

Byron Kim came of age as an artist in the early 1990s, a moment when buzz-words like “multiculturalism” and “identity politics” ruled the day, and artists and institutions attempted to come to terms with the thorny relationship between power in the art world and the politics of race. In this climate, the 1993 Whitney Biennial proved controversial. Kim exhibited *Synecdoche*, 1991 (fig. 2), an enormous painting composed of nearly three hundred 8 x 10-inch panels, each painted a single shade of peach, beige, or brown, arranged on the wall in a tight grid. The colors correspond to the skin tones of as many individuals, rendered from life by the artist; the panels are hung in alphabetical order by first name of the sitter, who is identified on a wall label.

Attempts to categorize *Synecdoche* raise some interesting conundrums. At first glance, this grid of colored rectangles looks like an abstract monochrome painting, but as it portrays people, it might more accurately be termed representational or even figurative. Still, it can't properly be called representational, because it utilizes the visual language of abstraction. It becomes clear that, although the painting fits partially into each category, it doesn't fit entirely into either. Instead, it occupies a unique position between the two, what Kim calls a “threshold.” A position he has consciously attempted to occupy throughout his career, without attaching a name to it until recently,¹ the concept of “threshold” provides a lens through which to regard this overview of Kim's paintings.

Threshold: Byron Kim presents four major bodies of monochromatic paintings the artist has produced since 1989, none of which can be classified in only one way.

Abstract painting, both its art historical role and broader cultural implications, has intrigued Kim since his college days at Yale in the early 1980s. In a

¹ Conversation with the artist, November 5, 2003.

2 Byron Kim, "An Attempt at Dogma," *Godzilla Newsletter*, 1992, p. 3.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

polemical essay of 1992, Kim outlined his views on twentieth-century abstraction as they evolved over the course of his undergraduate studies. He published this essay, "An Attempt at Dogma" (a tribute to the painter Ad Reinhardt), in the newsletter of Godzilla, an activist Asian American arts group to which he belonged. Initially, Kim's choice of venue might appear incongruous (what does abstraction have to do with race?), but as the essay unfolds, the appropriateness of this choice becomes apparent. In his essay, Kim recalls the dichotomy between form and content he encountered as a student and his gradual realization that the "history of Western art privileges form at the great expense of content."² He began to understand his teachers' reluctance to discuss the content of art when he realized that modernist abstraction is the inevitable culmination of an art history in which content has largely been a side issue. Agreeing with critic Thomas McEvilley's overview of Western art history's linear sense of inevitability—starting with the Renaissance ability to render outer reality and proceeding gradually from the mastery of nature to the mastery of the sublime and absolute offered by abstract art—Kim embraced the idea of the abstract sublime: "This notion . . . in painting fascinates me. I am especially interested in paintings that deal in extremes of abstraction, particularly abstract monochrome paintings, and the notion that these paintings had a special, spiritually advanced standing and also, somehow stood at the end of art history."³

Yet, despite his embrace of extreme forms of abstraction, Kim identified what he felt were two problematic issues in the abstract tradition. The first was the supposed universality of the effect abstraction has on viewers. Discussing the experience of looking at the "fuzzy" colored rectangles in paintings by Mark Rothko, Kim observed: "I don't deny that these moments of transcendence occur. I'm sure they do. But I often wonder to what extent these phenomena are prompted by purely visual, neurological stimulation and to what extent they are governed by convention, what we have learned."⁴ The second issue was the exclusivity of "the club" of abstract painters, a club that seemed devoid of artists of color.

In "An Attempt at Dogma," Kim wrote:

[B]efore I'm through making monochromes, I'd like to make some large paintings exactly like Brice Marden's "Grove Group." And I mean exactly like his (beeswax, talcum, palette knife, green-gray, blue-gray) except that I painted them. These paintings would respond directly to those who ask me, "Why are you making abstract paintings?" The "you" meaning Asian-American-artist, artist-of-color, artist-with-something-to-say. Of course, my intention would be to make this line of questioning the inevitable content of the painting, one that would dominate the ostensible, conventionally romantic content.⁵

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Looking for ways to embrace abstraction as a formal aesthetic and simultaneously to acknowledge and question these inherent cultural biases led Kim to seek to make art that evaded easy classification. He turned to the example of Ad Reinhardt, in his view the first artist to raise the problem of categorization. For Kim, Reinhardt represented the position of a threshold artist by self-consciously devising strategies that would prevent him from being neatly pigeonholed. For one thing, Reinhardt wrote about art, publishing several essays (including "Art-as-Art Dogma, Part II") in magazines of the day; this, in Kim's mind, disqualified him from simply being labeled as a member of the New York School. And although Reinhardt claimed his work was not spiritual, many observers thought otherwise.⁶ Thinking about Reinhardt in this way led Kim to respond with *Synecdoche*.

