

# ARTFORUM

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Online

INTERVIEWS

## KIM WESTFALL



Kim Westfall, *Forever Young*, 2019, tufted acrylic yarn textile, 51 x 73". Photo: Marc Tatti.

*The New York–based artist Kim Westfall’s cheeky compositions of tufted yarn contend with the banality of selfhood. Her work finds humor in the insatiable human ambitions for uniqueness and authenticity, but also hits a nerve of real longing for deeper meaning and social cohesion. Her latest tapestries draw connections between human reproduction, the mechanical reproduction inherent in her medium, and ideologies of the ego that keep us stuck on repeat. “Splendid Bitch” opened on January 23, 2020, and runs through March 7, 2020, at White Columns in New York.*

**THE THING ABOUT TEXTILES IS IT'S THE FREAK ZONE.** I work with yarn; I can't be that self-serious because it's the same material you make into sweaters and stuffed animals. It's not heroic like painting because it doesn't have the same theoretical framework and history. I never go to an art supply store. I go to Michael's in the middle of the day, and it's all knitters collecting balls of yarn for their Game of Thrones fan blankets and women with carts full of faux flowers to make Sandra Lee tablescapes. There are huge signs with laughing children all over the walls. It's a very Lynchian shopping experience, but we're all in it together. It's very comforting to me.

I want to make a large-scale image without being chained to a loom for six months. My works are handmade, but also mechanical. I use a tufting gun, which is similar to a sewing machine in how it punches in and out. I start off with a drawing or painting done digitally, and then I project it and edit as I tuft. The gun has different speeds, so you can really fly on it. You can never achieve a perfectly clean contour. The tufted line has a nubby, almost pixelated look. As a Korean with no inherited Korean culture, I've always found the concept of "finding yourself" to be a strange and ironic pursuit. In *All You Can Ever Know* Is I've Never Been to Me, I depict myself flying an anthropomorphized airplane, which looks like me, to an unknown destination. It's a cursed image about the irony and inevitable failure of my self-actualization, at least according to popular notions of Asian American subjectivity. The title is a composite of *All You Can Ever Know* by Nicole Chung—a best-selling memoir about her adoption from Korea—and the Charlene song "I've Never Been to Me." To me, both are bad-faith examples of how to "find yourself."

The pop star Kyary Pamyu Pamyu has said, "I try to show cuteness in a traumatic way." I do too, but I also want to show trauma in a cute way. In Korean restaurants, you can find signs with smiling cartoon hot dogs grilling themselves and baby chicks cutting up some fresh chicken—maybe their own family! In public restrooms, there are signs with a smiling cartoon toilet inviting you to throw soiled papers into its mouth and flush them out of sight. I think about Georges Bataille's limit-experience, about Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject as a place where meaning collapses. For me, Korea is the place where meaning collapses. I had so many ego-shattering experiences there. When I'm there, I'm at once an abomination and an object of envy. I am as tragic as I am lucky.

Women are treated best by society when they are newborn children, young and hot, or pregnant. I Frankensteined them all together in the piece I call *Forever Young*, which depicts two bodies with reproductive organs stitched together from their waists down, pumping out innocent babies in an endless cycle. Reproduction still requires a woman's organs to host a baby. Maybe this won't always be the case and in the future there will be technology beyond in vitro, surrogacy, and adoption. International adoption from Korea is viewed as humanitarian by most people, but it was also pioneering in terms of commodifying intimate relationships. It also allowed Korea to outsource social welfare so it could concentrate on strengthening its other cultural exports. I am an unreliable narrator of my own history. I feel like I am endlessly guest-starring in a bunch of bad TV shows. In one, I'm a white girl's assistant. In another, I'm an orphan. In another, I'm just another artist taking up space in Brooklyn! I'm every Asian girl you've ever known! My work *Flaming Wheel of Law*, which shows a figure spinning manically out of control, is about the feeling of being trapped in someone else's narrative. It's a cycle that keeps going around. Making textiles is so maddeningly repetitive that language really lends itself to my concerns. It's hellish, but worth the ride.

— *As told to Vanessa Thill*