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CINDY JI HYE KIM

[WEB REVIEW](#) BY PAUL LASTER
MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER

[USA](#) [CANADA](#) [KOREA, SOUTH](#)

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Trained as an illustrator at the Rhode Island School of Design (2013), Cindy Ji Hye Kim came to painting a few years later, during her MFA at Yale University School of Art (2016). For Kim, illustration sees a painting as an image rather than an object, in contrast to the modernist approach to a painting as a surface for materials. Perceiving this latter art-historical principle as authoritarian, like parents, Kim casts herself as an infantilized illustrator-child, portraying strange psychological situations involving archetypal figures of mother, father, and child, whom the artist has respectively named Madame Earth, Mr. Capital, and The School Girl.



Installation view of CINDY JI HYE KIM's (center) *Superego Fortuna*, 2020, graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, acrylic, and oil on canvas, 172.72 × 137.16 cm, on two sides; (left and right) *Double-Tongued Citadel*, 2020, graphite, pastel, acrylic on wall, 988.06 × 314.96 cm.

Staging her works within the confines of the MIT List Visual Arts Center's smallest gallery, Kim engaged the architecture of the space in a variety of eye-catching ways. The center of attraction was the grisaille painting *Superego Fortuna* (2020), of an interlocking network of floral vines that create the outline of the artist's Madame Earth figure and a wheel-like shape that also appears in another large canvas titled *Yearnings of the Flesh* (2019). The backside of *Superego Fortuna*, rendered in graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, acrylic, and oil on silk, employs a birchwood structure in the shape of a human pelvis bone in the place of traditional stretcher bars to create a metaphoric portrayal of Fortuna, the Roman goddess of chance who is also associated with female fertility.

The placement of this painting within the space was particularly important. Suspended by wires in the center of the room, it was backed by the commissioned graphite, pastel, and acrylic mural *Double-Tongued Citadel* (2020), which portrays two sections of white floor-to-ceiling scaffolding, entangled with ropes that form female and male silhouettes—Madame Earth is woven into the structure on the left, Mr. Capital on the right, their figures popping out against the solid black surface of the rest of the wall. Because *Superego Fortuna* is suspended and lit from behind, the giant wooden pelvis is seen as a haunting shadow from the front of the painting and a formidable silhouette from the rear. On closer examination, the silhouette reveals Mr. Capital, with his signature ten-gallon hat, penetrating a pair of spread female legs—defined by light coming through the vine-covered canvas—with his penis.



CINDY JI HYE KIM. *Reign of the Idle Hands #1*, 2019, graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, acrylic, and oil on birch wood, 30.5 cm diameter.



CINDY JI HYE KIM. *Reign of the Idle Hands #2*, 2019, graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, acrylic, and oil on birch wood, 30.5 cm diameter.

Two small round paintings, *Reign of the Idle Hands #1* and *#2* (both 2019), capture Madame Earth and Mr. Capital as characters on a phenakistoscope, a Victorian-era animation device where radial pictures of the sequential phases of an action are reflected in a mirror as a single moving image when the disc is spun. In Kim's first version Madame Earth is shown climbing a rope, while the second finds Mr. Capital balanced like an acrobat on a spiraling tightrope. If the 12 figures on each painting were viewed as in a rotating disc of a phenakistoscope, Madame Earth and Mr. Capital would seem to move, but Kim prefers to keep her characters suspended or immobile—a nod to the saying that nothing good comes from idle hands. The idea of being frozen or perhaps trapped extends to *The Body Sins Once* (2020), in which Madame Earth is carved into a wooden pole that is squeezed between the floor and ceiling.

Whether these characters are the artist's parents, authority figures in general, or sides of herself is not obvious. Nor is it clear if the hooded School Girl, who's caught like a hamster on a wheel on a spotlighted stage in the painting *Yearnings of the Flesh* (2019), is Kim working like a monk on her art or an alter-ego expressing a repressed sexual identity in the face of external control. The last piece in the show is *Iron Nerve* (2020), a section of steel cable—the kind she typically uses for the suspension of her paintings—attached to the wall with screw eyes. Shaped like the strings of a corset, it alludes to restriction and discipline— notions that Kim's School Girl perhaps wishes to reject in favor of shameless fun.

Paul Laster is a New York desk editor at ArtAsiaPacific.

Cindy Ji Hye Kim's [solo exhibition](#) is on view at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, until September 12, 2021.

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