

Sung Hwan Kim. Protected by roof and right-hand muscles

In musical collaboration
with
David Michael
DiGregorio (aka dogr)

23.11.24
– 21.4.25



Sung Hwan Kim.
Protected by roof and
right-hand muscles

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, artist Sung Hwan Kim has produced lyrical multimedia installations and performances that merge the mythological and the everyday, with music—namely his collaboration with musician and composer David Michael DiGregorio (aka dogr)—critical to all. *Protected by roof and right-hand muscles* carries with it the artist's tendency to situate his working-through of large concepts in the domestic sphere and with self-reflection. The exhibition title is borrowed from DiGregorio's song *things are not more exciting than they are* from his 2009 album *In Korean Wilds and Villages*:

*things are not more exciting than they are (as real as the world
of gossips)
is this the start of paranoia? (am I too weak?)
philosophy of looking at his own hand
(protected by roof and right-hand muscles) if you wait, you'll
hear my story
doubles another story doubles another story*

The exhibition was originally produced by the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, where it was curated by Yolande Zola Zoli van der Heide in close collaboration with the artist. A prelude to the exhibition took place at Framer Framed in Amsterdam. At the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Kim also takes the role of exhibition designer and rearranges key film environments and performances from works that poetically navigate and contextualize ideas around borders. A seminal artist within and beyond his generation, Kim often assumes the position of storyteller to interpret history through the senses and embody and distill the ineffable.¹ Folklore, myth, and gossip are portals through which to enter his layered installations where feelings are reliable sources for understanding the world. Through his distinctive method of intertwining video, music, storytelling, and sculpture within the gallery space, Kim has developed a unique narrative approach to migration, immigration, translation, and regeneration.

Each section consists of a key video work by Kim, along with drawings and installations that interact with it in customized architectural environments. The eight film installations express the breadth of his practice: his early series *in the room* (2006–12) through ritual, song, gossip, urban myth, and horror stories alludes to home as a contested site where one begins to practice one's politics; his most recent series, *A Record of Drifting Across the Sea* (2017–), moves out of the domestic to the detachment from the past in current migration discourse and investigates the twentieth-century move of undocumented Korean people to the US by way of Hawai'i.

One way to enter the exhibition is through this theme of migration embodied by the recent additions to the *A Record of Drifting* series: *Hair is a piece of head* (2021) and *By Mary Jo Freshley* 프레실리에 의(依)해 (2023). “How does one care about the trouble beyond their national border, let alone the border of one’s skin?” asks Kim, noting “identity is about how people approach boundary.” The exhibition is not “about” the identity of subjects within the films, nor is it entirely autobiographical; Kim takes his reflection into his artistic production, recognizing the gap between subjectivities instead of talking about the “other.”

Kim’s practice is collaborative, involving many of the same people, chiefly his niece Yoon Jin Kim whom you can see grow up across the films *From the commanding heights...* (2007), *Washing Brain and Corn* (2010), and *Love before Bond* (2017). Musician and composer DiGregorio is a sonic entry point heard throughout, significantly in section 6 with *Temper Clay* (2012) and section 1 with *Washing Brain and Corn*.

The emphasis on height (visual and physical), texture (same objects in different materials), trajectory (within each work and room to a room), and drama (absence and presence of light) abstracts reality in Sung Hwan Kim’s exhibition, inviting the viewer to seek their own sensory interpretations of the film environments.

- 1 In an unpublished correspondence with art historian and curator Harry C. H. Choi related to the artist’s 2022 exhibition *Night Crazying* at Barakat Contemporary in Seoul, Sung Hwan Kim expresses his use of the ineffable as follows: “Ineffability (and ephemerality) [is] a frequently used trope in Korean literature as well. I was interested in the notion that in the US, a story of minority, stated by Queer, Feminists, and marginal ethnicities sweep away other subtle differences contained in another type of body.”

What feelings come
up as you move
through the rooms of
the exhibition?

Are there experiences
and memories that
the videos, drawings
and collages
reminds you of?

