Christine SUN KIM

Christine Sun Kim was photographed in, around and on top of her gallery, the François Ghebaly, which is south-east of downtown Los Angeles, California.

Christine wears a metallic beaded veil with black leather straps over a purple cupro dress and a black wool coat, all by NOIR KEI NINOMIYA. The silver cowhide high-tops are by CHURCH'S × NOIR KEI NINOMIYA. Worn throughout: sterling silver stacking rings by SOPHIE BUHAI and Christine's own gold ring and wire-rimmed glasses.

On the previous page, she is wearing a navy viscose knitted bodysuit and a black-and-navy satin skirt, both by JIL SANDER by Lucie and Luc Meier. The silver Circle bangle is by SOPHIE BUHAI.

Text by
ANN FRIEDMAN

On one slice of the pie chart titled "Why I Work with Sign Language Interpreters" by the artist Christine Sun Kim, charcoal letters read: "It gives me a voice." Born Deaf and brought up in a signing household, Christine, 41, resisted making sound her subject until realising the role it plays in society could be fertile ground for drawings, performances, sweatshirts – everything. Hers is a world full of language, and her hilarious, provocative captions feature in galleries and at public sites across the world. And though her heart is in America, for now Christine's happy in Berlin with her family and a really good colouring book.

Portraits by
CLARA BALZARY
Styling by
JASMINE HASSETT

I meet the artist Christine Sun Kim at a home she is renting for a few weeks in the hills of Silver Lake in Los Angeles. When she opens the door, I hold my palms flat and slide the upper hand, palm facing down, over the lower, palm facing up, then extend my index fingers upwards with the other fingers down and point at Christine: "Nice to meet you."

If I've bungled the American Sign Language (ASL) greeting, which I learned with the assistance of YouTube, Christine is kind enough not to mention it. She responds with a big smile and a hug. Her lips are painted a deep purple, and round wire-rimmed glasses frame her eyes. Her hair is dyed a teal ombré, and she's wearing silky trousers with a subtle check and a fuzzy orange camisole. Christine lives in Berlin with her husband, Thomas Mader, a conceptual artist, and their four-year-old daughter, Roux. But she's originally from Southern California and is here to visit her family with Roux, who's with her grandparents today.

Christine was born Deaf – a word she capitalises because deafness is a culture unto itself, the way German or American culture has its specific rituals and tropes. "Deaf to Deaf, we're the same," she says. "Kind of like an extended family."

As I am not a member of the family, we'll need the help of Francine Stern, Christine's interpreter for our conversation.

"I plan to move back one day. There are issues –

Choosing an interpreter is a necessary but delicate task for Christine. "I have to think about who voices me best," she says. She prefers to work with the same ASL-to-English interpreters again and again, as they tend to deepen their knowledge of her meaning and sense of humour over time. She and Francine are a relatively new match.

Christine is an artist who creates drawings, videos, installations and performances. Much of her work engages with the role sound and noise play in the world around us, for both hearing and Deaf people. "When I think of sound, it's almost like a score. I realise that it parallels a lot with my relationship with interpreters," Christine says. "It's like I'm conducting my interpreters. I'm saying, 'Can you use this English word? Can you do this? Can you say that?' So it's like I'm the score and they're the performer." This realisation, she tells me, led her to conclude "that sound itself was an entirely new territory, and I always ignored that."

One of her works on paper is "Why I Work with Sign Language Interpreters" (2018). It's a pie chart, with the circle drawn just wobbly enough to reveal it was made by hand, and the captions in Christine's careful block capitals. The largest slices say "The majority of people don't know sign language" and "It saves time". The thinner slices are variously captioned "It gives me a voice", "So I can tell bad jokes", "They prevent me from making bad decisions", "They're service providers like therapists or tax accountants", and "They make me look more human".

Her friend Gan Uyeda, the senior director at her gallery, François Ghebaly, in Los Angeles, has observed first-hand how hearing people respond to Christine's work. "There's a way that she understands sound better than we do," he says.

Christine's parents, who immigrated to the US from South Korea with her grandparents in the late 1970s, are both hearing. Christine and her older sister, Jayne, are both Deaf. Christine was 10 years old – a child with dimpled cheeks, a puffy permed fringe and hearing aids – when the Americans with Disabilities Act became law in 1990. It put the United States far ahead of many of its international peers when it came to access and inclusion for disabled people. "I saw a big change," Christine says. "There was captioning on TV.

