

the Offing

ART

House of Worship

By DANIELLE WU | 14 JAN 2020



Harry Gould Harvey IV, *Syzygy as Far as the I Can See*, 2019. Casting wax, forged Walnut from the Newport Mansions, walnut veneered MDF, old man's beard, forged clay from

Swan's Island, formica from Cocaine Sam's Seaside Hideaway, aluminum, found candle, Art in America mailers, Newport Art Association mailer, faux Saarinen tulip table base 63 ×

48 × 48 in.

The most consistent yet overlooked character of any horror is easily the haunted house. Rather than instill fear through antiquated design, recent artistic production in Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* (2019), where the affluent and elegant Park family mansion functions as a looming antagonist, reveals equal unease about modern style. Fluorescent-lit galleries and handsome sliding bookcases disguise a secret tucked deep inside a dark underbelly. [At Bureau in New York, a two-person exhibition](#) *Coniunctio* offers a similar egress into the lonely life of "poor little rich man," where highly individuated style threatens to swallow us whole. Although these intricate settings are designed to endure, part of capitalist deception that things can indeed be infinite, their depictions prompt us to consider how aesthetic aspirations compare to our own mortality. If wealthy lives show us a desirable future, what happens when we discover the vile defects in this dream?

When viewing works by Kyung-Me and Harry Gould Harvey IV in *Coniunctio*, I could not help but recall an early, relatively innocuous scene in *Parasite*. In the film, the camera introduces us to a sleeping architectural beast by first gliding through a stately entryway that opens into the foot of the stairs, before pivoting from the sitting room to the dining area to show the building's full girth in one take. Kiwoo, who hails from more meager means, looks breathlessly upward, outside the frame, indicating that there is still more to be admired. Later, we will witness this admiration for the abode not dissipate, but rather transform into something more sinister. As we follow Kiwoo's stare into an exquisite abyss, we too are filled with ineluctable greed that leeches away our self-control, and we watch it bleed into the texture of a scene.



Kyung-Me, *Papillon de Nuit V*, 2019. Ink, charcoal and graphite on Arches paper 23 5/8 × 35 3/4 in. Photo by Dario Lasagni.

In a series of grayscale drawings, Kyung-Me renders every wood grain and textile fiber with ink, charcoal, or graphite in crisp detail, with no loss from foreground to background. The meticulous clarity is dizzying, even hallucinatory. With no singular focus or discernible narrative, the subjectless interior induces a *horror vacui* through its elaborate, often competing patterns. In Kyung-Me's *Papillon de Nuit V* (2019), a circular

door frame evocative of Chinese Moon Gates is flanked on either side by Richard Lloyd Wright's Willits chairs. This metered symmetry is echoed in the next room, which features a pair of identical porcelain lamps against a wallpaper depicting the Tale of Genji. In the center, a grand piano sits atop a Persian rug with no stool to encourage engagement. Still in the distance is a monumental painting, its borders impossibly contained by each sequential doorframe, each nested within the other with no overlap.

Kyung-Me's rooms have been assembled with obsessive exactitude. Captivating to the point of debilitating, they embody what Hal Foster has described as *gesamptkunstwerk*, or a crushing "world of total design." For Foster, this approach privileged the artfied environment over human spontaneity, fabricating a fantasy that was "all image and no interiority." One step by a living presence would ruin the view; indeed, in some scenes, it already has. In *Papillon de Nuit III*, where this "nesting doll" syndrome reaches new heights, a single foot protrudes from the central seat. This scene is not disconcerting because we worry about this immobile body, but rather because the dominating perfection of the room has overridden its importance. Our own insight on this scene feels like an intrusion. Occasionally, the interior's clean, even lighting is betrayed by a nonsensical shadow. In *Papillon de Nuit VI*, a wine glass casts a perpendicular shadow even while surrounding furniture indicates that the light is directly overhead, altogether completing the illogical logic of a film noir *Mise-en-scène*.