Washing Brain and Corn

(2010), installation (2012/23)

Washing Brain and Corn (2010) is made up of a video, drawings, and sculptures. The work was originally shown as part of a larger installation that opened the Tanks at the Tate Modern, London, in 2012. It is inspired by the poem *Leichen-Wäsche* (Corpse Washing) (1907) by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). Sung Hwan Kim's book *Ki-da Rilke* (2011), pages of which appear in section 2, was published as a parallel project to *Washing Brain and Corn*.

The video features Kim's niece Yoon Jin Kim and is inspired by a propaganda phrase—"nan-kong-san-dang-l-sil-eu-yo," translated as "I hate the communists"—heard in his youth rendered in the video as a musical refrain. *Washing Brain and Corn* retells a Cold War-era Korean story about a boy whose mouth was ripped open by North Korean spies after uttering this phrase. As his narrative unfolds in the film, Kim begins drawing on acetate sheet and projecting the scene onto the faces of the actors—David Michael DiGregorio (aka dogr) and Yoon Jin Kim. Ultimately, haunting sequences take form in actions as diverse as the artist giving his niece a new identity by drawing on her face via an overhead projector and using old anticommunist propaganda. Music is an integral part of Kim's work.

Do you know a book
that has affected
you so deeply that you
still remember it
today?

Imagine you are part
of this story. How
would you influence
the storyline of the
book?

Part of *Yolande's Room*

(2004–23), installation

At the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, a selection of 56 drawings and collages by Sung Hwan Kim, created between 2004 and 2023, was presented in the installation *Yolande's Room*. Here at the ZKM, a part of this selection is shown in sections 2 and 9.

When Sung Hwan Kim is drawing, or writing for that matter, film editing takes a back-stage but the works are often brought into conversation in the film installations. Kim works by association, reflected in further collage and drawing works in which the artist's delicate approach to geometric shapes is rendered tenderly on parchment paper, mounting board, and transparent plastic sheets stacked on top of each other to generate fantastical, abstract compositions.

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In the vitrine are pages from the artists' book *Ki-da Rilke* (2011), which was developed for the exhibition *Line Wall* at Kunsthalle Basel in 2011. In the book, Kim engages with the work of the Prague-born poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). The first part of *Ki-da Rilke* features a transcription and drawings of Rilke's collection *New Poems* (1907) in the German original and on thin sheets of paper and notepads. The second part features Kim's drawings inspired by Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923), which are then further developed in the book's third part, which comprises an independent picture story featuring recurring characters. These figures are named in an index on loose sheets of paper.

Is there a place where
you get inspired to
create your own world
and stories?

What do you take
along with you,
and with whom do
you share this space?

From the commanding heights ...

(2007), installation (2012/23)

Part of the series *in the room* (2006–12)

When you enter this section you meet a wood structure on which are prints of maps, each conveying an image of the world at night taken by NASA. In the corner is a green costume, a result of a workshop Sung Hwan Kim guided as part of the residency *Very Real Time* in 2006 organized by fellow artist Gregg Smith in Cape Town, South Africa. A group of fifteen-year-old students from various schools were invited to tell horror stories based on urban myths they knew. Kim, in turn, drew from these stories to design garments, one of which is the green dress.

"I know that it doesn't matter if things are true or not, but this is a true story," opens the central film *From the commanding heights... (2007)*, which takes its title from an excerpt of Paul Virilio's 1984 book *War and Cinema*. The artist proceeds to tell us fantastical stories, introducing his tendency to merge truth and fantasy in myth. One is about a woman with a third ear on her head, illustrated in the film through the artist's drawing a woman on a transparent sheet. The film also includes a recording of a phone conversation between himself and his mother, in which they discuss a rumor from his childhood illustrated by images of those involved. Through the interweaving of fantasy and his mother's tale, Kim questions the authoritative voice of politics.

From the commanding heights... developed in stages, first as a theater performance in 2006, and in the following year, as a single channel video in an installation and also as an artists' book. The installation was once transformed into a performance space where Kim performed *pushing against the air* (2007, section 5) from which *Drawing Video* (2008, section 5) is derived.