"In the school district, if you had Deaf kids, they would send a teacher to your home to teach the parents to sign," she says. So her parents learned Signed Exact English, "not a language, just a weird communication system," Christine says. "But it really helped us communicate as a family. My sister and I had Deaf friends, so we eventually turned to ASL." It's hard to overstate how important this was. More than 90 per cent of Deaf people are, like Christine, born to hearing parents, more than 75 per cent of whom do not sign. But Christine grew up with language. "I meet so many people in the Deaf community who are obviously victims of language deprivation," she says, "and they've struggled with writing, with decision-making, mental health, long-term impacts on their cognitive function. It's really, really hard."

She and her sister attended what "felt like a Deaf school within a public school, it had such a high number of Deaf students", in the Orange County suburbs south of Los Angeles. Christine was big into swimming and gymnastics. "There was one Deaf teacher who came to my school once a month to teach us how to make paper and draw. She was my favourite teacher." But when Christine asked to enrol in a sculpture class, she was told there was no interpreter, so it was off limits. And she remembers her parents, who owned a series of small businesses, gently discouraging her from pursuing a career in art. "They said, 'Oh, no, art is just a hobby. I mean, you can major in graphic design.'" Which is what she did.

In 1998, she went to the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York state to study graphic design. When she inquired about taking studio art classes, "They said, 'No,

we don't have interpreters. You have to join the classes that already have Deaf students.'" Eventually, in 2004, she did enrol in an MFA programme at the School of Visual Arts in New York, where she started to explore what kind of art she might want to make. "I initially painted, because I had no voice, or didn't know where to find it," she says. "That's probably why I experimented by borrowing other artists' narratives, motifs, styles. I wanted to know how they found their voice."

After completing her MFA, in 2008 she found work as a digital archivist at the publisher WW Norton. That same year, the Whitney Museum of American Art hired Christine for a few hours a month to set up resources and programming for Deaf museumgoers. (The programme is ongoing, and there's a robust archive of videos on its website in which Deaf educators discuss the collection.)

Christine's work is multidisciplinary and along with performance also includes drawings and public installations. She combines it with a significant amount of activism and public speaking. Her work is deeply conceptual, often about the social and cultural role that sound fills in our world, and seeks to not just the vocabulary but also the facial expressions, fingerspelling, pointing and other modes of communication that don't exist in spoken languages. ASL gloss might contain notes like "fs" – to indicate a noun should be fingerspelled – or indicate that a sign be accompanied with "eyebrows up" so it is clear it is a question, not a statement. (In sign language, facial expressions are grammar, serving the same function as a full stop or exclamation mark in written language.) Gloss is reminiscent of musical notation, and Christine began making hand-drawn conceptual scores on paper, using the conventions of sheet music to convey experiences that stretch far beyond the musical.

She represents concepts such as "the sound of temperature rising" or "the sound of laziness" with musical symbols and arcing lines. Some pieces evoke sounds that could also theoretically be captured with a recording device ("Korean gospel song" or "muffled club music"), stripped back to their essences and put on a page as a feeling or concept: a series of staccato notes or clusters of notes to evoke togetherness. Christine has developed this practice further into making charts and graphs that distil the complex dynamics of her Deaf experience into deceptively simple visual structures whose meaning shifts and twists depending on the viewer's own experience of sound and language.

To create the charts and graphs, she sets large sheets of paper on the parquet floor of her studio, in the third-floor railroad-style flat she rents with her husband and daughter in Wedding, in north-west Berlin. She works in "normal black charcoal, not too soft, not too hard", drawing with bold, sweeping motions. Almost all the drawings have a few charcoal smears and smudges,

guns, fires... But US disability rights are amazing."

"That was my first baby," Christine jokes. But by 2010, she realised it was time to give her own practice another try, having discovered what she hoped would be her subject during an arts residency in Berlin. She applied for the MFA in music and sound at Bard College in the Hudson Valley north of New York City, where she began thinking about her interpreters as performers and her own ideas as the score. What if the unique expression of her artistic voice was, improbably, focused on *sound*?

