WORLDWIDE WEB OF WOES

Cindy Ji Hye Kim

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A woman lies naked on a table with her underwear pulled down between her legs. The pages of a book resting on her pelvis are flipped open, and other tomes are scattered on the floor. The image's high-contrast, black-and-white palette recalls the chiaroscuro lighting of film noir, creating a cinematic atmosphere. It's as if an erotic act has just taken place. This scene from Cindy Ji Hye Kim's charcoal drawing Interpretation (all works 2019) evokes Romantic painter Antoine Wiertz's canvas La Liseuse de Romans (The Reader of Novels, 1853), which likewise depicts a naked woman absorbed in reading. Both figures are portrayed as objects of desire, as is emphasized by their uninhibited company: in Wiertz's painting, a disembodied hand reaches stealthily toward the woman's bed. In Kim's rendering, a couple, appearing only as ghostly silhouettes, peak at the woman's private moment through a window. This voyeur-subject relationship within the composition provokes reflections on how we, as viewers, receive the work, and positions us as merely passing witnesses to an act of creativity.

In her solo exhibition "Verses from the Apocalypse" at New York's Helena Anrather gallery, Kim took revenge on her audience, making them work by hanging her sketches along wires strung across the space. Visitors had to duck and dodge, contorting their bodies to have a closer look at the miniscule pieces—many of them depicting heroine-sex slaves. Besides pointing to the often thankless role of artists, Kim refers to her experience working in an animation studio as a trained illustrator, which required her to produce art mechanically, underscoring the intermingling of suffering and pleasure in her creative process. This is encapsulated in the drawing Creativity, in which a girl is knelt in prayer for ideas in front of her notebook, with a pencil rammed through her palms. In Poetry, another girl is twisted around the corner of a table, the scrunched-up balls of paper in front of her testifying to her struggle for inspiration.

Through these provocative illustrations, Kim reveals how creativity can converge with violence, and how this process is often overlooked, justified, or even considered an acceptable matter in the eyes of the public.

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