



ISSUE

SEP 01, 2022

New York: Joeun Kim Aatchim

BY EMILY CHUN

Joeun Kim Aatchim: Homed

François Ghebaly



JOEUN KIM AATCHIM, *A Study for the Fish Dinner (The Original Memory Game after al di la)*, 2019–22, mineral pigment and refined pine-soot ink on silk mounted on aluminum frame, sterling silver pendant and chain, 24 × 29cm. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy the artist and Francois Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles/New York.

“Homed,” Joeun Kim Aatchim’s solo exhibition at François Ghebaly, was composed of 18 works and two restaurant ticket rails that ran along opposing walls at waist height, bearing ephemera as varied as sketches, writings, desiccated butterflies, packaged pills, and furniture install instructions. The highlights of the exhibition were multiyear works like *Such Person* (2013–22) and *A Study for the Fish Dinner (The Original Memory Game after al di la)* (2019–22), with superimposed strata of old, new, and some unfinished drawings on diaphanous silk. *Fish Dinner*, for example, layers images of prepared fish on plates; a sitting figure; bowls on a table, and more—it’s difficult to parse all the images. These works call to mind the habits of Roy Newell or Albert Pinkham Ryder, who often worked on the same paintings for upwards of a dozen years, continually adding new layers. But whereas Newell and Ryder reworked the same surfaces repeatedly to the point of sculptural encrustation, Aatchim’s oneiric drawings have the opposite effect of weightlessness and delicacy. It’s no wonder that critics have often discussed her works in terms of the elusive nature of memory—not just due to the works’ haunting aesthetics but because they thrum with plangent yearnings and autobiographical elements (Aatchim’s grandmother, for example, was a silk merchant).

But perhaps an overlooked aspect of Aatchim’s practice is the centrality of the written word to her process. In compressing long passages of time and experience into a single object, these multiyear artworks function almost like cumulative textual drafts or diaristic records. Indeed, the premise of the show was the artist’s copious note-taking of her life, which yields raw linguistic material to work from. Small clippings of writing, examples of such records, were hung on the ticket racks along the show’s perimeters; one note, torn from a journal, narrativized Aatchim’s experience of hearing her name spoken by an unnamed “A” with a speaking tic. Another, more intimate, note signed by the artist’s mother read in Korean: “Good work, thank you, I love you, I’m very proud of you.”

The role that language plays in Aatchim's work is complex given the long-standing tension between word and image, and the question of whether written language furnishes art with final or overdetermined meaning. ("In one poem from 2019," notes the gallery's press release, "Aatchim likens her nonnative English to a 'struggling husband' whom she gladly cherishes in his homeliness.") Many of the works' titles are themselves full sentences; take, for example, *My Intermittent Prayer in Adulthood was only an Embarrassing Plagiarism of My Childhood's. Then Again, I Rely on My Mother's Secret Speaking in Tongues that No one Knows what it Meant Even Herself* (2021–22). This title simultaneously elucidates the image of a figure kneeling with her head on the ground and holding out clasped hands, while almost foreclosing other possible readings. And then in other works like the diptych *Homed (Unwilling & Never Not Awkward)* (2021–22), where images of ethereally rendered seated women seem to barely exist, the role of language is much less heavy-handed. Here, the specter of the written word is evident not in the paintings' title but primarily in their formal qualities. The depictions of the women are suspended in structures made of brass, wood, steel, and leather knots that are traditional to Korean silk painting. Slightly reminiscent of a Rauschenbergian combine with its wooden beams, the work almost resembles a book with its intricate binding, which holds the silk image taut.

In its boxy framings of individual works and unabashed investment in the magic of the mundane, the exhibit invites comparisons with the works of Joseph Cornell, for whom, in the words of art historian Marci Kwon, "enchantment was located not in some distant firmament but in the world around him." This view deeply pervades the works of Aatchim, who knows how to infuse her works with her day-to-day subjectivity in a way that feels both ambiguous and expansive.

MORE IN CATEGORY

ISSUE

OCT 03, 2022

Vancouver: Christopher K. Ho