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## Riot Material Speaks with Artist Joeun Kim Aatchim

MAY 31, 2022 BY [RACHEL REID WILKIE](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

**JOEUN KIM AATCHIM**

사자굴 [SAJAGUL] — THEN, OUT OF THE DEN

AT MAKE ROOM LOS ANGELES (THROUGH JUNE 4<sup>TH</sup> 2022)

**RACHEL REID WILKIE:** There seems to be a shamanistic quality to your work. You summon your family members into the architectural space of your paintings and beckon them to dream with you, as a collective consciousness, as a collective dream-body. Did you journey together into the dreamscape? Or did you collect your family memories piece by piece?

**JOEUN KIM AATCHIM:** It was piece by piece, or more precisely, space by space, then object by object. Carefully approaching what I learned from the psychology classes I had taken during the 2020 lockdown, I experimented with a trauma-site revisiting protocol inside of my memory, my pseudo and amateur exposure therapy of some sort, repeating to myself, “*Focus on facts instead of emotions*,” and slowly revisiting the site in my imaginary walk-through in the drawing of the space.

I gathered my memories of specific objects in the house, domestic and architectural details, and summoned the unprocessed memories of that particular period. Since my family’s emotions about those

times were still unprocessed and fragile, I showed my drawings of the spaces and particular objects first and spoke individually to each family member, and their emotions opened up naturally.



Joeun Kim Aatchim. *Doubt The Hands (The Debt Collector Seeks the Father Through a Milk Delivery Hole)*. 2022.

All images courtesy of the artist and Make Room Los Angeles.

**WILKIE:** Memory is not an individual experience. It is a collective responsibility of those present. But it can also be revisited and remembered differently, with respect to the whole. Do you find that you revisit the scene again and again from different perspectives, layering image upon image to define and yet further blur the imagination until “Truth” no longer holds its importance and pure impression begins to reign?

**AATCHIM:** Remembrance is hard to measure, similar to dreams. More and more times, I am astounded by how differently memories are written by each of us. I find the drawing does wonders; it is a portal to glimpse each other’s memory, possibly the only visual way to tell what one remembers and how vividly one remembers. It is like a tangible replica of the memory to invite the others to compare and counter your memories with theirs.

Someone recently told me that recalling a memory is making a photocopy of it, and its resolution might deteriorate each time we remember it. I agreed and disagreed, and if I only *talk* about certain memories, sure, they may decay and alter each time we recall them. However, in drawing from memory, especially the way I like to do it — which is almost a mission to recall every detail until I no longer have anything left behind to add — it restores the memory.

For the same reason, testimonial drawings of survivors were also my subject of interest for a while. In my first solo exhibition, *Souvenir*, in 2014, I presented a series of etchings recreating testimonial drawings by Maria Rosa Henson, a survivor of the “Comfort Stations,” which were military brothels that systemically drafted girls from the colonies who were under the rule of the Imperial Japanese Army during the WWII. Tracing each line of her drawings was like holding her hands while visiting her trauma site together. Of course, there were written words, too. But drawing from memory does an incomparable work that gives us insight into what each of us actually sees in our head when we say, “I remember that vividly.”

**WILKIE:** The written word taps into our imagination with an almost divine, direct perception, cutting through any ambiguity of inner and outer veils of obscurity. How do words succeed to express your message where images might otherwise fail? Or, perhaps, for you, it is the reverse?

**AATCHIM:** The words are there like a memo to my future self and the audience for a reminder to ask me about them. Written words in my works are a double-edged sword — they can limit the image narrative and be a generous guidance to essential information and narratives. If I am in a debate, I often choose to include written words because it is a placeholder for grander stories to unpack. Even if the stories aren’t ready to be shared under current emotional and political circumstances, as long as there is a written word as a placeholder I can go back to the debate and decide again.

Besides that, I include words because I can’t be with my work to converse with the audience, so I leave my voice handwritten on the edge of the paintings so the audience can hear the reading voice in their head — what, for instance, I might want to ask *them* if I were present with them: “Have you ‘heard’ of Lions?, or was it a ‘herd’ of pianos?”

