES" zips down to the floor with a *splat!*; and "REST" shoots upward into a pair of clouds. *Poof poof!*

These comic references are a new development in her work, Kim tells me in American Sign Language,

logged on to Zoom from her home in Berlin. (Her interpreter, Su Kyong Isakson, translates in a separate screen.) "They're so dynamic in showing movement," the artist adds; each bounce and zip represents how these words in ASL bring the hands in contact with the body. "TIME" is two taps on the wrist, she explains, and "OWES" is the index finger landing on the upward palm. "REST", which is the arms crossed over the chest with closed fists, becomes a focal point in our conversation. In the mural, it describes both a collective fatigue under the burdens of capitalism ("It's slowly killing us all,"

## Christine Sun Kim

Kim recently tweeted), as well as her own exhaustion navigating a world designed for the hearing. "As a deaf person," she says, "you have to conserve your energy."

*Time Owes Me Rest Again*, on view through January 2023, is the kind of visual poetry innate to Kim's practice, where for more than a decade, she's played with the structures of language and notation to depict her relationship to sound. Born deaf in Orange county, California, to a family of hearing parents and a deaf older sister, she experienced sound by closely watching its effects on hearing people. Her art, which spans performance, video and naively styled drawings in charcoal and oil pastel, distills sound to its essential qualities – its moods and materialities, emotional frequencies and social baggage.

"There's a freshness to her work that represents a new kind of voice," says Gan Uyeda, a director at

Kim's Los Angeles gallery, Francois Ghebaly. "She's very much creating her own language." Combined with the features of ASL, including rhythmic spacing and repetition, ordinary English text finds movement. In *The Sound of Temperature Rising*, for example, a 2019 mural about impending climate change, the title accompanies four musical notes that float upwards and multiply, illustrating a boiling crescendo. Facial expressions, "which represent grammar in ASL", Kim says, also play a prominent role. In her 2016 video, *Classified Digits*, she plays out specific conversations – Skyping over spotty wifi, for example – solely through the awkwardness on her face, while the artist Thomas Mader, her husband and sometimes collaborator, acts them out with his hands as if they were hers.

"Humor is such an important part of the work, and I see how she uses it very tactically," Uyeda adds, describing how drawings like *Shit Hearing People Say to Me* and *Degrees of Deaf Rage* are serious



📷 Time Owes Me Rest Again.

Photograph: Hai Zhang

## François Ghebaly

grievances tempered by jokes. The former is a pie chart of misguided commentary that Kim's heard over the years: "You're smart for a deaf person" or "I'm sorry you can't hear." The latter, her breakout charcoal series from the 2019 Whitney Biennial, provides metrics for frustration on a scale of 1 to 360 degrees: museums with no deaf programming elicit a 360-degree circle of "Full on Rage", while in-flight entertainment with no captions only elicits 180 degrees, a semi-circle of "Straight Up Rage".

Kim initially feared that the piece would make her look angry, but "humor brings a level of access, kind of like a meme," she says. "If I were just mad without the humor, I think it might be uncomfortable and people would leave. They wouldn't do the complex contemplative work that I want them to do."

The subtext of the artist's fondness for laughter, data visualization and other universal modes of communication is a general wariness of being misrepresented and misunderstood; Kim knows intimately well how language barriers, as well as poor language choices, have the power to marginalize. Ahead of our interview, she sent me an access rider with links to resources about the deaf community, and a few gentle reminders – that ASL is not a "series of gestures", and to please refrain from referring to her as a "deaf artist" or "an inspiration".

"I wanted to start off on the right foot," she says, recalling the frustration of prior studio visits where "I've spent 45 minutes explaining deaf culture to curators and museum directors, leaving the last 15 minutes to talk about my work." In response, Uyeda wrote out the rider to stem the tide of ableist language that would inevitably appear in media coverage and museum texts. "I felt like he was really watching my back," Kim recalls. "It saved so much time and energy not having to do all this follow-up and explanation."

The artist finds her work in high demand these days, with works now in the collections of the Tate, the Museum of Modern Art, Lacma and more. Work on the scale of the Queens Museum has also become the norm; even in the midst of a pandemic, Kim was

actively working on murals for institutions in Europe, Asia and North America. Her largest work to date was Captioning the City, a series of installations for the 2021 Manchester international festival. For about two and a half weeks, her texts graced the height of buildings and banners flown from airplanes: "[THE SOUND OF SEARCHING FOR SEATING]" read the main facade at Selfridges, with "[THE SOUND OF INTERMISSION THICKENING]" in the windows of the Royal Exchange.

To make work at this scale is "amplifying the loudness of her expression", says Hitomi Iwasaki, the director of exhibitions who commissioned Kim's mural for the Queens Museum. "Visual art is all about maximizing communication, and expressing something beyond our system of language. To me, Christine's work is like artistic expression 2.0."

For Kim, her work has created a vital and growing platform for the advocacy and visibility of the deaf community, occasionally in surprising ways. In 2020, she kicked off the year by signing the national anthem at the Super Bowl LIV, which she followed up with a New York Times op-ed. She criticized Fox Sports' decision to only air a few seconds of her performance as a failure of accessibility, to a sea of positive responses.

Still, she says, the term "political artist" feels too specific a label for her practice. "I want the privilege of being able to experiment, say, with butterflies and flowers," she says. "But I do have a strong connection with political issues and social issues because it impacts my very basic human rights, and I can't not talk about that in my work."

"As an artist," she adds, "I get to decide and assign meaning to ideas into things. There's a lot of power in that."

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/mar/24/christine-sun-kim-unique-sound-art-queens-museum>