"At first I was a little embarrassed to tell my Deaf friends I'm working with sound as a medium," she says. "I had a lot of identity issues surrounding that. Eventually I came to terms with it. I think in the beginning it was all about breaking the rules. I had to work through that process." The work she made near the end of her time at Bard reflects this evolution. For a piece entitled "Subjective Loudness" that she performed in Tokyo's Ueno Park in 2013, she set up speakers in front of every seat in an amphitheatre and equipped the audience with microphones and printed prompts. On Christine's cue, the audience began to vocalise what was on the cards: "ringing telephone", "car wash". In the video the performance sounds like total chaos, the subjective vocal interpretations of dozens of people all at once rather than a choir in unison. "People often said, 'That doesn't sound good,'" she says. But, she wonders, "Why does it have to 'sound good'?"

Soon she was exploring the idea of glossing, a written notation system used to transcribe sign language, indicating upend the assumptions of both hearing and Deaf people. Her 2013 work "Face Opera II", for example, breaks several rules at once. When the audience learns the performance is by all Deaf people, she explains, they expect to see signing. But it features no hands. The performers "sing" with their faces, which is surprising because "if it was fully Deaf, it would be purely visual – sign language and images." The resulting work is irresistible to both Deaf and hearing audiences – when I came across it online several years ago, before I was familiar with her work, I was entranced. This is Christine's museum-educator side coming through. "I always believe you need to find the one access point," she says. Here, it was the element of surprise: the "opera" is not what you expect it to be.

and one, "Trauma, LOL" (2020), has a scotch stain near the top of the paper. Yet they don't feel like drafts or works in progress. They carry a sense of urgency. There is a palpable anger to the lines and arcs of her series Degrees of My Deaf Rage (2018) even before the observer has seen a piece's title.

Every piece of art is, in some sense, a work in translation. It must move from an artist's mind to its external form, and then on into the mind of the audience. But for a Deaf artist who lives in a world that caters to hearing people, the translation stakes are higher. "I'm always envious of artists who have the privilege to be misunderstood, and they just go, 'Misunderstand me,'" Christine says. "But I cannot afford to be misunderstood." Throughout our conversation she pauses to repeat things and ensure that Francine is capturing her ideas accurately. As we converse, Christine's fingers occasionally flicker and wiggle as she searches for the right expression. Her nails are painted purple. There are occasional clicking noises as she moves her mouth expressively, and soft pops and taps as her hands and forearms brush and come together as she signs.

"Trauma, LOL" highlights the frustration of being misunderstood. It's the titular piece from her recent exhibition, *Trauma, LOL*, which opened at the François Ghebaly gallery in December 2020. The hand-drawn work features the words "trauma upon trauma upon trauma upon trauma" repeating to form a circular shape. In the white space in its centre, four words float: "stay positive", "important", and "cool".

This is a piece that is instantly comprehensible to Deaf people: signing "important" and then "cool", Christine explains to me, "is a Deaf way of saying, 'If you're stressed out, calm down. It's important to be cool. Stay cool.'" This is the rueful *LOL* contained within the experience of a trauma. "Like, trying to laugh trauma off while being shell-shocked. But it's still there," Christine says. "And I love that drawing so much. I wanted it to be the star of the show." As a hearing person who doesn't know any sign languages, I realise how much of Christine's work flies over my head. The gap between the experience of hearing and Deaf people and the trauma created in that gap are detailed specifically in other works, including the 2019 pie charts "Shit Hearing People Say to Me" and "When I Play the Deaf Card".

In her 2015 TED Talk, she describes how "As a Deaf person living in a world of sound, it's as if I was living in a foreign country, blindly following its rules, customs, behaviours and norms without ever questioning them." She was brought up to be mindful of the noise created by slamming a door or opening a packet of crisps. And so Christine was, she realised, an *expert* on sound and the way people react to it, having been forced to observe those reactions so closely. "Sound is like money, power, control, social currency. And sound is so powerful that it could either disempower me and my artwork or it could empower me. I chose to be empowered."

