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Art in America

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Sin and Symmetry: An Interview with Kyung-Me

By Mira Dayal



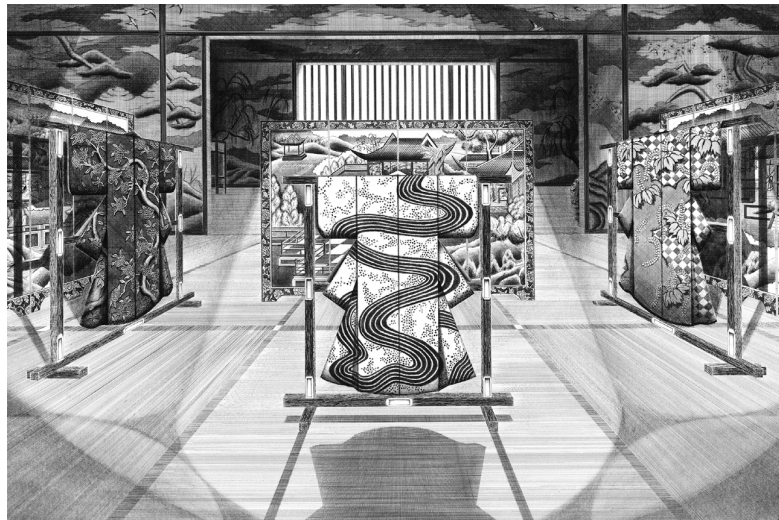
Kyung-Me, *The Marriage*, 2022, pen and charcoal on paper, 32 by 47 ½ inches.

A rigorous sense of order rules the drawings in New York-based artist Kyung-Me's first solo exhibition at Bureau, on the Lower East Side. Mirrors, columns, curtains, room dividers, spotlights, and frieze-like elements form geometrical divisions in the symmetrical compositions, each nearly three feet tall by four feet wide. The scenes are set in two spaces meant to evoke otherworldly beauty: the okiya, where geishas sit or lie in silence, and the convent, where nuns in elaborate robes orient themselves toward unseen presences. Despite the show's title, "Sister," the women centered in most of the images appear isolated, tied to their elaborate environs more than other human figures. Viewers can get lost in the details, all rendered in cross-hatched pen lines and charcoal gradients on paper. But examination comes with the sense that one might discover something darker lurking in the shadows, or in the additional rooms just visible at the edges of some drawings. *The Fall*, a small piece at the start of the show, depicts a woman on the threshold of a forest of twisted trees, foreshadowing the religious and psychological tensions pulsing underneath Kyung-Me's visions. Below, the artist discusses these tensions and the origins of an enigmatic body of work. —Mira Dayal

A few years ago I became very invested in Carl Jung’s theory about symbols. One fundamental idea is that every symbol holds the tension of opposites and that, through investigating our personal symbols, we can better understand the underlying tensions in our psyches. For “Sister,” I wanted to examine how the symbols I’ve returned to in my work—the woman, the mirror, and the labyrinth—correlate to tensions in my psyche and in larger societal structures.

I was also inspired by some iconic imagery, namely the symmetry and asymmetry in the image of the Crucifixion of Christ, in which Christ is placed in the center between the penitent and impenitent thieves, and the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Conceptually, I wanted to draw a line down the central vertical axis of this image and “fold” the image in half to compress the opposing archetypes (good thief, bad thief, virgin, whore). I wanted to create images imbued with the tension of these opposites that would feel open and enclosed, charged and vacuous, oppressive and liberated.

I created eight drawings featuring two labyrinthine houses and two archetypes. Four drawings are set in a convent, focusing on the figure of the nun, while the other four are set in an okiya, featuring the figure of a geisha. I was interested in the way these houses mirror each other and the way they protect and entrap their occupants. Both the nun and the geisha are often in a position of debt to their house, and they must atone through piety or service.