Musician and composer David Michael DiGregorio, who composes most of the music in Sung Hwan Kim's films, recalls a song that his grandmother (his elder) used to play for him.

Do you also recall songs an elder has played or sung to you?

Section 4

Dog Video

(2006), installation (2012/23)

Part of the series *in the room* (2006–12)

Dog Video (2006) explores Sung Hwan Kim's childhood in South Korea, and his time in Amsterdam where he spent his young adulthood. In the video, Kim's long-term collaborator David Michael DiGregorio (aka dogr) plays his childhood dog, complete with a canine mask. Kim, meanwhile, portrays his own strict father, also wearing an absurd mask, who rings a bell and shouts orders at his dog-son to assert control over him. This contrasts with the space of Kim's home in Amsterdam, where the sounds of distant church bells can also be heard, an authority but at a remove from the home. As with all of Kim's works on display, the installation features a musical arrangement, which here includes a reading of a text by Prague-born poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) and instruments such as the tambourine, bass drum, voice, and kazoo played and sung by DiGregorio. Kim shot the video from a ground-level perspective, creating a sense of voyeurism for the viewer that parallels the intimate spaces, which are the subjects of the film.

Do you heard a story
about a place you
visited later?

Do you remember how
you imagined the
place and how you
actually perceived it?

Section 5

Drawing Video

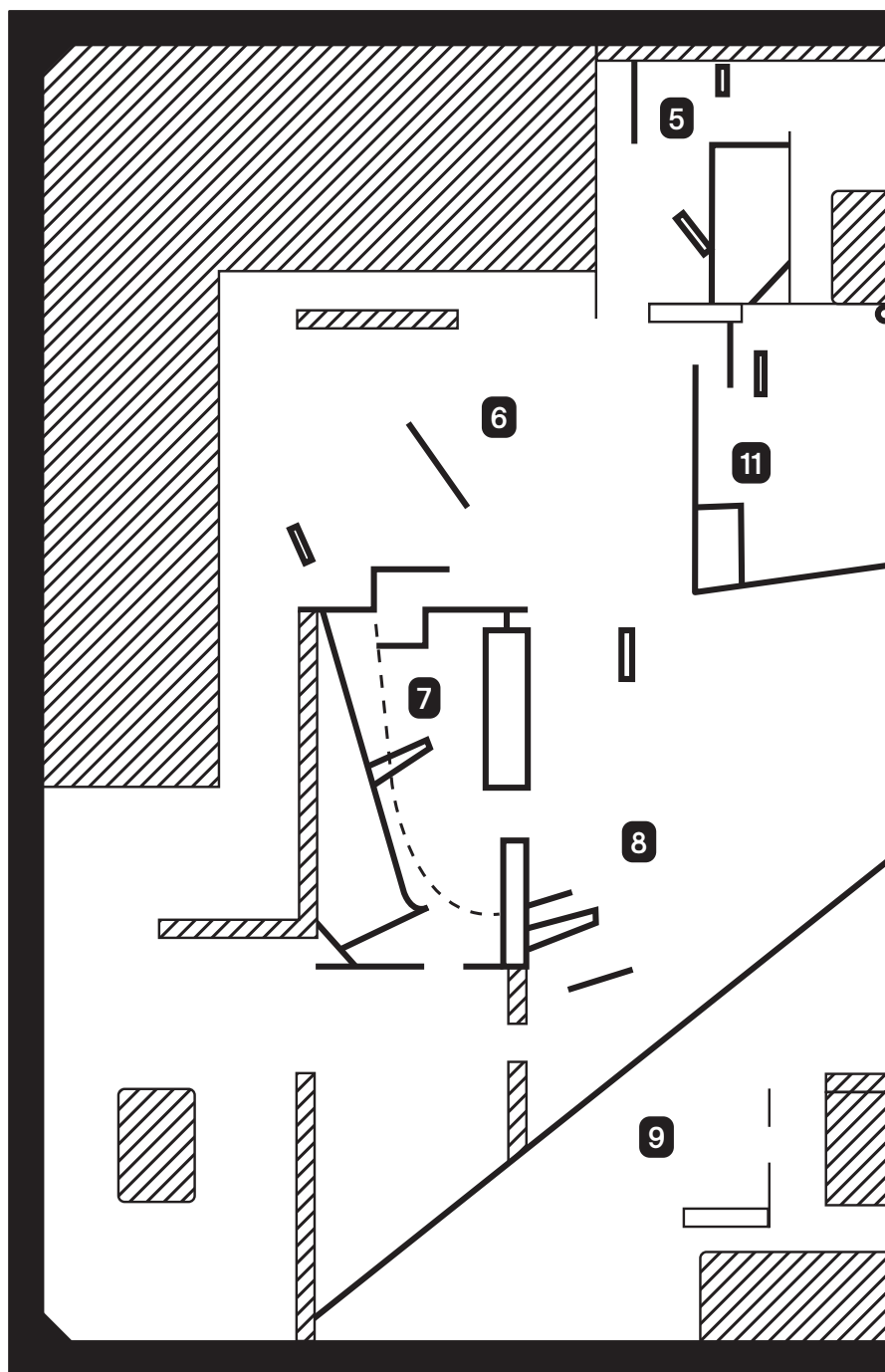
(2008), installation (2008/23)