Increasingly, Christine is representing the Deaf community in more prominent venues. In January 2020 she flew to Miami, where she had agreed to be the sign-language interpreter of the national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner", at America's most-watched television event, the Super Bowl, on 2 February. The request came to her from the National Association of the Deaf, the oldest civil rights organisation in the US, which has been signing at the Super Bowl since 1992 and for which Christine has enormous respect. And she knew that 100 million people would be tuning in. At the same time, the National Football League had been under fire for cracking down on players who protested racist policies by taking a knee during the national anthem. She didn't want to seem as if she was supporting the league's actions.

There was also the matter of her not being an interpreter. "I'm not a person who signs songs," she tells me. She worked for months to figure out her precise translation of the national anthem and partnered with an interpreter who could cue her so she'd remain in sync with the vocal performance. "It was my translation, but it was her timing on the song and holding the notes," Christine says. Even the wardrobe proved a challenge: she gravitates towards bright patterns, but the occasion required something understated. She ended up in a blue-grey high-necked sleeveless dress designed by Humberto Leon of Opening Ceremony. "When I put it on, I was like, 'Oh yes.' I could move my arms freely." Her performance was a work of athleticism to rival anything that happened on the field. "It was a little bit of an opera in a way," she says.

But the millions of television viewers missed most of it. The broadcast showed Christine for only a few seconds. So she followed up the performance with an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, asking, "Why have a sign language performance that is not accessible to anyone who would like to see it? It's 2020: we've had the technology to do so for decades."

Christine lives and works in Berlin, a city where she's always felt a particular freedom to experiment and play with her work. She first visited in 2008 for

"Why does it have to 'sound good'?"

Up on the roof, Christine is in a black-and-white organic cotton shirt by MARIA McMANUS and grey wool trousers by PROENZA SCHOULER. The Nike trainers are Christine's own. The gold ring on her middle finger is by CATBIRD; the SOPHIE BUHAI bangle is as before.

Hair: Tiago Goya at Forward Artists. Make-up: Homa Safar at Tann Production. Photographic assistance: Essence Moseley. Production: Mini Title.

01 “Why I Work with Sign Language Interpreters”

02 “Subjective Loudness”

03 “Face Opera II”

04 “The Sound of Temperature Rising”

05 “The Sound of Laziness”

06 “Korean Gospel Song”

07 “Muffled Club Music”

08 “Trauma, LOL”

09 “Shit Hearing People Say to Me”

10 “When I Play the Deaf Card”

11 “Find Face”

12 “The Sound of Another Day Rising into Being”; “The Sound of Another Night Sinking into Existence”

13 “My Two Year Old Child’s Interpretation of the Faces I Make While Reading Deaf-Related Headlines People Sent Me During the Lockdown.”

14 “Stop Asian Hate” shirts

ARTWORKS BY CHRISTINE SUN KIM CITED IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:
01: 2018, charcoal on paper, 125 × 125 cm; 02: October 2013, performance as part of Sound Live Tokyo at Ueno Park Outdoor Stage; 03: May 2013, performance as part of Calder Foundation’s *They Might Well Have Been Remnants of the Boat*; 04: 2019, charcoal on paper, 36 × 48 cm; 05: 2016, charcoal on paper, 55 × 70 cm; 06: 2016, charcoal on paper, 53 × 67 cm; 07: 2016, charcoal on paper, 53 × 67 cm; 08: 2020, charcoal on paper, 148 × 148 cm; 09: 2019, charcoal and oil pastel on paper, 125 × 125 cm; 10: 2019, charcoal and oil pastel on paper, 125 × 125 cm; 11: 2021, with Thomas Mader, video installation, MGKWalls, Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen; 12: 2020, with *Weltkunst*, murals at Deutsche Oper Berlin, 11.2 × 11.7 m; 13: 2020, with Roux, colouring book; 14: 2021, with Ravi Vasavan, Meeya Tjiang, Jeff Staple, Staple Pigeon and Deaf Power.

a month-long arts residency. The city was affordable. She met other artists and went out drinking and cycling with them. On her second trip, for a group show in November 2012, on a night out, she met Thomas Mader. They passed messages back and forth on a phone. To converse in a dark bar, “in the old days, you had to look for a candle and then get a piece of paper,” she says. “The phone changed my life.”

