

ARTFORUM

Joyous Apocalypse: Kyung-Me's Ink Paintings Blaze with Color

At Bureau, sunflowers explode “like a firework in negative—the flare dark, the background alight.”

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By Barry Schwabsky



Kyung-Me, *Untitled*, 2024, ink and watercolor on mulberry paper, 19 3/4 × 15 1/4".

Through August 1, 2026—Enraptured by the chromatic intensity of van Gogh's sunflowers, Beauford Delaney turned to abstraction, but with a similarly blazing solar yellow. Kyung-Me seems to have taken a contrary path: Starting from an impulse toward abstraction, the Queens-based artist quickly found herself painting sunflowers.

None of this would have been predictable from Kyung-Me's previous exhibitions. Her earlier works—monochromatic representational drawings—were intricately composed, tightly rendered, highly detailed, and stringently perspectival. They might make you think of engravings such as those reproduced by Max Ernst in his collage books *La Femme 100 têtes* (The Hundred Headless Woman), 1929, or *Une Semaine de bonté* (A Week of Kindness), 1934.

But eventually she felt trapped by the exacting control of her pictorial spaces and, as she stated in a recent interview, resolved “to change everything about myself, to be honest.” In search of greater immediacy and presence, she began studying Asian ink painting. Still hewing to black, she began by concentrating on mark-making, the basic building blocks of composition. But something clicked when she added yellow watercolor to her vocabulary: “A sunflower appeared,” she writes. “With petals like rays of light bursting from a dense, dark center, the sunflower reminded me of the solar eclipse—a collision of opposing energies.”



Kyung-Me, *Untitled*, 2025, ink and watercolor on mulberry paper, 87 1/2 × 44”.

The results, as seen in her current show, “I, Sunflower,” range from fairly literal renditions of the motif (in some small works such as *Untitled*, 2024, black ink stands in for the plants’ green foliage) to pieces in which the sunflower appears as a barely tangible idea. It’s in the latter paintings that the opposing energies described by the artist manifest most dramatically. Among these are the show’s four largest works (each roughly seven feet high and three-and-a-half feet wide), also all *Untitled*. One of them, from 2025—where the yellow has been subsumed into a range of fiery reds and the central black stem sears the canvas like a burning wick—is downright apocalyptic in feeling, but it’s an apocalypse of joy, somehow, rather than of disaster.



Kyung-Me, *Untitled*, 2025, ink and watercolor on mulberry paper, 87 1/2 × 44".

I've rarely seen watercolor pushed to a state of such vivid opacity: Rather than veils of translucent color, the brilliance of the pigment shines forth. In another painting, dated 2026, what should be the dark seeded disk of the sunflower is replaced by a cascading spill that encompasses notes of blue, red, and green amid the black; the yellow-orange surround is brighter at the top, more deeply shaded at the bottom. I kept thinking this was like a firework in negative—the flare dark, the background alight.

Exhilarated as I was by the visceral impact of Kyung-Me's paintings, I was just as impressed by the rare willingness of a young artist with an already established style to remake herself. That kind of risk-taking is thrilling in its own right—at least when the outcome is as successful as it is here.