⁶ Conversation with the artist, November 5, 2003.

⁷ Kim, "An Attempt at Dogma," p. 8.

It's a strange project because I'm making abstract paintings, but their subject matter is so concrete. In a sense these paintings are representational, even figurative. . . . "Synecdoche" as a whole will have the look of a huge, formalist painting. This tradition in art has been an elite tradition, and the group of people allowed to gain prominence within the bounds of this tradition is a highly exclusionary club. Like all good abstract and romantic monochrome paintings (and as its title suggests), "Synecdoche" will imply a much larger, boundary-less work. While I want these chips of brown and beige to push in and pull back and give visual pleasure, I also want them to have the mundane flicker of an art that is inclusive as a matter of fact.⁷

With its combination of an impeccable formal lineage and timely cultural implications, *Synecdoche* became Kim's signature piece of the nineties. Over the years, he has added several hundred panels to the painting, some of which were commissioned by museums to represent trustees or artists in the permanent collection. But even when portions of *Synecdoche* belong to a public or private collection, Kim regards them as part of the overall painting.

Synecdoche and the other "skin" paintings play on the confluence of the skin of the painting and the skin of a person. In contrast to the assumed universality of the New York School's evocation of the abstract sublime, Kim's abstract paintings can be quite intimate, referring to his family, like *Lisa Sigal/Byron Kim*, 1992, a portrait of the artist and his wife; and *Emmett at Twelve Months*, 1994 (fig. 27), a portrait of his son. Like other artists of his generation, for example his friends Janine Antoni and Glenn Ligon, Kim infuses the anonymous abstract language of sixties Minimalism with personal and political content.⁸

⁸ See Constance Lewallen, ed., "Generosity: A Conversation with Byron Kim, Janine Antoni, and Glenn Ligon," in this catalog, p. 49.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

A few years before he began *Synecdoche* and other works that refer to the body, Kim experimented with the painting's surface or skin. Inspired by the example of Eva Hesse and her fascination with process, he employed a range of techniques to alter the surface of the picture plane. A thick layer of encaustic builds up the surface of *Untitled [Thick Painting]*, 1990. Fingerprints destroy the pristine layer of pigment in *Please Do Not Touch*, 1991 (fig. 4), while .22-caliber bullet holes perforate *June 4, 1989*, 1989, a work that commemorates the tumultuous events of the Tiananmen Square democracy demonstration on that day. Kim's desire to radically alter the flatness of the surface led him to pour pigmented latex into a pocket created by attaching a sheet of latex to the front of the canvas, resulting in a bulge that reminded viewers of a pregnant belly. Although Kim initially resisted this figurative allusion, he eventually gave in and adopted the reference, calling these works "Belly Paintings" (fig. 1).⁹

Whereas the skin paintings investigated the racial implications of color, a group of paintings Kim embarked on after the 1993 Biennial examines the link

between color and memories of place. These works look back to the years of his childhood spent near Hartford, Connecticut, and his early adulthood, prior to becoming a parent, in Brooklyn, New York. *Errant Colt, Colt Factory, Hartford, CT*, 1994, refers to trips Kim took with his family to New York. On the drive back to Hartford, catching a glimpse of the distinctive gold and blue dome of the Colt factory meant that they were almost home. The horizontal bands in shades of pink of *46 Halsey Drive, Wallingford, CT 06492*, 1995 (fig. 9), represent Kim's attempts to re-create the color of the family home on the basis of the combined memories of his parents and sister, who each selected paint chips they felt most closely approximated the color of the house. Undoubtedly the most endearing of these paintings is *Miss Mushinski (First Big Crush)*, 1996 (fig. 25), a small canvas of green and dark blue stripes. The stripes refer to the turtleneck shirt Kim was wearing when his first grade teacher, the eponymous Miss Mushinski, told him she liked it, resulting in his wearing it for three straight weeks. Moving from childhood memories to those of young adulthood, *1984 Dodge Wagon*, 1994 (fig. 8), three panels in brown and buff, memorialize the artist's beloved Dodge Aries station wagon, while the green and mustard panels of *Metropolitan Pool, Williamsburg, Brooklyn*, 1994 (fig. 5), recall a community swimming pool he frequented. Kim refers to this group of paintings as "spots of time," a phrase from "The Prelude," a poem by the British Romantic poet William Wordsworth, that refers to epiphanies, significant childhood experiences that continue to shape one's adult life.

There are in our existence spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
In trivial occupations, and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired; . . .¹⁰

¹⁰ Jack Stillinger, ed., *Selected Poems and Prefaces by William Wordsworth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 345.