Christine returned home, and for eight months, she and Thomas volleyed emails back and forth. She always figured she’d end up partnered with another Deaf person. In 2013, after winning a TED Fellowship, she quit her job to focus on her art – which freed her to leave New York. “So I moved,” she says. “I’m not a big fan of moving for love, but I did.” The transition from email to face-to-face conversation was bumpy, because Thomas was just starting to learn how to sign. “He can read and write in four to five languages, and then signing was really hard for him because visual languages are different than spoken languages,” Christine says. (Alongside the thousands of spoken languages in the world, there are hundreds of visual ones: British Sign Language, ASL, German Sign Language, the list goes on.) “It was a struggle at first, and I was like, ‘Why did I sign up for this shit?’ But we eventually found a way around it, and now we have a kid!”

Thomas has become, she says, “fairly fluent” in ASL. He and Christine try to collaborate on one artwork per year. Their most recent is an installation outside Germany’s Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen that opened in February. “Find Face” is a video piece about the power relations between signed and spoken languages, and the two artists’ different levels of fluency in sign language.

In March 2020, a month after the Super Bowl, Christine was back in Germany to unveil two huge murals at Deutsche Oper Berlin. It was touch and go whether the opening event would happen, because of a virus that was spreading across the globe. “The next day,” she says, “it was lockdown.”

The sudden necessity of protective face masks profoundly changed the way Christine interacted with the world. She doesn’t read lips, but she does rely on other people’s lip movement to understand when they’re trying to get her attention. “I couldn’t figure out if they were talking to me or they weren’t talking to me because their mouths were covered. So I had to develop new observational skills for that situation.” There were some upsides. The masks forced people to communicate better, to put their thoughts into words and gesture more. And the pandemic gave her extra space to focus on her art. “I made so much work,” she says. She and Roux even collaborated on a colouring book, *My Two Year Old Child’s Interpretation of the Faces I Make While Reading Deaf-Related Headlines People Sent Me During the Lockdown*. Roux was “going through a phase of drawing faces”, Christine says, so she decided to use them in the book.

Roux is hearing but fluent in ASL. She also speaks German and knows a bit of German Sign Language; her English, which she began to learn in May, is coming along, too. “I want to make sure we have really good communication, my daughter and I,” Christine says. But she often worries that as her daughter’s spoken language skills develop she’ll abandon signing. “It’s scary.”

Last year was, Christine says, “a really heavy year for me personally.” The global attention to the Black Lives Matter movement struck her as a necessary reckoning, and she joined the protests at the US Embassy in Berlin. As the pandemic wore on, “there were issues on top of issues,” she says, placing one hand on top of the other. She noticed first-hand the uptick in anti-Asian racism as people in Berlin began to step away from her on the train. She and a few of her collaborators started making shirts that said “Stop Asian Hate” in ASL. “I was so intrigued by the collective consciousness happening,” she says. “It’s become… performative.”

Now that she’s vaccinated and able to travel again, she is still working on projects. “But I’m struggling with drawing.”

At the time of our conversation, she was about to debut a series of works in the north-west of England, commissioned for the Manchester International Festival. In it, she played with the idea of captions, exploding the confined notion of cinema subtitles to translate the emotions and power dynamics of the real world. Christine applied caption texts to the walls of 40 different buildings across the city centre. On the walls of the National Football Museum, “[The sound of agreeing never to call it soccer]”. On the side of an Aldi supermarket, “[The sound of Zoom life fading away]”. On the Manchester Deaf Centre, “[The sound of BSL asking why there isn’t one universal spoken language]”.

For now, she’s happy to be taking a break and spending time with her family. “As a Deaf person, I plan to move back to America one day,” she says. “I know there’s a lot of issues – guns, fires, drought, earthquakes – I know all of that. But disability rights are amazing here. And that’s why I don’t plan to stay forever in Germany.

“It took me a long time to see that I could make a living off art,” she continues. “And then I had a platform, and then the platform widened and multiplied.” Today her work is in the collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and of her former employer the Whitney. This has changed how she approaches her art. Growing up, she had to cultivate an awareness of how hearing people experience sound. She had to learn the etiquette of being quiet around the house and in certain public spaces. She’s gone from being a little girl who’s grateful for TV captions to an artist who manipulates them to express herself. “And now I can say, ‘This sounds like tofu and that’s final.’ And people will accept without objecting. I love that shit.” She’s done borrowing voices.