Part of the series *in the room* (2006–12)

In this section the viewer is also introduced to an example of Kim's film environments that serve as settings for a performance. The video *pushing against the air* (2007) activates the installation as performance space, with a script based on Kim's interviews with his regular collaborators DiGregorio and fellow musician Byungjun Kwon about love songs they have composed. A quote inspired by Kwon's radio show, *World Music Journal*, broadcast nationwide in Korea from 2004 to 2005, is the departure point: "It is officially considered a major error in radio broadcasting when there is even five seconds of silence on air." A video component shows the perspective from Kim's camera during the performance while *Drawing Video* (2008) derives from the three performances, similarly sharing scary stories.

Even though it was rehearsed and performed many times before being made into a video, *Drawing Video* (2008) comes across as spontaneous, creating a space of vulnerability and intimacy. This larger body of work includes and is based on the performance *pushing against the air* (2007): initially three performances in which scary stories were told, and later a video (section 5) in which Sung Hwan Kim is in discussion with David Michael DiGregorio (aka dogr) and fellow musician Byungjun Kwon.

In *Drawing Video*, while drawings are made a voice tells scary stories loosely connected to the performance. The stories recall the focus of the *in the room* (2006–12) series on the safety of boundaries versus the horror of not having them, through spectral realities such as co-habitation, haunting, and aging. Kim interviews the other two participants, operating the camera with his left hand while constantly drawing (as if doodling) with his right hand. He places the camera below the drawings, so that the audience sees the projected images behind the two composer/musicians. At a certain point in the performance/video, Kim speaks about the drawings to "revers[e] the relationship between the host and the guest." In this sense, this drawing is not a visual exploration, representation, or metaphor for something else; instead, it takes center stage, while the music is the backdrop for the drawing's movement and Kim's stories. The installation includes *Cover* (2003), a film by David Michael DiGregorio.



The video shows various landscapes related to Sung Hwan Kim's life. Where have you lived, and what do those landscapes look like? Have they changed since you first remembered them? If so, what has contributed to them changing?

Temper Clay

(2012), video

"I was invested in depicting the division, or the replacement of roles in contemporary Korean family structures in reference to dissolution of family structure along the distributive process in *King Lear* (exemplified by the separation between the father and three daughters)," notes the artist of the work *Temper Clay* (2012). The prominent central film projection with a musical soundtrack by David Michael DiGregorio is played on six channels, and is an example of Kim's interest in narrative structure merged with personal history. While the narrative has autobiographical features, it avoids representation in being universalized through the use of a popular story. The artist notes: "A more private motive for *Temper Clay* is to question if my being (of institutional and systemic lineage) can, through my current production, revise the very structure that had birthed my being." The film is installed alongside Kim's collage works—geometric shapes rendered tenderly on parchment paper, mounting board, and acetate sheet stacked on top of each other. They generate fantastical, abstract compositions that resemble the shapes of a half-woman-half-beast creature (*Metaphor drew herself*, 2020/22 and *a metaphor carries another metaphor*, 2020–21)—a gesture that repeats itself in *They carried the heads of theirs* (2022, section 7).