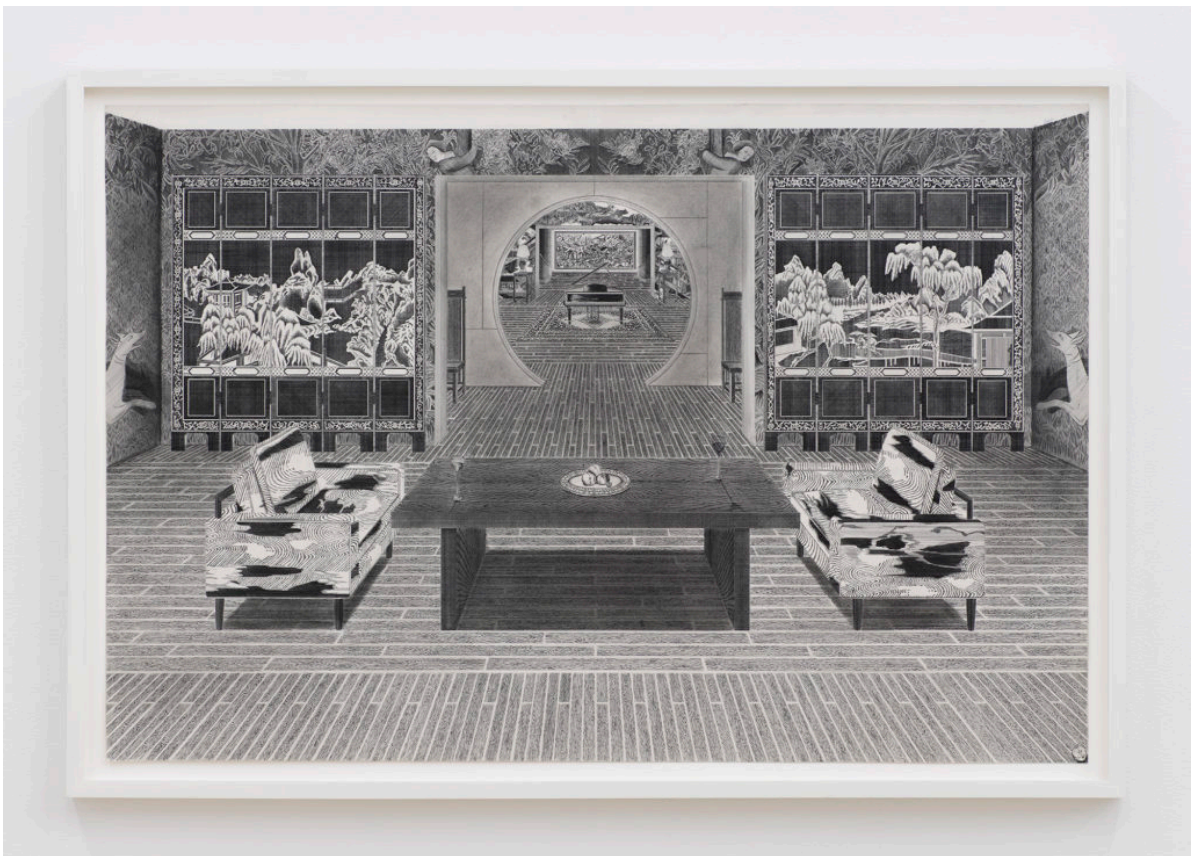


Like the *Parasite* home, Kyung-Me's rooms induce anxiety through the illusion of openness and transparency. Modern architects such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright originally favored the "open plan" concept for its possibility and sociability; openness was freedom. Now, the concept of unpartitioned expanses mainly signals moneyed taste; openness implies a free market. Open floor designs are apparently falling out of favor in the United States, in part, because homeowners complain that **too much is on display**. The vitrine-like showroom offers more opportunities to be surveilled in your own home. Some who can afford it have begun to ameliorate the pressure for a home to be both lived in and not *appear* lived in by duplicating communal areas. For example, a main open kitchen will disguise a smaller "mess kitchen," indicating a regression into old classist (and gendered) divisions between servant's and master's quarters. The capitalist private realm is so haunted by crowdsourced idealism, at the mercy of international (in the case of *Parasite*, Western) scrutiny and judgement, that it can only be sustained by a malignant split. A highly staged, cosmetic home masks a separate, operational phantom home. The irony of the *Parasite* house, and what we are led to speculate about Kyung-Me's rooms, is that its surface-level perfection only articulates its failure at its most basic function, which is keeping its occupants safe.



Scene from Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* (image courtesy Bong Joon Ho and CJ Entertainment).

Pamela M. Lee describes this late capitalist atmosphere as an anesthetized, “manufactured ether,” where the worker’s individuality is replaced with mindless repetition.¹ In Andreas Gursky’s photographs, for example, landscapes are given a cold frontality, and every object an unnaturally clear, omniscient visuality. Others such as Josephine Meckseper have similarly meditated on the capitalist display as a seductive portal. Those who gaze inside cannot help but desire the life it promises, even if that promise is made by lifeless beings. Like Gursky and Meckseper, Kyung-Me draws our concern to those beings that have been fossilized, or perhaps sublimated, by idealized hyperrealism.