**WILKIE:** As the keys on a piano are only whole once both ivory and ebony keys are present, memories are only whole when each member is given the opportunity to sing their song. In *A Safe Coffin — A Tale of a Tail, Out of the Blue. (Kinderzenen)*, 2022, the lion’s tail caresses the piano, home only to ivory keys, and so removing harmony and playing to the chaotic chime of noise. How does audio discord play

a significant role in your memory of home? And how did you surrender yourself, as does the protagonist, to the noise of a chaotic household?



Joeun Kim Aatchim. *A Safe Coffin — A Tale of a Tail, Out of the Blue. (Kinderszenen)*. 2022.

**AATCHIM:** You saw it quite correctly. Since I couldn't play piano, the massive elephant-like object was sitting in my room, presenting my inability and inadequacy. When I was working on the *Sajagul* project, I went to a piano store near my studio multiple times, mainly to draw the piano keys, but in the end I decided to leave it blank. Although I am exceptionally good at visual memory, the allocation of the memory has a sliding scale; one can only remember when there is any reason to care.

**WILKIE:** In the same piece, the abandoned book seems to hold truth to the resignation of knowledge in the face of experience, or perhaps the written word is a prophetic prelude to the surrendering nature of experience? How do you perceive this?

**AATCHIM:** I grew up in a household of bibliophiles, and myself being one of them. Even in the most challenging time, even living in a half-basement, we moved with books. My parents met each other in a literature major at the university, and told me their first 'business' they started was also a publisher, which didn't last. I was destined to love every aspect of books and making books myself. I treasure how the smallest object that takes minimal space can hold the entire world of somebody.



However, despite being an avid writer and book lover, I have a learning disability, dyslexia, and dyscalculia, due to my eye misalignment. My mother made sure all her daughters excelled in every academic aspect and had us hand-transcribe classic books and Psalms every year when I was growing up. But during those periods of her absence, the homework equaled guaranteed humiliation alongside my unwashed clothes; hence the socks and the books on the floor take equal role in the painting, ironically extremely white.

Oftentimes, it seems children's melancholy is marginalized, and invisible to adults, since children's physical vulnerability already takes up considerable space for worries. I thought of this a lot these days, especially since I had been teaching drawings to 3rd grade students in a public school, which is the same age as me in my Sajagul period, coincidentally. Teaching the class of 9 years old was a part of a community outreach from The Drawing Center, but more than the humble lessons I had offered, it taught me a bigger lesson in understanding the psychology of children, their complex inner worlds resonating back to my own.

**WILKIE:** The Lioness as a spirit animal represents family, fierce protection, harmony, female power. The pride of lions in your work seem to represent the family unit, untethered, unhindered by the translucent architecture, unbound by the limitations of the home itself. The cubs "play" is uncensored by the absence of the Mother Lion. You also refer to "a Saja" being both "a lion" and "the dead" roaming around the house. Are you referring to the metaphorical "death" (absence) of your Mother? Or are you referring to the death of the memories as they fade, with time, into the abyss of our collective imagination?

**AATCHIM:** Death and absence were two different things to me, since I always believed in perseverance and recovery, even in the most uncertain time. There's an inexplicable power in children waiting for their mothers and mothers who want to return to their children.

However, I do and did feel there was an actual death roaming around the house at the time, which was my family's experience and many families' during The Korean Financial Crisis of 1997-98. The epidemic of family suicides, individuals experiencing various degrees of suicidal ideations, death threats between individuals due to national bankruptcy, and survival modes were the topics that filled the news and daily conversations.

**WILKIE:** In *The Untouched and the Delivered — A Tale of a Moon Light Prayer in the Lion's Den*, 2022, you recall a male Lion as the main character in the multi-dimensional labyrinth of translucent

walls, seemingly pawing at the space to escape. Is this reflective of a particular memory, perhaps of your Father or of a male sibling? His writhing posture is reaching for yet another memory of a pained female encased in her own psychological torture – perhaps your Mother? What inspired this scene? And is there a poem that relates to this moment that you hold in your archive that could offer some insight?



Joeun Kim Aatchim. *The Untouched and the Delivered — A Tale of a Moon Light Prayer in the Lions' Den.* 2022.