They are Kim's most intimate abstract paintings (no longer an oxymoronic notion), expressing a great sense of endearment and, like their literary source of inspiration, a deep sense of loss for a past that can be recovered only through memory.

In *Whitney Philip Morris*, an installation of three wall drawings, Kim utilized material rather than color to evoke a sense of place. While he did not copy any one artist, echoes of many artists resonated on the walls, paying homage to the legendary heroes of the abstract sublime. One wall painted with the pattern of bricks offered a visual pun on Sol LeWitt's descriptive title "wall drawing." The most distinctive aspect of the enormous wall works was the translucent silvery gray pigment used to paint them. Close inspection showed globs of dust, strands of hair, cigarette butts, and other debris stuck onto the wall. The pigment he concocted for this work was made from the contents of several vacuum cleaners used by maintenance workers at Philip Morris that he emptied into buckets every evening and mixed with water. Made up of dirt and debris from the building in which they were located, Kim's wall drawings put a new spin on the concept of site specificity. As with the "spots of time" paintings, these convey a sense of loss, not of an individual past, but of an art historical past; a sense that the tradition of formal abstract painting can no longer be taken up unexamined; that a rupture with that tradition has taken place.

At the same time as he was working on the "spots of time" paintings, Kim began the celadon series, *Grey-Green*, a group of canvases that refer to his Korean American heritage. Celadon is a ceramic glaze characterized by hues in a range of blue- to gray-green tones. Although the glaze originated in China, it is associated in Korea with the Koryŏ dynasty (A.D. 918-1392). Wrote Kim:

A few years ago, I had the horrifying experience of dropping and shattering an exquisite cup with a handle in the shape of a dragon's head. It arrived at my studio in Brooklyn in mint condition after eight hundred years of commerce and through the generosity of my parents. Due to one instance of carelessness, there it lay, demystified on my studio floor. Though I was very saddened, I learned something by looking at the fragments

themselves. The cup had an unremarkable, cement-colored body to which the brittle glaze adhered. Seeing a cross-section of the color layered on top of the neutral ground taught me how close the potter's process is to that of the painter and how appropriate it would be to resurrect this experiment in grey-green through abstract painting.¹¹

The celadon paintings are single unbroken fields of gray-green that (unlike the “spots of time” paintings) reflect the subtle variations of the ceramic glazes. They correspond remarkably to Kim's desire, stated in “An Attempt at Dogma,” to redo, in his own way, Brice Marden's Grove Group, begun in 1973, a touchstone in Kim's career. Kim admired these monochrome paintings for their “tactile feeling of color,” which seemed to give the canvas the look of an object. Here, Kim seems to be drawing analogies between the skin of an American abstract painting and the glazed surface of an Asian ceramic celadon cup. He has said that he regards the celadon paintings as an opportunity to debunk the idea of absolute beauty, the belief that beauty can exist and be perceived independently of learned cultural convention. Just as the transcendent beauty of abstract canvases by painters of the New York School, Rothko, Newman, and Reinhardt, can be appreciated by those who are schooled in those conventions, so is the beauty of celadon appreciated by Koreans because it is a culturally ingrained commonplace.

It is not surprising that Kim, an English major and admirer of English Romantic poetry, eventually turned to the theme of landscape in his work, with Wordsworth once again a source of inspiration. Wordsworth's well-known poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” in which the memory of a field of daffodils dancing in the breeze lifts the spirits of the writer, provided the title for Kim's first wall painting, in 1997 (frontispiece). As a companion piece, Kim presented *Whorl (Ella and Emmett)*, 1997 (fig. 3), two small panels depicting the backs of the heads of his young daughter and son, framing the sliver of skin where the hair naturally parts. The proximity of these emblematic representations of his children to the wall covered in vivid hues of yellow and green touches on the Wordsworthian theme of nature and, by extension, the innocent and impressionable nature of

11 Phyllis Rozenzweig, ed., “Correspondence with Byron Kim,” in *Byron Kim: Grey-Green* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1996), unpaginated (exhibition brochure).

childhood. Kim's four-part *Painted from Memory of San Juan River Near Moab, Utah*, 1991 (fig. 7), one of his earliest landscapes, resembles a skin painting in its use of tan desert tones. The format refers to Brice Marden's Grove Group, but the factual specificity of place described by Kim's title seems deadpan in contrast to Marden's lyrical title. *Through the Night (Skowhegan)*, 1997, an enormous black-on-black painting of the night sky glimpsed through foliage, with its barely discernable distinction between sky and tree, pays homage to Kim's idol, Ad Reinhardt. In addition, it commemorates the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, the renowned summer art program in Maine, which occupies a meaningful place in Kim's life (among other things, he met his wife, Lisa Sigal, there). In 2001, Kim began a series of large sky paintings, the most overtly romantic of all his work to date. While a horizon line in *Grunion Run*, 2001 (fig. 10), schematically divides the canvas into sea and sky, for the most part, the paintings are devoted to portraying sections of the sky, ranging from deep blue with nearly invisible wisps of cloud in *Clear Blue #2*, 2004, to the subtly modulated field of *White Painting #3*, 2001. These paintings look back to empirical cloud studies by nineteenth-century British painters like Joseph Wright and John Constable. At the same time, the scale of Kim's canvases and the way they slip in and out of abstraction recall Rothko's schematic and ethereal landscape-like compositions, with their ability to move the viewer beyond the appearance of exterior reality.