Kyung-Me, *Papillon de Nuit VI*, 2019. Ink, charcoal and graphite on Arches paper 23 5/8 × 35 3/4 in. Photo by Dario Lasagni.

Punctuating Kyung-Me’s grayscale drawings are several charming wall sculptures by Harry Gould Harvey IV. Their delicate parabolic curves touch tangentially in the center, forming a symmetrical silhouette. Viewed from a distance, they might seem like partial architectural detailing that has survived the dissolving ether that pervades Kyung-Me’s drawings. In a way, they are. Most are constructed from rescued wood, derived from mansions in Newport, Rhode Island, or from felled white oak trees infested with gypsy moth. When viewed in isolation, they take the form of a crucifix or an astrological symbol. This religious, spiritual

connotation is further affirmed by a gold Christ figure inhabiting Harvey's freestanding sculpture *Syzygy as Far as the I Can See* (2019) and the altar-like triptych format of his wood-framed drawings.



Installation view: *Coniunctio*: Kyung-Me & Harry Gould Harvey IV, Bureau, New York. Photo by Dario Lasagni.

How is it that these seemingly disparate cultures, from Gothic architecture to Japanese Heian-era painting, feel so complementary together? The Latin translation of the exhibition title, *Coniunctio*, suggests that the two artists perceive themselves to be a union of opposites. For the same reason that British impressionist painting borrowing from Japanese woodblock print constituted part of the Aesthetic Movement (1860-1900), these styles converge because they are perceived as excessive in their ornamental aestheticism. Ralph Nicholson Wornum, Keeper and Secretary of the National Gallery of London during the height of the Aesthetic Movement, observed that any picture, whatever the subject, becomes an ornament once its primary focus is symmetry and contrast. He also wrote this about Ornamental Art: "Ornament is essentially the accessory to, and not the substitute of, the useful; it is a decoration or adornment; it can have no independent existence practically."²

Rather than simply reject the superficiality that characterizes caring for objects, Harvey and Kyung-Me's denizens, from sanguine wax figures to estate sale tchotchkes, instead allow us to take seriously impractical, disposable, and otherwise decorative lives. Kyung-Me **has directly spoken** about mourning personified things that are tasked with nourishing the human. Reflecting upon the classic children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit*, where a toy rabbit is discarded once its owner contracts scarlet fever, Kyung-Me said, "The rabbit questions whether he is actually real or if he is only real when he is with the boy."³ Subject to the perils of trend and moneyed whims, the ornament's mortality is in most instances shorter than human life. It undergoes cycles of desecration and restoration. Gothic architecture, for instance, was dismissed as unsightly before later regaining public favor during an era of "Gothic Revival." Steeped in sumptuous elegance and dramatic in their execution, the layered encrustations at the fore of Harvey and Kyung-Me's works oscillate between powerless and powerful.

Although it would be easier to mount an opposition to luxury and surface treatment, the combined work of Harvey and Kyung-Me strokes their more unsettling, cult-like appeal to heightened affect: the uncanny valley between fashionable flourishes and religious iconography, utopia and dystopia, buyer's paradise and financial purgatory. Harvey's *Syzygy as Far as the I Can See* (2019) includes cheeky self-abasing references that recognize the artist's own culpability within this tradition, by turning *Art in America* mailers into quasi-ecclesiastical script. In *Parasite*, even the modern house slides so easily from shelter to prison, exotic to grotesque, sanctuary to abandoned property. While every decade gives rise to new theories and embellishments on old ideas, style remains subservient to isolated patronage: an expensive boys' club with loyal followers, symbolic relics, and glorified figureheads. If the upscale fantasy home of today and the abandoned haunted house seem like two sides of the same coin, it is because the aesthete responsible for their creation burrowed inside us and never left.



Installation view: Coniunctio: Kyung-Me & Harry Gould Harvey IV, Bureau, New York. Photo by Dario Lasagni.

Coniunctio: Kyung-Me & Harry Gould Harvey IV is on view through January 19, 2020, at Bureau, New York.

1. Pamela M. Lee, *On Forgetting the Art World*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2012). [↗](#)

2. Ralph Nicholson Wornum, *Analysis of Ornament. The Characteristics of Styles: An Introduction to the Study of the History of Ornamental Art*, (London, England: Chapman & Hall, 1856), 11. [↗](#)

3. "A Conversation with Kyung-Me," *The Editorial Magazine*, Accessed January 2, 2020, <http://the-editorialmagazine.com/a-conversation-with-lo-kyung-me/> [↗](#)