**AATCHIM:** The female figure, the *Moon Light Prayer*, is someone in deep fear; in the level that couldn't distinguish between the hands of help or hands that threaten, like rescuing an animal stuck in a trap — the hands of help are still symbolic of danger. This scene is a direct homage to the biblical reference, Daniel in the lions' den. The story of Daniel being untouched in a lion's den is such a pictorial, psychologically charged scene. Another inspiration that I paid close attention to was the psychological phenomenon that people commit suicide in the lion/tiger cage.

I didn't intend to assign a male lion and had a hard time drawing it, especially since I drew without photographic references, but it was what came out of me at the time. For things that I can't observe in person, I have a strange way of drawing things to make an image of my own. I call my methods an *image juicer*; what goes in will come out in some form, not exactly how it entered. I shoved a myriad of moving images (not still images) of lions, mostly by watching them while I was on a treadmill. Then I attempted to draw and rebuild the lions, working with the image datas I had in my head in my internet-less studio at the time. For some reason, all my lions came out quite cute, fairytale-like, than what I

imagined. Not that fierce at all. They looked inaccurate and funny to me, but at least *I* generated it. I don't have any poems for this scene, but my titles are poems and a safe place where I store critical information.



Joeun Kim Aatchim. *Deliver her — Like a Thief in the Night. We Heard of Lions, Above a Herd of Pianos.* 2022.

**WILKIE:** Boundaries, restrictions and limitations are all facets of our collective childhood as we are taught, somewhat unfairly, the confines of our society. In *Deliver Her — Like a Thief in the Night. We heard of Lions, Above a Herd of Pianos*, 2022, there seems to be a determined division of architectural space; a living room of elevated status and a lower room where the lion cubs intertwine in play, or perhaps confusion. Did you experience a sense of confusion as you struggled to navigate your way through the complications of your culture from the perspective of a child? And were you ever presented with the possibility of climbing the ladder in order to free yourself from this confusion, only to enter into the symbolically fraught world of adulthood which inevitably entangles us in yet more constraints?

**AATCHIM:** This scene's first and foremost inspiration is to record the space accurately. The most efficient way to put the most information for me is to draw everything transparently from every viewpoint. The apartment's interior is drawn from many different angles through the painting series, and there are two external views: this one and the *Exodus Us . . . Game Over*, 2022 [below]. My father's memory gave its narrative beyond the architectural details I sought, such as a story about the ladder.

The drawing and memory 'peer-review' process was a constructive excuse to hear his version of the memory, a stoic Asian father who doesn't reveal his emotions much. It was the first time I learned about the ladder in the scene; how he broke into his own house by climbing up a ladder and entering through the window, like a thief, which was to rescue my mother who was inside a locked room.

His story reminds me of the last scene of a Korean folk tale, the Sun and the Moon: a scene in which the siblings call God for sending them a rope to climb up to flee from the big cat who pretended to be their mother, whom the beast had already eaten. Also, the biblical reference appears again here— "the day comes like a thief in the night." Then again, I looped the word "thief" back to my mother's description of my father's appearance during that period; the way he grew a beard like a thief and secretly came and went at night to disguise himself from the group of men searching for him at the time.

**WILKIE:** A haunting presence occupies the staircase leading, it appears, to the piano store below your apartment in *Exodus Us — by the Name of Double Edge Roses. Deliver Us — from the Herd of Roaring Pianos. Man Does Not Live by Sack of Rice Alone, Item Repelled. Game Over*, 2022. The lions are at rest, each in their own 'piano den,' but something lurks along the stairway — a menacing presence, one of a forceful if not repellent nature, refusing to accept the gift of the roses, as if seeing the rose as a sacrificial gesture in the face of an apology. An apology which no longer serves but distracts. Tell us



more about this scene and the significance of the rose, held as an offering upon an “other-realm energy-blown” pillow.

**AATCHIM:** Perhaps this could be an excellent example of my poor draftsmanship, because the pillow you refer to is supposed to be a sack of rice! (laughs) It looks like a pillow, quite uncomfortable with the thorny roses on top. There is an expression in Korea, “like a borrowed sack of barley grain,” which means awkwardly taking place where one doesn’t belong. A similar expression in English would be a “fish out of the water,” I believe.