More closely resembling the format of nineteenth-century cloud studies are Kim's Sunday Paintings (figs. 13–17), small paintings of the sky on panel, each painted from direct observation. Kim began by writing a few lines under each image, but soon found himself writing directly over the image. His notations do not pertain to the type of clouds or weather conditions, as those of his British predecessors did, but rather note everyday occurrences, like a journal entry: "(Park Slope 4pm 09/23/01) The city is still edgy. Can't imagine things getting back to normal. Emmett's soccer team, the Tornadoes, played well today. Very muggy—hazy sky." The Sunday Paintings simultaneously record a moment in the

natural world and in human society, particularly the artist's life, and metaphorically suggest the possibility of a transcendent reality. The appearance of words on the picture plane creates a play between the paintings as a flat surface and as a window opening onto illusion. These paintings introduce a cinematic quality into Kim's work. Lined up on the wall, each panel appears like a frame in the loop of a film, a moment in time stilled. Like the panels in *Synecdoche*, each Sunday Painting is part of a larger ongoing whole.

The Sunday Paintings underscore the significant role text plays in Kim's work, with the artist's inscription on the surface suggesting a narrative counterpoint to the image of the sky underneath the text. In some of his work, text assumes the form of titles, as in the "spots of time" paintings and the celadon series *Grey-Green*, a means of orienting the paintings away from a strictly formal reading. Kim's employment of text grows out of his position as a conceptual painter, a category-defying term that can only be applied to a threshold artist like Kim, who begins a group of paintings with an idea of parameters, a set of conditions that will be met.

The participatory aspect involved in some of his art-making also can be linked to a conceptual practice. To make *Synecdoche*, for example, Kim approached people to ask if he could paint their skin color and then, equipped with brush, paint, and panel, spent twenty minutes with those who agreed. More recently, Kim has spent time in the galleries of nineteenth-century painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, making a copy of a portrait by Jacques-Louis David and conversing with passersby curious about his presence and activity in the galleries. The Metropolitan Museum was the site of a 1996 socially oriented art experiment Kim undertook with Tom Finkelppearl, then co-director of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Interested in public and community-based art, Finkelppearl had come across a 1968 lecture given by Ad Reinhardt to the students and faculty at Skowhegan. The lecture espoused a modernist position advocating the separateness of the fine arts from any of the

¹² Quoted in Tom Finkelpearl, "Abstraction and Attraction," in *Uncommon Sense* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), p. 16.

¹³ Kim, "An Attempt at Dogma," p. 8.

other arts (not to mention other aspects of life). Discussing what happens to works of art when they enter museums, Reinhardt remarked: "When objects move into a museum of fine art, no matter what they meant at a certain time and place, they lose all other meanings. You don't have religious objects in the museum of fine art. Sometimes audiences don't believe this when I say it, but all I have to say is—try to go up to the Metropolitan Museum or the Cloisters and get down and pray. You would get thrown out."¹² Kim and Finkelpearl did just that. Kim meditated in front of Buddhist works and, in one gallery, stood before a huge image of the Buddha, bowed, kneeled, touched his head to the floor, and stood, 108 times in succession. Their experiment proved Reinhardt's assertion wrong.

Written at the outset of Kim's career, "An Attempt at Dogma" laid out his position on abstraction and pointed to the direction he was to follow for a decade, as he addressed the dichotomy between form and content and retooled the language of "extreme" abstraction to represent things in the world. In this essay, Kim observed: "The truly fascinating thing about an abstract monochrome painting that works is that, content-wise, it operates at both extremes. You look at it once, and it is merely a red rectangle. You look again; it is the universe in red. It is nothing and everything."¹³ He could have been writing about the paintings he was going to make. Paradoxically, occupying a threshold position has enabled him to work at both extremes. Recently, Kim recalled what he felt was the quintessential threshold experience: paragliding in Colorado, soaring above the earth and beneath the sky, between life and death. Kim's paintings show us that, in choosing to occupy a threshold—the space between heaven and earth—there is nothing and everything.