Temper Clay re-sketches Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*, wherein Lear, intending to retire, stages a love test for his three daughters: he will portion his kingdom between them as dowries according to how much they profess to love him. Similar themes of real estate property and familial care are echoed in *Temper Clay* through themes of "property for love, loyalty and class reaffirmation." The film takes place in Kim's childhood home in the Hyundai Apartments in Seoul and the vacation house where his father had hoped to retire. A transcribed interview with Kim's nanny, Misoon Huh, is read out by the younger performers in the film, and refers to her career in this domestic environment; performers recreate child-like actions including running in, out, and around the surrounding woods, overlaid by quotations from *King Lear* to do with familial relationships and the ownership of property.

Which cultures and
languages are
connected to the
place where you
feel at home?
If they could tell a
collective story,
what would it sound
like?

Hair is a piece of head

(2021), installation (2022)

Part of the series *A Record of Drifting Across the Sea* (2017–)

Hair is a piece of head (2021) is the first chapter of three films in *A Record of Drifting Across the Sea* (2017–), a series that demonstrates Sung Hwan Kim's engagement with history through archival research. The artist relocated to Hawai'i to research undocumented Koreans who migrated to the US in the early twentieth century. Kim came to know materials related to Hawaiian history, culture, and the struggles of the Indigenous people. In the video presented alongside sculptures, drawings, and archival photography, the artist quotes the oral histories of Korean picture brides in Hawai'i from the early 1900s, who tried to differentiate themselves in appearance (through facial features, clothing, behavior, language) to avoid having to endure hate crimes similar to those being committed against Japanese people as a result of the Asia-Pacific War. Kim connects this history to Hawai'i, and notes that "for centuries, Hawai'i has served as the integral point of passage for most, if not all, immigrants first crossing the Pacific, including Koreans, and the first patch of 'US soil' that many migrants encountered historically. This historicizing is often oblivious to the dwindling fate of another nation, that of kānaka maoli, Native Hawaiians."

Hair is a piece of head was made during the Covid-19 pandemic when all production was shut down, and as a result is edited using the iPhone "Live Photos" feature. The film installation is also accompanied by a publication, which includes a selection of the artist's research before making the film. Chapter II of the series *By Mary Jo Freshley* 프레실리에 의(依)해 (2023) was produced from 2022 to 2023, and is presented in section 8.

Are there characters
in your life who
have accompanied
you through your
own personal history?
If so, who is it and
how did this character
evolve?

By Mary Jo Freshley

프레실리에 의(依)해

(2023), installation (2023)

Part of the series *A Record of Drifting Across the Sea* (2017–)

By Mary Jo Freshley 프레실리에 의(依)해 (2023) is the second installment in a series of films within *A Record of Drifting Across the Sea* (2017–), which demonstrates Sung Hwan Kim's engagement with history through archival research into undocumented Koreans who migrated to the US in the early twentieth century. The audiovisual installation is presented in an artist-designed architectural environment, alongside sculptures, drawings, and archival photography. You hear movement instructions from Kim's teacher Mary Jo Freshley, an American instructor of Korean dance. Mary Jo Freshley was born on 25 September 1934 and still teaches at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and the Halla Pai Huhm Dance Studio. While she is not ethnically Korean, she is one of Hawai'i's foremost experts in the dance and knowledge first taught by Halla Pai Huhm (1922–94). We watch Freshley teach Kim how to dance in the video. Neither Freshley nor Huhm are well credited for their contributions and historicization of Korean dance. Huhm's embodied history and dance studio are preserving a part of Korean culture away from the so-called motherland. Kim's film challenges the notion of a reliable narrator and brings us right up the edge of the question of where my subjectivity ends, and yours begins, and when I might begin to talk about yours.