Joeun Kim Aatchim. *Exodus Us — by the Name of Double Edge Roses. Deliver Us—from the Herd of Roaring Pianos. Man Does Not Live by Sack of Rice Alone, Item Repelled. Game Over.* 2022.

The rose is to protect us from harm, but it is a double-edged rose, like double-edged swords in their allusion to a painful yet fruitful experience. Although this scene is quite fantasy-like, yet again, it was my genuine attempt to encapsulate everything I remember in the scene. The sack of rice was given to us by a neighbor who worried about whether my family were eating OK. But when the neighbor revealed her identity as a shaman, my mother rejected the rice out of deep fear. More often than I’ve ever wanted,



I recalled the sack of rice sitting in my doorway with a red sharpie mark “X” (or “†”), which I drew as the double edge roses in the painting.

I recreated the scene to end the chapter, hoping for the finale. And I physically mopped this painting with a rag and boiling water numerous times, quite an emotional removal process. It somewhat resembled the final scene of the movie *Jumanji*, when every bizarre thing was sucked back into the game like a tornado. Also, in Disney’s picturesque depiction of Exodus where the spirits pass over the houses: if there are blood marks at the door, they promise to be all undamaged, which was another close resonance with the painting I later found.

**WILKIE:** The vessel, found in the top left corner of this piece, is a recurring symbol found in many of your other works. It’s as if you are leaving a trail of clues embedded in your visual tales so that we may also play a part in the construction, perhaps reconstruction, of your memories. Tell us more about the symbolic meaning of this vessel. And please share other symbols that are integral to your storytelling, culminating in your vision as a visual artist.

**AATCHIM:** The vessel is there to guide your location in the drawing of the house, like a landmark. This unknown ornament was a kind of indoor fountain that I first successfully got my father’s attention, which convinced him to collaborate on gathering back the forgotten memories of the *Sajagul* period, instead of erasing them. He was amazed how I drew this unidentified object seemingly out of a memory he had not recalled for two decades. It is clear that if there’s no name, it’s hard to remember. Below is a quote from my draft for the video and the book version of the *Sajagul* project that I talk about the object:

“In the house where everything had paused in chaos,  
there was a small indoor fountain,  
with serenely flowing water noticing no change around it.  
Undoubtedly and flawlessly round,  
holding a stone, the size of an adult fist,  
keeping one place spinning round and round over the water.  
I used to rest my finger on it.  
The first thing I specifically recalled when  
I recalled the house was also this unknown ornament.  
Was it because I was thankful?

—the tranquility of it and how it keeps in its place  
without any changes amid all incomprehensible *episodes*.”

**WILKIE:** Has there been an element of collective healing for your family members since you began to express yourself through words, visuals and sound? Has your essentially shamanic process as an artist offered energetic medicine, such as the release of trauma, to you and your siblings, your Mother and your Father?

