

# Kyung-Me

Drawings and paintings  
balance chaos and control.



**It's rare for an artist to spend years honing a craft and perfecting a way of working only to one day pivot 180 degrees.** Kyung-Me makes this look both easy and essential.

After Kyung-Me first saw the 12th century illustrations for *The Tale of Genji*, she “became obsessed with drawing, almost overnight,” as she told me when I visited her studio in Ridgewood, Queens. First, she copied drawings from the work – considered the world’s first novel, and written by a woman – with urban grids drawn in parallel perspective. Then she zoomed in, imagining what went on in the buildings’ interiors – and with the many women who starred in Prince Genji’s story.

The resulting black-and-white line drawings are only 32 inches wide but utterly expansive – both brimming with detail and extending deep into space by way of one-point perspective.

In *The Marriage* (2022), a cathedral-like room is divided up with ornate Gothic molding that appears to go on forever. In *The Profession* (2022), the texture of a gridded tatami mat is meticulously hatched: Every warp and every weft gets its own line. In *Papillon de Nuit VI* (2019), a floor of perpendicular bricks comes to feel like an infinite lattice.

Kyung-Me made these drawings for 12 years, and her style never ceased to be striking. Each scene feels like a still from a different film, each drawing a brief glimpse into its own rich world. But she became disenchanted with drawing just as quickly as she fell for it: One day, she realized she’d spent a decade drawing women trapped alone in labyrinthine rooms – and the drawings were turning her into those isolated women in her pictures. She’d stay inside for long hours; eventually, her arm began to hurt from overuse.



*The Marriage*, 2022.



Kyung-Me: *Sunflower 3*, 2025.

So Kyung-Me decided to mix things up: She wanted to loosen up her arm and feel looser more generally – to stop fixating on perfection. She said she basically wanted “to change everything about myself, to be honest.” So she decided to learn a new medium, took a painting class, and fell for her teacher Sungsook Setton’s philosophy. “Asian painting is about clearing your mind, focusing on your breath, and cultivating inner peace and wisdom,” Kyung-Me explained. “You constantly have to balance these opposite energies.”

She started with ink abstractions, focused on releasing control, and soon experimented with color – first yellow, which she found looked like a sunflower with the black ink, but also a solar eclipse. She’s been painting the form of the sunflower ever since, drawn to the way it holds brightness and darkness, describing it as “a vessel that could teach me how to channel my different energies into one thing.”

Kyung-Me’s new paintings – on view at Bureau gallery in New York this summer – are indeed quite the opposite of her earlier work: big, fiery sunflowers made with layers of watercolor and ink. She paints them loosely and quickly; if she makes 50, she might trash all but one. To get there, she had to fight the shame she felt about wasting materials, the fear of making something ugly. It paid off: The paintings feel utterly alive.

I asked her if balancing and embracing opposites in her art carried over to her life. She explained that, while she used to avoid certain energies and emotions that felt too intense, she now sees them as a gift – something to channel onto paper. I left her studio with the feeling she’d given me permission to invert all my impulses, too – feeling lighter and free.

—Emily Watlington

Courtesy Kyung-Me and Bureau, New York (3)