In this section Kim's long-term collaborations are made tangible. The viewer can see—as the artist has said of his own work—“how the body moves through history.” For example, Kim's niece is featured in the photograph *Turning Yoon Jin into an owl, an endangered species* (2010/23) and again in the film *Washing Brain and Corn* (2010, section 1); in *David Michael DiGregorio's hair blowing in the wind (after Terrilee Keko'olani's hair photographed by Ed Greevy)*, *Mau'umae Trail (Pu'u Lanipo Trail)* and in *Wilhelmina Rise* (2020/22, Ed Greevy's original photograph also included in the installation in section 7) DiGregorio is dressed as a Korean picture bride with full-face make-up, a photograph taken while filming *Hair is a piece of head* (2021, section 7) in which DiGregorio also figures; and the artist himself is seen in portrait as part of the body of work *Hairwaterbody* (ca. 2004–05/23) developed with a lady from the sea (section 7). These long-term collaborations are placed in dialogue with archival photographs, including that of a Korean waterfront worker.

**Which encounters
in your life could
inspire you to make
a film? How would
you portray it?**

Section 9

Part of *Yolande's Room*

(2004–23), installation

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Section 9 includes among others *Small Metaphor* (2021/23), a body of works in dialogue with the series *A Record of Drifting Across the Sea* (2017–, section 7) which investigates the twentieth-century move of undocumented Korean people to the US by way of Hawai'i.

Have you noticed the special architecture in the exhibition?

The pathways between the areas connect the different topics bridging one space to another.

Are there boundries that we can see as transitions rather than borders?

Night Crazying 01, 02 and 03

(2022)

Her Son Cut to Ribbons 1 and 2

(2017/18/23)

Part of *Love before Bond* (2017), installation (2017)

The works in section 10 connect the themes from section 6 and 7. Sung Hwan Kim's formal gestures in collage and architecture used as tools toward world-building that enables the artist to blend the filmic and the real. The fantastical atmosphere of the film spills over into the universe that surrounds it.

The *Night Crazying collages 01 through 03* (2022) are more examples of Kim's meticulous abstractions made up of geometric shapes in acrylic and oil-based paint on paper, with stacked transparent plastic sheets and shimmer made with aluminum tape. This series was developed for this solo exhibition with the same name *Night Crazying* in 2022 at Barakat Contemporary, Seoul.

The two-part collage *Her Son Cut to Ribbons* (2017/18/23) appears in relation to the film, *Love before Bond* (2017) in section 11. The work is inspired by Kim's niece Yoon Jin Kim and Samori Coates, who both live in the US, and meditates on the anxieties and depression felt by teenagers resulting from a lack of media representation and social inclusion. The film and collages were brought together in a 2018 exhibition at daadgalerie in Berlin, where Samori Coates was a participant in an earlier related workshop at the United Nations International School—he was the recipient of a letter from his father, Ta-Nehisi Coates, in the form of the 2015 book *Between the World and Me*. The Berlin exhibition title *And who has not dreamed of violence* appears here in silver, quoted from James Baldwin's 1961 essay *Alas, Poor Richard*. Part of the title is printed in Arabic, the text of which is spoken in the Sudanese dialect by one of the teenage performers.

as mutual: there was no reason to suppose that Parisian intellectuals were more "prepared" to "receive" American Negroes than American Negroes were to receive them—rather, all things considered, the contrary.