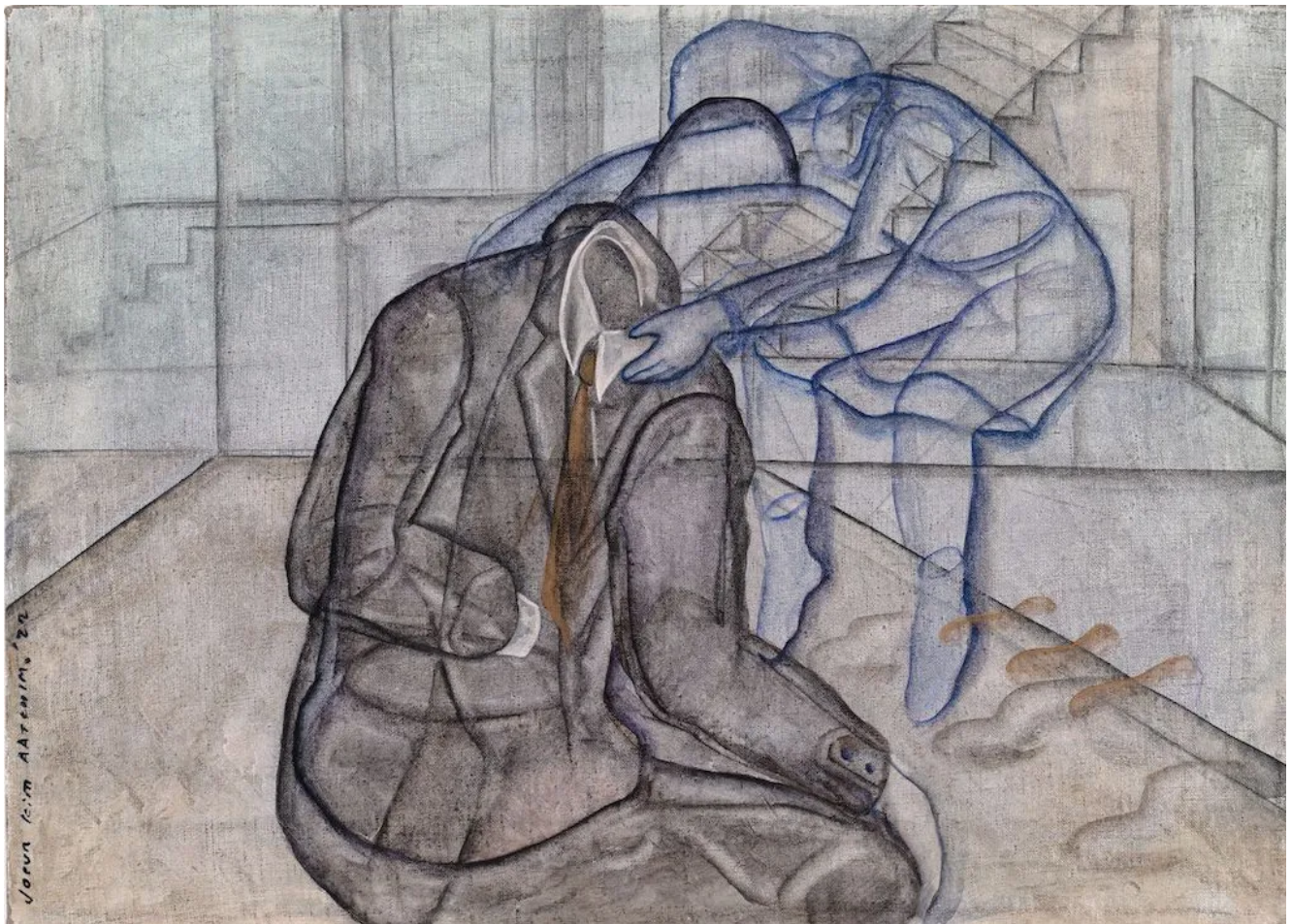
**AATCHIM:** At least for me, it certainly did. I no longer get a bodily reaction, such as nausea, from recalling the time as I walk into the space and time in my head over and over again. I am amazed how successful my pseudo ‘exposure’ therapy worked in the process of drawing. My family also got a bit more comfortable talking about the time together. (I bothered them a lot during these three intense months.)

Although things happen that can unhappen, I am immensely grateful that we have a miraculous story of resilience to share. We are resilient and have the love that wins, quite Hollywood-like, but who knew I’d share the story in my exhibition in Hollywood? (laughs)

Once again, my urgent desire lies in accurately recording specific memories of a certain period. My genuine obsession to archive my family’s stories had become a mission to interweave them with cultural and psychological aspects. And I learned that a family’s experience is a microcosm of a society’s and a step closer to making art that concerns universal experiences.

The art is a souvenir of resilience that an artist experienced, first and second handedly. If my work can be a solace to someone who needs to hear the miraculous story of recovery, even if the expense of it is a revelation of embarrassing scars, I am utterly blessed to share my stories through these humble works. Sincerity is quite contagious, so I thank you for having this interview with me.

**WILKIE:** Thank you Joeun Kim Aatchim! It is an honor to share your work with Riot Material!



Jooun Kim Aatchim. *And My Wishes— I Wish I Had Told Him That He Did What He Had to Do for Her and the Girls.* 2022.



Rachel Reid Wilkie is co-publisher of Riot Material.

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