The large, monochromatic works in Christine Sun Kim’s “Oh Me Oh My” at the Tang have three main layers. The first are oversized graphical representations of facts surrounding the artist’s life as a deaf person. This seems the core of the show, but it ends up not being the best of it. What matters more is the second layer, the actuality of being which the artist prefers because it suggests the full and separate culture it is. The third layer, in a surprise, is sound, both suggested and literally in the gallery, without irony.

The graphs get you quickly. “Why Most of My Hearing Friends Do Not Sign” answers its own question with a simple, large pie chart. Over half the circle is marked, “they assume I am 100% okay with this.” Smaller segments offer other excuses, like “learning a visual language is hard,” with “hard” in quotes.

The fact these are drawn artworks, charcoal and oil pastel on paper, makes them personal and oddly friendly, so they seem to avoid becoming mere statistics. But here, with many on view, the formal impact wanes, leading inevitably to the point behind all of it.

And that point really is the crux of the artist’s work. This is the part that made me worry that I was insensitive to people

Above, an installation view of Christine Sun Kim’s “Oh Me Oh My” exhibit at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College.

At left, Christine Sun Kim gives an artist talk in March at Skidmore’s Tang Museum.
Much to see, learn at ‘Oh Me Oh My’ Tang exhibit

who are deaf, or who communicate with ASL.
(I don’t know any deaf people and so have never learned ASL.
That’s my excuse.) The works ask questions that are not about
the artist, after all, but about the viewer. Even an especially
inward question in one piece, “Why I Stopped Taking Speech
Therapy,” begs the viewer to wonder what they would do, and what role
they (we) have in forcing the deaf to need speech therapy at all.
As you might see, the show can lead to intense, heartfelt
dialectics. I imagined a tidy book with these
same questions and visual answers, small
and compact, and I realized I’d have exactly
the same responses. Not that I mind
grappling with all this in a
beautiful gallery, but it
does make you wonder if the art part of it, the visuals, are enough?
And why, after all, is everything so big? And
so black and white. Kim
was apparently
inspired by the great
W.E.B. Du Bois’s
infographic charts from
1900, and his lively use
of color might have
been welcome here.

The third layer relating to music and aural experience is quite complex, after a bit of
looking and listening. There are headphones for viewers/listeners to use in seven
different lullabies created by experimental sound and music composers marking the
birth of the artist’s daughter, Roux, who can hear. These were
stipulated by the artist to be without words,
and to emphasize lower frequencies, which can be more easily felt,
physically. Many will find the sounds a bit
intellectual, especially when forced to sit on
bench with them. For me these sonic effects
were a tonic, but would have been more forceful
made ambient, filling the gallery.

“Why Most of My Hearing Friends Do Not Sign” is an infographic display, making clear how
Christine Sun Kim’s deafness and ability to communicate affects her friends, or doesn’t.

If you go

“Christine Sun Kim: Oh Me Oh My”

Where: The Tang Museum, Skidmore
College, Saratoga Springs

When: Through July 16

Hours: Thursdays 12 to 9 p.m., Fridays to
Sundays 12 to 5 p.m.

Admission: Free

Info: tang.skidmore.edu/exhibitions
or 518-580-8080

It was here in my visit that I felt the
yearning the artist must have for sound to be
part of her world in a visceral way, and to
knead this into the fullness of experience
having a child. And not just for Roux. The
implications of sound, beyond language, are
everywhere. Though they seem inaccessible
at first for the deaf, they are integrated into
daily life. This is where poetic magic is at play,
and Kim gives us a
graphical sense of motion and sound—music—with how the lines rise and fall, and with
notations on how to feel
the lines.

This visualizing of
sound, in terms of
language, becomes literal in some videos on
monitors in a beautifully geometric, glassy
museum space. For “Classified Digits,” made in
collaboration with her
husband, hands come
from behind one figure,
signing to the viewer,
with text overlays, in
a kind of playful confusion.

“Oh Me Oh My” is an
interesting show, for
sure. The curators call
Kim’s gallery pieces
“data visualizations”
and this is a revealing,
almost belittling phrase, getting to their limitations as visual art,
but also to their depths as
social statements.
And as social questions.