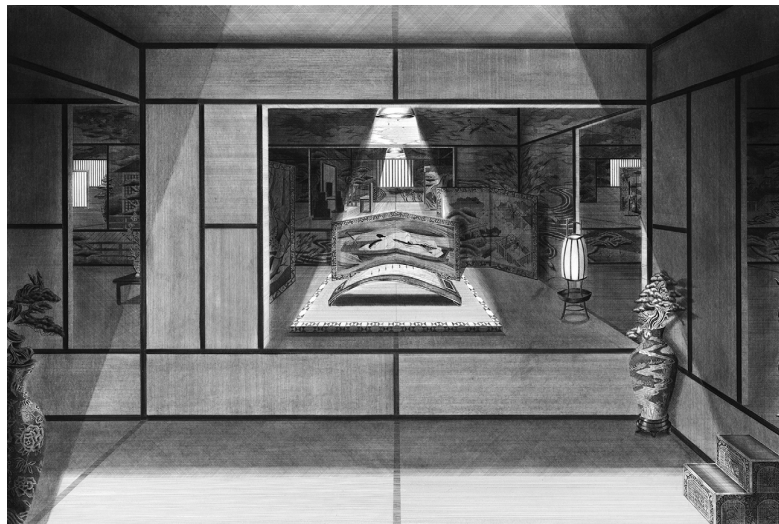
Kyung-Me, *The Resurrection* (detail), 2022, pen and charcoal on paper, 32 by 47 ½ inches.

In the convent, the nun aspires toward the divine image of the Virgin Mary, who embodies the impossible contradiction of being both a virgin and a mother. She lives a cyclical life of serving, praying, confessing, and repenting. She is in the constant pursuit of purifying her soul so that she can achieve salvation in the next life. In the okiya, the geisha aspires toward a different type of immaculate image of beauty that is cultivated by the house. Her success within the house depends on her will to transform herself into a living piece of art. In her training, a geisha must learn to mimic the house’s ideal of beauty and perfection in her movement, speech, and art. Even at night, she sleeps on a wooden pillow that preserves her updo. For her, there is no true rest. While the nun aspires toward an immaculate image to please God, the geisha’s immaculate image is ultimately cultivated to entice men. If the geisha is successful enough in her art, she can buy her freedom.

The pursuit of embodying an immaculate image requires unrelenting discipline, constant self-surveillance, and a never-ending void of desire. These women are constantly thinking about their performance of the self, which is why the drawings are all composed as stages, with the figures lit by stage lighting. In the world of these drawings, the women’s private and public lives have totally merged. Even in private moments, like in *The Confession*, the woman figure has several implied audiences: herself, her sisters, her God, and the viewer who is looking at her in the drawings. I wanted to convey a sense that she has no escape from a judgmental eye.

Aesthetically, this project merges a lot of Japanese and Christian imagery. After Korea was liberated from Japanese forces, the Christian narrative of salvation offered a new hope for a spiritually disenfranchised people. In *The Resurrection*, I merge the composition and form of the crucifixion scene with kimonos hanging from frames. In *The Vessel*, the central woman has collapsed into a stringed instrument, a koto, that resembles a figure with its back arched, pelvis up to God, as in the “arch of hysteria” once illustrated in medical journals. The visuals also consider parallels between the two architectures in the drawings. The space of a church makes you feel very small, and if you’re moved by its beauty, then you’ll submit to its order. It’s designed with the intention to indoctrinate and consume. Relatedly, the geisha house is built to serve the most wealthy and powerful men, so it must reflect that in the architecture and every single object in the house. It’s quite sinister and seductive. I like that tension.

One overarching theme of my work is entrapment. What is the smaller thing you entrap inside of yourself and what is the larger thing that entraps you? All of these scenes depict an interior space, but screens within these spaces depict the outside world, or windows allude to it. Yes, these women are trapped in a house and in an image and in this void, but they are also trapped by something outside of all this that is only alluded to—familial, societal, and political structures. For these women, their prison is also their shelter.



Kyung-Me, *The Vessel*, 2022, pen and charcoal on paper, 32 by 47 ½ inches.

A related theme in this work is the mise en abyme structure. A lot of the screens within these drawings reference *The Tale of Genji*, considered the first known novel, written by a woman in 11th century Japan named Murasaki Shikibu. A roaming young prince, essentially a playboy, goes from woman to woman and creates deep connections with them, but he’s always moving on because he’s on a greater journey that doesn’t always involve them. The story is about how this man moves through the world, but it’s also about how the women must cope afterward. One starts spiraling and becomes mad because she feels she can’t live without him. Another becomes a poet and a creator of her own world. It’s such a long novel, with so many little stories within it. I love this theme of stories within stories and women dealing with situations in different ways; I think the book is essentially about how a woman can become a victim or forge her own path. I learned how to draw by copying scenes from *The Tale of Genji*, and its themes are now reflected in the drawings too.

Early in my practice, I felt like I was at the entrance of a labyrinth. I’m always trying to weave my way through it, but I’m somehow spat back out at the entrance. The process is spiraling and repetitious and there’s a minotaur that I’m seeking, but as I get closer to it, I don’t know if I want to approach it or return to where I began.