This was the extent of my connection with the Franco-American Fellowship Club, though the club itself, rather anemically, seemed to drag on for some time. I do not know what it accomplished—very little, I should imagine; but it soon ceased to exist because it had never had any reason to come into existence. To judge from complaints I heard, Richard's interest in it, once it was—roughly speaking—launched, was minimal. He told me once that it had cost him a great deal of money—this referred, I think, to some disastrous project, involving a printer's bill, which the club had undertaken. It seemed, indeed, that Richard felt that, with the establishment of this club, he had paid his dues to American Negroes abroad, and at home, and forever; had paid his dues, and was off the hook, since they had once more proved themselves incapable of following where he led. For yet one or two years to come, young Negroes would cross the ocean and come to Richard's door, wanting his sympathy, his help, his time, his money. God knows it must have been trying. And yet, they could not possibly have taken up more of his time than did the dreary sycophants by whom, as far as I could tell, he was more and more surrounded. Richard and I, of course, drifted farther and farther apart—our dialogues became too frustrating and too acrid—but, from my helplessly sardonic distance, I could only make out, looming above what seemed to be an indescribably cacophonous parade of mediocrities, and a couple of the world's most empty and pompous black writers, the tough and loyal figure of Chester Himes. There was a noticeable chill in the love affair which had been going on between Richard and the French intellectuals. He had always made American intellectuals uneasy, and now they were relieved to discover that he bored them, and even more relieved to say so. By this time he had managed to estrange himself from almost all of the younger American Negro writers in Paris. They were often to be found in the same café, Richard compulsively playing the pin-ball machine, while they, spitefully and deliberately, refused to acknowledge his presence. Gone

were the days when he had only to enter a café to be greeted with the American Negro equivalent of "*cher maître*" ("Hey, Richard, how you making it, my man? Sit down and tell me something"), to be seated at a table, while all the bright faces turned toward him. The brightest faces were now turned from him, and among these faces were the faces of the Africans and the Algerians. They did not trust him—and their distrust was venomous because they felt that he had promised them so much. When the African said to me *I believe he thinks he's white*, he meant that Richard cared more about his safety and comfort than he cared about the black condition. But it was to this condition, at least in part, that he owed his safety and comfort and power and fame. If one-tenth of the suffering which obtained (and obtains) among Africans and Algerians in Paris had been occurring in Chicago, one could not help feeling that Richard would have raised the roof. He never ceased to raise the roof, in fact, as far as the American color problem was concerned. But time passes quickly. The American Negroes had discovered that Richard did not really know much about the present dimensions and complexity of the Negro problem here, and, profoundly, did not want to know. And one of the reasons that he did not want to know was that his real impulse toward American Negroes, individually, was to despise them. They, therefore, dismissed his rage and his public pronouncements as an unmanly reflex; as for the Africans, at least the younger ones, they knew he did not know them and did not want to know them, and they despised *him*. It must have been extremely hard to bear, and it was certainly very frightening to watch. I could not help feeling: *Be careful. Time is passing for you, too, and this may be happening to you one day.*

For who has not hated his black brother? Simply *because he is black, because he is brother. And who has not dreamed of violence?* That fantastical violence which will drown in blood, wash away in blood, not only generation upon generation of horror, but which will also release one from the individual horror, carried everywhere in the heart. Which of us has overcome his past? And the past of a Negro is blood dripping down through leaves, gouged-out eyeballs, the sex torn from its socket and severed with a knife. But this past is not special

Are there any role models who would have helped you as a teenager? How would they have influenced your perception of yourself and your surroundings?

Love before Bond

(2017), installation (2017)

A rendition of the *Pleasure Pavilion* (1964)

Love before Bond (2017), is a fairy tale about people who have never met, originally commissioned for the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017. Through his own experience with displacement, Kim tackles cultural otherness by using explicit references to African American literature, notably the work of James Baldwin (1924–1987).

Love before Bond stems from the artist's interest in his niece's teen angst that came about amid the movement for Black life and hints at reparations for slavery in the US. It addresses anxiety, depression, and anger felt by today's teens and the experience of racism, everyday prejudice, lack of media representation, and social inclusion. Kim explains: "As a Korean American female, my niece tries to find herself in an existing narrative of the marginalized. This, presently in the US, is the narrative of people of color, which, for a teenager, is as alien as anything else—so it is for a young man of color."

Together, the film, drawing, and architectural sculptures question the ethics behind aesthetics in relation to race and migration. The columns in the film and installation comprise a rendition of the *Pleasure Pavilion* (1964) by Philip Johnson, whose aesthetic path offsets Baldwin's, even though they both lived in New York City at the height of the American civil rights movement.

The Exhibition

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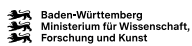
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